

The Christ in the Book of Numbers

TOPICAL STUDIES



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THE CHRIST
in the Book of NUMBERS

Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

Luke 24:44–45

A person can only understand the Bible's prefigurations and prophecies about Jesus if the Lord gives him understanding. In the Book of Luke, we see that when Jesus spoke to His disciples, their hearts burned within them as He explained the Old Testament prophecies concerning Himself (Lk 24:32). The outcome was that they gained a deeper knowledge of His death on the cross and His resurrection, and were able to firmly believe in His promise. Moreover, their hope of eternal life was rekindled, they regained strength and were able to praise God (Lk 24:52, 53).

The Lord Jesus shed His blood to establish a new covenant with His disciples—a covenant that has since been extended to us, even though we were excluded from the first. By believing in the Lord, we are welcomed into the covenant, and we can glimpse the spiritual blessings that He had prepared before the first covenant, and even before creation (Eph 1:3, 4).

The Old Testament shows that within the covenants that God established with the ancient saints He repeatedly hid an everlasting hope—namely, Himself. Through the exposition of the apostles, in

particular Paul, and through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, we are able to comprehend the scale of His salvation and to embrace His faultless plans. It allows us to be filled with a living hope in the eternity beyond this life.

We thank God that Preacher Sheng Chuan Chen has been able to share some important insights into the Pentateuch, drawing upon his study of the Mosaic books and four trips to Palestine. The outcome of his research, *The Christ in the Book of Numbers*, was first published in Chinese in 2001 by the Taiwan General Assembly of the True Jesus Church. It detailed the prefigurations of Christ in Numbers, revealing each one like a hidden pearl, and showed God's silent preparation of salvation from Old Testament times, as well as His mercy upon those who were not His chosen people.

When the International Assembly's Department of Literary Ministry later decided to publish an English version of Preacher Chen's book, it called upon various people to help. The youths of the church in Toronto and the Singaporean Coordination Board undertook the translation work; Sister Li Fang Qiu carried out the revision; the DLM team in the UK did the final editing and proofreading. May God remember and bless all the workers who diligently served Him. Also, may God grant us a deeper knowledge of Christ, God's Anointed One, through the publication of this book.

KC Tsai

**Department of Literary Ministry
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In years past, when I was studying soteriology, I became fascinated by the prefigurations relating to salvation in the Pentateuch. For this reason, I followed up by analyzing some of the theological concepts, and was struck by the richness of the Pentateuch's content and its links to other parts of Scripture, historical periods and teachings concerning the typology of Christ. The Christ who is hidden in the Book of Numbers is a prime contiguity: the prefigurations of God's salvation are indicated metaphorically through various people, events and objects—serving to unfurl the body of Christ in a most comprehensive manner. Because of this, the book stands out in the Old Testament as an exceptional piece of work, and one that is complete in its own right. Although Moses could not have known it when he was transcribing the contents of Numbers, the book is important not only for its wisdom and cultural value, but because it contains the theology of Christ. When we look beyond the literal words and concepts, we find the characteristics and practicality of God's truth.

The redemptive plan of God is an enduring, laborious and extraordinary piece of work that can be seen in the essence of His promises from the time of creation. In the theology of the Old Testament, Christ is the Promised Saviour and King, and He is the locus and core of God's plan. That plan entails the divine proclamation of salvation, the revelation of prefigurations concerning Christ, the manifestation of His true image, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26).

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I was able to undertake the writing of *The Christ in the Book of Numbers* from October 1997

to December 1998, while I was pastoring the churches in Taichung, Lugang and Lunwei. I focused on eight prefigurations in their order of appearance in Numbers, looking beyond the bare theological, literary and historical details, to apply research to the pursuit of theological knowledge and to present important truths for our spiritual cultivation. My hope is that believers will be edified by the teachings, and that the book will be a useful resource for the church.

May the Lord bless the readers and grant them a better understanding of the mighty workings of His salvation, so that our faith can grow as we strive to be successful people in the wilderness. Amen!

Sheng Chuan Chen

The Book of Numbers is one of five books commonly attributed to Moses and is so-called because it records two censuses of the Israelite males. The Hebrew title Bemidbar is derived from the words in the opening sentence: “In the wilderness”. The first half of the book documents God’s laws and statutes, while the second half recounts the history of Moses and Aaron leading the elect during the wilderness years.

The book describes how the Israelites “were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1–2). These were people who experienced the providential care of God and yet readily accepted the bad report of the spies who were sent Canaan. The outcome was rebellion and a refusal to believe in God’s promise. In the end, the spies were killed by a plague; those who murmured were denied entry into Canaan; and the remainder were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Num 14:1–38). Who could have imagined such tragic consequences when they first set out from Egypt?

Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:17–19

However, did God totally reject this group of disbelieving, ignorant and helpless people? And were the forty years of wandering simply a cruel and heartless punishment? Not at all. God contained His fury

and continued to care for the Israelites. He also taught them His laws which set out the things they needed to do to preserve their lives. As it transpired, all their experiences—their rebellion, repentance, failures and victories—became examples for believers in the end time (1 Cor 10:11).

Sadly, just as the life of man is limited, so is his wisdom. The Israelites could only see the adverse circumstances before them and were overwhelmed. They could not understand the greatness of God’s plan, nor could they obey His will to complete the arduous journey. Instead, they rebelled and murmured continuously, thereby incurring His wrath (1 Cor 10:1–11). Perhaps, if the elect had been able to see ahead, to understand how significant their forty-year journey would be to later generations, they might have taken pride in their sufferings and played out the roles that God had appointed for them. Unfortunately, the forty years passed in mist and smoke. It is only now, in hindsight, that Christians are able to see the valuable teachings from the wilderness era: prefigurations relating to the faith of the elect in the last days, God’s forgiveness and the salvation work of Christ.

The life of God’s elect in the wilderness is documented in Exodus 12:37 to 19:25 and Numbers 16:1 to 25:18. Besides the historical details, the point to note about these two biblical passages is that God had hidden important truths about the Messiah within the system of ritual cleansing and salvation. Indeed, Jesus would become its true image. Hence, the Lord told the Jews:

Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

John 5:45–47

In the Mosaic books, we find many references to, and prefigurations concerning, Jesus Christ. These are extremely important, but are often overlooked by Bible scholars. Therefore, the author hopes that through the explanations offered in this book believers can understand God’s plan and superior wisdom.

As there are ten prefigurations concerning Jesus Christ in the Book of Numbers, we shall refer to them as “the ten Christs in the Book of Numbers”. However, we should note that these prefigurations are in no way disconnected: they are part of a greater whole. In the field of theology, they belong to a branch called the “doctrine of fulfilment”. When we integrate the ten prefigurations, they reveal the complete and true image of Christ. In short, not only can we learn the lessons of history, we can go to a deeper level to understand the prefigurations of Christ, God’s hidden salvation grace and other related teachings. In this way, we can grow spiritually and feel the breadth and depth of God’s plan.

The Nazirite Consecrated To The Lord

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin. All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. Then he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD.

‘And if anyone dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it. Then on the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting; and the priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the dead body; and he shall sanctify his head that same day. He shall consecrate to the LORD the days of his separation, and bring a male lamb in its first year as a trespass offering; but the former days shall be lost, because his separation was defiled.

‘Now this is the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And he shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened

wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings. Then the priest shall bring them before the LORD and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering; and he shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of a peace offering to the LORD, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest shall also offer its grain offering and its drink offering. Then the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. And the priest shall take the boiled shoulder of the ram, one unleavened cake from the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and put them upon the hands of the Nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated hair, and the priest shall wave them as a wave offering before the LORD; they are holy for the priest, together with the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering. After that the Nazirite may drink wine.'

"This is the law of the Nazirite who vows to the LORD the offering for his separation, and besides that, whatever else his hand is able to provide; according to the vow which he takes, so he must do according to the law of his separation."

Numbers 6:1–21

The Israelites were a unique race, distinguished by a political, social and religious system that was unlike that of the surrounding nations. They were a people who worshipped the one true God who had chosen them and entrusted them with His laws. A core requirement of the latter was to serve Him wholeheartedly (Lev 26:1–2)—a principle that is summed up in the twelfth century Jewish work, the *Sefer Hamitzvot*.¹ The outcome was a nation which manifested His laws in every deed and word, and who put their religion at the centre of their lives.

Issuing instructions through His servant Moses, God appointed the sons of Aaron and the tribe of Levi to serve in the tabernacle. Their role was to attend to all matters pertaining to worship, particularly the offering of sacrifices and the performance of religious rites—a privilege that would pass from one generation to the next. However, God also had a greater plan which was to establish “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6; cf. 1 Pet 2:9). To this end, He extended the privilege of service by creating a separate order—that of the Nazirite—to allow any person, regardless of tribe or gender, to be

sanctified to Him for a period of time, or even for a lifetime.

The establishment of the Nazirite order would enable ordinary people to serve the Lord, unfettered by the cares of life. A person could either make the vow of his own accord, or else, a parent could do it on his behalf. Only a minority were barred, namely widows and divorced women (Num 30:1–16). Examples of Nazirites consecrated from birth include the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 1:11), the judge Samson (Judg 13:5), and John the Baptist (Lk 1:15). In the apostolic period, it appears that Paul took the vow to consecrate himself for a time (see Acts 18:18, 21:23–24).

Ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ is the true and everlasting Nazirite, God’s hidden truth who manifested the divine plan when He came to the world. Accordingly, the Nazirite is the first prefiguration of Christ in the Book of Numbers.

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Taking the Nazirite vow meant that a person could dedicate himself to God’s service. For this reason, we can see how the role prefigures Jesus Christ: for our sake, He came to the world, proclaimed the gospel of the heavenly kingdom and gave salvation to mankind. His very nature transcended that of the secular world.

The Gospels record that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, meaning He was a Nazarene (Mt 2:23). The name for His hometown is thought to derive from one of several Hebrew words: *netzer*,² meaning “branch”; *natsar*,³ meaning “to guard”; “*nazar*”,⁴ meaning “to consecrate” or “to separate”, from which the word *nazir*⁵ comes (English, “Nazirite”). If we accept the latter, then we find that even the place of Jesus’ upbringing alluded to His special status.

All the rules relating to the Nazirite—consecration, wholehearted service and separation—were manifested through Jesus Christ. On account of His birth, ministry, miracles and fragrant offering on the cross, the veil between man and God was torn in two (Mt 27:51). He entered the sinful world with the spirit of fulfilling His Father’s

¹ [Book of Commandments]. A compendium of 613 mitzvot (commandments) in the Torah by Rabbi Moses ben Maimon.

² See “Nazareth” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Volume 4, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

³ Strong’s Hebrew reference no. H5342.

⁴ Strong’s Hebrew reference no. H5341.

⁵ Strong’s Hebrew reference no. H5144.

business (Lk 2:49), shunning the pleasures of life and overthrowing the power of sin. He was a model Nazirite, an example to those who strive to be consecrated to God in the end time.

CONSECRATED TO THE LORD

On account of his vow of separation, the Nazirite was obliged to exercise self-control. As such, he had to abide by a number of ordinances during the period of consecration.

1. Abstaining from Wine

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin.'"

Numbers 6:1–4

For the Israelites wine, vinegar, grape juice, fresh grapes, raisins and other fruit products were important staples. They were also used in the celebration of the annual feasts (see Deut 12:17–18; Ps 104:15). Some had special uses, such as grape seeds which were the basis of a tonic for aiding digestion and enhancing the appetite. Abstinence, then, equated to the surrender of life's pleasures and the right to celebrate. During the period of the Nazirite's vow, a simple life was in order.

Jesus Christ, the true Nazirite, lived a life that was devoid of worldly pleasures. From His humble beginnings to the day He was nailed to the cross, He led a simple and, at times, austere life. There were occasions when He was destitute, lacking even the basic necessities like shelter. He told the disciples, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Lk 9:58). Hence, the Bible says, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).

