



In the early days of church history, there was a significant debate about the body of the Lord Jesus. Was it flesh and bone or did it just appear as flesh and bone? The issue centred on one Greek word in John chapter 1 verse 14, *ginomai*. The word can mean 'became' or 'appear', depending on the context. Ultimately, the church understood and agreed that the Word literally became flesh and thus Jesus is both fully human and fully God in one person.

One of the important passages of the New Testament which teaches us about the pre-incarnate Christ is Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 17. Paul describes the Lord Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.'<sup>1</sup>

## What does firstborn mean?

The Greek word is *prototokos*, made up of two words, *protos*, meaning 'first', and *tokos* from *tikto*, 'to give birth'. The word simply means to be born first. If so, could it be that Jesus was the first and greatest of God's creations? That would have implications for just about every aspect of the gospel and confirm one of the basic teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses.

It is worth noting that Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 17 is a key passage that is often used by Jehovah's Witnesses to try and disprove that Jesus was fully God. In their 'translation' of the Bible (New World Translation) the word 'other' is incorrectly inserted in this passage to distort its true meaning.

So, we need to have a closer look at the use of the word 'firstborn' in the Bible, as the meaning of words are often determined by the context in which they are found.

## Firstborn in the Old Testament

In the family context, the firstborn was entitled to the double portion, Deut. 21. 17, to the blessing, Gen. 27, and to special treatment, Gen. 43. 33. It does appear that the firstborn son in a family had rights and privileges that the other children didn't receive.

The firstborn was uniquely the father's heir and representative. The emphasis had nothing to do with a 'beginning' for the son, but rather was about rank, responsibility and rights.

Israel was also referred to as God's firstborn in the

special sense of Israel's superiority and exaltation above the nations of the earth. It was not the first nation to exist and so we can see that being a firstborn nation did not mean being the first nation to be born.

'Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn"',  
Exod. 4. 22.

Perhaps the most significant use of the firstborn in the Old Testament is in Psalm 89, where the psalmist is emphasizing the pre-eminence and superiority of the coming Messiah.

'Also I will make him My firstborn, The highest of the kings of the earth',  
Ps. 89. 27.

## New Testament

In the New Testament, the word *prototokos* appears eight times.<sup>2</sup> On six occasions, it is in the singular and refers to the Lord Christ, with the other two in the plural form.

Luke chapter 2 verse 7 refers to Jesus as being the firstborn of Mary, using the word in its most basic form as it is used in the genealogical lists of the Old Testament. The other references, however, take on a far greater meaning.

## The context of Colossians chapter 1 verse 15

As Paul teaches the deity of the Lord Jesus, he does so in His relation to the Father as 'image' and to creation as 'firstborn'.

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation', Col. 1. 15.

This is seen in the following verses where the relationship of the Lord Jesus to creation is expanded.

'For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist', Col. 1. 16, 17.

Paul goes to great lengths to emphasize that the Lord Jesus was responsible for the creation of all things: invisible and visible, all spiritual powers, all

worlds, all seen things in the universe we live in.

He cannot be responsible for all creation and also be a part of it, just as God cannot be Creator of the universe and also a part of it.

As the Firstborn of all creation, the Lord Jesus has rights, responsibilities, and authority over all things. Perhaps the New Living Translation gives the clearest rendering of Colossians chapter 1 verse 15 for us today.

‘Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation’.

Quite remarkably, the firstborn of all creation could say, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have

nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head’, Matt. 8. 20.

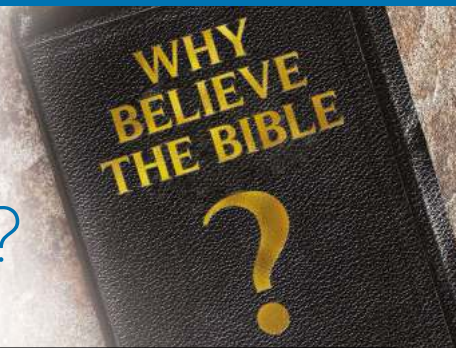
‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich’, 2 Cor. 8. 9.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations in this article are from the NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2. 7; Rom. 8. 29; Col. 1. 15, 18; Heb. 1. 6; 11. 28; 12. 23; Rev. 1. 5.

