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“Put on the whole armor of God”

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So What Is Zionism?

The world today is witnessing a growing sentiment of anti-Semitism. This has been primarily due to the Zionist Movement, resulting in millions of Jewish Hebrews returning to Palestine.

*For decades this has generated a relentless—and often violent—resistance. So **what is Zionism?** Should we fear it and therefore resist it?*

By **BILL WATSON**

John Hagee claims to be a “Christian Zionist.” He is the Founder of an organization dedicated to helping Jewish people return to their homeland—it’s called Christians United For Israel (CUFI). It’s an organization that has donated millions of dollars to this cause. Mr. Hagee is a firm believer that all Christians should help the Jewish people return to Palestine. He has been both honored and criticized for organizing this initiative and what he believes to be the *prophetic fulfillment* of “Israel’s” return to its homeland.

Those who criticize this movement and are against the Jewish people returning back to their homeland is not new. It’s been going on since the 16th and 17th centuries and originally

was known as the “Haskala” (Jewish Enlightenment Movement). But most recently, the more modern beginning of this *nationalist Zionist movement* is found in the late 19th century. It emerged due to the persistent yearning and ancient attachment the Jewish people have to Palestine, which gave energy to the Eastern and Central European Jews back in 1896 by a man credited with its genesis—Mr. Theodor Herzl.

He was an Austrian journalist who became very passionate about forming a Jewish nation because of the increasing anti-Semitism in Europe. He convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, authoring the “Basel Program” that established as its *mission state-*

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Nehemiah

By **ARNIE FONTAINE**

There are many luminaries in the Old Testament (OT) that are worthy of studying for our own personal spiritual growth. There are at least four individuals in the OT that played an important role in non-Hebrew governments. They would be Daniel, Joseph, Esther, and Nehemiah.

I would like to focus on Nehemiah. To begin, we need some background of where he was living, his station in life, and his thoughts on qualities needed for the jobs he was tasked to do.

The story begins in the month of Kislev, November/December, in the Persian Empire, modern-day Iran.

We find him in the court of the king; mind you he is a Jew in the king’s court. His brother, Hanani, comes to him with bad news from Jerusalem: “And they said to me, ‘The remnant who are left of the captivity there in the

province are in great affliction and reproach. And the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire” (Nehemiah 1:3).

There was turmoil in the Persian Empire, not only from surrounding governors resenting the presence of the Jews but from an individual named Megabyzus, who rebelled against the Persian king. Later he came into line with Artaxerxes. The situation could be part of the rebellion or local governors making life miserable for the Jews.

Our first thing to notice was Nehemiah’s response. This is a window into his way of dealing with adversity. The first thing he did was go into a state of remorse and grief. How many fellow Jews would respond so? He then *prayed* to God.

Nehemiah 1:4–5: “Now it came to pass when I heard these words, I sat down and wept. And

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War in the Middle East: A Historical Perspective

By **MIKE JAMES**

On the Last Great Day, Palestinian Hamas forces struck Israel with a devastating terrorist attack. Over 1,400 Israelis lost their lives during this surprise attack. Israel is now at war with Hamas, primarily in the Gaza Strip. Israel has pounded sites in Gaza over the past few weeks killing over 8,000 Palestinians. Ground incursions into Gaza by the Israelis have now begun. As with any war, what this will lead to is anyone’s guess. But let us take a closer look at what we can learn from the latest significant flare up in the Middle East.

To get a better grasp on the present Palestinian-Israeli struggle, we need to go back into history to understand what is happening today. How far back you go may color how you look at the present struggle. I suggest we go as far back as we can to get the best perspective on this complex issue.

There are different ideas on when the Israelites left Egypt and headed toward the Promised Land (Canaan). The date of this is anywhere from around 1400 BC to 1200 BC. A group known as the Philistines, who likely migrated from areas of modern-day Greece, also entered the coastal areas of Canaan around the 1100s BC.

By the time of David’s Kingdom in Israel (1000 BC), Israel had control of the area known as Israel and Palestine (Gaza Strip and West Bank) today. By about the fifth century BC, Babylon’s conquest of the area disabled any remnants of Philistine civilization. Certainly, by the time of Alexander the Great, the Philistines were no longer a national entity.

A similar fate befell Israel and Judah. Most Israelites were taken away during the

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ZIONISM

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ment: “Zionism strives to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law.”

Zionist Congress began appearing and meeting every year, early in the first decade of the 20th century. But soon thereafter, the Ottoman government refused Mr. Herzl’s appeal for Palestinian autonomy. However, due to the failure of the Russian Revolution of 1905, waves of pogroms (persecution of a particular ethnicity) against the Jewish people, and additional repressions, along with WW I, two Russian Jews living in England—a Mr. Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Sokolow in 1917—successfully helped negotiate the Balfour Declaration. This agreement promised England’s support for the creation of a Jewish Homeland.

By 1925, major settlements were established in Palestine, along with autonomous organizations that helped solidify the Jewish culture. And so, with the combination of previous “organic” settlements that commenced by certain Jews coming at their own discretion at the turn of the century and the Balfour Declaration of 1917—by 1933, close to a quarter million Jewish immigrants settled in Palestine. This became disturbing to the Arabs, and tensions began to grow in the area, resulting in Zionism becoming “politicized” into a very controversial movement.

In due time, multiple Arab uprisings occurred between the years 1936–1939. Compounding these contentions was the rise of Hitler’s Third Reich. British military forces endeavored to keep the peace, but sadly, lost heart to sustain its support of a Jewish state as was originally agreed to in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. This led the British, in 1939, to restrict the number of Jewish immigrants moving into Palestine. This *did not sit well* with the Zionists. They began to believe they were betrayed, intensifying the controversy of this movement.

The Zionists *violently resisted* this British policy, and opposed them with protests, terrorist attacks, and assassinations, organizing a clandestine illegal immigration program to settle Jewish immigrants into Palestine, regardless of Britain’s attempts to restrict the volume of Jewish immigrants. However, because of the enormous scope of extermination of European Jews conducted by the Nazis during WW II, Jews seeking refugee status migrated to Palestine—while, in combination, support of the Zionist’s objectives grew in acceptance, especially in the United States, with large numbers of people in other countries embracing Zionism’s *original intent*.

But tensions continued to grow among the Arab population, causing Britain to appeal for help from both the United States and the United Nations. This resulted in a proposal of partitioning the country into separate Arab and Jewish states, with internationalizing the city of Jerusalem. On May 14th, 1948, the United Nations formally announced Israel was a separate state. This triggered an Arab-Israeli war, resulting in Israel soundly defeating the Arabs. By the time the armistice documents were signed in 1949, Israel held more land than was originally partitioned under the UN’s arrangement.

Then, fast-forwarding 70 years to 2019, what do we find? We see this Israeli state, though a sovereign nation, remains surrounded by an armed camp of hostile Arabs and a variety of Islamic terrorist organizations, primarily sponsored by Iran, that are dedicated to and engaged in terrorism and the total annihilation of Israel—while still struggling to achieve the original United Nations agreement of 1948.

So What’s the Point to a Jewish Sovereign State?

In today’s world we find growing tension and large-scale disruption and violence from many sources that continue to threaten the peace and well



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

being of the nations around the world. It seems regardless of what is done to settle the volatile conditions, we see it’s never enough. It’s as though senselessly, forces are constantly at odds and in conflict with what you know would solve mankind’s problems.

What we fail to realize is that we are in the midst of an agenda—an *active plan*—that is much bigger than ourselves and destined to play out in a specific way, *as per God’s expectations*. And that is a major “actuality” we must accept. This is God’s plan—He’s in charge and calling the shots (Romans 9:20–21). And unless mankind repents and accepts His terms, the plan will play out as described in the *voices of the prophets*.

And therein lies the *answer* to why a sovereign state of Israel is so important—because *it’s significant to God’s plan* and has been written in His *prophetic writings*, recorded by multiple prophets over the course of Israel’s history. This embedded truth is found interwoven within the original story of ancient Israel. However, it concerns a very important *specific* that clearly needs to be understood for a few reasons. **First:** The present return of millions of Jewish people to Palestine *is not* the *biblical* definition of Israel’s return to their homeland. **Second:** The current Jewish migration back to Palestine is, indeed, for a “latter day” *specific reason*, which we’ll address later in the article.

But, notice first what the prophet Ezekiel has to say about the return of Israel to its homeland in Palestine. “The word of the LORD came again unto me, saying, Moreover, you son of man, take you one stick, and write upon it **For Judah...** then take another stick, and write upon it, **For Joseph**, the stick of Ephraim and for all the house of Israel his companions: And *join them one to another into one stick*; and they shall become one in your hand.... Will you not show us what you mean by these? [Let the Bible interpret itself.] Say unto them, Thus says the Lord God;

Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is the hand of Ephraim, and the **tribes of Israel** his fellows, and will put them with him, even the stick of **Judah**, and make them one stick, and *they shall be one in mine hand....* And I will *make them one nation* in the land upon the mountains of Israel [Palestine]; and one king [Jesus Christ] to them all: and they shall be *no more two nations* [Israel and Judah], neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all: ...And David my servant shall be king over them; and they shall have one shepherd [Jesus Christ, from the line of David]: ...And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt [Palestine]; ...and my servant David shall be their prince for ever” (Ezekiel 37:15–25).

What Ezekiel just described is the *biblical* definition of Israel’s return to their homeland. And notice, this is an extremely *critical distinction*: it includes both houses—Israel and Judah—*not just the Jews!* It’s important we *understand* that Israel existed as a divided kingdom for over 225 years! Four books in the Bible document this arrangement—1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. These four books identify the two nations of Israel with separate king-

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ly lines as 1) *Israel*, and 2) *Judah*. Israel was made up of 10 of the 12 tribes, and Judah had the other two, which included the *Jewish* people. They are the only remaining tribe of the original twelve that retained its identity, validating the nation of Israel and making the connection to the Bible.

However, unfortunately this has led people to misunderstand the Jews to be all there is, when defining the nation of Israel. And though all Jews are Israelites, not all Israelites are Jews—that is a key differentiation and significant to the *biblical* definition of Israel's return to Palestine. If we *recognize* this specific *nuance*, we can then *know* the present day Jewish people's return to Palestine is *not* the described *biblical* return of Israel. Instead, Ezekiel revealed in chapter 37 that *both* houses, Israel and Judah, represent the actual *biblical* definition of the nation Israel's return to their homeland. This is the actual biblical definition of Israel's return. And unless both houses are in migration to Palestine, it cannot be considered the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy, described in chapter 37.

So then, what is it we are witnessing today that is defined as this Zionist movement? Is there any *biblical* importance to this present day migration of Jews returning back to Palestine? To what *biblical* purpose does this modern-day Jewish immigration back to Palestine really mean? Is it biblically *significant*?

Is There a Biblical Purpose For the Jews to Return?

Many are unaware, but the Bible is approximately 30 percent prophetic. That's right, your Bible addresses many *future events* that are yet to happen. And, arguably, though many will claim events construed to be applicable for the future are instead actually *already* fulfilled, the fact is, that's just not true! They are wrong!

In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, Jesus was asked by His disciples: "...and what shall be the sign of your [future] coming, and the end of the world [aionios, "age"]?" Interestingly enough, as He proceeds down through a variety of events and descriptions of end-time conditions, He comes up to a detail that causes Him to caution, "...whoso reads, let him understand)." This detail is recorded as the "abomination of desolation, spoken by Daniel the prophet."