In the world, many people are preoccupied by the pursuit of material gain and power, and it is a challenge for Christians not to be influenced. To distinguish ourselves and to attain to spiritual maturity and eternal life, we need to rid ourselves of worldly desires and to lead a God-fearing life. Peter says, "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Pet 4:1–2).

In these last days, Christians must remain alert and reflect on Christ's sufferings and sacrifice. In this way, we can avoid being corrupted by the world and be true to our status as spiritual Nazirites.

2. Uncut Hair

A distinctive feature of the Nazirite was his uncut hair. The Mosaic Law states: "All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. Then he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow" (Num 6:5).

Since ancient times, people have made use of special colours, adornment and insignia to signify particular aspects of religious devotion. For the Nazirite, it was long hair.

The cutting of one's hair is an essential aspect of grooming: it is a means of maintaining one's appearance and comfort. This leads us to view God's requirement, then, as rather unusual. In truth, the long hair of the Nazirite was meant as a sign of his special identity and a symbolic reminder to distinguish himself from the world through holiness of speech and behaviour.

Christ came into the world without any claim to personal beauty—a point prophesied by Isaiah as early as 600 BC: "For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isa 53:2–3).

For Jesus, His own appearance was never a matter of consequence, and neither was that of others. Yet, others judged Him outwardly and despised Him. Nevertheless, Jesus bore their contempt.

Today, in our pursuit for spiritual growth, we ought to come before God with a heart of reverence and sincerity, and to pursue those matters that are pleasing to Him. We should not conform to the world or allow ourselves to become corrupted in our thinking (Rom 12:1–2).

3. Not to Go Near a Dead Body

The purpose of the Nazirite was to lead a holy life and to be unfettered by the cares of the world. It entailed that he purify himself and avoid defilement. It meant that he could not go near a dead body, even if the deceased person was his own family member.

“All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD.”

Numbers 6:6–8

From a human perspective, it would seem reasonable for a person to be allowed to grieve over the death of a loved one, especially a parent or a sibling, and even to perform final rites. Therefore, God’s law for a Nazirite not to approach a dead body may seem uncompassionate, especially given the fact that it went beyond the requirement for priests. But it is important that we view God’s laws from a spiritual perspective: the Nazirite vow entailed disengagement from worldly affairs. Going near a dead body equated to defilement and meant that the Nazirite would have to start over again: to shave the head, to be consecrated, to make sin and burnt offerings, and to re-dedicate himself to the Lord. The previous days of dedication would have been deemed null and void (Num 6:9–12). These strict requirements emphasised the importance of remaining undefiled by the world.

As we serve the Lord, we should endeavour to free ourselves from mundane concerns. Where necessary, we may even need to set aside family obligations and personal feelings for the sake of wholehearted service, the pursuit of holiness, or to avoid clouded judgment. Jesus says, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mk 10:29–30).

How many of us would be willing to give up parents, children, brothers, sisters, houses, and fields—people and things that we hold dear to our hearts? Yet the underlying message is that we should never allow anyone or anything to interfere with our relationship and service to God. Furthermore, rather than being complacent about our faith, we should strive to serve God with all our heart and to take care lest we sin and waste our previous efforts. The prophet Ezekiel warns, “... [B]ut he trusts in his own righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteous works shall be remembered...” (Ezek 33:13).

ORDINANCES FOR THE COMPLETION OF CONSECRATION

Aside from the ordinances relating to the vow of separation, there were also ordinances relating to the completion of consecration:

“Now this is the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. And he shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings. Then the priest shall bring them before the LORD and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering; and he shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of a peace offering to the LORD, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest shall also offer its grain offering and its drink offering. Then the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. And the priest shall take the

boiled shoulder of the ram, one unleavened cake from the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and put them upon the hands of the Nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated hair, and the priest shall wave them as a wave offering before the LORD; they are holy for the priest, together with the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering. After that the Nazirite may drink wine."

Numbers 6:13–20

On the day of completion, the Nazirite was obliged to make three sacrifices, shave his head and burn the hair. After that, he could eat, drink and resume normal life.

The importance of the Nazirite vow lay not in the length of consecration, but in its contribution to the grander scheme of things—namely the accomplishment of God's will to establish a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6).

When the period of consecration was fulfilled, the Nazirite could resume a normal life—for example, to return to work and to take care of his parents and family. But before he could do so, he had to implement another set of ordinances. These contain further teachings for Christians.

1. Three Sacrifices

The first three ordinances pertained to the sin offering, burnt offering and peace offering (Num 6:14–18).

Although it was the personal decision of the Nazirite (or that of his parents) to be separated to God for service, it was still conditional upon divine acceptance, forgiveness and the bestowal of the peace blessing. The sin, burnt and peace offerings signified the person's humility, reverence and gratitude towards God, and reminded him that his consecration and service were possible only on account of God's grace, as opposed to personal effort.

The three offerings were made in a specific order, serving as a reminder to Christians that we are entitled to serve God on account of the precious blood of Jesus Christ which has granted us the remission of sin, acceptance before God and the blessing of peace. Without Christ's salvation, it would not matter how good we are, our sense of morality, or our willingness to sacrifice all that we have; such matters would be insufficient. This is

because man has been defiled by sin, come under its control and made subject to its wages, which is death (Rom 5:12, 19; 6:23). It is only on account of Christ, the eternal sin offering, that we have been consecrated, accepted by God and deemed worthy to serve Him. For these reasons, we have nothing to boast of.

2. Shaving of the Head at the Entrance to the Tent of Meeting

The next ordinance was the shaving of the Nazirite's head at the door of the tent of meeting and the placing of the hair on the fire of the peace offering. It was only after this that he was allowed to drink wine (Num 6:18–20).

As the Nazirite's hair was a sign of his consecration, there was a risk that he might want to retain his locks as a memento of a vow fulfilled or even as a trophy. Human nature is such that when our faith reaches a peak that spiritual weakness can set in. Knowing this, God required the Nazirite to shave his head and to place the hair on the fire—in effect, to remove all signs of his consecration. Moreover, it prevented the consecrated hair from being defiled, as it would now be preserved forever before the Lord.

As workers of God, we should emulate the Nazirite. After rendering service to the Lord, we should be as "normal" and avoid being self-righteous or boastful about our work. Rather, we should give all glory and honour to God. In this way, our heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward us (Mt 6:4–6).

3. Offering All

"This is the law of the Nazirite who vows to the LORD the offering for his separation, and besides that, whatever else his hand is able to provide; according to the vow which he takes, so he must do according to the law of his separation."

Numbers 6:21

Contained within the law of separation was the phrase "whatever else his hand is able to provide". In the Chinese New Version Bible, the wording is: "When the days of his separation are fulfilled, if he has vowed to offer other sacrifices besides the vow he made, he must do so according to his vow". In other words,

the law required the Nazirite to fulfil any outstanding vows (if he had made any) in addition to the three obligatory sacrifices.

An important teaching from the ordinance is that, as believers, we have been redeemed and offered up to Christ, meaning we no longer belong to ourselves. Paul says, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom 12:1).

As spiritual Nazirites, we constitute a complete sacrifice that belongs to the Lord in totality. Therefore, we should not limit our service to God or feel that we can only offer certain resources, such as our time and wealth. We should remember that the Lord has blessed us with everything, and we should therefore “serve the LORD [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul (Deut 10:12; cf. Mt 22:37–40). This is the meaning of the phrase “whatever else his hand is able to provide”.

4. Receiving a Blessing

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

*“The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.” ’*

“So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Numbers 6:22–27

This passage details the Priestly Blessing: after performing the sacrificial rituals, Aaron would lift up his hands towards the people to bless them with these words. It later became an integral part of the nation’s mode of worship (see Lev 9:22). From this, we understand that a ministering nation is a blessed nation.

CONCLUSION

The Nazirite ordinances highlight four key principles in a believer’s faith: consecration, worship, zealous service, and the acknowledgement of God’s gracious blessings. The Nazirite is the prefiguration of Christ and a reminder that every believer should be separated from secular things and be wholehearted to God.

The Manna that Fell with the Dew

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it.

Numbers 11:7–9

Despite having rescued millions of Israelites from the clutches of Pharaoh, Moses soon found himself facing a new and seemingly insurmountable challenge—that of providing for the people’s daily needs. Where, in the endless desert, would he find enough food and water for a multitude?

When the Israelites entered the wilderness after leaving Egypt and found that their provisions were exhausted, the state of their faith could not have been in starker contrast from when they had crossed the Red Sea—a time when they had sung and danced with thanksgiving. Now, there was nothing in their hearts except doubt and dissatisfaction.

Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.”

Exodus 16:2–4

These biblical verses explain the origin of manna: God rained it down miraculously from heaven. It came continuously for forty years, stopping only on Sabbath days, to sustain the Israelites during their wanderings in the arid, desolate desert. It was unfortunate that they did not realize how blessed they were and that they even came to despise it. Nevertheless, God continued to bestow manna until Joshua, the second-generation leader, led the people across the River Jordan into Canaan, at which point they began eating the local produce (Josh 5:12).

The Book of Exodus records that there was a “mixed multitude” among the Israelites (Ex 12:38). These non-Jews would have witnessed the ten plagues in Egypt and had either been moved by the might of God or had simply taken the opportunity to depart with the elect. From the biblical account, we learn that they became demoralized in the face of setbacks and created unrest among the chosen people. Their effect was like that of yeast amongst flour: although they were a minority, they caused the entire dough to be leavened.

Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: “Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!”

Numbers 11:4–6

After eating manna day after day, the novelty soon wore off. The mixed multitude developed cravings and stirred up the Israelites to make unreasonable demands. The latter began to express yearnings for the food they had left behind in Egypt.

Reflecting on the events, we need to be alert in case there is likewise a “mixed multitude” within the church—believers who remain shackled to Egypt and who crave after the pleasures of life: fine food and drink, fashionable clothes and so forth. Because their behaviour has the potential to affect us, we must stand firm. We should aspire to a simple life, gather spiritual manna each day, and exude the fragrance of Christ.

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

The time from the wilderness journey to the appearance of Jesus Christ was around 1,400 years. Nevertheless, the mystery of Christ was already hidden in the fall of manna.

During Jesus' ministry in Capernaum, a group of people came searching for Him. When they found Him, they asked, "Rabbi, when did You come here?" (Jn 6:25).

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled" (Jn 6:26). He understood their motives: they were looking for Him not because they had witnessed His miracles, but because they had had their fill of the physical bread He had provided. Jesus therefore took the opportunity to impart an important teaching—that of the need to labour for the food that endures to everlasting life, as opposed to the food that perishes (Jn 6:27). At this point, the Jews asked Jesus for a sign, perhaps hoping for a repeat of the miracle of the five barley loaves (Jn 6:1–14). Hence, they tested Him, saying, "Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat' " (Jn 6:31).

In response, Jesus told them that the manna which their fathers ate was not the true bread from heaven, but that "the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn 6:32–33).

And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 6:35–40

Jesus directed His words not only at the Jews of that generation, but at all the people of the world; He wanted everyone to know that He is the bread of life, the giver of the truth.

1. Christ Has the Words of Life

Then Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 6:68

As Christians, we are not exempt from the responsibilities and routines of life, but we can avoid the emptiness that is often experienced by the people of the world and live a victorious life. The Bible teaches us to do this by overcoming the temptations of Satan, which elder John defines as the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the 'pride of life'" (1 Jn 2:16). Jesus sets out the way, which is to rely on the word of God: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).

Amos once prophesied, saying, " 'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord GOD, 'That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD' " (Amos 8:11). Just as our physical body needs food and water, so our spiritual life requires the word of God—manna from heaven—in order to survive. Jesus says, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (Jn 6:63). When we eat the words of Christ each day, we will never hunger or thirst, and our spiritual life will thrive as we continue our faith journey.

2. Christ is the Bread of Life

In Capernaum, Jesus told the Jews, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51).

If we were to interpret these words literally, their meaning would allude us. Not surprisingly, the Jews debated amongst themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" (Jn 6:52). They failed to realize that Jesus was, in fact, talking about a sacrament He would soon institute—the Holy Communion.

