

THE BEGINNING

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" To this end were the four accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John written, that we might come to believe about Jesus, who He is. We can only say from our point in history that John's stated reason for writing, John 20:30, 31, was also the reason the other three accounts were written. Each has its place in God's plan to draw for the reader a clear portrait of His Son. These books are designed to present evidence which is sufficient to the reasoning mind to produce faith. For that cause, and for no other, did God have these books written. He did not intend to leave us without a basis for faith, so that we would believe blindly, irrationally, a "leap in the dark" sort-of-thing. He did not intend either, that a mark of unbelief would be a mark of intellectual incapacity. The Christian system was and is directed to rational, thinking human beings. Each of the Gospels, then, draws its own portrait of Jesus, so that we may see Him from four different points of view. And yet, all of them dovetail together to present Jesus (as Peter expressed so well in Matthew 16:16) as the unique Son of God.

Matthew has written with almost constant reference to the fulfillment of prophecy, and begins by showing that Jesus was the Son of David, and of Abraham, that He was the predicted King out of David's royal line. He intends for us to see that Jesus is the promised seed through whom all peoples of the earth are to be blessed; and the keeping of God's promise to Abraham. Mark ushers us immediately to the ministry of John who was to prepare the thinking of the Jews for Jesus. He intends to give us unimpeachable testimony about Jesus the miracle worker who went about doing good. Luke intends that we should see Jesus in His humanity, concerned and involved with all types and classes of people, and at the same time

to assure us of our faith in Christ with what he writes. John completes God's description of His Son with a book that is both simple and profound, an account that has inspired men and led them to search diligently about that One Who was before the beginning.

We can but rejoice in God's providence for providing a record at once so brief and yet so complete. Men would have written tomes on this subject, and would have not said as much as God did in the brief compass of the four books of good news, the Gospels.

It may be of interest to some of you who read this that though John's Gospel begins "at the beginning," it is not the one normally used as the first Gospel for translation into a new language. When a book is chosen for the first part of the Bible to be put into a new language which has never had any of God's Word in it, the translator must consider several things of great importance. For instance, he will want to present the person and work of Jesus to those who do not know of him. He will want a book with few figures of speech and a lot of narrative, since figures of speech are hard to translate into another language, and narrative is much easier. He will want a book that is both interesting and without a lot of references to the Old Testament, since the new reader will have enough problems trying to read (for he is just learning to do this), and any reference to a book which he does not have at all will surely hinder his understanding. The contrast between his religion and the Christianity in the New Testament will often be startling, with such concepts as a resurrection and one and only one supreme God being presented. The book with the least problems is a must. The Gospel of Mark is almost invariably chosen. It is short, presents the good news of Jesus clearly, and with a free flowing narrative helps to sustain the beginner's interest. Matthew's Gospel with its many references to Jewish

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customs and Old Testament texts, plus its greater length, makes it a real problem for the translator and the new convert or prospective convert. Luke's Gospel is really as long as Matthew's in content and includes a genealogy and allusions to Jewish customs that make it difficult also. John's Gospel is both lengthy and begins with a philosophical treatment of Jesus as the pre-existent Word, which would make it difficult in translation. So Mark is generally chosen as the first book of the good news about a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord. May I challenge you to consider what you might do about putting the Bible into the language of someone who does not have it, perhaps because that language does not have even an alphabet, let alone a means to teach people how to read.

John's Gospel really starts at the proper place for a real understanding of Who Jesus is, with His relationship to the material world as well as the human race. The expression "in the beginning" reminds us that there is a definite point in time from which all things human are reckoned, as the identical expression in Genesis 1 does. John wants us to know that whatever point in time and space we would consider, the incarnate Word was present. He also affirms in plain language that He existed before this time, as an equal with the personality we call God. This is the message of the whole New Testament, whenever it speaks about Jesus and His relationship to God. It never presents Him as anything less than equal with God, nor did He ever affirm otherwise. We have those in our day and time who teach that Jesus was less than this. But they do not get it from anything Jesus taught, nor do we think they find it elsewhere. John affirms that Jesus possessed the quality which makes it imperative that we make Him no less than equal with God. It certainly is of interest to note that when Jesus claimed such, as in John 5:17, and the Jews understood His claim