# Equipped to Evangelize Part 3 – Why should people believe the Bible?

BY PAUL MCCAULEY, BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND



In a society in which there is so much unbelief and so many other beliefs, we can't just assume that people view the Bible as reliable or relevant, never mind as God's word. Often, before we can tell them what the Bible says, we have to make a case for why they should listen. That's what we are going to look at in this article and the next.

So, how do we know that the Bible is God's word? We use our EAR. EAR is an acronym we will use to present three lines of evidence for the divine authority of the Bible. It stands for Experience, Agreement and Revelation.

## Experience

When you read the Gospels, you find the Lord's word had power – He told the paralysed to get up, the blind to see, the demons to depart, the dead to rise, and it happened. Those who were healed by Christ were living proof of the divine authority of His word.

So it is with the Bible. This book has a message that transforms lives, and you can testify to that. Your own testimony is a powerful tool, whether you are witnessing

to atheists, cultists, or people from other religions, because their worldview doesn't even pretend to offer what the gospel offers – the assurance of salvation, new life, and a personal relationship with God by grace.

Even if you weren't in the gutter of sin, you have your own experience of the gospel giving you new life and an interest in things that once you had no interest in. You have your own experience of knowing the reality of God in your life.

Write out and memorize your own personal testimony so you can deliver it in less than a minute. You should be able to tell briefly why you wanted to be saved, how you were saved, and what it means to you now. The gospel isn't dry theory or dull theology – it is something that makes a powerful, positive difference in the lives of those that embrace it.

If you want to prove there is power at a socket, you plug in an appliance. You, and millions of others, have 'plugged in' to the biblical gospel and proved it to be 'the power of God unto salvation', Rom. 1. 16.

## Agreement

Sometimes you will meet people who will tell you they tried to read the Bible but gave up. One of the things I have found helpful is to emphasize the unity of scripture. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books, written by about forty different authors over a period of about 1600 years, and yet it tells one story – the story of God redeeming fallen humanity through Christ.

All the stories of the Bible come together to tell that one story – that is remarkable. Imagine if someone came to you with a piece of a jigsaw or a paragraph of text, then sometime later someone else gives you another piece of a jigsaw or another paragraph of text. This happens over a period of years, and when you look at all the jigsaw pieces you find they all fit together to form a picture, or when you put all the paragraphs together, they form one story. What would you conclude? You certainly wouldn't put it down to luck. You would recognize someone was behind it all. When it comes to the Bible, the only one who could have been behind it all is God.

Not only do all the stories come together to tell one story, but all the stories individually illustrate that one story. That's why the Sunday School teacher can go through the Old Testament and not only tell the children wonderful stories but from those stories present Christ and preach the gospel. It is useful to have a couple of examples ready to share if opportunity arises. For instance, you could relate the story of Noah's ark and say, 'God warned of judgement for sin, but provided a way of salvation through the ark, and those who sheltered in the ark were saved from the judgement. The ark took it for them, and they were brought into a new creation – that's the message of the gospel'. Or, you could sketch out the story of Joseph, 'It's the story of a beloved son who claims he is destined to rule. He is rejected by his own people, handed over to the Gentiles and condemned as a criminal, but he rises to prominence and becomes the saviour of the world'. You can then enlarge on these points of correspondence and show that the God of the Bible is sovereign in history, telling the story in advance over and over again.

*To be continued in the final part of this short series.*

# Study Notes on the Book of Esther – Part 3

**Final notes, practical lessons and conclusion**

BY MALCOLM BEATTIE, BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND



## Author

The writer is unknown. He was possibly a Persian Jew who had access to 'the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia', Esther 10. 2. Others suggest it was written by Mordecai.