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever."

John 6:51, 53–58

According to the Lord's words, His body is the everlasting bread which He is willing to share with those who believe. He says that His flesh is "food indeed" and His blood is "drink indeed", for whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood will have eternal life, be raised up on the last day, abide in Jesus, and have the abidance of Jesus in him (Jn 6:54, 56).

The apostle Paul says that whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup during the Holy Communion, we remember the Lord's death and anticipate His second coming. We should examine ourselves beforehand and understand that it is the Lord's body and blood that we are partaking of, lest we incur judgment (1 Cor 11:23–31).

Whoever eats the body of Jesus Christ and drinks His blood will live forever, unlike the wilderness generation who ate the physical manna for forty years and passed away. He is the true spiritual food that we need on our journey to heaven.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Because of God's providential care, none of the Israelites perished on account of hunger in the wilderness. The manna that sustained them was physical, but it prefigured a type of bread that was spiritual.

1. The Bread that Came Down from Heaven

God, the giver of life, always sustains His creatures with the goodness of the earth. Yet, the manna that He bestowed upon the Israelites was different from His other provisions: it came down from heaven and settled on the ground with the dew—a phenomenon that contravened the laws of nature. Manna was certainly a physical food, but it was not of this world.

The nature of manna highlights the qualities of Jesus Christ. He, too, was not of the world: He descended from heaven and was conceived by the Holy Spirit, as opposed to human will. Accordingly, He was free from sin, unlike man, who is born of woman and is under the bondage of sin (Job 14:1; Rom 5:12).

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 1:18–20

Through the birth of Jesus Christ, God revealed the true bread from heaven who would give life to all nations. Hence, Paul says, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory" (1 Tim 3:16).

On one occasion, when Jesus was discussing the events in the wilderness years with the Jews, He pointed out, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead" (Jn 6:49). His meaning was that man's life is limited; even the elect who ate manna did not have any special dispensation over death. But now, the true manna had arrived: Jesus had come down from heaven to impart the "words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).

“For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

John 6:33

And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”

John 6:35

“And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

John 6:40

“I am the bread of life.”

John 6:48

“This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die.”

John 6:50

Despite the truths that Jesus shared, many of the Jews persisted in rejecting Him. It reflects the situation today where believers fail to treasure His word, even though it has the power to sustain their spiritual lives. Many prefer things of a secular nature, despite the fact that they can neither satisfy, nor bring about spiritual growth. Such people are like those Israelites who considered the manna to be tasteless and bland. Yet, had it not been for this heavenly bread, the chosen people would have perished, and the inheritance of Canaan would have been an impossible dream.

2. Prepared for the Elect

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram, “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not

theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”

Genesis 15:12–14

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kenites, the Kenezites, and the Kadmonites; the Hittites, the Perizzites, and the Rephaim; the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

Genesis 15:18–21

From Abraham’s perspective, God’s words constituted a future promise. Yet, we note His choice of words: “To your descendants I have given this land...” They give the impression that somehow the Israelites had already departed from Egypt, completed their forty-year wilderness journey, and conquered the promised land. But this was obviously not the case, for God spoke these words 600 years before the exodus. The conclusion, then, is that God’s view is different from man’s: in the eyes of the One who was, and is, and is to come (Heb 13:8), all His promises are fulfilled, even as He speaks. Furthermore, in order to keep His promise to Abraham and his descendants, God even arranged for the manna to come down from heaven. It was part of His gracious plan and providential care—Jehovah Jireh (Gen 22:14). It is for this reason that the psalmist praised the Lord:

*Yet He had commanded the clouds above,
And opened the doors of heaven,
Had rained down manna on them to eat,
And given them of the bread of heaven.
Men ate angels’ food;
He sent them food to the full.*

Psalms 78:23–25

In 1 Corinthians, Paul recounts the history of Israel, cautioning the believers not to be ignorant of the fact that their “fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:1–4). Here, Paul refers to manna as “spiritual food”

as it prefigures Christ and His spiritual provision for the saints. Hence, Jesus says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:9–10). Jesus is the food that God has prepared to sustain our spiritual life.

3. Freely Given

God bestowed bread from heaven each day for the Israelites. However, despite experiencing this miracle, the people were ungrateful and even began murmuring (Num 11:6). In doing so, they angered and grieved the heart of God (Num 11:10).

Man’s nature is often such that we fail to cherish those things which are free in life. But as Christians, we should realize that everything comes from God (Mt 10:8). Therefore, we should learn from David to offer up prayers of thanksgiving:

*Both riches and honor come from You,
And You reign over all.
In Your hand is power and might;
In Your hand it is to make great
And to give strength to all.*

*Now therefore, our God,
We thank You
And praise Your glorious name.
But who am I, and who are my people,
That we should be able to offer so willingly as this?
For all things come from You,
And of Your own we have given You.*

1 Chron 29:12–14

Throughout his life, David fought victoriously against Israel’s enemies, yet he understood that all he had achieved and possessed was on account of God. It was thus with an earnest attitude that he entreated God to accept the offerings made by himself and his people. The question is, do we have the same heart as David, or are we at risk of discontentment?

4. Must be Gathered

The people went about and gathered it...

Numbers 11:8

“This is the thing which the LORD has commanded, ‘Let every man gather it according to each one’s need...’ ”

Exodus 16:16

So they gathered it every morning, every man according to his need. And when the sun became hot, it melted.

Exodus 16:21

When God rained down the manna, He expected the people to go out and gather it. It was not a difficult task (Num 11:8), and if they did it each day, they were assured of sustenance. Compared to the time when they were enslaved in Egypt and subject to harsh labour, it was a world apart. Yet, the elect deluded themselves, recalling a past where they seemingly sat around, feasting on pots of meat (Ex 16:3); they did not appreciate God’s grace.

Believers need God’s word to nourish their spiritual life. It was for this reason that the saints of old assembled together constantly to draw near to God (Heb 10:25). They understood that this was the way to joy and fulfillment.

In short, although the manna was freely given, the people had to gather it each morning. The same principle applies to believers today: we must put in effort to gather the spiritual food we need each day; there are no short cuts.

5. Prepared in Different Ways

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil.

Numbers 11:7–8

Manna proved to be a versatile food. It looked like coriander seed and could be ground on millstones, crushed in a mortar, cooked in pans, or made into cakes—much like grains of rice, wheat or beans. Because the manna could be prepared in different ways, its taste would have been rich and varied. It was unfortunate that the Israelites grew tired of it (Num 11:6).

The Israelites' reaction brings to mind the experience of Jesus Christ. In order to accomplish salvation and remove the emptiness in man's heart, He endured many afflictions. Like the manna, He allowed Himself to be crushed, milled and passed through fire. The apostle Paul says:

[W]ho, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Philippians 2:6–8

Also, Peter says, “[W]ho himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Pet 2:24).

Jesus is also like the cake of manna. During the last supper, He instructed His disciples, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk 22:19; cf. 1 Cor 11:24). In giving His body for us, He became the food that would nourish our spiritual life.

6. Exceedingly Fragrant

And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”

Numbers 21:5

In the Book of Numbers, manna is described as having “the taste of pastry prepared with oil” (Num 11:8),¹ ² while the Book of Exodus says, “the taste of it was like wafers made with honey”

(Ex 16:31). The Israelites' complaint of a “worthless” food was therefore a serious distortion of the facts.

Man's life depends on the word of God (Deut 8:3; Mt 4:4), and those who diligently seek it will experience its wonderful taste. King David says, “The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps 19:9–10). Another psalmist writes, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:103).

CONCLUSION

Through His sufferings and His sacrifice on the cross for mankind, Jesus became the true manna, the word of eternal life. As faithful believers, we should appreciate God's loving provision and salvation grace. We should not bargain with Him over our daily bread, nor complain when it does not meet our expectations. Furthermore, we should pursue the truth through daily Bible reading and regular service attendance. And instead of striving after the transient things of the world, we ought to focus on the hope that is everlasting.

1 Today's Chinese Version Bible: “It tasted like cakes baked with olive oil.”

2 Studium Biblicum: “It had the taste of a pancake.”

Aaron's Rod

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

"Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a rod from each father's house, all their leaders according to their fathers' houses—twelve rods. Write each man's name on his rod. And you shall write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi. For there shall be one rod for the head of each father's house. Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against you."

So Moses spoke to the children of Israel, and each of their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers' houses, twelve rods; and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses placed the rods before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness.

Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their murmurings away from Me, lest they die." Thus did Moses; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did.

Numbers 17:1–11

After the Israelites had sinned by making a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses rallied God's faithful to his side. The sons of Levi duly responded (Ex 32:26), earning them the reward of consecration

to the Lord (Num 8:16, 18). They were assigned the responsibility of assisting the sons of Aaron to serve in the tabernacle (Num 3:6–13; 8:14–15, 19, 22–26). It was unfortunate, then, that members of this tribe later led the people to sin against God.

When the Israelites were driven back by the Amalekites and Canaanites to Hormah (Num 14:45), a group emerged to challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron. It comprised Korah, the son of Izhar and the great-grandson of Levi; Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, from the tribe of Reuben; and 250 leaders of the congregation (Num 16:1–2). The rebellion gave rise to one of the most painful and arduous tests for Moses and Aaron in the course of their forty-year leadership. It was an explosive conflict, with Korah and his supporters in the majority. As such, it was a situation that only God could resolve, and showed that the true authority belonged neither to Moses or Aaron, nor to anyone else for that matter, but to the Lord Himself. As it transpired, God exercised that authority to deal with Korah and his company in a most severe manner (Num 16:31–33).

It was following this incident that God made Aaron's rod come to life: to sprout, bud, blossom and yield ripe almonds overnight. The miracle confirmed the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and halted the rebellion and the people's murmurings.

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

The Book of Exodus portrays the rod as a symbol of power and authority. For example, we learn of God enabling Moses to turn his rod into a snake, to prove to the Israelites that he had been chosen by God to lead them (Ex 4:1–8); Aaron transforming his rod into a snake before Pharaoh and his magicians (Ex 7:8–11); Pharaoh and his magicians' counter-attempt to demonstrate their power with their enchanted rods (Ex 7: 11–13); Aaron using his rod to bring about the plagues of blood, frogs and lice on Egypt (Ex 7:19–20; 8:5–6, 16–17); Moses lifting his rod to part the Red Sea (Ex 14:16, 21).

During Korah's rebellion, God made use of Aaron's rod to manifest His power. The outcome was not only the cessation of the conflict, but visual proof for the Israelites that God had given His authority to Aaron and that He was now re-affirming his status as high priest.

However, what was not evident to the people at the time was that the rod also revealed important truths about the future Messiah. Like Aaron's rod, Jesus Christ would die and resurrect; He would have the power of life (Heb 8:1) and be acknowledged as the most honourable, glorious and everlasting High Priest (Heb 7:20–25).

1. Revival

All living things have a beginning and an end; it is the law of nature. However, this was not the case with Aaron's rod, for God gave it a new lease of life. Indeed, the miracle hinted at the resurrection of Christ and His authority as High Priest:

And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15:17–22

Even though death came to the world because of the first man, Adam, resurrection would come about on account of Jesus Christ. For this reason, when Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, He told Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (Jn 11:25).

2. Affirmation of the Priesthood

They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”

Numbers 16:3

The Levites had been granted the privilege of ministering before God in the tabernacle, yet they were not satisfied. They rejected Aaron as the high priest and sought to usurp his leadership, along with that of Moses.

A biblical proverb says, “A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones” (Prov 14:30). Jealousy is usually directed at those who are more capable and upright, and is often the Achilles' heel of those in leadership. We learn, for example, that King Saul directed his jealousy at David and eventually lost his glory (see 1 Sam); the chief priests were envious of Jesus and nailed Him to the cross (Mk 15:10). Where jealousy exists, Satan works further to corrupt the heart of man.