History tells us that Antiochus Epiphanes, upon invading Jerusalem in and around 168 BC, desecrated the temple by erecting a statue of Zeus, while sacrificing pigs on the altar. He claimed he was Epiphanes—the visible god (that he and Jupiter were identical), but the people called him Epimanes,



Israeli protesters supporting hostage return

meaning the madman!

This event is a haunting "pre-type parallel" of what Jesus explains will occur just prior to His *future* return to earth. Notice what He says: "When you therefore shall see the *abomination of desolation*, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso reads, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judea [Palestine] flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. ...For then shall be great tribulation, such as was *not since the beginning of the world* [one of a kind] to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:15–21).

Obviously, this is talking about a one-time event that is horribly *unlike any other* time in human history, and "except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved" (Matthew 24:22). It is a time that is so crushingly *devastating* that if God did not intervene with Christ's second coming, mankind would self-destruct!

This is the *worst of the worst*; never before has this occurred. This is *not* describing Antiochus' invasion, but rather a time, yet in the future, when Judea will be *invaded again*, in the latter days, and a similar abomination will be set up in a *rebuilt temple in Palestine*, right prior to Christ's return.

The apostle Paul describes this end-time event in similar fashion, corroborating what Jesus describes in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Notice what Paul says: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians. 2:3–4).

Since Paul was convinced Christ would return in his lifetime, he fully expected this "man of sin" to set himself up in the existing temple of his day. Little did he know he was speak-

ing *prophetically* to the latter day abomination of desolation that Jesus said would happen *again*, at the time right before His return, as Daniel describes it. So, how does Daniel explain it, since Jesus references his narrative?

Notice: "And he said, Go your way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the *time of the end*. Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand. And from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away, and the *abomination that makes desolate set up* [set up right at the end], there shall be 1290 days" (Daniel 12:9–11).

Daniel is clear about the *abomination that makes desolate* will be set up near the end. Notice: "But go you your way *till the end be*: for you shall rest [die], and stand in your lot at the *end of the days*" (Daniel 12:13). The point is made that this occurs during the end times. This is confirmed in the context of this chapter by connecting us up with the "time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation even to the same time" (Daniel 12:1). This parallels and locks in with Matthew 24:21–22, Mark 13:19–20, and Luke 21:22.

This Leads Us to the Second Point: The Reason Why

In Joel, we find an interesting *warning* to a people in Judah and Jerusalem, but notice the *time* for this warning—it's right "*before* the great and terrible day of the LORD come" (Joel 2:31). This is the *same time* described as no other time of trouble, and if Christ didn't return to stop the madness, humanity would destroy itself. Notice: "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, *BEFORE* the great and terrible day of the LORD come.... For behold, in those days [the day when this will occur], and in that time, when I shall bring *AGAIN* the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat [the battle of Armageddon, Revelation 16:16], 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" (Joel 2:31, 3:1–2).

Clearly, what is being explained, is a nation of Judah and city of Jerusalem, *existing at the end time*, will *AGAIN* be brought into captivity right *BEFORE* the return of Christ. God's prophetic word is *WARNING* the Jewish nation of impending captivity *AGAIN*.

Now the prophet Daniel, when describing the bat-



Israel firing at Hamas targets in Gaza

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tle between the king of the North and the king of the South substantiates this and adds some back story to Joel's reference. Notice how Daniel explains this: "And at the time of the end shall the king of the south push at him: and the king of the north shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over. He shall enter also into the *glorious land* [Palestine], and many countries shall be overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand..." (Daniel 11:40–41).

This invasion of the king of the North into Palestine (the "glorious land") indicates they will occupy the area as was done previously by Antiochus, setting up this abomination of desolation; and according to Joel, put the Jewish people back into captivity. This fulfills these prophetic narratives God has planned for the future as He brings his salvific program to completion.

As we read further down into Daniel 11 and 12, we see it's at this time Michael the archangel stands up to commence the "Day of the Lord," which is described as a time of trouble like never before. Notice: "And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which stands for the children of your people [Christians]; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time [so great that no flesh would be saved alive if not stopped]; and at that time your peo-



War damages in Gaza

ple shall be delivered, everyone that shall be found written in the book [Christians]. And many of them that sleep [dead] in the dust of the earth shall awake [the resurrection], some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt [abhorrence]" (Daniel 12:1–2).

So clearly, we see God's prophetic Word *HERALDS* a *warning* message for the Jewish people of today that a coming *occupation* of Palestine will occur

AGAIN by an invading king of the North who moves in to the glorious land and sets up an abomination of desolation as part of a *globalist empire* (Revelation 17:11–14). This globalist government will "sit [influence and control] on many people, multitudes, and nations, and tongues" (Revelat-

ion 17:15). It will be actively influencing the world right up to the return of Christ, and actually and literally, violently resist the returning Son of God—Jesus Christ Himself!

Notice again what Daniel says about the fate of this globalist empire. "...he [this beast] shall also stand up *AGAINST* the Prince of princes [Jesus Christ]; but he [this globalist government] shall be broken without hand" (Daniel 8:25). The apostle John corroborates this successful victory in Revelation 19:19–21. Read it, because it provides the details Daniel summarizes.

War is coming unless all of mankind repents and accepts Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Needless to say, that's a tall order when realistically considering the state of humanity's attitude toward the God of Israel.

So with that in mind, let our prayer be that those of us seeking a relationship with our Father through Jesus Christ can find comfort and mercy in these very desperately dire and evil times, praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17) for His kingdom to come quickly, as the Feast of Tabernacles reminds and portrays for us our Lord's victory and mankind's rescue (Daniel 7:26–28)!



Hamas firing rockets at Israel

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Assyrian captivity (circa 700 BC), and the Jews went into Babylonian captivity (586 BC) and returned to their land 70 years after this captivity in a diminished capacity. The Jews continued to live in their land under other rulership for the most part until the destruction of their temple in AD 70 by the Romans.

By the time of the Muslim conquest of the Middle East (beginning late 600s AD) remnants of the Philistines may have mixed with Arab populations moving into the land that became known as Palestine. Most of the Jews were out of this area by around AD 700. Over the next 1,200 years a majority Arab population lived in the original Promised Land of the Jews and Israel.

The modern struggle between Palestinians and Jews can be traced back to the 1800–1914 timeframe in the region. During this period the Ottoman Turks controlled the land of Palestine/Israel. As their power waned the European powers became more influential and powerful in this region of the world.

By the year 1914, there were estimates of about 650,000 people in the area known as Palestine (modern Israel, Gaza, West Bank, and parts of modern Syria and Jordan). Of this number, about 80,000 were thought to be Jewish. The majority were Palestinian Arabs.

Keeping the biblical perspective (God gave the

land to Israel) out of the equation, many today argue there were a lot more Palestinians in the land than Jews when the Ottoman Empire was ending.

A counterpoint to this is the Arabs in the Middle East at that time were not caught up in the notion of nationalism which was much more a European concept at that time.

Nationalism was much more popular with the Zionist movement circa 1914. Zionism was a movement in the later part of the nineteenth century that was trying to create a secular national Jewish state. It was partly inspired by anti-Jewish prejudice in Europe.

During and after World War I, decisions were made by France and Great Britain to take over administration of areas of the Middle East formerly administered by the Ottoman Empire.

On 2 November, 1917, the British issued the Balfour Declaration which promised a national home for Jews in Palestine. Part of the reason for this declaration was to use Jews in Russia to continue to support Russian's war effort. Russia was in alliance with England and France against Germany and the Ottomans. The United Kingdom also believed American Jews would push Woodrow Wilson (US President) to join the British side in World War I.

According to *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* by Charles Smith, "The Balfour Declaration was not based solely on British evaluations of self-

interest and immediate war aims. Key British statesmen had a deep sympathy for Zionism, sparked both by a Christian interest in the land of the Old Testament and by a sense of guilt at Europe's treatment of the Jews."

This is quite ironic given the traditional Church of God theory of a connection between ancient Israel and the modern US and UK as a type of Israel.

Another important quote from Smith's book which helps us understand how the modern state of Israel came to be: "Finally there was the natural assumption of European statesman that they had the right to dispose of foreign lands, as they wished, conditional on the agreement of their rivals rather than the wishes of the lands' inhabitants. Imperialism and the security of imperial interests were the crux of nineteenth-century great power relations, based on the economic as well as military and political advantages to be derived from direct or indirect control of territory. Here Zionism melded with British assumptions of their right to deal with territories as they saw fit. Zionism was also 'right' because it was part of a European experience—the persecution of the Jews—that had to be redressed."

During the period of 1920–1930, Zionists began to buy land in Palestine. Some Palestinians who owned land sold land to the Zionists. From the early 1930s to the outbreak of World War II, the British had some reservations about their commitment to the Balfour

Declaration, but the rise of Hitler tempered some of that. There was also an Arab uprising during this period due to concern the British were favoring the Zionists.

In 1937, the Peel Commission devised a plan to partition the land of Palestine. A larger area was designated for the Arabs, but they were not happy because it was a less fertile area. A White Paper was also produced by the British in 1939 reneging somewhat on the Balfour Declaration. It called for a Jewish National Home within an independent Palestinian state. Both Arabs and Jews rejected this White Paper for different reasons. World War II put everything on hold in Palestine.

A brief synopsis of what happened leading up to the recent 2023 Palestinian-Israeli conflict is provided below. Please note this is a brief synopsis with plenty of the details being left out.

Soon after the end of the World War II, the United Nations (UN) approved a plan to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state. This led to war between Israel and the Arabs (including Arab nations) soon afterward. After the war in 1948, Israel expelled many Palestinians from the lands they had battled for. Many of these expelled Arabs took up residence in Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab nations. Some Palestinians remained in Israel.

Another short war occurred in 1956 after Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. Tensions over the Straits of Tiran escalated in what became known as the Suez Crisis, when Israel invaded Egypt over the Egyptian closure of maritime passageways to Israeli shipping. Britain, France, and Israel struck Egypt. Israel ended up occupying some Egyptian territory but had to return it after the UN censured the aggressors in this brief incursion.

By the mid-1960s the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed with the purpose to strive for a free Palestine. The PLO is an umbrella organization of Palestinians working for Palestinian autonomy. Another Palestinian group known as Fatah also formed around this time. They began attacking Israeli installations and developing plans for terrorizing Israel. The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union began to play into the Middle East situation to a greater degree at this time. The Soviets began to supply Egypt, Syria, and Iraq militarily as the United States created a closer relationship with Israel.

Israel reiterated its post-1956 position that another Egyptian closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping would be a reason for war. In May 1967, Egyptian president Nasser announced that the Straits of Tiran would again be closed to Israeli vessels. He then mobilized the Egyptian military into defensive lines along the border with Israel. Soon after this Israel struck Egyptian airfields to take the upper hand in this short war. Jordan and Syria also took brief actions against Israel in this war.

In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel took over the Gaza Strip from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan which were not a part of Israel when they became a nation in 1948. The Palestinians occupied these two territories. Another 100,000 Palestinians became refugees from Israel after this war.

In the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel. The Arabs had some initial success in this war, but they were eventually pushed back to 1967 positions. After this war Israel gave back the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Israel had taken it in the 1967 war. This war eventually led to the 1978 Egyptian Israeli peace accords which led to peace between Israel and Egypt.

In 1982, Israeli forces entered Lebanon due to Palestinian terrorist incursions into northern Israel. This war ended after Israel surrounded Palestinian forces in Lebanon and a negotiated settlement was reached. The PLO forces in Lebanon eventually fled to Tunisia.