## Dates and Time Span

There are three specific date markers:

- Chapter 1 verse 3 – 'the third year of his (Ahasuerus) reign' – circa 483 BC
- Chapter 2 verse 16 – 'the seventh year of his reign' – circa 479 BC

- Chapter 3 verse 7 – 'in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus' – 474 BC

The book spans about twelve years, focusing on the period commencing in Ahasuerus's twelfth year with the decree to destroy the Jews.

## Casting Pur

In chapter 3 verse 7, we read about 'casting Pur before Haman'. This refers to Haman seeking guidance from diviners and astrologers, which possibly involved the casting of lots. This is how he arrived at the date for the destruction of the Jews.

There is a practical lesson here. Trying to understand the future through astrology and horoscopes

is wrong. Christians must not be involved in such practices. Esther shows that the Lord is in control, so we need not worry about the future. It is completely safe in His hands.

## The Law of the Medes and Persians

Once a law was written in the king's name and sealed with his seal, it could not be altered or reversed, Esther 8:8. So it was not possible to cancel the decree ordering the destruction of the Jews, 3:8-14; instead, a further decree had to be issued, 8:9-14, which permitted the Jews to defend themselves on the day the earlier decree was to be carried out – note the wording of chapter 8 verse 13.

## Communications

Effective, speedy communication is essential to government and this is evident in Esther in the form of letters, sealed with the king's seal, distributed by runners, and mounted couriers. Note how comprehensive the descriptions are – every language was covered, and every part of the kingdom reached. The full machinery of state was used to trigger the genocide, but subsequently used to counter that.

- Chapter 3 verses 9 to 14 – This is the irreversible decree of 13th Nisan ordering 'to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish all Jews' on 13th Adar.
- Chapter 8 verses 9 to 14 – The counteracting decree, composed by Mordecai, dated 23 Sivan, empowering the Jews in all the provinces to prepare for and to defend themselves on 13th Adar.
- Chapter 9 verses 20 to 22 – The letter to the Jews throughout the kingdom, written by Mordecai, to establish a two-day celebration of the victorious events, to be held yearly on 14 and 15th Adar. It is referred to as Purim and is celebrated up to the present day.
- Chapter 9 verse 29 – A 'second letter of Purim' from Esther confirming, by command, the instructions given by Mordecai regarding Purim.

Another lesson is that we are called upon to be subject to government, Rom. 13:1, but that there may be laws contrary to the word of God that we cannot obey, which was Daniel's experience, Dan. 6.

## Celebrations, Banquets and Feasts

There are feasts and banquets throughout the book.

- Chapter 1 verses 1 to 4 – The book begins with a great 180-day celebration of the wealth and power of the kingdom in Shushan the palace; a gathering to win the cooperation of the military leaders of Persia and Media to support Ahasuerus with his ongoing military campaign against Greece.
- Chapter 1 verse 5 to 8 – A subsequent seven-day banquet, in tents and marquees in 'the court of the garden of the king's palace'. It was notable for the fact that no limitation was placed on the behaviour of the guests; 'each man was allowed to drink with no restriction', Esther 1:8 NIV.
- Chapter 1 verse 9 – A simultaneous banquet held by Vashti.
- Chapter 2 verse 18 – A banquet termed 'Esther's feast' to celebrate her coronation.
- Chapter 5 verse 6 and chapter 7 verse 1 – Esther's two-part banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman when she revealed her nationality and exposed Haman's wickedness.
- Chapter 9 verses 17 and 18 – The Jews celebrated 'rest from their enemies' with 'a day of feasting and gladness' on 14 and 15th Adar.

Some of these banquets ended with debauched behaviour because of the levels of alcohol consumed – a practical lesson for us as Christians is to avoid such events and, because of the dangers involved, to abstain from alcohol altogether!

## Conclusion

Esther teaches us that despite outward appearances, world events, and even our own spiritual condition, the Lord is in control, moving faithfully and unfalteringly to protect His people and bring about His own purposes.