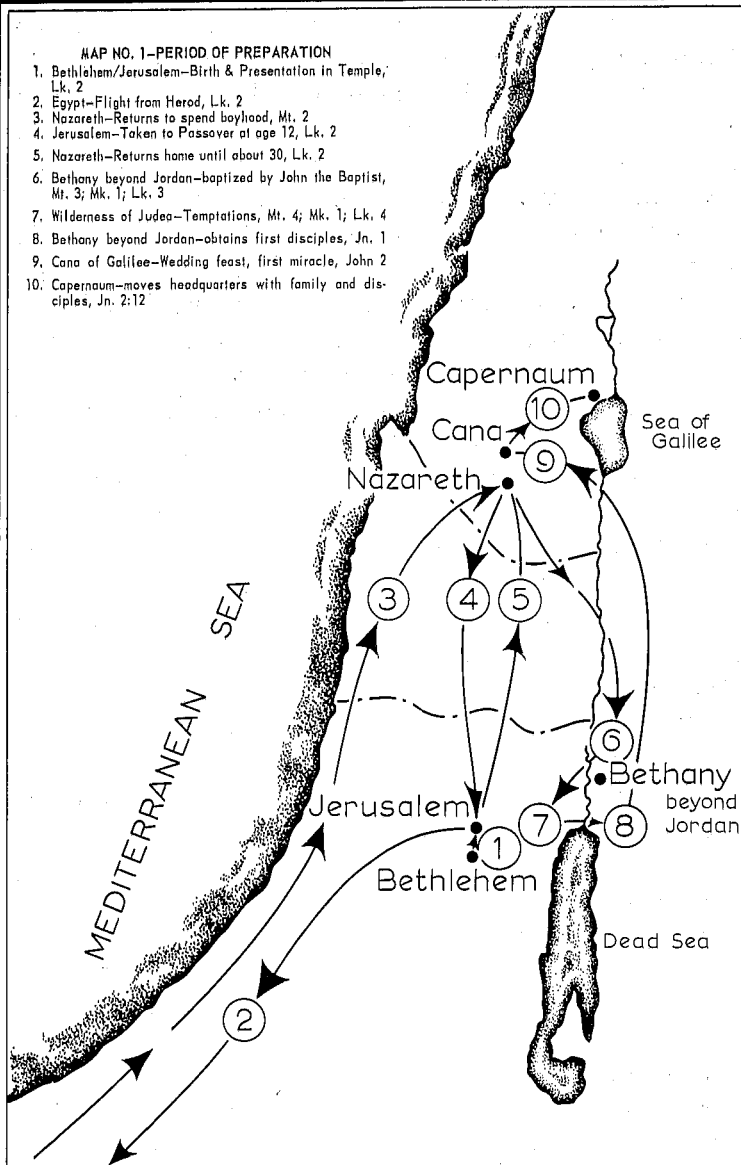
in this light, Jesus did not correct them. Instead, He preached a sermon that clearly teaches that such a conclusion as the Jews drew was exactly what He intended for them to draw. Examples will be noted of other instances of this nature as we go along. It also is of interest to note that in verse 18 of John 1, many of the best manuscripts read the word "God" rather than the word "Son." It is not hard to see why the word "Son" would be inserted by copyists as they recognized the affirmation which this text made about Jesus' deity when it read "God." So they would be inclined to "tone down" such a clear statement about Jesus if they did not believe such.