After Israel took over the Gaza Strip in 1967, they built 21 Jewish settlements there. In 1993, the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO aimed at giving the Palestinian people the right to self-determination. In 1994, Palestinians took control as the governmental authority of Gaza. Part of this push for peace involved Israel disengaging and dismantling Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip under a 2003 plan from then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

In 2005, Israel gave up control of the Gaza Strip under internal and external pressure, withdrawing 9,000 Israeli settlers and military forces from the Gaza Strip. Hamas was one of two major Palestinian political parties that came to power after an election in 2006. The other party, the Palestinian Authority (PA), is an agency of the PLO and has significant control in the West Bank.

Another war occurred between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah (Shiite militia supported by Iran) in 2006. Israel went into Lebanon to fight Hezbollah after Hezbollah cross border raids into Israel. After a short period of time Israel pulled back out of Lebanon.

With that summary we need to know a few more details to make sense of the latest fighting.

The PA is primarily composed of Fatah (Palestinian political party) members and accepts the right of Israel to exist. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ, a smaller, less political faction) do not accept Israel's right to exist and have committed many terrorist attacks against Israel over the years.

Despite giving up control of the Gaza Strip, Israel has kept a land, air, and sea blockade on Gaza since 2007. This has caused problems for Palestinians. The UN said in 2009 that the blockade from both Israel and Egypt had been "devastating livelihoods" and causing gradual "de-development" in Gaza. Israel argues that the blockade has served to keep control of Gaza's border, prevent Hamas from getting stronger, and protect Israelis from Palestinian rocket attacks.

The initial stages of this new conflict have inflicted losses on the Israeli civilian population in a way that Israel has never experienced before. In only three days, more Jewish people were killed than at any other time since the Holocaust. During the first Palestinian uprising (intifada), from 1987–1994, about 200 Israelis were killed and 1,000 Palestinians. In the second Palestinian uprising, from 2000–2005, about 1,000 Israelis died and 3,000 Palestinians.

One other interesting aspect of this most recent violence is the sudden nature of it. Hamas and PIJ militants broke through about 30 points along the Gaza/Israel border. They overran some army bases so quickly that some Israeli soldiers were killed in their bunks. They also took out communications networks so efficiently that the area became a blind spot for the military. The attack also occurred on a Sabbath day and a Holy Day Sabbath at that. The attackers knew this would help with the element of surprise. Israeli officials had also been speaking about Hamas as posing no immediate threat.

Any time we see conflict in and around the nation of Israel some people express concern that it might be a sign of the soon return of Christ. Reading the Bible carefully should make it clear what is happening now is not a sign of the imminent return of Christ.

Let me explain why. Based on **Luke 21:20**, some believe one of the signs of the imminent return of Christ will be when Jerusalem is surrounded by armies. There are no indications that any other nations are going to go against the nation of Israel currently. Hamas does not even have a conventional army. **Matthew 24:15** also mentions another sign before Christ's imminent return—an abomination of desolation in the holy place. Some believe this refers

to a future temple in Jerusalem (which does not yet exist) that will be desecrated in some way.

Daniel 12:1 also makes it clear the time of the end will be more distressed than any other time in history. The problems in the world today don't compare to the distress of World War II. **Daniel 11:40** also tells us there will be a battle between a King of the North and a King of the South. Nobody can definitively identify anyone fitting those individuals at this point. Nor do we see God's two witnesses (**Revelation 11**) or the Beast power on the scene yet (**Revelation 13**).

But if this recent conflict is not a sign of the end, how could it be a precursor that aligns things toward the end times? Hamas struck at Israel at this time for a variety of reasons. One may have been due to recent internal squabbles in the Israeli government. Saudi Arabia was rumored to be ready to sign a peace deal with Israel as other Arab nations have over the past ten years. As more Arab nations make peace with Israel the Palestinians might feel desperate. They may feel their efforts for a nation state are diminishing. This is due in part to the inability of Palestinians and the nation of Israel to reach a peace agreement. If Hamas is destroyed by Israel perhaps a final peace agreement can be brokered between the PA and the Israelis since the PA is a bit more moderate than Hamas.

But let us not forget if a peace deal is brokered that may be when we really need to be watchful. **First Thessalonians 5:3–4** tells us to be wary when people think there is peace and safety. This might be another sign of the imminent return of Christ.

But other possible scenarios include that pressure might build for the PA to enter the fight against Israel if Israel overplays their hand in the Gaza Strip. Could Hezbollah enter the fray from Lebanon and cause Israel to have to open a multi-front war? In 2006, Israel battled with Hezbollah until a negotiated settlement ended the conflict. Analysts were surprised by Hezbollah's enhanced ability to fight based on their performance in a previous conflict with Israel back in the 1980s. Would Iran enter the fray? As I said earlier, when war starts no one can be sure how it will end.

But what we can be sure of is all conflicts in this world will not end until Christ returns to set up His kingdom on earth. Let us pray that day comes sooner rather than later.

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NEHEMIAH, continued from page 1

I mourned for days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven. And I said, “I pray You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God Who keeps covenant and mercy for those who love Him and keep His commandments....”

Next, he admits that “we” have sinned against “You.” He includes himself. He realizes that if they repent of their ways God will continue His relationship with them.

In verse 11 we come across the next bit of information about Nehemiah. He was a cup-bearer for the king. You may ask, well so?

In Daniel 1:4, you can read typical qualifications for those deemed worthy of presence in the king’s court. He would be trusted with the very life of the king, for he would need to taste the wine or even food before the king partook. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Qamma 92b) states: “The whole credit for it is due to his cupbearer.” This implies Nehemiah was the wine steward. He spent much time with the king as a trusted companion.

Now back to the story. Months pass, and we arrive at the spring season and the month of Nisan (Nehemiah 2:1). Why the long delay from November/December to Nisan (in or around April)? Was he unable any longer to hide his grief for his people before the king? I think the greater point was that the king was in tune with Nehemiah so well that he noticed something different. Nehemiah was sad, so much so that his facial expressions and body language showed his condition. The king asks why he is sad, and Nehemiah tells of the state of Judea, specifically Jerusalem. The king cuts to the chase and asks what he wants.

Nehemiah once again does what? Prays for guidance from God!

What does he ask for but to leave the king’s side as a trusted companion to leave for a construction project without a specific timeline of return. Oh, and the queen was there too. More trust for a Jewish slave.

Nehemiah requested letters of passage and access to timber, and the king gave him the necessary documents and an armed entourage as well (verse 9).

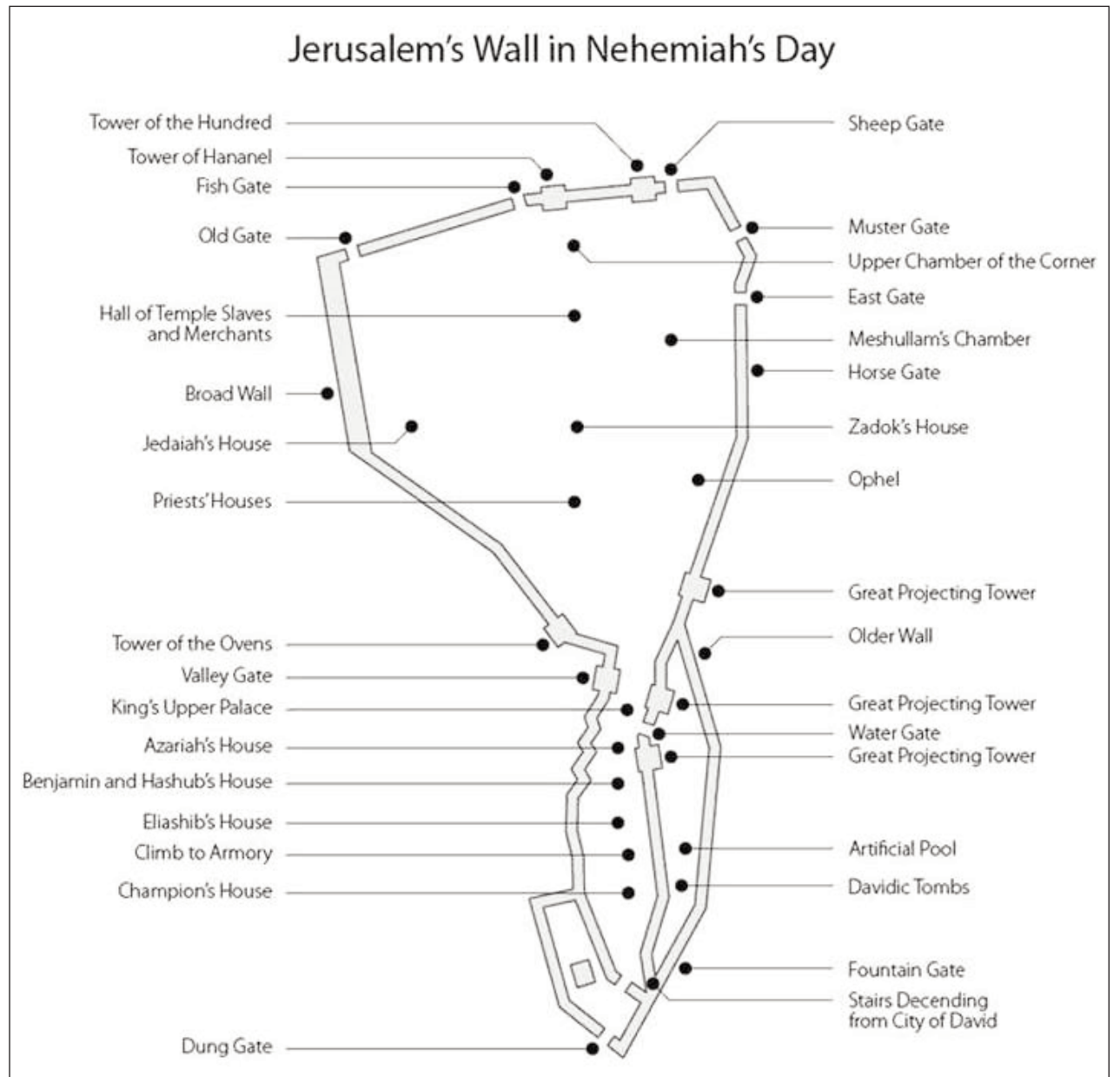
What kind of man elicits such honor and respect? And trust for his word? Was Nehemiah an accomplished building contractor with the ability to assign sub-contractors? What talents did he possess to take on such a massive project? The story continues with more revealing qualities of this man. Once he arrives on the unsettling scene of Jerusalem, he decides to do a personal evaluation of the situation. He did not ask for advice from those there. Sounds like he had a plan, a well thought-out one that went back to his time in the king’s court. By the way, he was now governor of this province. After viewing the poor situation, he gives a speech to the Jews with such power, they are ready to the task.

Leadership qualities? The surrounding governors ridicule Nehemiah upon hearing of his plan. It is a common practice to ridicule the efforts of others to dissuade and discourage them so much so that they give up from the weight of the scorn. Have you been under such a weight in decisions you’ve made in your life? If you are a first-generation Christian, you may have.

Nehemiah’s response?

“Then I answered them and said to them, ‘The God of heaven, He will prosper us, and we, His servants, will arise and build. But you have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem’” (Nehemiah 2:20).