During their time in the wilderness, Korah and the other rebels would have witnessed the miracles performed by their two leaders—confirmation that the latter had been appointed to their roles by God. Yet, they dared to disregard Moses and Aaron and to put aside reverence for God and their own holy status, in order to stir up dissension among the people. In the end, God executed judgment by opening up the earth to swallow up Korah and his company and sending a plague to kill 14,700 of the Israelites (Num 16:49).

Immediately after Korah's rebellion, God performed the miracle of bringing Aaron's rod to life. In doing so, He gave the stiff-necked multitude a further opportunity to reflect upon their behaviour. In fact, God had no need to do this, for He had personally appointed Aaron to his office and had already confirmed his calling through many signs. Yet, He chose to perform one more miracle to re-affirm the status of His servant and to let the people know that they owed him due honour.

Aaron's plight mirrors to some extent the experience of our Lord Jesus. Despite coming to the world as the Messiah, He was given neither glory nor honour by the Jews, and many failed to believe in Him. Nevertheless, the Lord resurrected from the dead and manifested His status as the everlasting High Priest:

Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 7:23–25

3. Chosen Man of God

The Bible records that “the rod of Aaron was among their rods” (Num 17:6). God’s intention was to dispel any lingering doubts on the part of the people following the destruction of Korah and his company. When the rods were retrieved the next day, only Aaron’s rod came to life: it had miraculously budded, flowered and borne fruit overnight.

What happened to the rod mirrored the life of its owner. Like the rod in his possession, Aaron had been indistinguishable from any other person before God chose him for service: he had no obvious merits and no special status. But after God called him, he was empowered to overcome the schemes of Pharaoh; given the privilege to stand before the Ark of the Covenant; and was appointed to the office of high priest to serve the most holy God. God’s miracle of bringing Aaron’s rod to life reinforced the fact that Aaron was able to minister and bear fruit on account of divine grace and power; for that reason, no one had the right to reject him.

The miracle of Aaron’s rod also reminds us that we, as Christians, were once sinners—no different from anyone else in the world. But, when God chose us, He bestowed us with power and honour, and the privilege of partaking in His holy work. Apostle Paul understood this truth, for he said, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 Cor 4:7). Our successes are like the budding of Aaron’s rod: they are only possible on account of God.

4. White as Blossoms

The almond tree is native to Egypt and Israel. It flowers ahead of other trees, usually in the first or second month of the year. It has lush green foliage, grey branches, fragrant white (or pink) blossoms, and green fruits that turn brown when ripe, splitting open to reveal an edible nut. We can imagine that in the inhospitable environment of the wilderness the sight of Aaron’s rod blossoming and bearing fruit would have caused quite a stir. But the most important outcomes were that it quelled Korah’s rebellion and re-affirmed Aaron’s position as high priest.

Furthermore, this wondrous sign hinted at the qualities of the future Messiah—His holy nature and status as the firstfruits of resurrection (1 Cor 15:20).

When Jesus came to the world, He made it His mission to teach, heal and proclaim the gospel of the heavenly kingdom. He showed compassion towards the people who, in His eyes, were like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:35–36), and brought their hearts back to life. Therefore, Jesus was like the almond blossoms, bringing hope by signalling the end of the harsh winter and the arrival of spring. The white petals symbolized His holy life and character, and the red stamen, the zeal in His heart. Since the nature of Jesus is holy, we too must pursue to be likewise. Moreover, the church as a whole must preserve its holiness, contend for the truth and guard against those who may attempt to create the rebellion of Korah (Jude 11).

CONCLUSION

In response to Korah’s rebellion, God gave a sign to the Israelites: He made Aaron’s rod to sprout, blossom and bear ripe almonds. In doing this, He put an end to their doubts and re-affirmed Aaron’s position as the high priest. However, the miracle also hinted at the future Messiah—specifically to His holy nature and resurrection. As Christians, we should trust in the leadership and guidance of this everlasting High Priest with a submissive and humble heart.

The Ashes of the Red Heifer

Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD has commanded, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which a yoke has never come. You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may take it outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him; and Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of the tabernacle of meeting. Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned. And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet, and cast them into the midst of the fire burning the heifer. Then the priest shall wash his clothes, he shall bathe in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp; the priest shall be unclean until evening. And the one who burns it shall wash his clothes in water, bathe in water, and shall be unclean until evening. Then a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and store them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of purification; it is for purifying from sin. And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until evening. It shall be a statute forever to the children of Israel and to the stranger who sojourns among them.

‘He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him.

‘This is the law when a man dies in a tent: All who come into the tent and all who are in the tent shall be unclean seven days; and every open vessel, which

has no cover fastened on it, is unclean. Whoever in the open field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. And for an unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel. A clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, sprinkle it on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, the slain, the dead, or a grave. The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.

‘But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from among the congregation, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean. It shall be a perpetual statute for them...’ ”

Numbers 19:1–21

In chapters eleven to fifteen of Leviticus, God specified a number of things that would render a person unclean. They included eating certain types of meat, coming into contact with the carcasses of animals, childbirth, menstruation, leprosy and bodily discharges. All these things required specific rituals for purification. In Numbers 19, God specified another type of defilement, which was brought about by a person touching a dead body, a bone, a grave, or going into the tent of someone who had died. In such situations, the Israelites had to cleanse themselves with purification water made from the ashes of a burnt red heifer. The penalty for failing to comply was excommunication from the congregation. Aside from Numbers 19, two other passages also refer to this purification rite: Numbers 31:19–20, 23–24 and Hebrews 9:13.

Due to the passage of time, we will never know certain details, such as what species of cattle the red heifer might have belonged to. However, such details are unimportant; what is important is that the purification water foreshadowed Jesus’ cleansing blood (Heb 10:1). When Jesus died on the cross, He opened up a fountain to wash away sin and uncleanness (Zech 13:1). Hence, Paul writes, “[N]ot by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). This “washing” is the fulfilment of the Old Testament law relating to the water of purification made from the ashes of the red heifer.

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:11–14

According to the Mosaic Law, the blood of animals was the price of atonement, and without the shedding of blood there was no remission of sin (Heb 9:22). The writer of Hebrews, however, understood in hindsight that the sacrificial system foreshadowed something greater, namely salvation through Jesus Christ: “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12).

The Law also stipulated specific criteria concerning the type of animal that was to be used for the purification water (Num 19:1–2). Firstly, it had to be a red heifer (a young cow that had not given birth)—its colour being symbolic of blood, the source of life. Secondly, it had to be blemish free. Thirdly, it must not have been yoked. These criteria prefigured the characteristics of the Messiah: His sacrifice and shedding of blood on the cross (Jn 19:34); His lack of defect (1 Pet 1:19); and His holiness and separation from the world (Lev 19:2; 2 Cor 6:17–18).

Concerning the process for making the purification water, Numbers 19 states that the high priest had to take the red heifer outside the camp, where it was to be slaughtered in his presence (v. 3); he was to take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times in front of the tabernacle of meeting (v. 4); the heifer had to be burnt in his sight, including its hide, flesh, blood and offal (v. 5); the priest had to throw cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool into the fire (v. 6); a man who was deemed ritually clean had to gather up the ashes for storage in a clean place outside the camp (v. 9); the ashes were to be mixed with running water in a vessel, as required (v. 17); a clean person was to dip hyssop

into the purification water and sprinkle it on the unclean person or item (v. 18).

In Numbers 19:11–19, God instructed that the purification water be used for the cleansing of a person who had touched a dead body; a person who entered the tent of someone who had died, or who was present at the time of death; uncovered vessels in the tent of someone who had died; a person in an open field who had touched a dead body, human bone or grave. In truth, this law went beyond a lesson in physical hygiene: it instilled in the Israelites the concept that uncleanness was “contagious” and taught them the importance of keeping holy.

The significance of the purification water made from the ashes of the red heifer has since been realized by the Lord Jesus. For our sake, He was oppressed and afflicted, and offered up as a paschal lamb (Isa 53:7; 1 Pet 1:19). His sacrifice can be likened to the placing of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet thread upon the fire, producing a fragrance that has spread far and wide. The outcome is that believers can access a deep cleansing through water baptism, which is effected by living water, the Holy Spirit and Christ’s blood (1 Jn 5:6–8).

ASHES OF THE RED HEIFER

The ashes of the red heifer prefigure the purification and redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

1. The Killing of the Red Heifer

Just as the red heifer was killed to remove the uncleanness of the Israelites, so Jesus came to the world to sacrifice His life for the sins of man and to give him the chance of spiritual rebirth. Paul says, “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? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor 6:19–20). This is the grace of God and His pre-arranged plan (Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2; Hos 10:1).

2. Sprinkling the Blood Seven Times

‘[A]nd Eleazar the Priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of the tabernacle of meeting.’

Numbers 19:4

In the Bible, the number seven denotes completeness, and thus the sprinkling of blood seven times by the priest signifies a complete cleansing (Heb 9:12–14; 10:10–12). The Book of Hebrews also explains that the tabernacle of meeting prefigures the church (Heb 9:11; cf. 10:21). Together, these truths tell us that, on account of Jesus Christ, the High Priest who was crucified and shed His precious blood once for all, the church has been made clean. Paul says:

... [J]ust as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:25–27

From his words, we learn two important teachings. Firstly, the cleansing of the church entails both the word of God and “the washing”, which is water baptism (Tit 3:5; Jn 3:5). Secondly, because Jesus paid such a high price to cleanse the church and render her glorious and honourable, we have a duty to preserve her holiness.

Paul says, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person... Therefore ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person’ ” (1 Cor 5:11, 13).

The sprinkling of the heifer’s blood in front of the tabernacle seven times signified that the animal belonged to God, for the whole sacrifice was being offered up to Him. In the same way, Christ’s offering was made in totality: His birth, life, ministry and death on the cross were all offered up to accomplish the salvation of God.

[W]ho, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Philippians 2:6–8

In light of this, Paul teaches us, saying, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom 12:1).

3. Storing the Ashes

‘Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned. And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet, and cast them into the midst of the fire burning the heifer.’

Numbers 19:5–6

‘Then a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and store them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of purification; it is for purifying from sin.’

Numbers 19:9

The Book of Leviticus records a law concerning the sin offering whereby the hide of a bull, its flesh, head, legs, entrails and offal had to be carried outside the camp to a clean place, where the ashes from the offerings were normally poured out. There, it had to be burnt on the wood (Lev 4:11–12). The ashes of the red heifer were produced in a similar way, reinforcing the point that it was a sin offering. However, one difference was that the heifer was burnt together with the cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet thread. Cedar wood—renowned for its distinctive woody aroma, strength and durability—symbolized fragrance and incorruptibility. Hyssop,¹ which was valued in the ancient

¹ Latin, *Hyssopus officinalis*. “Hyssop belongs to the mint family. Hyssop is an erect perennial herb with slender square stems. Hyssop can reach a height of 60 cm. The small pointed leaves are positioned opposite. Hyssop flowers from summer to autumn. The hyssop flowers are purple-blue in colour, but some cultivars have pink or white flowers. The hyssop flowers produce a strong scent, which attracts bees.”
Source: <<http://www.phytochemicals.info/plants/hyssop.php>>

east for its cleansing properties, symbolized purity. During the plague of the firstborn in Egypt, stems of this plant were used for daubing blood onto the doorframes (Ex 12:22). The scarlet thread, the same colour as blood, symbolized the atonement of sin (Lev 17:11). It became a symbol of salvation in the story of Rahab where the two Israelite spies told her to tie a scarlet cord on her window so that her family could be identified and saved in the subsequent siege of Jericho (Josh 2:17–21).

Jesus Christ became a fragrant offering for mankind. He was pure and had the power to forgive sins, yet He was cursed and forsaken for our sake. His plight is symbolized by the ashes of the red heifer that were placed outside the camp.

*Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:4–6

As Christians, we should learn from Christ to forgive the wrongs of others, and to make daily offerings that are fragrant and pure. Paul says:

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:14–16

Emitting the aroma of Christ entails that we lead a holy and disciplined life. This principle underpinned the laws that God gave to the Israelites. As such, He expected them to make

appropriate choices in their diet (Lev 11; 17:10–16); to avoid sexual immorality (Lev 18); to maintain scrupulous physical hygiene (Lev 12–15); to uphold justice and social order (Lev 19); and to be faithful in their worship and service (Lev 19–21). In this way, they would be qualified to be known as “a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations” (Num 23:9).