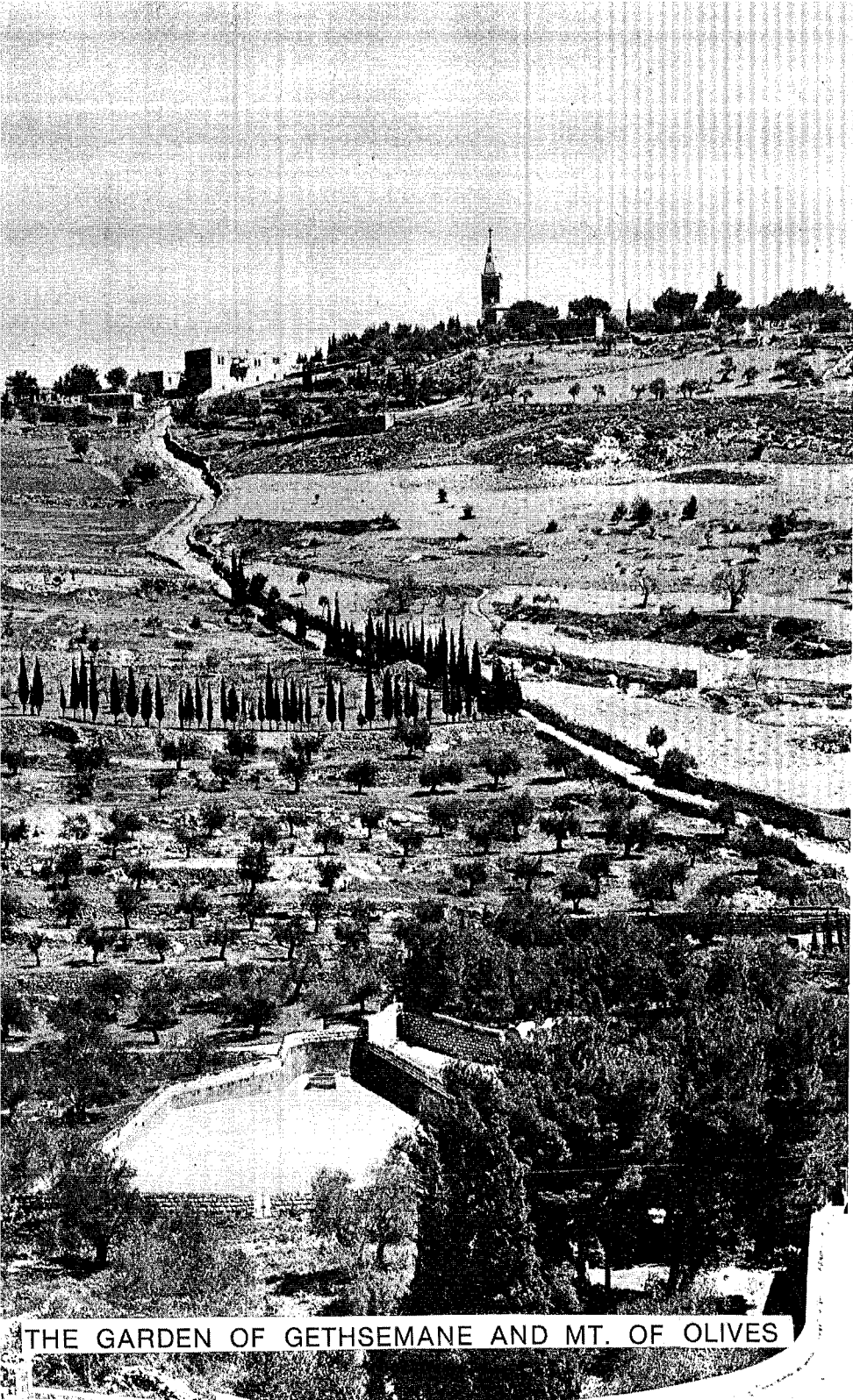
We will find it impossible to completely understand the relationship of Jesus, in His divine state, to God, just as we will find it impossible to understand the relationship of Jesus the man to Jesus the God. The reason is this: we are finite, which means limited. How then do we expect to understand what is not limited and not finite? The Jews had this problem too, but Jesus did not attempt to explain the relationship as much as He did to display the fact of it. In Matt. 22:41-45 (Mark 12; Luke 20) Jesus attacked this problem as He asked the Jews about David's son being David's God. He did not attempt to explain it but rather stated it as a fact to be believed. God does not always give us an explanation of everything we are to accept by faith. This is one of those tenets of our faith which is not explainable. Note that Paul affirms the same fact that John does when Paul affirms in I Tim. 3:16 that God was manifest in the flesh. In the same epistle, the expression of 1:17 quite properly refers to Jesus Christ, since the immediate context from verse 12ff. has Him in view.

Sometimes people misunderstand the word "Son" as it is used in reference to Jesus. We can hardly expect that son should mean a physical relationship, since this

MAP NO. 1—PERIOD OF PREPARATION

1. Bethlehem/Jerusalem—Birth & Presentation in Temple, Lk. 2
2. Egypt—Flight from Herod, Lk. 2
3. Nazareth—Returns to spend boyhood, Mt. 2
4. Jerusalem—Taken to Passover at age 12, Lk. 2
5. Nazareth—Returns home until about 30, Lk. 2
6. Bethany beyond Jordan—baptized by John the Baptist, Mt. 3; Mk. 1; Lk. 3
7. Wilderness of Judea—Temptations, Mt. 4; Mk. 1; Lk. 4
8. Bethany beyond Jordan—obtains first disciples, Jn. 1
9. Cana of Galilee—Wedding feast, first miracle, John 2
10. Capernaum—moves headquarters with family and disciples, Jn. 2:12





THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE AND MT. OF OLIVES

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would mean He must have a mother. This expression should be understood as referring to a given kind of relationship, as we find in Gal. 3:26; II Samuel 23:6; Deut. 32:8; John 8:39, 44; Rom. 9:6-8; Matt. 23:15 (child). We would grant that it sometimes means a physical relationship, but not always, anymore than father or children always mean a physical relationship. Context must determine how we understand the word.

John the apostle then introduces us to the forerunner of Jesus, who was not the light-giver, but rather the herald whom God prepared for this express purpose: to turn men's hearts toward the things of God. Prophesied in the book of Malachi, 3:1 and 4:5-6, Jesus affirms in Matt. 17:10-13 that God kept His word, and John the Immerser was that messenger, Lk. 7:27; Mt. 11:14.

This prophecy about John and the stated fulfillment by Jesus should focus our attention on this fact: scripture, whether prophetic or otherwise, must not be interpreted literally in every instance. Neither should it be considered always in a figurative sense. Maintaining either position dogmatically to the exclusion of the other can only lead to misinterpretation. If the New Testament states that a prophecy is fulfilled, we must accept such a statement without question. Elijah returned in the person of John, Jesus said. That settles it for us.

