Light

...on a New World
ONE of the most prominent characters in the New Testament is Simon Peter. He stands out in the four Gospels as the most active and outspoken of Jesus’ twelve disciples. In the book of Acts he is a leading apostle in the early church and in the two books that bear his name we have his own letters written to guide and encourage the believers.

Peter is not presented to us as a perfect man like his master, but a man with both strengths and weaknesses, someone we can all identify with. Although at times he made mistakes, such as his denial of Jesus, his strong conviction of faith and bold support of Jesus are always there. As we follow him through the New Testament record we can see him grow and mature in his faith, overcoming his weaknesses – a fine example for us all to copy.

SIMON THE SON OF JONAH

When he first appears in the Gospel records, he was a Jewish fisherman called Simon, working on the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel with his brother Andrew and friends James and John. Simon’s first meeting with Jesus took place near the river Jordan where John the Baptist was preaching and baptising. His brother Andrew was a disciple of John, and Simon probably was too. They must have been men of strong religious conviction to have travelled a considerable distance to hear John preach, and humbly accept his challenging call to repentance.

John also foretold the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, the saviour and future king of Israel spoken of in so many Old Testament
prophecies. From just a brief meeting with Jesus, Andrew was convinced and hurried to tell his brother Simon the exciting news: ‘We have found the Messiah’ [John 1.41].

YOU SHALL BE CALLED CEPHAS

Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. There is no record of Simon’s thoughts or words at that first meeting, but Jesus quickly recognised his potential: “‘You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas” (which is translated, a stone)’ [John 1.42].

His new name ‘Cephas’, is better known by the Greek translation, ‘Peter’. In naming him ‘a stone’ Jesus foresees that Simon would later become one of his apostles, the foundation stones on which the household of God was to be built [Ephesians 2.19-22].

FOLLOW ME

Peter and Andrew returned home to their families and work. But one day when they were washing their nets, Jesus himself appeared and asked to use Peter’s boat as a floating pulpit from which he could teach the crowd on the shore. When he had finished, Jesus told Peter, ‘‘Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Peter replied: “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at your word I will let down the net’’ [Luke 5.4,5]. It is clear that Peter already had enough respect for Jesus to go on what he believed to be a fool’s errand, but his objection implies he really trusted his own experience as a fisherman more.

All disciples of Jesus struggle with pride. It takes great humility to trust him more than our own opinions and instincts, but as Peter was about to learn, the word of Jesus is far more reliable than human wisdom. To the fishermen’s astonishment, when they pulled the net back up it was bursting with fish. Peter immediately regretted his scepticism as we see from his words to Jesus:

‘…he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me,
for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”... And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed him’ [Luke 5.8-11].

Jesus had shown Peter and his friends that their skills and experience as fishermen counted for nothing next to him: he had far more important work for them to do as ‘fishers of men’. So they turned their backs on their old way of life and set out on a new one, trusting completely in Jesus.

Their trust was well placed; the great sacrifices they were making for Jesus’ sake, and continued to make for the rest of their lives, will not go unrewarded. When Peter later reminded Jesus, ‘See, we have left all and followed you,’ he replied:

‘Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of
the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come everlasting life’ [Luke 18.28-30].

‘YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD’

Throughout the Gospels and in the early chapters of Acts, Peter stands out among the apostles for his boldness. He was not afraid to declare openly his firm faith in Jesus, even when others were doubting and he was not afraid to put himself in danger for Jesus’ sake (see for example Acts 4.13-21).

When many of Jesus’ disciples turned away from him, unwilling to accept his message, he asked the twelve, ‘Do you also want to go away?’ It was Peter who spoke up:

‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ [John 6.66-69].

Peter’s confidence must have been an inspiration to his fellows, as it is to believers now. Jesus saw that Peter’s leadership would help the other disciples recover from the shock of his crucifixion, and later told him:

‘…I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to me, strengthen your brethren’ [Luke 22.32].

WHY DID YOU DOUBT?