Elder Peter reinforces the importance of a consecrated life:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 2:9–12

Paul also teaches the need to set boundaries with those who do not believe in God:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God...

2 Corinthians 6:14–16

As Christians, we need to be differentiated and holy in all aspects of our lives: our friendships, careers, conduct, lifestyle, marriage and faith. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to go to Christ outside the camp, to be separated from the world and its lusts, and to be willing to share in His afflictions and humiliation: “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb 13:12–13).

4. Mixed with Running Water

'And for an unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel... The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.'

Numbers 19:17, 19

According to God's instructions to Moses, running water had to be mixed with the ashes of the red heifer to make the purification water. The water would have been from a natural running source—a spring, well or river.

God established this method of purification in the Old Testament to prefigure the salvation that would come through Jesus Christ—specifically, the shedding of His precious blood and its connection to water baptism. Elder John understood this truth, for he said:

This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three who bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.

1 John 5:6–8

In writing these words, John recalled the miracle that occurred when Jesus breathed His last upon the cross: “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe” (Jn 19:34–35).

The testimony that “is true” was the issue of blood and water from Jesus' side, a phenomenon that fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah: “In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness” (Zech 13:1). Hence, from the day of Pentecost, when the church was established through the downpour of the Holy Spirit, the apostles called people to believe and be baptized

in the name of Jesus Christ: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call’ ” (Acts 2:38–39). In doing so, they would be cleansed in the blood of Jesus in living water.

We understand, then, that the forgiveness of sins comes not only from the ashes of the red heifer, it also depends on the addition of running water. When the shadow was realized in the New Testament, elder John was able to testify, saying, “This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood...” (1 Jn 5:6). His words reveal an important and inextricable link between Christ's sacrificial death and water baptism. For this reason, everyone must repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Only then, can our sins be cleansed through the blood of Jesus Christ in living water, enabling us to be born again.

CONCLUSION

We can imagine that God's law relating to the making of the purification water from the ashes of the red heifer would have been enigmatic to the Israelites. Indeed, it was only after God's salvation plan was fulfilled by the Lord Jesus that the Holy Spirit revealed its true significance: the purification water prefigured water baptism. In light of this, we cannot help but be in awe of God's wisdom and planning, and we should be thankful for His wonderful grace and salvation.

The Rock from which Water Flowed

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.”

So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.”

This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the LORD, and He was hallowed among them.

Numbers 20:7–13

After the Israelites departed from Egypt and entered the arid, inhospitable environment of the wilderness, the matter of finding water became an immediate and recurring concern. Exodus 15:22–26 records their first experience of a water shortage in the Wilderness of Shur. Having endured three days of thirst after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites came to the waters of Marah which they found to be bitter and undrinkable. At this point, tempers flared, and the people complained against Moses. After Moses cried out for help, God instructed him to cut down a tree and to cast it into the waters. Miraculously, the waters turned sweet.

The second incident is recorded in Exodus 17:1–7. After leaving the Wilderness of Sin, the Israelites arrived in Rephidim where they contended again with Moses. However, this time, the people were so irate that they were ready to stone their leader (Ex 17:4). At this point, God told Moses to strike the rock to bring forth water.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.”

And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. So he called the name of the place Massah¹ and Meribah², because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Exodus 17:5–7

After the passing of more than thirty years, history repeated itself. The people arrived in the Wilderness of Zin and camped at Kadesh (Num 20:1). It was here that Miriam died and was buried. When the congregation found they had no water to drink, they gathered against an ageing Moses and Aaron to vent their feelings. The complaints were reminiscent of the early days: the unfairness of being forced to leave Egypt and made to languish in the wilderness—a place devoid of grain, figs, vines, pomegranates and water (Num 20:3–5; cf. 11:1–5). As the situation worsened, God told Moses, “Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals” (Num 20:8).

At this point, Moses disobeyed God’s command. Still seething from the people’s attack, he railed against them and struck the rock twice with his rod (Num 20:10–11). By God’s mercy, the rock yielded water, but it did not mean that all was well. God determined that Moses and Aaron had sinned against Him and needed to be punished. The outcome was severe: God forbade them from entering the promised land.

¹ Meaning “Temptation.”

² Meaning “Contention.”

From a human perspective, God's punishment seems disproportionate and cruel. We are mindful that Moses had been a constant and faithful servant, taking care of God's household over the decades. Moreover, both he and Aaron had to endure continual provocation from their brethren. Was it really fair, then, for God to blame them and not give them a chance to present their case? However, when we view the incident from God's perspective, we realize the severity of Moses and Aaron's sin: as leaders, they had failed to believe in God's words and to honour Him before the Israelites (Num 20:12). For that reason, He could not overlook the matter.

There is a further perspective, which is an allegorical one. Moses and Aaron both represent the Old Testament order: one, the Law and the other, the priestly system. It is noteworthy that both men stopped short of entering Canaan, the land of rest prepared by God (Josh 22:4). In the New Testament, we learn of the significance behind this fact, which is that no one could be made perfect or saved through obedience to the Law, including the offering of sacrifices (Acts 13:39; Heb 10:1). It was only through the guidance of the next generation's leader, Joshua—a type of Christ—that one could enter into God's rest.

Another teaching which will be expounded upon later in this chapter is that the rock in the wilderness typified Christ (1 Cor 10:4). For this reason, Moses should never have struck it a second time at Meribah, for this would have signified the re-crucifixion of Christ (Heb 6:6).

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Apostle Paul was gifted in interpreting the Old Testament Scriptures, a key reason being that he received a personal revelation from the Lord Jesus (Gal 1:12, 16). In his epistle to the church in Corinth, he cited the Israelites' forty-year journey:

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:1–4

Paul pointed out that the chosen people had been “under the cloud”—that is, led by the pillar of cloud throughout their journey, and they had “passed through the sea”—referring to the crossing of the Red Sea. These events prefigured the grace of Christians in the New Testament era, namely their right to receive water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Israelites were baptized into Moses, so Christians would be baptized into Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Paul explained that, in a spiritual sense, the Rock that followed the Israelites and from which water flowed was Jesus. Just as the Rock issued water for the people to drink in the wilderness, so Christ would shed His precious blood for the salvation of mankind.

THE ROCK IN THE WILDERNESS

We can imagine that God, through His mighty power, could have provided His people with water in any way He chose—perhaps by commanding it to come up from the ground. Yet, His will was for Moses to strike the rock at Rephidim and to issue a command at Meribah. This aspect of God's plan reveals an important prefiguration concerning Christ and also gives us a number of teachings.

1. Striking the Rock at Rephidim

The wilderness in which the Israelites sojourned was an inhospitable place. Yet, it was in such an environment that God chose to manifest His power, glory and sovereignty. Not long after leaving Egypt, when the people set up camp at Rephidim, God told Moses to strike the rock so that it would give out water (Ex 17:1–7). Whilst there were other rocks in the wilderness, only this rock at Horeb (Ex 17:6) provided this life-giving resource because Moses obeyed God's command.

For Christians, this event is significant because the Bible explains that the rock in the wilderness is Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Just as water flowed from the rock when it was struck, so a fountain opened up from the body of Christ when He was pierced (Jn 19:34). This fountain became a source of renewal and life for believers. The outcome is that the church has been redeemed through the precious blood of Jesus, and the members are able to receive life when they partake of His blood through the Holy Communion (1 Cor 11:25–26).

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him."

John 6:53–56

Although these truths were prefigured in the time of Moses and Aaron, their meaning remained hidden for a long time. It was not until the New Testament that Jesus and the apostle Paul revealed them to the believers.

During the forty-year wilderness journey, God's providential care was evident through the manna that descended with the dew each day and the presence of the spiritual rock that accompanied the people, which Paul describes as the protection of Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Thus, the chosen people lacked none of the basic necessities, and their lives were preserved. Unfortunately, they did not praise or give thanks to God—such signs of gratefulness seemingly disappeared after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 15:1–21). Instead, their hearts were weighed down with discontent.

2. God's Command to Speak to the Rock at Meribah

When the second and third generation Israelites arrived at the Wilderness of Sin, the congregation contended once again with the two leaders over a lack of water. On this occasion, God told Moses, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals" (Num 20:8).

However, Moses, who felt exceedingly provoked by the people, lifted his rod and struck the rock twice. The Lord's rebuke came swiftly: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them'" (Num 20:12). The translation in the New International Version Bible states: "...Because you did

not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites..." (Num 20:12). From these words, we understand that failing to obey God's command equates to "not believing" and "not trusting [Him] enough to honour [Him] as holy".

3. The Wrath of Moses

What specifically was Moses and Aaron's sin? The Bible indicates that they were guilty on a number of counts: being arrogant (Num 20:10); striking the rock and doing so twice (Num 20:11); failing to believe in the words of God (Num 20:12); rebelling against His command (Num 27:14); not hallowing Him (Num 20:12); and speaking rashly and angrily (Ps 106:32–33). Summing up, the sins fell into three categories: disbelief, disrespect and disobedience.

As such, Moses and Aaron did not commit one small mistake, they committed three major ones. Bearing in mind that God stopped one generation of Israelites from entering Canaan for their acts of disbelief and disobedience (Num 14:20–37), we are left in no doubt of His just nature. Therefore, even though Moses rendered forty years of loyal stewardship and endured his brethren to the point of unsurpassed humility (Num 12:3), God had no option but to punish him and Aaron for their sins, however painful it was on both sides. God is impartial and will deal with each person fairly, be it an ordinary believer or a powerful and trusted servant.

One of the psalmists looked back on this historical incident and commented thus: "They angered Him also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses on account of them; because they rebelled against His Spirit, so that he spoke rashly with his lips" (Ps 106:32–33). He saw the failing of Moses as one of anger stemming from provocation, a matter for which he had to pay a high price. The psalmist noted that "it went ill with Moses", meaning that he was excluded from the promised land.

The moral is that the mistakes we make in our lives, such as errors of speech, have the potential to cause irrevocable damage, and we must therefore be careful. Elder James says:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

James 1:19–21

From the events at Meribah, we learn that even the greatest and most devout of God’s servants are prone to moments of weakness, and it is a sober reminder for us all.

4. Not to Strike the Rock Again

It was God’s will for Moses to give a verbal command to the rock at Meribah. Unfortunately, he struck the rock, thereby incurring the wrath of God. The significance is that salvation is achieved through the one time sacrifice of Jesus. Since the rock represents Christ (1 Cor 10:4) and striking the rock signifies His suffering—specifically His being nailed to the cross to fulfil salvation for mankind—we cannot expect Christ to undergo it a second time. For this reason, God did not want Moses to strike the rock on the second occasion at Meribah.

Paul writes: “[K]nowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God” (Rom 6:9–10). Peter says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18). The author of Hebrews also says, “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). It was God’s will to reveal these prefigurative meanings in the wilderness, but Moses failed to do his part.

For Christians, the incident at Meribah warns us not to continue in sin, because if we do, we will put Christ to shame and crucify Him a second time. Jesus died to remove our unrighteousness, but this can only happen once.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

Hebrews 6:4–6

It would be unfortunate if, after believing in the Saviour and being washed clean from the filth of the world, we fail to treasure His salvation grace. In such a case, our end would be worse than our beginning (2 Pet 2:20). It is vital, then, that we do not misunderstand that being saved through baptism into Christ equates to being saved forever; we still have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). Moreover, we must take care never to grow complacent in our faith (Rom 12:11; Heb 6:11–12), lest we forfeit our right to salvation.

CONCLUSION

Paul teaches that Jesus is the Rock from which water flowed. We must therefore heed the lessons from the incident at Meribah. We should not be like Moses and Aaron who spoke rash words and disobeyed God to strike the rock a second time. After receiving the Lord’s salvation grace, we must live obedient and godly lives and be diligent to serve Him, so that we do not crucify Him again.