Chapter 3 may seem rather boring to some, but think about it for a moment. Individual after individual, group after group, station after station join in the effort. There are motivational speakers that make a very good living getting people off the dime, so to speak. Nehemiah was able to motivate, really motivate. Have you ever done a word study in the Bible?



Well here’s an amazing observation. The phrase “next to them” occurs ten times in the Bible and all in Nehemiah chapter 3!

Continuing, Nehemiah is then presented with the next problem he had to address—how the Jews had been treating one another apparently since before he came on the scene.

The Persians taxed heavily on their occupied territories, creating hardship on those not financially able to pay. To compound the problems, there was a food shortage. In chapter 5 we read:

“And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews, for certain ones said, ‘We, our sons and our daughters, are many. Let us get grain for them, so that we may eat and live.’ There were also some who said, ‘We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses. Let us buy grain because of the famine’” (verses 1–3).

Shoulder to shoulder with a unified purpose, each a job to do. Imagine the Church of God with such purpose! Nehemiah had a can-do attitude, and it bled down into man and woman. Incredible! Through it all, he gave God the credit.

The surrounding peoples had planned to make trouble for the Jews (chapter 4), but Nehemiah had gotten wind of their plan and called on God to help. As the story unfolds the planned aggression doesn’t happen, and Nehemiah has the workers continue, but armed and ready. Nehemiah was ready for each challenge.

Continuing in chapter 5, we read: “There were also some who said, ‘We have borrowed money on our lands and vineyards for the king’s tax. Yet now our flesh is like the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children. And, lo, we bring our sons and our daughters into bondage, to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought into bondage already. And there is no power for our hand to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards’” (verses 4–5).

This refers to the fact that some had borrowed money and even sold their children into slavery to pay property taxes to the king. This was not an

unusual circumstance in the Persian Empire, which taxed excessively, removing vast sums of money from circulation, and thereby running up inflation.

“Documents from Babylonia show that many inhabitants of this area had to mortgage their fields and orchards to get silver for the payment of taxes to the king. In many cases they were unable to redeem their property and became landless hired laborers; sometimes they were compelled to give away their children into slavery.

“According to some Egyptian data, the taxation was so heavy that the peasants fled to the cities, but were arrested by the monarchs [regional governors] and brought back by force” (M. Dandamayev, “Achaemenid Babylonia,” *Ancient Mesopotamia*, I.M. Diakonoff, ed., 1969, p. 308, quoted in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 4). “The acquisition of land by the Persians and its alienation from production helped produce a 50 percent rise in prices.”

Nehemiah is outraged at how the people are treating one another and scolds them roundly. Not only were the Persians taxing heavily but, to make matters worse, usury was being practiced on the poor, something forbidden in the law. Notice what the law says in Exodus 22:25: “If you lend money to one of My people who is poor among you, you shall not be to him as a money-lender, neither shall you lay upon him interest.” Also note Leviticus 25:35–37: “And if your brother has become poor and his hand has failed with you, then you shall help him; yes, even if he is a stranger or a visitor, so that he may live with you. You shall take no interest from him, or an additional profit. But you shall fear your God, so that your brother may live with you. You shall not give him your silver on interest, nor lend him your food for profit.”

There are numerous scriptures in the Psalms and Major Prophets condemning taking advantage of the poor or fellow countrymen. So, he exhorts them to restore things to their rightful state, and they listen and do. It is amazing to read of the power of persuasion Nehemiah had over his governorship. One

might ask, Okay, what did Nehemiah do during his twelve-year tenure as governor? The balance of the chapter tells us.

In verses 14–18, we see that he took no salary, even though he rightfully could have. Also, what he lent was with no interest. He and his servants worked on the wall along with everyone else. He fed over 150 individuals at his table frequently. He was a rich man who self-financed himself and his staff for twelve years. His position at the court of Artaxerxes apparently was a very lucrative position.

Chapter 6 reveals Nehemiah's skill at dealing with political intrigue. The surrounding provincial leaders attempt to divert his building efforts by calling for "negotiations" with the intent to lure Nehemiah some miles away from the worksite to do him harm. He sees through the ruse, but the intrigue continues with five letters threatening accusations of rebellion against the Persian king. He denies such nonsense (he was after all the king's cupbearer). No sooner had he defused this incident, we have this:

"And I came to the house of Shemaiah, the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabel, who was shut up. And he said, 'Let us meet together in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us shut the doors of the

temple, for they will come to kill you. Yea, in the night they will come to kill you.' And I said, 'Should such a man as I flee? And who, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in. And, behold, I discerned that God had not sent him, but that he said this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. Therefore he was hired that I should be made afraid, and do so, and I should sin, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me'" (Nehemiah 6:10–13).

Nehemiah was not a priest, so hiding within the temple as described would be a sin. By now it should be clear we are reading about a very special God-fearing talented man. The wall was completed in 52 days! Try that today.

His next step with Ezra was to begin a spiritual revival which unfolds in chapter 7. The scene is the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles with the reading of the law prompted by the people's request. The spiritual revival is recorded through chapter 12. Sounds great, but wait. After twelve years, he left to return to the king's court. Then news comes to him of a falling away. In his absence, the Jewish state falls away in three aspects: ceasing the support of the priesthood in tithes and offerings, Sabbath breaking,

and intermarriage with idolators. He once again must redirect the people to God's ways and directives. Without a godly leader, they fall back time and again.

So what does all this mean? What can we apply to our lives?

In review, we find Nehemiah tasked with a series of problems in Judea. The area has fallen into serious disrepair, the people are morally and spiritually wanting.

Fast forward to Christ's return. What state of affairs will we face upon setting up the Kingdom of God with Jesus Christ? Without Satan's influence and with direct connection with Jesus Christ, we will have a somewhat easier task, but nonetheless it will take a full 1,000 years to prepare the planet for an influx of approximately 100 billion resurrected humans. The planet will need an "all hands on deck" attitude by us. Are we preparing, as Nehemiah obviously did, with God's support and wisdom in our lives to rebuild this planet to an Eden-like state in all necessary aspects? Matthew 25 and Luke 19 lay out some very high standards for us to attain to. What talents that we have are we developing to participate in this massive rebuild?

The Mystery of the World's Most Contested Real Estate

By JEFF FLANICK



At the time of this writing, it is well past one month of war between Hamas and the nation of Israel. While it is possible for a cessation of hostilities in the region by the time this article is published, I do not hold out much hope for such an outcome. Animosity between Arabs and Jews, descen-

dants of Ishmael and Isaac, have gone on for many centuries. We have witnessed violence and unspeakable atrocities, vast destruction, and retaliation these past few weeks. The issues surrounding the ever-present turmoil in the Holy Land are complex—biblically, historically, and geographically. The intention of this article is to present information for consideration which may not have been previously contemplated by the reader.

The establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 was a watershed moment in Middle East as well as world history. Individuals, including many Christians, hold views pertaining to the current nation of Israel that may in fact not be true. The purpose of this article is to increase our grasp of what the Bible has to say about issues affecting our world currently. It goes without saying that any violence by either side in this conflict is regrettable beyond words. We worship a Messiah who is the Prince of Peace, the antithesis of violence! There is a large segment of evangelical Christianity that has been influenced by Christian Zionism and a belief that the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948 was a fulfillment of the sixty-sixth chapter of Isaiah.

"Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once?" (Isaiah 66:8, NKJV throughout unless noted). Is this well-circulated assumption biblically accurate upon intense scrutiny? Weren't Jewish people in the land prior to 1948? Do Jews comprise all the tribes of Israel? When the Ottoman Empire fell after World War I, it was partitioned by the Allies. In a simplistic cursory summary, large sections of the empire were given to Britain and France to control. The French mandated areas eventually yielded Syria and Lebanon. One of



the areas Britain controlled became British Mandate for Palestine, which was later divided into Mandatory Palestine and the Emirate of Transjordan. Adherents to the Isaiah 66:8 theory regard the nation state of Israel's "birth" on May 14, 1948, when the British Mandate over Palestine expired, as being confirmation of Isaiah's prophecy. Many fail to remember there was another "birth of a nation in a day," *Transjordan*, about the same time, in the same region, under similar conditions. On May 25, 1946, the emirate became the "Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan," achieving full independence on June 17, 1946. Transjordan became known as Jordan in 1949, following the 1948 Arab Israeli War, and the annexation of the west bank of the Jordan River.

There are many other examples of nations being *born*, or declared, in a day. Is the official establishment of a governmental authority, within a specified territory, what the Prophet Isaiah was describing? It is more probable Isaiah was looking deep into the future, to the ultimate fulfillment of God's Covenant with His people. The nation Isaiah describes involves not just geographical land but, more importantly, a Set-Apart group of people obeying the terms of the Covenant God made with His followers at Sinai. Those who abide by God's Covenant are in fact Israel, independent of where they are located currently. Credit must go to Todd Bennett of Shemayisrael.net for motivation to contemplate these issues.

Are most of the people in the land of Israel today in Covenant with God? Wikipedia states the following: "A Gallup survey in 2015, determined that 65% of Israelis say they are either 'not religious' or 'convinced atheists,' while 30% say they are 'religious.'



Israel is in the middle of the international religiosity scale, between Thailand, the world's most religious country, and China, the least religious." In 2007, a poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute found that 27 percent of Israeli Jews say that they keep the Sabbath, while 53 percent said they do not keep it at all. The nation of Israel today fails to meet the criteria of **Isaiah 42:6**: "I, the LORD, have called you for a righteous purpose, and I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and appoint you to be a covenant for the people and a light to the nations" (BSB). Of the Israelis who are religious, the vast majority of them practice Judaism whereby they do not believe in our Savior Jesus Christ. John is explicit in his first letter regarding the need to acknowledge Jesus Christ in one's walk with God: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world" (1 **John 4:1–3**). The country of Israel fails to meet this clear standard. Understanding most readers are well aware of the problems with Islam, I will simply state Islam is incompatible with God's Holy Word and is a false religion.