John the Baptist—Luke 1:5-80

The Gospel of Luke picks up the story by introducing us to the parents of John. They are both of the lineage of Aaron, devout and blameless in character, and also childless. For Zechariah and Elizabeth the last was a tragedy, since, among other things, it meant that they could not be the parents of the longed-for Messiah (to us, the Christ). To add to their woe, Elizabeth was now past

the age of bearing a child. But God is not hindered by the things that plague us as humans. So we read that as it came the turn of Zechariah to fulfill his week of service in the temple, in the course of Abijah, the eighth of the 24 groups of priests as appointed by David, I Chr. 24:10; II Chr. 8:14, God began to bring to pass what he had planned before the foundation of the world. It was at the hour of incense, perhaps in the morning, when Zechariah was in the Holy Place. Gabriel appeared at the right side of the altar of incense and expressed the first of many "Fear nots" to be found in the New Testament. He announced to Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear a son who would be called John. He would be a Nazarite, but more than this, he would prepare the hearts of his hearers for the Lord Who would follow. To Zechariah, it seemed so incredible that he was unbelieving. When he appeared to the waiting crowd, he was unable to speak and remained so until the birth of his son. This was the first indication to the Jews that God had begun to manifest Himself to them, after a silence of 400 years. We can hardly imagine the message which he brought to his wife as he went to his home in the hill country of Judah. Certainly the expression of Elizabeth as she speaks about the removal of reproach from her life is indicative of their great thankfulness.

God works in strange ways—His wonders to perform! To choose a husband and wife, though childless, to have a child is not out of the ordinary. We do not think it strange that God should bless them with a child. But to cause a woman to have a child when the woman is not married is an entirely different thing. Yet such was the case when about six months (vs. 26-38) later Gabriel again appears to a girl engaged to a man named Joseph, both of whom lived in Nazareth of Galilee. But God does not make mistakes. Mary was equal to the challenge

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of a life completely dedicated to His will. Would that all who read this be her equal in this respect. Informed of the task God had for her, she simply asked how it was to be done, and was told that God could accomplish that which He desired and she need not doubt.

You need to see that Mary was not ignorant of the things that would and could be said about her, but she was willing to place her life into the service of bringing forth a son Who would fulfill the promise of God to David, and Who would begin a kingdom that would have no end. Mary did not pray the world's commonest prayer, "Thy will be changed," but rather the world's greatest, "Thy will be done." She was aware that to be pregnant out of wedlock was not fitting for a woman. We can only admire her trust in the plan of God. Such is the life of faith.

The angel told her that her kinswoman Elizabeth was also expecting a child through the help of God. So she went to visit Elizabeth, and we are treated to the expression of Elizabeth as she greets Mary. We can only judge that the expression of Elizabeth was prompted by the Holy Spirit filling her life. The reader should note that the probability is that Jesus was six months younger than His kinsman John, but the text does not specifically say that Mary was with child at this time.

The verses of Luke 1:46-55 record for us the song of Mary, which resembles the song of thanksgiving by Hannah which she offered to God for her son Samuel. Mary's song is also filled with phrases taken from other parts of the Old Testament as well, which just shows us that she knew both God and His Word.

The rest of the chapter recounts the birth of John, his naming and the subsequent expression of his father about his son. Again the onlookers are treated to a display of God's handiwork. We can not help but wonder if

these people who marveled at the events surrounding John's birth heard of the events that took place in Bethlehem not many months hence, and if they did, what conclusions they drew. Surely Israel had not heard of anything such as this for a good long time.

Zechariah, in vv. 67-79, spoke about the destiny of his new son. In accordance with this destiny, John was a Nazarite, and reared in this way. Verse 80 tells us that he grew (in stature) and became strong in spirit, living in the wilderness area of Judea until he began to preach. We are not able to tell if John knew Jesus or not, though there is the possibility that he did so. Considering the exchange of words and knowledge between Mary and Elizabeth, we would be surprised if John's mother did not tell him about the events surrounding his birth as well as that of his kinsman.

THIRTY YEARS PREPARATION

Bethlehem—The Birth of Jesus—(Mt. 1:19-25)

Lk. 2:1-21

Mary's faith was really put to the test when she returned to Nazareth. If she was not noticeably with child at this time, she soon was, and the knowledge would cause Joseph to consider what he must do in respect to the situation. The tie of betrothal was as sacred as the marriage vow itself, and Mary could be stoned as an adulteress according to the law. But her chosen was equal to the occasion even as she was, and for this we again marvel at those whom God chose as parents of His Son.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was thinking about his action in regard to Mary. He recognized that Mary had apparently been unfaithful, but he had about decided to give her a bill of divorcement privately. The text says that he was a just man, which we take to mean both fair