The Bronze Serpent

Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."

So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us."

So Moses prayed for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."

So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Numbers 21:4–9

The incident documented in this passage was similar to a number of others during the wilderness years. In each case, discouragement and anxiety from an arduous journey led to rash words on the part of the people, followed by punishment from God—this time involving fiery serpents.

Numbers 21 records that the people had travelled north from Mount Hor towards Edom, by the Way of the Red Sea—a difficult and desolate route.

The Way to the Red Sea ran down the entire western length of the Arabah, the 110-mile-long valley stretching south from the Salt Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah and bounded by the steep limestone scarps of the southern Negeb on the west and the wall of sandstone mountains of Edom on the east. In midvalley it is strewn with rocks lying on a thin crust of gravel. The upper reaches of the watercourses that scar the hills are rough and full of boulders, but their lower margins form alluvial fans of sand mixed with loess and clay marked by scattered vegetation starkly punctuating the barren landscape. The Arabah narrows near midpoint to an average width of about four miles. Rainfall is less than one inch a year, and the watercourses are short and often empty year to year. Expanses of sand frequently give way to salt flats. Only south of the oasis at Jotbathah do the sand dunes alternate with sediments of sand and loess, where enough vegetation can grow to support flocks—at least during the rainy season.

Reader's Digest Atlas of the Bible, 1991, p. 73

Not only was the journey itself trying, so were the circumstances. The nation had been left bereft from the passing of Miriam in Kadesh (Num 20:1) and Aaron on Mount Hor (Num 20:22–29). At the same time, the king of Edom refused them passage through his land, meaning they had to change course (Num 20:14–21). We can imagine that morale was at its lowest ebb, hence the harsh words directed at God and Moses (Num 21:5). Their murmuring incurred God's wrath, such that He set fiery serpents upon the people, causing many to die. While we do not know what type of serpents they were, we can speculate that they were so-called because of the effects of their venom.¹

Moses, on his part, bore patiently with the castigations of his brethren and even agreed to intercede on their behalf before God—the Lord of life and death—asking Him to forgive their sins and to remove the fiery serpents from their midst. In the end, God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and to set it on a pole, so that those who were bitten could look up at it and live (Num 21:8).

¹ See "Serpent, Fiery" in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, eds., Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, John Rea (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Viewed in isolation, God's method of deliverance seems strange and even somewhat arbitrary. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we understand that there was a hidden significance: the bronze serpent prefigured the salvation of Jesus Christ.

In a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus about spiritual rebirth, Jesus referred him to this particular episode in history, saying, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:14–15). As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been familiar with this story. However, there was a gap in his knowledge, which was the significance of the bronze serpent—a thousand-year-old enigma. Jesus explained that the serpent, far from being an inconsequential detail, prefigured the Son of Man. It revealed the mystery of God's salvation plan and His transcendental wisdom.

For some people, there may be an inherent difficulty in accepting that the bronze serpent represents Christ. This is because we cannot help but recall that our first ancestors were tempted by a serpent in the garden of Eden. For this reason, we have the notion that the serpent is a symbol of Satan. However, in ancient Near Eastern culture, the serpent was a symbol of power. The Egyptians, for example, revered this creature of the desert, along with the eagle. Both coalesced in the persona of the pharaoh, highlighting his political and religious supremacy.

God Himself utilized the symbolism of the serpent to make known His divine power prior to the exodus.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.'"

So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the LORD commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.

Exodus 7:8–12

In this account, both Aaron's rod and the magicians' rods turned into serpents. The powerful Pharaoh was determined to show that he was not to be defied by anyone, least of all Moses and Aaron who dared to ask for the freedom of his slaves. Yet, the outcome was that Aaron's rod swallowed up Pharaoh's, demonstrating God's superior authority. Despite this, Pharaoh did not relent, thereby incurring trouble for himself and the whole of Egypt.

From the afore-mentioned story, we see that the serpent does not always represent Satan; it is also a symbol of authority. Unknown to Moses, the bronze serpent actually prefigured the Messiah: just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so Jesus Christ would be lifted up on the cross, so that sinners can look up at Him and be saved.

It was unfortunate that the bronze serpent was later turned into an idol to which the Israelites offered sacrifices. This continued for 700 years until Hezekiah ascended to the throne in Judah: "And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden images and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan" (2 Kgs 18:3–4).

THE BRONZE SERPENT SET ON A POLE

Hidden within the miracle of the bronze serpent are a number of teachings and insights for Christians.

1. One Bronze Serpent

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us."

So Moses prayed for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."

Numbers 21:7

Aside from symbolizing the suffering Messiah, the bronze serpent also revealed His uniqueness. For this reason, God told Moses to make just the one.

Satan can be likened to the fiery serpents in the wilderness, harming the elect during their journey. At the beginning of time, he had also tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen 3). However, because Christ was lifted up, man's sin was forgiven, and he was granted a new life. Hence, Peter and John testify by saying, "This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11–12).

In the 1,400 years from the time of Moses until the birth of Christ, the Jews, as a nation, upheld the belief in the one true God through the Law of Moses. For this reason, they found it hard to accept that Jesus, the Son of Man, was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), that He was one with God (Jn 10:30) and was God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim 3:16). Because of their unbelief, the Jews were constantly trying to find fault with Him and were convinced that eliminating Him equated to zeal and piety towards God. Even so, God, in His lovingkindness, did not abandon them. Indeed, He went on to fulfil His salvation plan, first alluded to 1,400 years earlier by the bronze serpent set on a pole.

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

John 3:14–16

This extraordinary prefiguration revealed the will and planning of God, and reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure' " (Isa 46:9–10).

The perspective of man is limited and partial. For this reason, it has been difficult for many to grasp the truth of the Godhead, particularly the fact that God is self-existent and eternal. Yet, the Bible is clear that He was the one true God in the past; He is the one true God in the present time; and He will be the one

true God in the future. Hence, when elder John wrote the Book of Revelation, he documented these words of Jesus: " 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' " (Rev 1:8). Accepting that Jesus Christ is the one true God is a condition of grace for both Jews and Gentiles alike.

2. Set on a Pole

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."

Numbers 21:8

Before the arrival of God's saving grace, the world was under the power of sin. Its effects could be likened to the venom of the fiery serpents which brought about man's certain doom. However, Christ died on the cross to save us from the bondage of sin and grant us the chance of renewal: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). This is the key significance of the bronze serpent.

3. To Look and Live

As the poison of the fiery serpents acted on the Israelites, Moses worked swiftly to make the bronze serpent according to God's instruction (Num 21:9). This method of deliverance must have seemed improbable at the time, but it proved effective.

In truth, the instruction to look up at the bronze serpent was nothing short of a test of faith—of the people's willingness to believe and act upon Moses' words. We can imagine that perhaps there were some who, even under the dire circumstances, judged the situation on the basis of their own logic and concluded that it was impossible for the bronze serpent to save them. If this was the case, they would have forfeited their lives.

God's wisdom is different from man's. This fact is illustrated, for example, by the fact that although Jesus ushered in a new era of grace, the scribes and Pharisees held on tightly to their Old Testament laws and traditions. In effect, their stance excluded

them from the blessing of justification by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 4:1–16). The situation is not dissimilar today: many people still find it hard to accept that they can be saved simply by believing in Jesus. However, the story of the bronze serpent reveals that salvation is given by God; everyone can have access to this grace; and it is easy to obtain. The only condition is belief: “Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy” (Ps 33:18). This truth could not be grasped by the Jews with their legalistic mindset, nor by those who later advocated complex and ascetic forms of religion. For both types of people, God’s salvation grace was a stumbling block.

Some people may wonder whether the bronze serpent had any inherent powers to heal those who had been bitten. The answer is no. Healing came simply from the people’s belief in God’s word. The lesson for Christians is that we, too, can be renewed in our spiritual lives if we look up at the bronze serpent set on the pole. We have no need to look towards Moses who represents the Old Testament Law, nor to Aaron, who represents the sacrificial system. Rather, we should look to Jesus Christ who died on the cross, and we shall be assured of victory over death.

*“O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?”*

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:55–57

CONCLUSION

Salvation was once shrouded in mystery, but God in His wisdom chose to reveal its path in different ways over the generations. One by one, His revelations pointed to the coming of Christ.

“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

Acts 5:30–32

Because we have received the salvation of Jesus through repentance and belief, we should hold on to it tightly by looking to Him each day of our spiritual journey.

The Star of Jacob

Then he took up his oracle and said:

*"The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened;
The utterance of him who hears the words of God,
And knows the knowledge of the Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Who falls down, with eyes opened wide:*

*"I see Him, but not now;
I behold Him, but not near;
A Star shall come out of Jacob;
A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel,
And batter the brow of Moab,
And destroy all the sons of tumult.*

*"And Edom shall be a possession;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession,
While Israel does valiantly.
Out of Jacob One shall have dominion,
And destroy the remains of the city."*

Numbers 24:15–19

From the ten plagues that preceded the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, to the signs and miracles that took place during their forty-year wilderness journey, news of these momentous events spread to the surrounding nations, inciting fear and trepidation (Josh 5:1).

As the Israelite army approached the land of Moab, King Balak became "exceedingly afraid of the people because they were many, and Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel" (Num 22:3).

He feared this nation not only because of its magnitude, but because it had defeated the mighty kings of the Amorites and Bashan (Num 21:21–35). Therefore, having decided that he had no hope of victory, he sent for Balaam, a renowned prophet from the land of Pethor by the Euphrates, to invoke a curse upon the enemy. Despite a warning from God, Balaam responded to the summons.

Although the Israelites were an unruly group whom God had to punish from time to time, they were still His chosen people. For this reason, He was willing to protect them: He stopped Balaam from uttering a curse and instead made him give a blessing.

Balaam was a failed prophet because, far from encouraging the Israelites to serve God, he collaborated with Balak to set up altars in an attempt to bring about their downfall. In this way, he showed that he was no different from the mercenary sorcerers and mediums of the land. Nevertheless, after he experienced God's intervention, Balaam had to concede: "For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' " (Num 23:23).

The inspired words spoken by Balaam make us recall the divine promise to Abraham, made when God first chose him:

*"I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

Genesis 12:2–3

After Balaam realized that the Israelites could not be cursed, he proclaimed their special status: they were a chosen race, a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations (Num 23:8–10).

In the end, the covetous Balaam was killed by the sword (Josh 13:22). However, he left behind an amazing story—one in which God prevented him from cursing the chosen people and, instead, made him give a blessing. He prophesied about the Star of Jacob, namely the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would manifest in the flesh (Num 24:17).

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

The Bible often uses the symbolism of stars to depict angels and saints (e.g. Gen 37:9; Job 38:7; Isa 14:12; 1 Cor 15:41; Rev 1:20). However, the Star of Jacob in Numbers 24 is unique as a symbol of the Messiah: "... A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Num 24:17). This particular prophecy indicates the two appearances of Jesus Christ to the world. In the first, He will arrive as a Star out of Jacob, coming in the flesh to bring salvation to mankind (Mt 2:2; Lk 1:78). In the second, He will come as a Sceptre—denoting authority and sovereignty—rising out of Israel to judge and destroy the sons of evil (Mt 24:29–31; 1 Thess 4:16–18).

The birth of Jesus Christ took place around 4 BC. Wise men from the east saw His star in the sky and set off to look for Him under its guidance (Mt 2:1–2). When they arrived in the small town of Bethlehem, they saw the baby Jesus lying in a manger. Ever since that time, the salvation light of Jesus Christ has been shining "to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:79). He is the "morning star" rising in the hearts of believers (2 Pet 1:19), the "Bright and Morning Star" (Rev 22:16). His glory, honour and salvation grace radiate amidst the darkness of death.

A STAR SHALL COME OUT OF JACOB

Two thousand years ago, God heralded the birth of Jesus Christ with a bright star. His incarnation became a testimony that enabled the world to see the great plan and work of God.