Having laid the *groundwork* for what I want to cover, I will now focus on the world's most contested real estate: Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the city most mentioned in the Bible, over eight hundred times! Biblically, the word *Jerusalem* does not always sim-

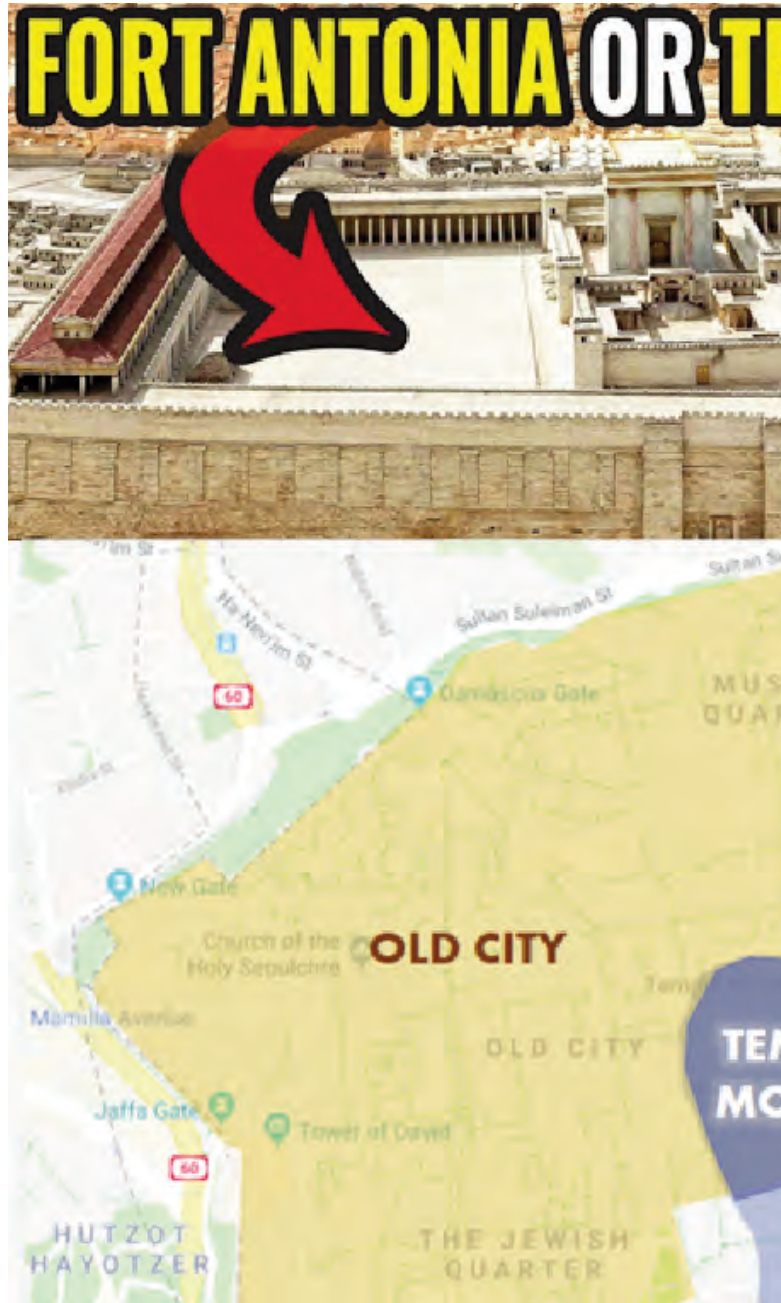
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ply refer to the small geographical footprint of the city limits. The name Jerusalem can be said to refer to the nation of Israel itself, much like Washington, D.C. may stand euphemistically for the United States when referenced in world affairs. Among the names employed to describe the city are: the City of Peace, Mount Zion, Zion, and the City of David, to list just a few. Many are under the impression these various names are all synonymous, when in fact this is not always the case. As with many concepts and ideas in the Bible, there are many levels of interpretation; therefore one must always remember context is of paramount importance! An article I read on the website *OneTruthOneLaw.com* entitled “City of David, Which Is Zion – Not Synonymous with Jerusalem” referenced a verse from the first book of Kings (among many other examples) to illustrate this point: “Now Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the chief fathers of the children of Israel, to King Solomon in Jerusalem, that they might bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the City of David, which is Zion” (1 Kings 8:1). Notice the ark was being brought up from Zion to Jerusalem, hence they are not the exact same geographical location. Of course there are many sources and discussions surrounding concepts such as these. As the prior example shows, at times it may become necessary to reevaluate our assumptions to assure they accurately align with Scripture upon closer examination.

The zenith of Jerusalem’s religious life was the Temple built for service to the True Living God. Readers are certainly familiar with its history and importance. As foretold by Messiah, the Temple (and the city of Jerusalem) were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Vast numbers of Jewish and Christian believers anticipate the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. Current events are acutely centered on Jerusalem, and in particular the Temple Mount/Dome of the Rock/Al Aqsa Mosque compound. The Old City of Jerusalem is the eye of the hurricane, so to speak. Palestinians have images of the Dome of the Rock on flags, paintings, and photographs which are prominently displayed everywhere, including the walls of official government buildings and diplomatic offices. This area is the third holiest site in Islam, whereby legend has it Mohammed was taken by a magical horse from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then to heaven during a single night’s journey in AD 621. An intractable problem is the intersection of three discordant religions laying claim to the same piece of real estate. Setting aside “rightful” claims to the land of Israel, Palestine, Jerusalem, and the Old City of Jerusalem, the Temple Mount area is the most difficult predicament. Most people believe the large Temple Mount complex was the actual site of Solomon’s Temple, later to be rebuilt and expanded during the reign of Herod. I realize there is so much more to be said pertaining to the Temple’s history—of course, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel immediately come to mind.

Perhaps, the assumed site of the original Temple being located on the Temple Mount is correct. After all, how could the location of such a monumental structure, so important to not only the spiritual history of mankind, but the fate of peoples, nations, and empires, simply vanish? This is surely a mystery, at least to those who wish to deeply consider the matter. On the surface, the simple fact ultra-orthodox Jews revere the Western Wall as the last remnants of the Temple complex strongly convey plausible confirmation of this area as the ruins of the Temple of God. World leaders and dignitaries make it a point to visit, pray, and honor the area of the Western Wall when they visit Jerusalem. It is well known that when Muslim invaders conquered areas, they “con-



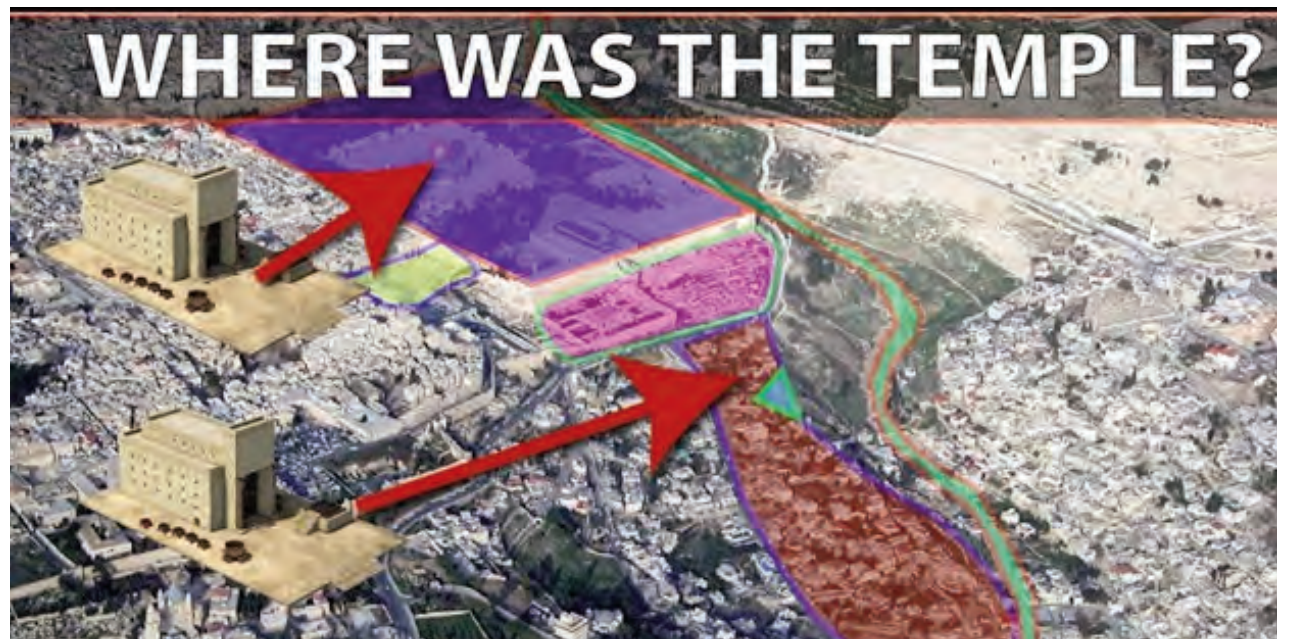
verted” religious buildings of other faiths into Islamic places of worship. Prime examples of this are the Hagia Sophia in Turkey, the Umayyad Mosque, also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, and even the Parthenon in Athens, Greece, among multitudes of other houses of worship around the world. Would Muslim invaders in the Holy Land place their house of worship, signifying their conquest of an inferior people and an inferior religion, in the wrong place? These notions are just a few things worthy of contemplation. I have read some very interesting books, pamphlets, and publications suggesting that the Temple Mount area is in fact *not* the location of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem.

One thing to consider are the words of Christ concerning the Temple. “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not *one* stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’”

(Matthew 24:1–2). Consequently, how do we explain the massive wall of stones remaining to this day, one on top of the other? Is this a word translation issue? Was the massive stone wall we see today rebuilt afterward? Was this not the correct location of the original Holy of Holies? Proponents of the alternate location hypothesis regarding the placement of the Temple include: Ernest Martin, Robert Cornuke, and Don Esposito. Key areas of focus viewed as providing convincing evidence for a different location of the Temple are the Gihon Spring, and the Roman Fort Antonia. Temple Service required a considerable source of water. Think about the multitudes of pilgrims visiting the Temple during God’s Appointed Times, and the requisite ritual baths, purification ceremonies, and general water needs of the people during this time. Of course, the slaughter of multitudes of animals was a messy endeavor, creating a need for vast amounts of water as well. The Gihon Spring was the only major source of running water in Temple times. Alternate location advocates also draw parallels to the size of the fort needed to house a legion of Roman soldiers, stating that the size of the Temple Mount aligns quite well with other Roman Forts in the days of the empire. I watched several YouTube videos that were quite convincing in substantiating a case for these beliefs.

Martin, who is a leading proponent of an alternate location of the original Temple, states it was built “over the Gihon Spring just north of the ancient City of David (Zion) on the southeastern ridge of Jerusalem. All the present antagonists fighting in Jerusalem over the Temple site are warring over (and for) the wrong place.”

In my quest for fairness, as well as a desire to uncover the *real* truth, I read and viewed material on the opposite side of the debate. There are solid arguments for the traditional Temple location, on the Temple Mount, in material that supports this more readily accepted view. Archaeologists have uncovered vast manmade cisterns under the Temple Mount which could easily provide the water necessary for Temple service. Language interpretations disputing the size of the Roman Legion stationed at Jerusalem are evaluated. Additionally, a critical examination of the Jewish historian Josephus’ writings is undertaken. As the title of this article states, I consider the location of the First and Second Temples a mystery. There is much information to unpack when you begin to examine this issue. I would be happy to



direct you to some of the sources of information I have discovered on this subject. Simply send me an email to the address provided at the conclusion of this article. I would also be interested in any input, or sources you may want to share with me concerning the Temple's history and location. Many believe that building a Temple in Jerusalem will usher in the Millennium, expedite the appearance of Messiah (a "first coming" according to a segment of Judaism: a second coming as expected by Christians), or cause a world war between the East (Islam) and the West (Judeo-Christianity). Just for a moment, let's imagine a monumental archaeological discovery "proving" the Temple was located just about a kilometer down the hill from the Temple Mount. Do you believe there would then be peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Jews, with the Al Aqsa Mosque preserved on the Temple Mount complex, and a third Temple built in the City of David? Would the difficult issues between Jews and Muslims now be fully resolved as a result of this scenario? Zooming out for perspective, let's examine matters on a deeper level. Is the intention to build and expand the nation of Israel, as well as the city of Jerusalem, of supreme importance to the family of God at this time? Would the construction of a third Temple change the hearts of men, and draw them closer to their God? Would the presence of Temple worship in Jerusalem cause the Jewish people to accept Jesus as the Messiah?