# A to Z of Priests – Annas and Caiaphas

BY JEREMY SINGER, BRIDGE OF WEIR, SCOTLAND

Have you noticed how Bible villains often come in pairs? For instance, Ahab and Jezebel menaced Elijah; later, Sanballat and Tobiah interfered with Nehemiah's building project. In this article, we consider a pair of bad priests, Annas and Caiaphas, who are mentioned in the Gospel narratives and the Acts of the Apostles. Their names and roles are confirmed by the Jewish historian JOSEPHUS.<sup>1</sup> Annas officiated as high priest from AD 6-15. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, John 18. 3, who was high priest during the public ministry of the Lord Jesus, Luke 3. 2; John 11. 49.

Annas and Caiaphas were guilty of three principal crimes:

1. Their rejection of the Son of God
2. Their ignorance of the word of God
3. Their hatred of the gospel of God

We will examine these sins in turn, then conclude with a practical challenge to ourselves.

## Rejection of the Son of God

Throughout His public service, the Jews repeatedly attempted to harm the Lord Jesus, even to kill Him. From Nazareth, Luke 4. 29, to Jerusalem, John 8. 59, the Lord's words and works infuriated the Jews. The priests' plot gathered momentum after the raising of Lazarus, John 11. 45-53, as 'they took counsel together . . . to put him to death', v. 53. Little did they know that their activity was anticipated in the 'determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God', Acts 2. 23. They designed their plan and accepted Judas' offer of treachery. They sent their soldiers to Gethsemane that fateful evening to arrest the Lord.

There followed a series of night-time judicial hearings, first before Annas, John 18. 13, later Caiaphas, v. 24, then before the Sanhedrin, Matt. 26. 59. While

false witnesses presented conflicting testimony against the Lord Jesus, Mark 14. 56, there was no valid cause for condemnation. The only sin brought to light was perjury by the witnesses. Like 'a sheep before her shearers' the Lord Jesus maintained a dignified silence, Isa. 53. 7. Eventually, Caiaphas posed a question under oath, which the defendant was honour bound to answer. The high priest asked, 'Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' Mark 14. 61. The Lord emphatically answered in the affirmative, alluding to the most famous Son of Man prophecy, Dan. 7. 13. At once, Caiaphas tore his priestly garment, contravening Levitical law, Lev. 21. 10, as he accused the Lord Jesus of blasphemy, confirmed by his cronies in the courtroom.

Annas and Caiaphas subsequently resorted to political manoeuvring to persuade the Roman authorities to sentence the Lord to death by crucifixion, in the ongoing sequence of trials early the next morning. Ultimately, these priests spoke out to condemn Christ – their rejection of the Son of God is the ultimate sin of blasphemy.

## Ignorance of the word of God

The Jewish ruling elite refused to accept the Lord Jesus, apart from a couple of notable exceptions like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. The priests' understanding was veiled, 2 Cor. 3. 14, so they could not recognize the Lord Jesus as the fulfilment of Messianic prophecy. Many of the Jewish leaders were Sadducees, who adopted a liberal, non-literal, interpretation of scripture, Acts 23. 8. Stephen exposed their stubborn resistance to the Holy Spirit in his final sermon, 7. 51.

The key moment that encapsulates Caiaphas' attitude to scripture is when he spoke a word of prophecy,



John 11. 51, that 'one man should die for the people', v. 50. Although Caiaphas said these words, he could not understand their real import – emphasizing the substitutionary sacrifice of Isaiah chapter 53. Instead, this high priest exhibited tragic ignorance of scripture.

## Hatred of the gospel of God

Annas and Caiaphas demonstrated animosity against the apostles in Jerusalem, Acts 4. 6. Although the Jewish leaders denied the resurrection, they could not deny resurrection power at work as seen on the day of Pentecost, also in the healing of the lame man, and in the conversion of thousands of Jews. 'Unlearned' men were proclaiming eloquent sermons, v. 13, because 'they had been with Jesus'.

The priestly family held a conference to plan their next move. After interviewing the apostles, they commanded them to cease from preaching the gospel. This official court order had authority, but the apostles rightly chose to 'obey God rather than men', 5. 29, so evangelism continued despite the priests' best efforts.