1. The Prophecy

Balaam was an evil prophet who "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet 2:15) and walked on the path of error for the sake of profit (Jude 11). However, God obstructed his plan to curse the Israelites and made him speak four beautiful oracles. In the first, he proclaimed the Israelites to be a consecrated nation (Num 23:7–10); in the second, that they had the abidance of God (Num 23:20–24); in the third, that they possessed the fountain of life (Num 24:4–9); in the fourth, that Christ would come forth from the line of Jacob (Num 24:16–22).

Concerning the fourth oracle, we know that Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the son of Isaac and the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 30). Indeed, up until the time of the prophets, the name Jacob was synonymous with the nation of Israel (see Isa 27:9; 58:14; Ezek 20:5; Obad 17). When God chose Abraham, He revealed seven great promises (Gen 12:1–3) which were at the core of His salvation plan and signalled the coming of the Messiah from the house of Jacob (cf. Gen 28:3–4, 14). The apostle Paul notes, "As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated'" (Rom 9:13). Also, Luke writes, "Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli... the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham..." (Lk 3:23, 34).

From the time that Balaam proclaimed the prophecy concerning the Star of Jacob, 1,000 years passed before Jesus Christ was born. In the eyes of man, He was the son of Joseph the carpenter, the descendant of Jacob, Judah and Abraham; in the eyes of God, He was the Saviour promised since the time of creation; Jesus was the fulfilment of the divine plan.

In the apostolic era, when many Gentiles converted to Christianity, Paul wrote to the church in Galatia:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:27–29

From his words, we appreciate that, as Christians, we are fortunate to have received a special grace: we have been baptized into Christ and put on Christ. Therefore, not only do we belong to Him, we also have a right to the promise that God made to Abraham. We are thus part of a great nation, with Jesus Christ as our King, and can look forward to our spiritual inheritance in the heavenly kingdom.

2. Star from the East

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Matthew 2:1–2

Depending on the translation, the wise men are also referred to as “astrologers” (e.g. the Amplified Bible) or “Magi”¹ (e.g. the New International Version Bible). The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopaedia says: “The Magi connected with Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus were probably strangers from Mesopotamia or Arabia who knew the OT predictions of a coming Messiah, and who watched the skies for some astral phenomena that would foreshadow His advent.”² On discovering the star in the east, the Magi embarked on a journey to Palestine to find the King of the Jews. Arriving with hearts of reverence, they paid their respects to the baby Jesus and offered him their best gifts (Mt 2:1–12). This demonstrated their true wisdom—one that was duly rewarded, for having followed the star, they found the door to salvation.

Within the story of the wise men is a lesson for Christians, which is the importance of pursuing both wisdom and the truth. Without the latter, a “wise man” is devoid of real wisdom. Paul says, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:20–21). And prior to Paul, the wise King Solomon also taught, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 9:10).

The world today is full of so-called wise men: intellectuals and scholars who seek after knowledge. But what are they really striving for? Fame and status, perhaps? If people cannot emulate the wise men from the east to search for salvation in the Lord,

their learning is in vain. No amount of academic pursuit can bring about solutions for man’s uncertain future. The prophet Isaiah says, “... For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden” (Isa 29:14). Only the wisdom that is based on God’s truth is everlasting.

3. The Bright and Morning Star

Before daybreak, there is a profound darkness over the earth. It lasts until the morning star appears in the sky, shining brightly to herald the arrival of dawn. The Lord Jesus is not only the Star of Jacob, He is also the Bright and Morning Star, providing mankind with a guiding light that breaks the darkness (Isa 60:2, 3).

On the island of Patmos, the Lord Jesus showed elder John the mysterious and amazing works He would do in the end time, including His bestowal of reward and retribution: “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to everyone according to his work” (Rev 22:12).

At His second coming, Jesus will not be the suffering Christ who came to the world the first time; He will be the sovereign Judge: “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev 22:16).

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul teaches that the church is the body of Christ, “the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23). Its function is to serve as a bright light in the darkness, bringing the Lord’s salvation to mankind and making available the living fountain for the forgiveness of sin (Zech 13:1). The existence of the true church enables us to know that daybreak—Christ’s second coming—is near.

This present age is one of darkness, where sin is prevalent. There is cruelty, violence, deceit, love of money and sexual immorality. Moreover, the level of wickedness in this generation surpasses that of previous generations. It is a clear sign that the end of the world is imminent. But what is worrying is that many Christians still do not realize the need to consecrate themselves, or to watch and pray (1 Pet 4:7). As such, there is a danger that

¹ Greek, *magi*, plural of *magos*, denoting “a Magician”. Strong’s reference number: 3097.

² *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, eds., Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos and John Rea (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975).

some will be swallowed up by the darkness. However, since we know that Christ is the Bright and Morning Star, and that the true church is the light in this world, we should resolve to rid ourselves of sin and fleshly desires and to submit to the will of God, so that we can lead godly lives until the righteous sun appears (Mal 4:2; 2 Pet 1:19–20). The church as a whole should endeavour to remain upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets and to have Jesus Christ as her cornerstone (Eph 2:20). She should uphold the truth, promote righteousness, strive after peace and wait for the second coming of Christ.

4. The Star in the Hearts of Believers

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

2 Peter 1:19

The words of Peter indicate that the morning star is also the Holy Spirit who shines in the hearts of men. When the Spirit appears, He will illumine darkened hearts, enabling them to understand the truth.

In the fourth century AD, Ezekiel spoke the following prophetic words:

“Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.”

Ezekiel 11:19–20

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

Ezekiel 36:26–27

Here, the “stony heart” refers to a heart that is hard, cold and callous, while the “heart of flesh” is a heart that is gentle, warm and humane. Today, many people have stony hearts. However, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, even these will be transformed into hearts of flesh. It means that man will submit to the law of God and darkness will be replaced by light.

Paul says, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Cor 2:12–13). On account of the light from the Morning Star, people of the world will be able to understand even the spiritual matters of God.

CONCLUSION

In the Book of Numbers, we find the earliest biblical reference to a star from the east. It records a prophecy spoken by the prophet Balaam concerning the Star of Jacob, signifying the birth and salvation work of the Messiah—that He would emerge from the house of Jacob, coming as the Bright and Morning star to cast His light upon the world. The Morning Star is also the Holy Spirit who has the power to illumine darkened hearts.

Cities of Refuge

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall appoint cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally may flee there. They shall be cities of refuge for you from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment. And of the cities which you give, you shall have six cities of refuge. You shall appoint three cities on this side of the Jordan, and three cities you shall appoint in the land of Canaan, which will be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there.' "

Numbers 35:9–15

" 'But if he pushes him suddenly without enmity, or throws anything at him without lying in wait, or uses a stone, by which a man could die, throwing it at him without seeing him, so that he dies, while he was not his enemy or seeking his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood according to these judgments. So the congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall return him to the city of refuge where he had fled, and he shall remain there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.' "

Numbers 35:22–28

Since ancient times, people have committed accidental killings, and the duty of any civilized society has been to ensure there is a means of expiation. Prior to the Israelites entering Canaan, God gave Moses detailed regulations for the creation of a unique system of cities of refuge for this purpose. Although it was unknown at the time, God had hidden the truth of salvation in them.

PREFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Numbers 35 records God's instructions to Moses concerning the establishment of six cities of refuge which would offer a place of safety to anyone who killed another person in accidental circumstances. Within the regulations, God defined manslaughter versus murder, and explained the process of asylum (Num 35:9–28). After Joshua led the elect to conquer the promised land, he implemented God's command, establishing cities of refuge from north to south on both sides of the River Jordan (Josh 20). The name of each city had a special significance in relation to the future salvation work of Christ.

1. Three Cities West of the River Jordan

Joshua established three cities of refuge on the west bank of the Jordan: Kedesh, Shechem and Kirjath Arba (Hebron) (Josh 20:7).

a. Kedesh (north)

Kedesh was located in the north of Canaan, in the mountains of Naphtali, 20 km from the city of Tyre. It was also known as Kedesh in Galilee (Josh 20:7) or Kedesh in Naphtali (Judges 4:6). The meaning of Kedesh is a "sacred place, sanctuary"¹ from a root word meaning "to be holy, to sanctify"².

The Bible says that the nature of Christ is holy (Jn 8:46; Heb 4:15; 7:26) and that it is God's will for us to be holy (1 Thess 4:7).

¹ Strong's reference number: H6943.

² Hebrew, *qades*. Strong's reference number: H6942.

b. Shechem (central)

The ancient city of Shechem was in central Canaan, near Mount Gerizim (Judg 9:7), in the hill country of Ephraim (Josh 20:7). Its location was probably where the current city of Tell Balata is, at the eastern end of the valley running between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, 50 km north of Jerusalem.³ The meaning of Shechem⁴ is “ridge” or “neck (between the shoulders) as the place of burdens”.⁵

The name of the city is an apt description of Jesus’ salvation: the fact that He would bear the sins of man, along with his physical and spiritual burdens (Isa 53:4; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24).

c. Kirjath Arba (south)

The ancient town of Kirjath Arba, better known as Hebron, was located in the mountains of Judah, between Beersheba and Jerusalem.⁶ It is famous because many of Israel’s ancestors resided here at some point, including Abraham (Gen 13:18). The meaning of the town’s name is “a community” or “alliance”.⁷

In terms of Christ’s salvation, He established an alliance with the believers through His precious blood and joined them as one to Himself (Jn 17: 20–21; 1 Cor 6:17; Gal 3:27–28).

2. Three Cities East of the River Jordan

Joshua also established three cities of refuge east of the River Jordan: Golan, Ramoth and Bezer (Josh 20:8).

a. Golan (north)

Golan was situated in Manasseh’s territory of Bashan (Deut 4:43). The precise location is uncertain, but it is possible that Sahem el-Jolan is the site of this ancient city.⁸ Golan was

given to the Gershonite Levites as their dwelling place (Josh 21:27; Num 35:2).

One meaning of Golan⁹ is “captive”. It highlights that Christ was captured and led away, like a lamb to the slaughter, in order to set us free (Isa 53:7; Gal 5:1). Another meaning is “round”,¹⁰ reminding us that the Lord constantly surrounds us with His grace and builds a hedge around us by way of protection (Job 1:10; Ps 3:3; 34:7). Jesus says, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

b. Ramoth (central)

The city of Ramoth in Gilead, also known as “Ramoth-Gilead”, was located in the central region. It was a city belonging to Gad that was allocated to the Merarite Levites (Josh 21:38).¹¹ The meaning of Ramoth¹² is “heights”.

We recall that when the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people cried out, “Hosanna in the Highest” (Mt 21:8–10). Jesus is our Lord in the Highest, King above all kings and head over all things (Eph 1:22). He was lifted up and nailed to the cross, like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so that people could look up at Him and have their sins forgiven (Jn 3:14; 12:32). As such, Ramoth, the city of refuge, testified to two matters: Jesus would be the exalted Christ, and He would be crucified on the cross.

c. Bezer (south)

The last city of refuge on the east of the River Jordan was Bezer in the south. Again, the exact location is uncertain, but the Bible mentions that it was on a plateau in the wilderness (Deut 4:43). It belonged to the tribe of Reuben prior to being allocated to the Merarite Levites (1 Chron 6:78).

The meaning of Bezer¹³ is “inaccessible spot” (by virtue of

3 “Shechem” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 3 (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

4 Strong’s reference number: H7927. The same as H7926.

5 Strong’s reference number: H7926. Ibid.

6 Merrill F. Unger, “Hebron” in *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

7 Ibid.

8 “Golan” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 1 (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

9 Strong’s reference number: H1474. From *golah* (H1473), meaning “captive”.

10 “Golan” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Volume 2, D–G, ed., Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

11 “Ramoth-Gilead” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 3 (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

12 Strong’s reference number: H7216.

13 Strong’s reference number: H1221.

height or fortification) and comes from a root word meaning “mighty things” and “strong”.¹⁴

Paul says that Christ is the spiritual Rock in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4). He is our fortress and guarantee. In perilous times, we can rely on Him to fight the enemy (Eph 6:10–17). Similarly, the prophet Isaiah says that Christ is our deliverer and reliance, and that His church is “the city that is sought out and not forsaken”.