It is important to note Jerusalem is not always referred to in a positive light by the Father and the Son. In the interest of brevity, I will quote just one verse to illustrate this point. In **Matthew 23:37**, Messiah says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!" Perhaps, current events in Israel are the activation of the Deuteronomic curses for failure to comply with God's Covenant? Acts chapter one contains a noteworthy conversation Christ had with His followers as He was preparing to ascend to the Father, after His resurrection. "Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (**Acts 1:6**). The Apostles, who were so close to Jesus, did not have a proper understanding of the chronology



of events that needed to take place *before* the restoration of Israel, and Christ's reign in Jerusalem, could occur. Not only was it not time for the Kingdom reign to begin, continuing to read the following verse Christ tells His disciples, "when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The Holy Spirit expands the scope of Messiah's message and ministry to the whole earth, not just the modest confines of the Holy Land. Recall, **Matthew 24:31** states, "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." The elect are not gathered from the Holy Land only, but the *entire* earth.

The subject of the Temple and the fate of Jerusalem is most fascinating. Pondering end-time prophecies, and potential scenarios leading to their fulfillment can be enthralling. We must tread carefully in our deliberations however, and be mindful of what was told to the prophet Daniel, as written down in the twelfth chapter of his scroll: "Go on your way, Daniel," he replied, "for the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end" (**Daniel 12:9**, BSB). During the days of Solomon's Temple, **1 Kings 8:11** reveals, "for the glory *and* brilliance of the LORD had filled the LORD's house (temple)" (AMP). The Temple indeed did house the presence of God. The Apostle Peter, in the New Testament, says, "you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (**1 Peter 2:5**). Notwithstanding the timing, manner, or location of a temple being constructed in Jerusalem, we should remember what the Apostle Paul wrote in **1**

Corinthians 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"

Returning to the subject of "The World's Most Contested Real Estate," perhaps we would be better served considering something much more valuable than real estate: mankind. The family of Elohim's (God's) great purpose is written in **Genesis 1:26**: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness....'" Satan, the Adversary, has been contesting, battling against God's great plan since the beginning. We are familiar with the story of Job, and Satan's ensuing challenges directed at him. In **Ephesians 6:12**, Paul says, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*." **First Peter 5:8** states, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." Thankfully we know how great God's love for us is. **John 3:16** tells us, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." This incredible Truth proves how valuable mankind is to God. Utilizing the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with of the powerful armor of God as listed by Paul in the book of Ephesians, we have the opportunity to be triumphant in our battle against Satan. We have the ability to be found faithful and obedient, as members of God's Covenant Community, worthy to participate in the wonderful scene described in **Revelation 21:2-4**: "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God *is with* men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'"

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The Greatest Ceasefire

By **GEORGE ROPER**



2023 has been a year fraught with several armed conflicts playing out on the world scene that have garnered a great deal of attention. Instances of ongoing regional unrest have always been present. Yet, in recent months, notable areas of war-ridden strife have exploded, commanding the attention of the rest of the world. Emerging from these hotbeds are hostilities and counter offenses committed with impunity by opposing sides on a global stage. As the atrocities and collateral damage from these wars mount, many onlookers have called for a ceasefire.

Although a truce does not represent an immediate resolution in the state of war, it can serve as a promising step towards peace. Unfortunately, ceasefires often dissolve as animosities boil over and war resumes. For this reason, many are skeptical of the effectiveness of an armistice. Peace appears to have no permanence. In fact, the concept of genuine peace seems to be a fantasy rather than an achievable reality.

Notable ceasefires have been reflected in fable and history. One illustration of a noteworthy ceasefire is recounted in the story of the Trojan War. The anecdote is found in various sources of Greek Mythology, Greek poetry, and Roman works. The narrative chronicles the ancient city of Troy as it was besieged by the early Greeks. The Trojans had been in a fierce war with the Greeks for a decade. The struggle had now reached a standstill. One of the strongest elements of the story relates how the Greeks aborted their siege of the city and abandoned their camp. As an extension of a ceasefire, the Greeks left behind a giant wooden horse to serve as homage to the city and its gods. Unbeknownst to the Trojans, a contingent of the Greek army was hiding inside of the large monument. When the Trojans saw that the Greeks had departed and had erected an immense statue as tribute, the Trojans gullably wheeled the structure into their walled city. When night fell, the Greek forces emerged from the horse and opened the gates to the walled city. The waiting Greek army then sacked the city of Troy, whose own army had been caught off guard. In the end, not only did the ceasefire prove not to be effective but it also revealed itself to be a ruse.

Many dismiss the account of the Trojan War as fiction. However, archaeological evidence does support the existence of Troy. Early written accounts also give credence to a military conflict at the time. Scholars debate how much truth lies in the legends associated with the Trojan War and what is actually plausible. Nevertheless, the ceasefire that was prominent in the allegory failed. Peace is elusive in fiction, but history proves that peace is equally as evasive in real life.

History demonstrates the influence of another truce by way of an impromptu ceasefire in the winter of 1914 during World War I. The ceasefire is more commonly known as the "Christmas Truce," as it occurred during the seasonal holiday in December. In the early stages of World War I, after five months of fighting in Europe, something strange occurred on the battlefield. Soldiers from opposing sides paused their fighting and emerged from their tactical positions in the trenches. They began to congregate and fraternize with each other in the middle of the battlefield. What ensued was a co-mingling of British, French, German, and Belgian troops. They exchanged pleasantries, sang songs, smoked ciga-

Continued next page

rettes, exchanged gifts, shared group pictures, and held a light scrimmage game of soccer. Both sides made allowances to retrieve their dead and even had joint burial ceremonies.

This pause in fighting was not officially sanctioned by high command but simply occurred spontaneously among the soldiers. Although all military personnel did not take part in the truce, multiple sections of infantry that extended along the frontline participated in the ceasefire. As reports of the ceasefire spread, many believed the accounts to be a story tale. However, the newspapers of the day soon corroborated those stories. Such a ceasefire was indeed unique and sadly would never happen again. The commanding officers from both sides were unmoved and took punitive steps to ensure that such an occurrence would not repeat itself in the future. Regrettably, the truce would only last for several days before both sides returned to practicing war.

The parties involved in ceasefires are often skeptical of the process and reluctant to participate. They may feel that a called truce is spurious and will not allow for their interests to be adequately addressed.

Indeed, ceasefires may have their limitations. Although ceasefires can falter and result in a resurgence in fighting, there are also many examples of ceasefires that have been successful. Interestingly enough, one of the most successful ceasefires have yet to occur.

The Bible foretells of a future period of time when God will usher in a global governance that will initiate a prolonged ceasefire.

“In the last days, the mountain of the LORD’s house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob’s God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths.’ For the LORD’s teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The LORD will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war

anymore” (Isaiah 2:2–4, New Living Translation).

It is clear that mankind’s endeavors in diplomacy, however well intentioned, have been inadequate. Thus far, universal peace has been unattainable. So much so, the potential longevity of a ceasefire is often met with pessimism. As seen in the account of the Trojan War, the proposal of a ceasefire may be best approached with cynicism for one’s own protection. Conversely, the ceasefire which occurred during the “Christmas Truce” was viewed as being so preposterous that, to this day, many believe the story to be a fable. However, the ceasefire to be initiated by God is assured to be successful and authentic.

“I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever’” (Revelation 21:3–4, New Living Translation).

Indeed, the ceasefire that God will establish will come to be known as the greatest ceasefire ever.

The Absurdity of Atheistic Philosophy

By MICHELLE ALGARRA



A Letter to a Christian Nation is a pusillanimous, anti-Christian polemic that condemns the belief in the existence of God, most especially the Judeo-Christian God, and the veracity of the Bible. It is written in simple English, and is more a brief philosophical exposition than dissertation on the reason why God does not exist and why Christianity is, as it seems to the author and other atheists, a farce.

Atheists like Sam Harris (the author of the book), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), and Bertrand Russell (*Why I am Not a Christian*) believe in the non-existence of God, surprisingly from a moralistic point of view. The main gist of their arguments is that there would not be so much suffering in the world if God exists, that Christianity (traditional Christianity) is a hypocritical religion, and that the tenets of the Bible are not one hundred percent feasible or are untenable for people who espouse different philosophical and moral viewpoints.

The proofs of the existence of God are questioned—such as intelligent design, answered prayer, the human manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, and even the viability of the moral tenets and teachings of the Bible in leading to productivity, health, and fulfillment and happiness in life—the application of the Bible in solving all human problems, in other words.

Atheists fail to understand that moral relativism, moral ambiguity, atheism, the theory of evolution, etc., are some of the root causes of all human problems and the fall of human society. Without a solid belief in God, albeit the true and living God—the God of the Bible, or the God of true Christianity—mankind loses all moral underpinnings, resulting in the proliferation of woe and misery and the abundance of evil.

The Bible prohibits abortion, for example, not because the disposal of human embryos (as if they were nothing more than waste products or excrement) is not considered a necessity for scientific research and as some kind of birth-control method or technique, but because scientifically and in all other considerations it involves the torture and murder of innocent human beings in their mothers’ wombs. It

questions the sanctity of human life and hides the fact that abortion also involves horrendous physical and emotional torture for both the little babies being aborted as well as their mothers and even fathers. Fact of the matter is, abortion is one of the ritual practices of pagan religion—infant sacrifice to Molech, Baalzebub, or Satan the devil.

In the book of Romans in the New Testament and the Torah in the Old Testament, the Bible prohibits homosexuality and condemns homosexual practices, not gays and lesbians as human beings, but because such practices are immoral, unnatural, and perverted. This is seen in the rise of AIDS (and it has already become endemic) and other forms of STDs, as well as psychological or psychiatric illnesses and emotional trauma as a result of homosexuality having been given credence as acceptable rather than abnormal behaviour.

There are numerous other examples. However, it is blasphemous, even for an atheist, to call the Christian God “psychopathic,” to question the Ten Commandments and the virgin birth, and to idolize the theory of evolution and scientific principles in the dogmatic assertion that it is the first cause and not God.

Common sense will tell you gorgeous little infants and the numerous specimens of human aesthetics or those who seem to embody the traits of physical beauty (according to “civilized” society’s standards) such as beauty queens, movie stars, etc., can hardly be compared to their supposed ancestors, hominid forms or the relatives of apes, chimpanzees, and baboons. Even people suffering from deformities or abnormalities would hardly accept the insulting or pejorative statement that they would in any way resemble the form, shape, and appearance, of primates.

Human intelligence is another proof that God exists. The fact that human beings are intelligent is enough evidence to show that we—all human beings—are facsimiles of God, for sentient and human life is the most profound creation. The very fact that these atheists proclaim, “God is dead” based on human philosophy is, paradoxically, proof that God exists, because they deny His existence based on their personal standards of morality, deviant though these standards may be.

Even history and archaeology are proofs that God exists, and their scientific underpinnings or evidence

from natural law are incontrovertible. So is creation itself, the existence of the whole universe, human society, and the spirit realm which is codified in the plurality of religious systems that recognizes the fact that God, or gods, and other spirit beings do exist.

Atheists like Harris, Dawkins, and Russel are blind bards singing praises to the false gods of atheism, Darwinism, natural selection, and moral ambiguity. Atheism in and of itself is both a philosophy and a religion, and its proponents being themselves moralistic is testimony to its farcical absurdity. Hilarious, based on an acerbic Christian’s perspective.

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Clearwater, Florida 2023--A Feast To Remember



Feast of Tabernacles services at Clearwater site

What a great time 80+ people had this year at the Feast of Tabernacles in Clearwater, Florida. It was indeed, a *Feast to be remembered* for many years to come. It was framed in some of the best weather Florida could provide. Opportunities to meet new people and hear inspiring presentations, while enjoying events that were nicely scheduled throughout the week—it really was a great time in sunny Clearwater this year!

