A woman is shown in profile on the right side of the image, looking towards a lit candle held in her hand on the left. The background is filled with warm, out-of-focus bokeh lights in shades of yellow and orange. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

CANADIAN COMMUNIQUÉ

FOI GOSPEL MINISTRY, INC.

Vol. 12.3 WINTER 2014

Light for a Dark World

by Charles E. McCracken



“O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.” Listening to the familiar words of this beautiful Christmas carol evokes a mental picture of peace and tranquility—a sleepy town—wintry fields and hills—a clear star-filled sky.

While it may well reflect the seasonal conditions on that night, history records that the political climate in Bethlehem at the time of Messiah’s birth was anything but peaceful and tranquil. Caesar Augustus ruled the world; Herod the Great ruled Judea.

ROME’S TYRANNY

Historian Will Durant describes Herod as a ruler, “typical of an age that had produced so many men of intellect without morals, ability without scruple, and courage without honor.”¹ He was ruthless and known for his prowess as a warrior. His calculating mind coupled with disarming charm enabled him to, “outtalk or out-bribe enemies who sought to discredit him.”² He persuaded

Rome to reduce the exorbitant tribute exacted on the land by Caesar, only to overburden the people of Judea with heavy local taxes to pay for his lavish building projects.³

Herod’s rule was hauntingly reminiscent of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) whose goal was the eradication of the Jewish people through coercive assimilation. Like Antiochus, Herod surrounded himself with Greek scholars and brazenly foisted Hellenistic culture on his subjects through fashion, literature, art and architecture.

Although Herod did not desecrate the altar or place his own image in the temple, his revitalization of the Temple Mount included rows of massive Corinthian columns to support new porticos reflecting the decadence of Hellenism. He adorned cities with nude statuary, erected monuments to Caesar Augustus and created shrines to pagan deities.

Funded by Rome, he dethroned a Parthian puppet king named Antigonos and slaughtered all Jewish leaders who supported him. At the discovery of the

slightest hint of insurrection, Herod had alleged perpetrators arrested, tortured, and speedily executed; sometimes, entire families were put to death. He not only had spies in every sector of his territory, he would frequently disguise himself and go among the people to personally eavesdrop on conversations and exact swift retribution for dissenting words. His own family suffered the brunt of his despotic machinations.⁴

The people of Judea loathed Herod and his incessant provocations. Making matters worse, Rome had an occupational force in Judea. This meant that the Roman army was dispatched under direct control of Caesar with license to mercilessly squelch insurgency from any quarter.

Roman governance was pragmatic and little concerned about inconvenience to its subjects. History documents that even something as mundane as a census (a regular occurrence) caused burdensome disruption to the daily life of individuals and families.

Luke records that Caesar Augustus imposed such a census requiring everyone to return to his or her ancestral home. It was this decree that obligated young pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph to make the uncomfortable and dangerous, weeklong journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

LIGHT FOR ISRAEL

Suddenly there was a ray of hope. The darkness unexpectedly exploded

into blinding light as the angel of the Lord materialized before terrified temple shepherds to announce, *Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people* (Lk. 2: 10).⁵

After 400 years of silence, they proclaimed the Good News:

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ [Messiah] the Lord (v. 11).

Micah the prophet specifically pinpointed Bethlehem as the location of

And the light
shines in the
darkness, and
the darkness
did not
comprehend it.

John 1:5



Messiah’s birth; and now, some 700 years later, Caesar’s edict guaranteed the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy.

The angel’s message corresponded to the widespread expectation that Messiah soon would come.⁶ Most believed He would rid the world of the despotic Roman Empire. And, for good reason!

WHY JESUS CAME

Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was more than an inspirational moment. His earthly ministry beginning some 30 years later centered on proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom (Messianic) and was inexorably linked to His death on a Roman cross—not as a martyr, but as the perfect sacrifice for sin as the prophets foretold.