*Indeed the LORD has proclaimed
To the ends of the world:
“Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Surely your salvation is coming;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.’ ”
And they shall call them The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD;
And you shall be called Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken.*

Isaiah 62:11–12

In summary, hidden within the six cities of refuge was the truth that Christ would come to bring His grace of salvation and become the refuge of sinners. Just as the manslayers were released upon the death of the high priest, so man would be freed from his bondage to sin and the wrath of God through the death of Jesus (1 Thess 1:10).

REFUGE FOR ACCIDENTAL KILLERS

In this section, we shall look at the point that the cities of refuge foreshadowed the protection of Christ for sinners.

1. No One is Free of Sin

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul writes about the origin of sin and its effects:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come).

Romans 5:12–14

From the time of Adam onwards, sin has reigned over the world, and people are under its bondage: “... [T]he whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn 5:19). Death of the body and soul is the price that man must pay; no one is exempt. It is no wonder, then, that Paul once lamented, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

Despite the reality and power of sin, many people disbelieve its existence. Nevertheless, they cannot escape the outcome, which is death, or lives that are filled with vanity, sufferings, illness and hopelessness. Furthermore, on the day of God’s righteous judgment, they will have to face His wrath and retribution (Rom 2:5–6). Even so, people in the world seem to have little or no inclination to seek out the path to life; instead, they are content to live as they please. However, it is for such people that God manifested His love.

Paul says:

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6–8

This is the salvation grace that we have obtained through the mercy of Jesus. He died and resurrected so that we could have a living hope (1 Pet 1:3). For this reason, we should tell everyone about the power and consequences of sin and how they can find protection in the spiritual city of refuge. In this way, they can access the fountain of living water for renewal, justification and sanctification through the grace of Jesus Christ (Jn 3:5–9; Tit 3:5–7).

¹⁴ Hebrew, *batsar*. Strong’s reference number: H1219.

Paul says that the church is the body of Christ, “the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23). It is therefore important that the members do much more than just worship God; they must also proclaim the way of salvation to others. Indeed, Christ established the church for the purpose of warning people about their sins and to enable them to enter His grace, be redeemed, put on Christ and escape from spiritual death. This is because the church is the spiritual city of refuge.

2. Fleeing to the City of Refuge

The relationship between God and man is based upon salvation; indeed, His sole plan for mankind is salvation. The cities of refuge foreshadowed that plan, and Christ became its substance—a fact that was revealed to believers in the New Testament. If Jesus did not die for us, to become our refuge, we would not be able to escape from God’s wrath in the future.

Before his conversion to Christ, the apostle Paul persecuted the church “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13). However, after the grace of the Lord came upon him, he was able to profess, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Tim 1:15–16). Paul’s experience serves as a powerful testimony to the mercy of Jesus: if Jesus could forgive him—the foremost of sinners—He would surely save others.

In ancient times, God established the cities of refuge to shelter those guilty of accidental killing. Today, the true church established by the Lord Jesus Christ is our city of refuge, and there is no other way for us to escape from sin. Everyone needs to enter in to avoid future calamity.

3. Distributed Evenly Throughout the Land

‘And of the cities which you give, you shall have six cities of refuge. You shall appoint three cities on this side of the Jordan, and three cities you shall appoint in the land of Canaan, which will be cities of refuge.’

Numbers 35:13–14

The six cities of refuge were distributed evenly throughout the land, meaning that a fugitive only had to make a journey of one or two days.

According to the rabbis, in order to aid the fugitive it was the business of the Sanhedrin to keep the roads leading to the cities of refuge in the best possible repair. No hills were left, every river was bridged, and the road itself was to be least thirty-two cubits broad. At every turn were guideposts bearing the word “Refuge”, and two students of the law were appointed to accompany the fleeing man and to pacify, if possible, the avenger, should he overtake the fugitive.

Merrill F. Unger, “Cities of Refuge”, The Unger’s Bible Dictionary, 1988

Moses instructed the Israelites saying, “So the congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall return him to the city of refuge where he had fled, and he shall remain there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil” (Num 35:25).

Not only did the path to deliverance have to be clearly marked out, it also had to be easy to travel. The same principles apply to the salvation of Christ. Nevertheless, when Jesus personally came in the flesh to reveal the truth of the cities of refuge, the scribes and Pharisees who were experts in the Law found His appearance and message perplexing; they could not grasp God’s plan. And in the case of the apostle Paul, he was only able to comprehend after the light of Jesus shone into his darkened heart.

During His ministry, Jesus explained the way to salvation to Nicodemus: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). And before He ascended to heaven, He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16).

Paul wrote to the church in Rome, saying:

Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

Romans 3:29–31

He also told the church in Ephesus, “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:13–14).

From the words of both Jesus and Paul, we understand that the path to salvation is no longer as intricate as it was in Old Testament times. In the New Testament era, those who approach the city of refuge—God’s true church—need only to enter the door with faith. In this way, they can receive Jesus Christ who came in the flesh, “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Rev 1:8), the one true God of yesterday, today and forever. Having faith means obeying Him to receive water baptism and regeneration through the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). This is the only way for justification and sanctification.

4. Refuge for All

‘These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there.’

Numbers 35:15

According to the Law of Moses, anyone who killed accidentally could seek asylum in the cities of refuge: Israelites, foreigners and sojourners. This point highlights the universal nature of God’s salvation, which was evident even in the Old Testament period. Indeed, when we study the theological messages in this part of Scripture—for example, the story of Noah and the Book

of Jonah, we learn that God’s grace extended to the Gentiles. Hence, when God made His seven great promises to Abraham, He said, “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2–3).

Likewise, the prophets revealed God’s universal salvation plan repeatedly. Isaiah, for example, said, “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it” (Isa 2:2). Habakkuk said, “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:4). His words became the basis of the doctrine of justification by faith that was later expounded by the apostle Paul.

Paul understood the inclusive nature of the Lord’s salvation grace, and he taught the believers, saying:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:27–29

For this reason, he became a proactive messenger to the Gentiles: “But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles)” (Gal 2:7–8).

In summary, even though the Jews were entrusted with God’s truth from ancient times (Rom 3:1) and were obliged to uphold the Mosaic Law, God did not abandon the other nations; He extended His salvation grace to them. In the New Testament era, we, as Gentiles, have received this salvation directly from God through the spiritual city of refuge, which is His true church. The outcome is that we have been liberated from the bondage of Satan, and this grace puts an end to punishment.

5. Remaining in the Safety of the City

Although a manslayer could find refuge and protection from the avenger of blood (a person nominated by the family of the deceased to take revenge), there was a crucial condition: “But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood” (Num 35:26–27).

The city of refuge was the sole place of safety. During the time of Joshua, the regulation stated: “And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them” (Josh 20:4). In other words, the manslayer could present his case to the elders and repent. This process was important because human life is precious and any form of killing, even if accidental, could not be viewed lightly; the manslayer had a duty to show that he would not repeat such an offence. Furthermore, because his life was at risk from potential avengers, he had to flee to the city of refuge and not attempt to leave. It was only when the high priest passed away that he could safely return home (Num 35:28).

The afore-mentioned points offer a number of teachings. Firstly, the people of the world face certain judgment for their sins, and anyone who delays entering the city of refuge or departs from it, will be in danger of losing their lives. Secondly, Jesus Christ is our High Priest who bore the sins of mankind. On account of His death, we have obtained life and freedom. But it is only by remaining in His love that we can be assured of eternal life and safety. If we fail to do this, we will find ourselves back under the bondage of sin (2 Pet 2:20). In this situation, we will no longer have access to grace or refuge. We should therefore depart from sin and treasure the salvation that is found within the city of refuge. It is there that we can wait for the High Priest to deliver us from the sufferings of this life and take us into the eternal city that is our true home.

6. Returning Home After the Death of the High Priest

The portion of the Mosaic Law that dealt with criminal injury and killing was based on the following principles: “But if any lasting harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex 21:23–25); “[F]racture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him” (Lev 24:20); “Your eye shall not pity; but life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deut 19:21). Accordingly, justice normally entailed a killer paying for the life he had taken with his own. The only exception was where someone had killed accidentally. But even then, because it constituted a sin, one could not escape without penalty.

For the manslayer, punishment meant confinement to the city of refuge, and he was not permitted to leave until the death of the high priest (Num 35:28). This was obviously an indeterminate length of time. Meanwhile, he had to forfeit family life and the right to tend to his property and land, and he also faced the possibility of never being able to return home at all (i.e. if he passed away before the high priest). Therefore, in some cases, it was equivalent to a life sentence.

The moral is that penance is not sufficient for the remittance of sin; we need the High Priest to lay down His life for us, to give us renewed hope: “[S]o Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Heb 9:28).

CONCLUSION

The law of God is stringent but humane, a fact that is evident from His regulations concerning the cities of refuge. They highlight the careful planning, wisdom and grace behind God’s salvation. They also reveal that the spiritual city of refuge today is His one true church. As Jesus Christ has laid down His life to atone for our sin, we must remain inside the city and abide in His grace. We should also call upon the people of the world to enter in without delay, so that they can escape God’s wrath at the future judgment.



CONCLUSION

The wilderness journey passed in forty years of mist and smoke. During that time, the elect underwent harsh training and encountered numerous spiritual experiences. For some, the end was successful entry into the land of Canaan; for others, it was death along the way.

Many people have since analyzed and evaluated the story in different ways. Some have looked at the historical details, while others have focused on the practical applications, warnings and lessons. A common approach has been to study the laws and statutes documented in the first half of the Book of Numbers and the recapitulation of history in the second half. Undeniably, this is useful, but it is inadequate on its own. We need to go beyond this, seeking the deeper spiritual meanings within the book and to discover the will of God at this early stage of history. It is only when we look at the bigger picture within Numbers, which encompasses the hidden prefigurations of Christ, that we discover the true value of this book and its spiritual significance. Out of all the books in the Old Testament, this one stands out as being the most complete in terms of its messages and prefigurations concerning Christ, and is therefore of paramount importance in the field of soteriology.

The first prefiguration, the Nazirite, reveals Christ as the true Nazirite consecrated to God. The second, the manna that fell with the dew, shows that Christ is the true bread from heaven. The third, the rod of Aaron, declares the resurrection of Christ and His eternal priesthood. The fourth, the ashes of the red heifer, reveals the sacrifice of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in accomplishing God's salvation. The fifth, the rock that issued water, tells of Christ who was struck and opened up a fountain of blood and water. The sixth, the bronze serpent, tells of Christ who was hung on the cross for sinners to look

upon. The seventh, the Star of Jacob, speaks of Christ's lineage and the nature of His salvation work. The eighth, the cities of refuge, reveals that Christ is the refuge of mankind and its source of grace.

When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he spoke of the mystery of Christ's salvation as revealed through the gospel:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 3:1–11

We find that his description is equally apt for the prefigurations of Christ in Numbers. They, too, contain “the unsearchable riches of Christ”; constitute the mystery “hidden in God who created all things”; and highlight the “eternal purpose of God which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

The significance of the prefigurations remained hidden from the Israelites during the wilderness years and was only realized when Christ came to the world. Through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, we are now able to understand the prefigurations. Therefore, as Christians standing at the conclusion of God's created realm, we can see the mystery of His salvation plan with clarity and appreciate His manifold wisdom and meticulous planning.

In the past, scholars of soteriology have focused on the New Testament, perhaps because the manifestation of Christ makes for easier study. In contrast, the soteriology of the Old Testament, which uses numerous prefigurations and types, can be more difficult to comprehend. However, through the work of the Holy Spirit who has opened our hearts to understand the word of God, we have been able to study the Book of Numbers, thereby gaining access to the mystery of God's salvation plan and seeing its enduring and consistent nature. It is hoped that we have been edified, and that we have gained a deeper level of spiritual knowledge.

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