## Practical challenges

Do we harbour similar attitudes to Annas and Caiaphas in our hearts, as we practically reject the Lord Jesus' claims upon us? It has often been said, 'If He is not Lord of all, then He is not Lord at all'.<sup>2</sup> Do we at times fail in our allegiance to Him? Further, do we neglect the study of scripture? A fervent affection and desire to study the word characterized the Psalmist, Ps. 119. 97: this should be a great example to us. Finally, although we may not hate the gospel, we can still maintain a 'guilty silence'<sup>3</sup> when we ought to be proclaiming good news. Let's endeavour to be the opposite of these priests in our love for the Lord, His word, and the gospel.

<sup>1</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews*, written by the first-century Jewish historian FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS.

<sup>2</sup> I have heard many preachers use this challenging quote, which may have originated with HUDSON TAYLOR.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN STOTT, *Our Guilty Silence*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1967.



# Things you should know – How to live as a Christian – Part 1

BY PHILIP RAGGETT, PRESTWICH, MANCHESTER, ENGLAND

One of the biggest challenges that every believer faces is their daily walk as a Christian. Our walk, or manner of living, should be consistent and Christ-like. When God saved us, He changed us and made us a 'new creature', 2 Cor. 5: 17, and this should be reflected in how we live our lives. There should be a difference that is clearly seen in us, as day by day we live out what God has made us.

## Exhortation

There are several passages in the Bible that give us instructions on how we ought to live as Christians. Ephesians chapter 4 is one such passage; we are going to consider this briefly. The first three chapters of this lovely Epistle present great doctrinal truths, but chapter 4 commences the practical section where Paul exhorts the saints to 'walk worthy of the vocation [calling] wherewith ye are [have been] called', v. 1. And to live in a way that is worthy of such a high and holy calling.

## Ethics

In verses 2 and 3, Paul sets out the code of conduct, or ethics, that we should follow as we seek to fulfil this responsibility. A **selfless attitude** of 'lowliness and meekness', v. 2, is essential. Our **saint-ward actions** should be marked by patience, forbearance, and love, v. 3. These two requirements will help us in our endeavour to 'keep the unity of the Spirit', v. 3. This is the outworking of the truth of chapter 2 where Jew and Gentile stand united in one body and are 'built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit', 2: 22. This unity has a doctrinal basis which is highlighted in verses 4 to 6 with reference to the three persons in the Godhead.

## Edification

In verse 1, we have Paul's **petition**. Then, in verses 2 to 6, we have the **principles** that should govern our conduct. Following on from verse 7 to verse 16

we have the **provision** of gifts by the risen Christ to build up and strengthen the saints so that we may make progress and develop in spiritual things. It is God's expectation that every Christian makes progress spiritually. Not one of us is exempt. The body has been given all the resources necessary to enable it to be built up and strengthened through the exercise of these spiritual gifts.

## Effects

From verse 17 to verse 32, we have the practical implications of Paul's challenge. The first thing Paul does is to present a **contrast**, vv. 17-19, that should mark us in our Christian walk. Our lives should be different from the ungodly around us. We should have different interests and desires. It is sad when our walk reflects more of the character of the world than it does the person of Christ.

The contrast that should be seen is because of our **conversion**, vv. 20-24. Paul points out that at salvation we put off the old man and a new man was 'created', v. 24. All that we were in Adam and our links with him have been broken and dealt with legally at the cross, Rom. 6: 6. We have now 'put on the new man', v. 24. This new man is created 'after God', v. 24, which simply means that we have become a new creation, created according to what God is like, righteous and holy. This is not something that we do ourselves but rather it took place the moment we were saved. The effects of it, however, should be seen in our daily lives. The following verses give us eight **characteristics** that should mark us – note the use of the word 'wherefore' in verse 25. The change is in light of what God has made us – a new man in Christ – these are the things that should be reflected in our walk.

I will outline these eight characteristics of a God-honouring Christian lifestyle in Part 2 of this article.