The Feast commenced with a “meet and greet” on Friday evening at the Edge Hotel. Though it was lightly attended, Bill Watson, our Feast coordinator, took time to explain the foundation of what is central to the observance of the Feast and the Last Great Day. It was assuring to those attending the rest of the week would be in “theme” about our destiny as born sons of God and His Kingdom on earth!

Mr. Watson’s first-day presentation explained the Feast of Tabernacles as a “Metaphor for God’s Kingdom.” Referencing Luke 13:18–19, he compared it to a mustard seed that grows into a magnificent tree, providing lodging for all—drawing on the fact that God’s Kingdom will grow and encompass the whole earth and ultimately beyond, providing mankind a place to spend eternity with Him. In effect, we’ve been given “*the greatest winning lottery ticket*”—an opportunity to become empowered spirit beings in service for God and His will. However, Bill warned, Christ’s Second Coming has the potential to be mistaken as an alien invasion by many. So we must stay ever vigilant in reading our Bible to know the *truth of God* and stand firm in the coming worldwide deception, which assuredly will wax worse and worse on into the future.

Robert Balsamo’s second-day presentation was given after special music, sung by Miriam Moreno. His message focused on how precious the Kingdom of God is and the promises it contains for us as Christians. Spirit life in the presence of God in His coming Kingdom is our goal. We will be in a position of leadership, even having authority to judge angels; we’ll be “hand-picked” for critical positions. As with any successful team, these individual leaders will need to work together, producing positive results during the Millennium as members of God’s family. So we must spend time *now* in training, knowing and studying God’s Word wholeheartedly, which is our “training manual. Why? Because we are saved by grace, but *rewarded by our works in this lifetime.*”

On the third day, Jeff Flanick gave a presentation entitled “Walking with God,” using the movie *Young Frankenstein* and Aerosmith’s song, “Walk This Way,” as a springboard to his subject. Well-seasoned with humor, Jeff illustrated how brethren need to walk in the direction of righteousness, imitating the

example set by Jesus in their daily lives. He gave examples of many individuals who walked with God in the Bible, from Noah, to Abraham, King David, and others. Using the Old and New Testaments, Jeff quoted scriptures that reinforced the theme of walking with our Father, Psalm 119 being a preeminent example of these scriptures—“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord” (verse 1); “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (verse 105). Jeff concluded by asking the brethren to imagine themselves walking the stunningly exquisite emerald-layered streets of New Jerusalem, described in Revelation 21:10–23 and to hear Christ say, “Well done my good and faithful servant.”

On day four, Deacon Mark Willee from Toledo, Ohio gave the sermon. Mark’s message was centered on “Beauty of Simplicity” as it relates to following God and His will. He contrasted the small Toledo, Ohio congregation with the elaborate pomp and ceremonial services held at the Vatican and asked what observers from a distant galaxy might think regarding the two events. He outlined his analysis into three parts: 1) the beauty of simplicity 2) intent or purpose, and 3) the process. He proceeded, summarizing how God’s expectation of us is to love God, as per the first four commandments, and to love your fellow man as yourself, as per the last six commandments. He concluded by encouraging the brethren to follow the “process,” which is to grow in grace and knowledge, consistently examine yourself in your walk with Christ, and create goals you can measure your progress by. Obviously, the key to that is a “disciplined plan” for Bible study.

Although brethren had ample opportunity to socialize and dine as small groups since their arrival in Clearwater, Tuesday evening was the first organized group event of the Feast. A wonderful sunset catamaran cruise along the Clearwater shoreline was enjoyed by many on an exceptionally gorgeous and serene evening on the ocean while sighting dolphins in the distance. Live music was provided to a sold-out cruise of brethren only. It was great for all onboard, with many memories made and new friendships created as we viewed a most captivating sunset that glowed in a variety of breathtaking colors!

The fifth day presented opportunity for a split sermon led off by Russ Camp of Tennessee. Russ’s sermon began with him asking the congregants how many years they have attended the Feast of Tabernacles. It was interesting to see how many have attended the Feast for many years and even decades. Russ compared faithful observance of God’s Holy Days to the world’s observance of pagan holidays. In our lives we should make every second count, not dwelling on setbacks and trials, but pushing forward

toward the goal of inheriting spirit life. Using an orange as an example, Russ illustrated when we are squeezed by trials in life, it’s possible to produce good fruit (juice); and as James said, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” We should build on our faith and understanding every year with the goal of keeping the Feast as spirit beings one day in God’s glorious Kingdom.

The second half of this split sermon was given by Nelson Moreno from CGI Atlanta, Georgia. He began by saying how he and his family enjoyed the catamaran trip the night before. However, humorously, he explained how he thought and expected a bigger boat. This got everyone laughing and “set the stage” for the heart of his presentation—to remind us the “*innocence of children*” are the gift of God. The brethren were encouraged to always remember Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” and to teach our children this command always, not only by reading it, but by example (Deuteronomy 6:7–12). He mentioned how easy it is to manipulate our children and why it is so important to teach them “how” to live according to God’s will and not become conformed to the world. He concluded by reminding us about Matthew 18:6: “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Day six included Miriam Moreno singing “Dust to Glory” before Robert Balsamo gave his message, which began by reminding us that we are commanded to *rejoice* during this Feast. As children of God, we are well off and, as such, should be cheerful, calm, and happy, *knowing we are His and destined for His Kingdom!* In the Gospel of John, Christ said, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Even though this world is difficult, we should have peace because of our understanding of God’s plan. Tribulations are “*training opportunities*” for those who trust in God. He asked, “If you could have all the pleasures of this world, would you give up your promise of eternal life in God’s Kingdom?” Brethren were reminded the world is turning against God and Christianity. So followers of God’s Way must be careful about how the Bible is characterized and confirm what the Bible actually says for themselves. We are to be disciples consistently studying and unpacking God’s Word.

Thursday evening, a sold-out crowd attended an elegant dinner at the Columbia Restaurant in Sand

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Key, Clearwater. Since 1905 this “Premiere Floridian” restaurant, situated right on the Intracoastal Waterway, has been providing exquisite quality food. This Mediterranean dining location was made to experience the comfort of casual dining in an atmosphere of fellowship and friends. It was a great time and the Mediterranean-style cuisine was just delicious!

It seemed time went so fast and the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles was upon us. Since it was youth day, 14-year-old Preston Collins led services. Additionally, as our tradition is, Bill Watson took opportunity to conduct a blessing of children. There were two girls, Sarah and her sister Victoria, the daughters of Elizabeth Ganesh, who attends CGI St. Petersburg, that were blessed.

Bill and Robert Balsamo shared split sermons. Bill explored our destiny in the Kingdom of God, and explained how most of the world is blinded to the fact God is reproducing Himself to create a family of spirit beings in the world to come. Bill reminded us of the great gift given to us by Christ, which was opening the door that allows us to obtain God’s Holy Spirit—this is significant! Bill spent the rest of the time explaining what a privilege that access is.

In the second presentation, Robert Balsamo encouraged us not to just go along with the way of the world, simply because it’s easy. He reminded us not to be like the Israelites who wanted to turn back to Egypt. He brought to mind Matthew 10:28: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot

kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” And this is why Mr. Balsamo, in reminiscing about the conflict he and his wife experienced when the Worldwide Church of God went apostate, explained just how important it is to stay true to the doctrines by always aligning them with Scripture.

Friday evening Bill Watson led an in-depth Bible study examining the Book of Revelation. He presented a detailed analysis, covering a conceptual outline of the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven plagues for analysis and discussion.

The Last Great Day of the Feast concluded the Holy Day gatherings in Clearwater on Saturday. Services opened with Robert Balsamo giving a splendid offertory message, followed by special music by Miriam Moreno. Bill Watson brought the main message explaining that most of the world is unrepentant; however, God has a plan to ensure all those who have ever lived have an equal chance to eternal life. *God is fair* and He is developing a people that genuinely want to be a part of His Kingdom. Clearly, to become a member of that Kingdom, followers of the “Way” must work on changing their character, their demeanor, and their outlook about their lives and relationship with God, now in this life! Christians today should be committed to continually improving and dedicated



Robert Balsamo delivering a sermon

to becoming better than they were yesterday through prayer, Bible study, and meditation, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

So, in looking back at this year’s Feast, it really was inspiring and helpful and left you with a desire of looking forward to next year’s Feast in 2024 at Clearwater, Florida.

Bill Watson & Jeff Flanick



Many enjoyed a wonderful catamaran sunset cruise along the Clearwater shoreline.

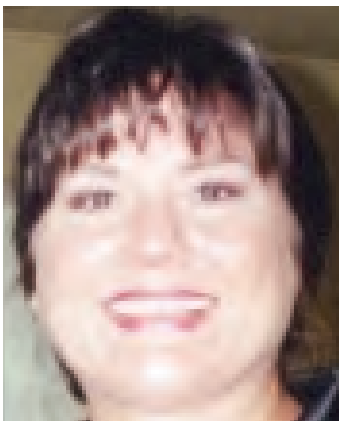


Preston Collins leading songs on Youth Day

In Loving Memory

Carolyn Ann Stokes

January 6, 1956 – August 10, 2023



A memorial service for Carolyn Ann Stokes, 67, of Ruston, Louisiana, was held on November 17, 2023, with Vance Stinson officiating. Carolyn was born on January 6, 1956. She died on August 10, 2023,

following an extended illness.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Lonnie and Margaret Davis.

Survivors include her husband of 26 years, Charles Stokes; sister, Rebecca Christian (husband Curtis); brother, Randy Davis (wife Ann); and the many spiritual brothers and sisters of her church family.

Carolyn had a variety of interests. She loved to cook, enjoyed swimming, and was known for her adventurous spirit, which motivated her to do such

things as take a flight in an ultralight aircraft and go whitewater rafting in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee. She had a great sense of humor, was an avid Bible reader, and loved going to church services. She was also a dog-lover. She once had a dog-boarding business and would take in strays and take care of them.

Carolyn was a longtime member of the Church of God. We look forward to seeing her again when all those who sleep in Christ awaken and rise to meet the returning Christ in the air.

⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵ “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” —1 Corinthians 15

Filipino Brethren Celebrate Feast of Tabernacles/Last Great Day at Four Sites



Brethren from the Kiara and Maranding churches gather for a picture at the Mindanao Feast site.

With excitement and great anticipation, the CGI Philippine congregation welcomed and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day in four different Feast sites. In each of the Feast sites, the atmosphere was one of joy and happiness as brethren from different local congregations who haven't seen each other in a while were able to meet again and spend time with one another. The main festival site is at Summit Ridge Hotel, Tagaytay City. Brethren from the Malolos, Manila, Alabang, Naga, and Masbate congregations converged at this site. We also had brethren coming over from UK to celebrate with us. For the first time, a fellowship group from Orion, Bataan province, joined us in our celebration. All in all, there were about 270 who celebrated the Feast here.

Summit Ridge Feast Site Activities for Everyone

The congregational activities kicked off with the Senior's day held at the Balay Dako restaurant. This traditional activity, hosted by the Naga brethren, is held in honor of our elderly members. Highlights of the activity included our elderly sharing their wisdom and insight to our youth. On the fun side, there was a sing-and-complete-the-lyrics activity patterned after the Singing Bee game. The elderly among us had to supply the missing word/s while singing the chosen "oldies but goodies" song. As it is, the rest of the brethren couldn't resist singing with them and sometimes ended up completing the song for the elderly. The activity ended with some of the elderly being honored by their grandchildren by dancing with them. When it comes to singing and dancing, we, the Filipino brethren, are not the type who would be left behind. We just love singing and dancing. So, it was fun. The game night for the youth and not so young who participated was also fun. It was an online game using Kahoot™, where Bible-based questions were asked. When that was over, the youth agreed to continue but this time focusing on math questions where everybody had fun figuring out the correct answers.