Isaiah clearly stated that Messiah would be,

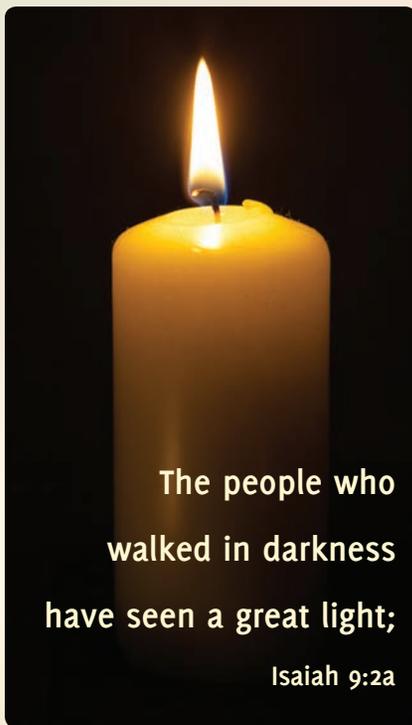
wounded for our transgressions and . . . bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him (Isa. 53:5).

It was necessary because *all we like sheep have gone astray (Is. 53:6)*. In other words, the punishment for sinful man to have peace with God was borne by Messiah.

Moses' words were definitive; *it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul (Lev. 17:11)*. The writer of Hebrews clarifies *without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin] (Heb. 9:22)*. The correlation a few verses later reads, *as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many (Heb. 9:27)*.

Forgiveness of sin, regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are the spiritual benefits for those who put their faith in Him alone. The connection between the baby tucked into a manger and the crucifixion of Messiah is a valid and essential component in God's provision of salvation.

Around 605 B.C., the people of Judah were exiled to Babylon.⁷ Here, the Hebrew prophet Daniel recorded the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar that outlined the progression of world empires culminating in the kingdom of Messiah (Dan. 2). The dream featured a great image with a head of gold (Babylonian Empire), chest and arms of silver (Medo-Persian Empire), waist and thighs of bronze (Greek Empire), and legs of iron with feet of iron



and clay (Roman Empire along with its revived form in the latter days). At the end of the dream, a stone smashed the feet of the colossal image bringing it crashing to the ground where it was ground into dust and blown away.

Clues from Daniel's interpretation of the dream and recorded history verify the authenticity of the prophecy and the image's correlation to the passing of the four successive historic kingdoms.

Those living at the time of the angel's announcement experientially knew the brutality of the fourth kingdom; and they longed for Messiah's coming to rid the world of the oppressive stranglehold of the Roman Empire. But, that event is not scheduled until the end of the age.

Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was supernatural confirmation, however, that God had not forgotten His Chosen People! Although the promises concerning Messiah's reign will ultimately be literally fulfilled to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Messianic Kingdom, there's more.

Isaiah tells Israel about the advent of Messiah saying,

Arise, shine; for your light has come! . . . The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isa. 60:1, 3).

The angel's announcement was like the first beam of sunlight dawning on a world enveloped in darkness.

LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

Isaiah describes the center of Messiah's earthly ministry as,

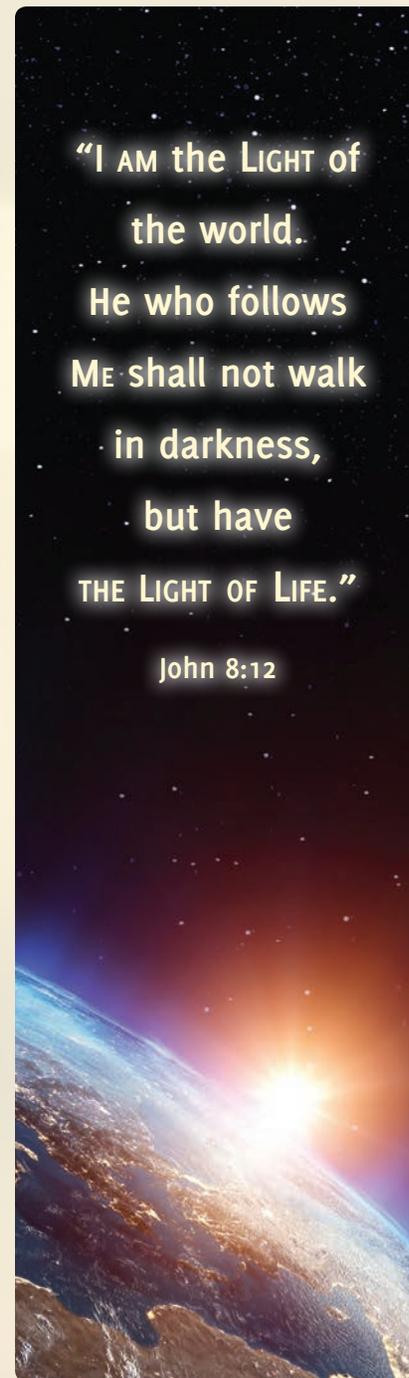
The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali . . . by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles (Isa. 9:1).

He continues,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who

"I AM the LIGHT of
the world.
He who follows
ME shall not walk
in darkness,
but have
THE LIGHT OF LIFE."

John 8:12



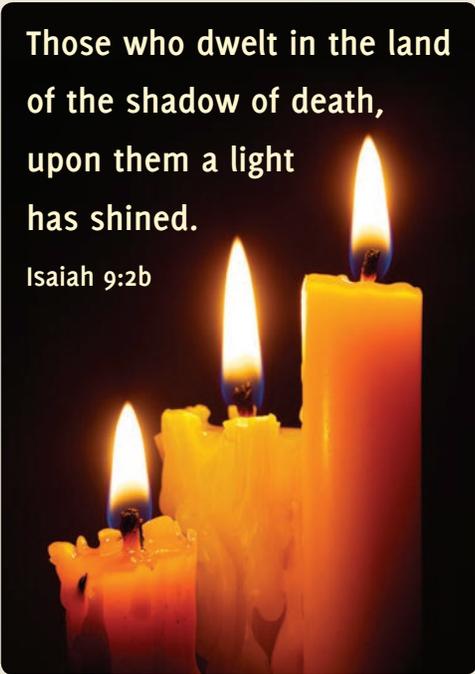
dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined (v. 2).

Matthew quoted this prophecy to affirm Messiah's earthly ministry in Galilee (Mt. 4:15-16).

Yet, the implications went beyond the scope of national Israel. The apostle John describes Messiah saying, *In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. . . That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world* (Jn. 1:4, 9).

Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.

Isaiah 9:2b



Addressing a crowd gathered to celebrate Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles), Messiah confirmed,

I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life (Jn. 8:12).

Isaiah revealed that Messiah would be given, *as a light to the Gentiles* (Isa. 42:6). So, it is not coincidental that the apostle Paul quoted this prophecy to validate his ministry to the nations of the world saying,

For so the Lord has commanded us: "I have set you as a light to the Gentiles that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47).

LIGHT FOR OUR GENERATION

Messiah was born at the right time and in the right place (Dan. 9:24-26; Micah 5:2). There was no glitch or an unexpected delay. God's plan was right on schedule assuring that the darkness enveloping the earth would not continue indefinitely.

Although the nativity is central to our Christmas celebration, Messiah's birth in Bethlehem is not the end of the story. Just as Messiah's birth occurred with perfect precision, His coming to establish the Messianic Kingdom on earth will also occur in accordance with God's impeccable timing. Jesus foretold His return saying,

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heaven . . . and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds

of heaven with power and great glory (Mt. 24:30).