For the first time in our observance of the Feast, we had a family gala night at Quest Hotel, where we were all dressed up to our best—the men in tuxedos or *barong* (traditional Filipino formal wear), the ladies in gowns or evening dress. It certainly added glitter and glamor to our Feast observance. The brethren had fun posing before a 360° video booth in their formal attire. After partaking of a sponsored sumptuous dinner, the brethren were treated to a showcase of the brethren's God-given gifts in the talent show that followed afterwards. As we see it, all

of these activities contributed to a Feast observance worthy of our remembrance.

This year's Feast schedule of activities allowed individual members to pace themselves. There was ample free time for them to hold smaller gatherings and fellowships and sharing. This further strengthened the ties that bind the brethren.

Daily Services – Spiritual Highlight of the Feast

Now, the Feast is not just about the physical food and drinks or the fun activities we had. The highlights are the daily services where hymns of praise and thanksgiving are offered to God and great, inspiring and insightful messages are delivered by the assigned speakers. From the different messages we heard, we learned new insights, things to be reminded of, be reinforced, or just be encouraged. These messages we are blessed to receive because they are very helpful in our Christian living. Some common themes that emerged from the various messages were:

- 1) Rejoicing. We heard several speakers talking about this subject but from different perspectives.

So, to us, God really wanted to impart this message, that we should rejoice during the Feast. After all, that is what He commanded us to do in **Deuteronomy 16:13–14**: "Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns" (NIV). And that's exactly what the Philippine brethren did. We enjoyed the moments we shared, the lunch together, shared stories over good food and drinks, family bondings, and whatever time we shared with the brethren.

- 2) Our incredible destiny. This is a recurring theme every year but, nevertheless, we are glad that they are reinforced year after year. It is an inescapable theme of the Feast. Paul says in **Romans 8:18–19**: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager

Continued next page



Teenagers from the Kiara and Maranding churches providing special music

Continued from previous page

expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (NIV). We are destined to become literal children of God. Paul, without invalidating our sufferings or painful experiences, is encouraging us to always remember this: our present sufferings are nothing compared to what God has in store for us. In other words, we should always keep in mind the ultimate goal for which God created us, whenever we face life’s trials. It should help us focus on what is really important in life.

- 3) Hope for a better future. Some of the messages we heard highlighted the reality of a better future for all of mankind, of peoples living in harmony, of worldwide peace. The Bible describes it in **Isaiah 2:3-4**: “Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (NIV). This is so timely given the unrest and volatility we are currently witnessing in the world. The messages we heard during the Feast help us to hold on to this hope and reminds us of that peaceful world to come. And this will soon be our reality experience.

Beautiful and uplifting special music was provided by our talented singers each day of the Feast.

Other Feast Sites

What we have described so far are the events at the Tagaytay Feast site. However, we can be sure that these same joys and wonders of Feast keeping were experienced as well in other Feast sites:

Visayas Sites

- 1) Bayfront Hotel, Cebu City. Brethren from Sagay, Maranding, and some from Alabang and Manila



The “Demillo Sisters with their Children” sing “Blessed Assurance” at Cebu site.”

congregations joined the Cebu brethren in their celebration of the Feast. There were 70 attendees.

2) Midtown Hotel, Iloilo City. About 24 attended this Feast site.

Mindanao Site

- 1) JM Horizon Resort, Initao, Misamis Oriental. The Maranding and Kiara congregations with peak attendance of 56 converged at this site for their celebration.

Other Highlights: Bible Studies, an Ordination, and Baptisms

During this year’s Feast, formal Bible studies were conducted in the Tagaytay, Cebu, and Initao Feast sites. At the Tagaytay Feast site, the ministers fielded questions the brethren had, dealing with a variety and wide range of topics such as baptism, interfaith marriage, the youth’s role in the church, the fate of

those who have not heard about Jesus, the stand of the church on LGBTQ, among others.

Among the highlights worthy of note that happened at this year’s Feast was the ordination of Mr. Cris Abiera as deacon of the Cebu congregation. He was supposed to be ordained a few years back but was put on hold temporarily due to the pandemic. Mr. Abiera has been serving the Cebu brethren as sermonette man for some time now.

This year’s Feast was made more joyful with several baptisms. We had two baptisms in Tagaytay and one from Initao. Prior to the Feast, five were baptized from the Cebu congregation, bringing the total to eight. It is with utmost joy that we welcome to the church of the firstborn Maria Dolores Tuason, Albert Anthony Tuason, Caralyn Rose Valde, Chrystal Demillo, Alexia Mae Cañete, Alexia Dawn Cañete, Jesualene Abiera, and Stephanie Baltazar.

Till We Meet Again

This year’s Feast, as we always say, was the “best Feast ever!” This was made possible by everyone—from those who provided special music, to those who shared their talents, to the speakers, to the generous sponsors, the media and technical team, the Festival coordinators and committees and to all the members who actively participated in the activities, sang their hearts out during the hymn singing, listened actively during the services, and by just staying joyful as this had a positive impact on everyone.

As we now reminisce this year’s Feast, we are now looking forward to that time that we meet again for next year’s Feast celebration. For now, we treasure the beautiful memories we have created and shared with each other.

Ferdie S. Padilla for CGI Philippines



Rene Corpuz enjoys coffee and snacks with the ladies from Cebu.

Brethren Enjoy “Small Taste of the Kingdom” at Salt Lick, KY Feast Site

Some might think it was a usual Sabbath for the Rowan Church of God. That is, those who don’t find it necessary to obey God’s command to keep the Feast of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day. The last feast of the year. But it wasn’t the usual Sabbath. It was a High Holy Sabbath.

As we gathered with anticipation and joy, we saw some usual faces and some new ones. There were participants from congregations in Kentucky, West Virginia, Indiana, Michigan, and Texas. Not a mistake. The great state of Texas.

We were blessed with messages of hope, inspiration, and knowledge. It was obvious the speakers spent a lot of time and put much thought into their messages. Although not planned, the Ten Commandments became the theme. Some of those messages covered our fate, praying, preserving God’s written Word, faith, comparing the beast to God’s Kingdom, God’s harvest, not knowing the truth, the Last Great Day, and of course, the Ten Commandments—the Way to Peace.

There was also special music. Some nervousness, but real talent. Also, youth day. They too concentrated on the Ten Commandments.

Each day we had a meal prepared for us that was delicious.

We also had planned activities every day. Some of those included a visit to the local Planetarium, a train ride, a paddle boat ride, and a fish fry. And, of course, everyone’s favorite, bingo night. A seven-year-old was our champ this year.

For the most part, we had cool but sunny weather. But Thursday we had some rain and it remained cloudy through Friday morning. But by noon it was sunny and warm. Just in time for a baptism at Cave Run Lake. What a blessing to be a part of welcoming another member into God’s family.

A common comment by those attending was, “It was the best Feast ever.” Not surprising, because over the years we have learned there is more to keeping God’s holy days than just showing up. We are a family. That

special thing that happens when you walk in the door each Sabbath. What is that special thing? Fellowship. It begins when you walk through the door and only takes a pause with “Good Morning my family” through the last “Amen,” and then it begins again as we share a meal. And it lasts until we go our separate ways to go home. Haven’t we all learned that just showing up isn’t enough? If we are to be a part of God’s family, it must begin now. Faith isn’t enough. What are we doing with that faith? Being self-righteous isn’t the answer. After all, we are just a bunch of sinners trying to be better. Does that offend you? Then take a look at yourself and read Romans 3:23, John 8:7, and Hebrews 4:15. All of us were there for one purpose only and to be able to do so as a close family. It was a small taste of what God’s Kingdom will be like. Could anyone ask for more? Thank you, Father, for all the good in our lives. May He continue to bless all of us each day until He returns.

Alice Edwards Lauria

Feast-goers From Several Groups Join CGI Brethren at Galveston Site

What an amazing Spirit-filled Feast we celebrated in Galveston, Texas this year. The fellowship was incredible as we had a very diverse collection of people from several different Sabbath-keeping churches. Churches represented included CGI, United, Living, Tomorrow's Church of God, Hebraic Roots, Hebrew Israelites, as well as other independent Churches of God.

The Feast began with a welcome praise, prayer, and shofar blowing service on Friday evening to commence the celebration and rejoicing as commanded in the Bible.

The first day we enjoyed special music by Mykala Buchanan. The main message, highlighting our invitation to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, was an uplifting, exciting message encouraging us to be prepared with our garments spotless. It was presented by Pastor Clifton J Buchanan and was titled, "Hear the Invitation." Immediately following the service, a love fellowship meal catered by the Tremont House Hotel was shared by those who were in attendance.

Day two featured the ordination of Deacon Jacques Russell and Deaconess Kathy Joseph. The main message was given by Deacon George Tanakis and was titled "God Will Be Glorified." After services we all headed to the beach for a family pot luck where the "cooks" of the churches shared their delicious dishes and desserts.

Day three, the message was given by MAP Candidate Deacon Albert Debolt and was titled "What's In Store For You, Part 1."

Day four featured the author of the book entitled *Divine Deliverance*, John Norte, who illustrated for us an inspiring detailed message titled "Preparing For the Royal Priesthood."

Day five, Deacon Jacques Russell challenged us to prepare to see "The Greater Works" as promised by Jesus Christ that we would do and witness.

Day six, Deacon George Tanakis presented an emotional heart-to-heart message titled "Entering Into God's Sabbath Rest."

Day seven, MAP Candidate Deacon Albert Debolt presented a thought-provoking picture encouraging us to look forward to "What's In Store For You, part 2."

The Last Great Day was headlined with special

music by Mykala Buchanan. The Last Great Day message was titled "Judgment Day," presented by Pastor Clifton J. Buchanan, where we saw painted throughout the Scriptures the "finality of Satan," the "new beginnings," and the honorable judgment given by the saints as it is written: "Until the Ancient of days came, and **judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom**" (Daniel 7:22, KJV); and, "To execute upon them the judgment written: **this honour have all his saints.** Praise ye the LORD" (Psalm 149:9).

Overall the Feast in Galveston was an incredible, amazing, exciting experience. The mornings prior to services were filled with a children's program directed by Deaconess Kathy Joseph, while the adults had thought-provoking seminars presented by John Norte. Monday: Divine Deliverance; Tuesday to Thursday: "Marriage Supper of the Lamb" (parts 1-3) seminar, PowerPoint presentation; Friday: seminar presented by Teena Tanakis took us on a journey through the "Prophecies Connected to the Wedding."

This event was well attended with 50 persons on the First Day and 40 on the Last Great day. Approximately 70 persons attended throughout the days with various visitors stopping by to fellowship with the Saints of the Most High during this glorious Feast of Tabernacles. Glory and praises belong to God, for his mercy endures forever.



Mykala Buchanan providing special music



John Norte delivering a message



Pastor Clifton J. Buchanan delivering a message at Galveston, Texas Feast site (See BACK PAGE for group photo.)



Feast attendees gather for a group photo on the Last Great Day in Galveston, Texas.



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