Daniel foresaw this event in a vision and described it saying,

And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. . . to Him was given

dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

The reality that Messiah will come again adds perspective to the circumstances we face in the 21st century. Left unchecked, world events suggest a dim prognosis for the future of planet earth. Suffering due to conflict, barbaric terrorism, failing economies, natural disasters, environmental concerns and epidemics seems more prevalent than ever. World leaders seem to have exchanged responsibility for expediency as the rule rather than the exception. Society at large has become egocentric and addicted to self-gratification at any price. But, all will change when Messiah returns as He promised. The light of His presence will replace the dense darkness characteristic of the current world order when He comes to rule the world in righteousness and peace.

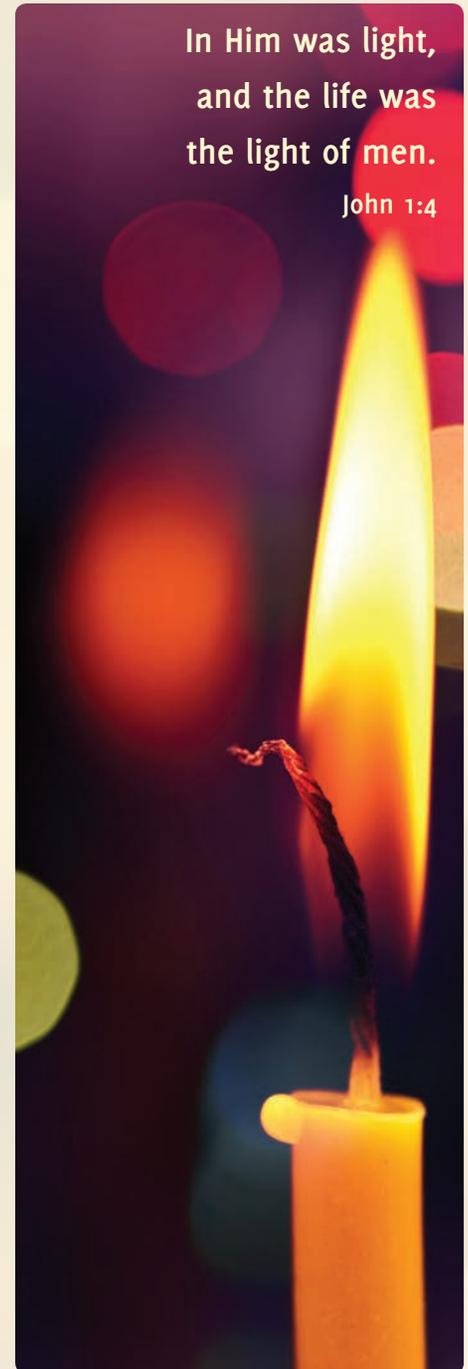
The first stanza of, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" concludes,

"Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight".

Those poetic words are at the heart of the real message of Christmas—the message that the Light will ultimately dispel the darkness when Messiah rules the world.

**In Him was light,
and the life was
the light of men.**

John 1:4



ENDNOTES:

¹Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1944), 531.

²Ibid.

³Herod was the son of Antipater and Cyprus. Antipater was an Idumean hailing from Idumea, formerly known as Edom southeast of Israel and inhabited by the descendants of Esau. Herod's mother, Cyprus, was the daughter of an Arabian sheik.

⁴In-laws, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus; his second wife, Mariamne, (accused by Herod's sister of plotting to poison him); and her two sons (accused by a son of his first wife of conspiracy)—were all executed, along with most of his wives.

⁵Interestingly, the phrase translated "I bring you good tidings" is the Greek word, εὐαγγελίζομαι (evangelizomai), the source of the English word

evangelize. Technically, the angel and the heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds near Bethlehem were the first evangelists.

⁶John F. Walvoord, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* <<http://www.walvoord.com/article/32>>.

⁷John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation* (Galaxie Software, 2008), 29–30.

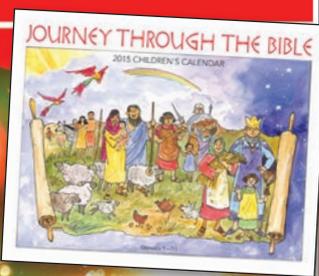


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