Peter’s boldness and firm trust in Jesus was not only expressed in his words but also in his actions. On some occasions when he appears weak, it was because his exceptional strength had led him into difficulty.
One example is when Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee. As the disciples in their boat struggled against the stormy wind at night, Jesus appeared, walking across the water. Peter called out to him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water’ [Matthew 14.28]. Jesus replied, ‘Come,’ and without hesitation, Peter climbed out of the boat and started to walk towards Jesus – but on the way he became afraid and began to sink. Although his faith proved too weak for the test, it is astonishing that he stepped out of the boat at all. What would you have done in his place?

The same is true of his denial of Jesus. When Jesus was arrested, all the disciples deserted him, but Peter secretly followed the soldiers back to the High Priest’s house. Having gained access to the courtyard, Peter waited to see what would happen and probably thought he was fairly safe until he was recognised by one of the High Priest’s servants as a disciple. Suddenly he was put on the spot by the challenge – ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee’ [Matthew 26.56-58, 69-75].

Again Peter’s courage failed him. Earlier that evening he had taken up a sword to single-handedly defend Jesus from an armed mob, so why was he now afraid to even admit to being his disciple? Perhaps his confidence had been shattered by Jesus’ arrest. Everything seemed to be going wrong; instead of becoming king, Jesus was being treated as a criminal and it was Judas, their close companion, who had betrayed him.

Peter’s denial was undoubtedly a lapse of faith, but it was his strong faith in Jesus that led him to that dangerous place when the others had fled. Again we must ask ourselves – what would we have done in his place?

‘GET BEHIND ME, SATAN!’

At other times Peter’s pride got the better of him, and he was openly rebuked by his master. On the first occasion Jesus was warning his disciples about his suffering and crucifixion:
‘Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an offence to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”’

[Matthew 16.22-23]

This happened soon after Peter’s great declaration of faith, and Jesus’ approval must have swollen his pride. Peter’s expectations of the Messiah did not allow for his suffering and death – he thought he knew best, and dared to contradict the Son of God.

A similar, though less dramatic incident occurred at the last supper, hours before Jesus was arrested. Jesus took the role of a servant, washing the dust from the disciples’ feet. Peter again found his expectations of the Messiah frustrated, and could not hold his tongue:

‘Peter said to him, “Lord, are you washing my feet?” Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with me.”’

[John 13.6-8]

A few hours later Peter made another mistake, trying to prevent Jesus’ arrest, and cut off the ear of the High Priest’s servant with a sword [John 18.10,11].

On all three occasions Peter over-stepped the mark, but in every case he was evidently motivated by a desire to protect his Lord from harm or disgrace at all costs, so strong was his love for him. But his love was misguided by his poor understanding of the Messiah’s true role.
FEED MY LAMBS

After his resurrection, Jesus prepared Peter and the other disciples for the work that lay ahead of them, preaching the Gospel as witnesses of his resurrection and leading the believers. Jesus said to Peter:

“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these?”
He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs” [John 21.15].

He was passing on to Peter a responsibility to care for his disciples as he had done himself. Later, in writing his first letter, Peter used the same metaphor when reminding the church elders of their responsibilities:

‘The elders who are among you I exhort...Shepherd the flock of God which is among you...being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.’

[1 Peter 5.1-4]

REPENT AND BE BAPTISED

Soon after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, Peter took a leading role among the disciples. On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them, it was Peter who addressed the crowd, preaching the resurrection of Jesus, as an eyewitness and concluding with the exhortation:

‘...Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins’ [Acts 2.38].

Peter’s words, combined with the miraculous sign of speaking in foreign tongues, convinced about three thousand people to believe and be baptised that very day.
The Apostles soon came to the attention of the Jewish authorities and Peter and John were arrested. They had no basis to charge them but instead threatened them not to preach any more in the name of Jesus. Now Peter’s boldness and determination to follow his Lord found their place:

‘…Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ [Acts 4.19, 20].

GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY

To a Jew like Peter it would have seemed impossible that non-Jews could also share in God’s salvation unless they were first circumcised and obeyed the Law of Moses. But God revealed through Peter that salvation was now open to all. He showed Peter in a vision a sheet full of ‘unclean’ animals that the Jews were forbidden to eat under the Law of Moses. But in the vision Peter was commanded to kill and eat. When he objected he was told: ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common’ [Acts 10.15].

Then some men arrived looking for Peter, sent by Cornelius, a Roman army officer who lived in that region. He was a man who believed in God and had been told by an angel of God to send for Peter. It soon became clear to Peter what his vision meant:

‘…In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him... To him [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through his name, whoever believes in him will receive remission of sins’ [Acts 10.34,35, 43].

There is no sign of Peter’s former pride; he had learnt from his master the importance of humility and submission to God’s will.
LIVING STONES

Peter’s two letters are as valuable to Jesus’ disciples now as they were to the believers who first read them. He not only reminded them of the principles of the Gospel and warned against false teaching, but also gave practical advice and stirring encouragement. He alluded to the name Jesus had given him, not to boast about his own importance as a foundation stone, but rather to teach that all true believers are ‘living stones... being built up a spiritual house’, a reminder that like Jesus they are ‘chosen by God and precious’ [1 Peter 2.4-10].

He encouraged the believers to endure suffering for Christ’s sake, reminding them of the sufferings of Jesus, not only as an eyewitness, but also as one who had shared in them, forsaking all to follow him [1 Peter 4.12-19].

His second letter draws to a close expressing his confidence in God’s coming judgement and the establishment of His kingdom:

‘The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night’ [2 Peter 3.9-10].

Finally he urged his readers to be prepared:

‘Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by him in peace, without spot and blameless...beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.’ [2 Peter 3.14,17,18].

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What did Jesus mean?

‘In my Father’s house are many mansions…’

The disciples of Jesus had experienced a challenging three years accompanying him on his travels, when Jesus comforted them with the words:

‘Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you’ [John 14.1,2].

At the beginning of that period, some of the disciples had left comfortable homes and regular employment to obey a call to follow Jesus. Others later declared their intention to become disciples too - until Jesus pointed out that they would be following a man who had no home of his own [Luke 9.58] and who depended on the generosity of others for many of his daily needs.

The disciples had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, who they rightly believed had been sent by God as the Saviour and would set up a kingdom on the earth in fulfilment of promises made to their ancient forefathers. The comforting words of Jesus were intended to reassure them and help them look forward to the day when, long after his death and resurrection and subsequent ascent into heaven, he would eventually return to the earth to fulfil that promise.

PREMATURE EXPECTATIONS

Towards the end of his three-year ministry, Jesus began to explain to the disciples, that instead of seizing power from the present rulers, he would soon be taken from them and cruelly put to death. Jesus knew
WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

that his death was a vital part of his work as the Saviour and he was in just as much need of comfort as were the disciples.

The disciples were overwhelmed by the prospect. It would seem to them as if the whole mission of Jesus had fallen apart and that the fulfilment of those promises to the Jewish fathers was further away than ever. Peter even tried to tell Jesus that such a thing should not be allowed to happen [Mark 8.32,33] and later that he was ready to give his own life instead of Jesus [John 13.37,38].

And so, on an occasion that is only recorded by John, Jesus gently told the sorrowful disciples that the prospect of the Kingdom had not been destroyed. It was simply that their expectations were premature. In the meantime his own role as king over that Kingdom was still being prepared. The cross had to come before the crown. After his death, he would be raised from the dead and then go away into heaven for a long time. Meanwhile his disciples would have to prepare themselves for his return.

TROUBLED HEARTS

Jesus knew that the disciples would be troubled for several reasons. Firstly, the forthcoming betrayal, trial and death of Jesus were dreadful events that would inevitably strike fear into their hearts.

Without doubt, the disciples would have wondered what would then happen to them. Would the Jewish leaders bring the Roman authorities against them as well as Jesus? Jesus therefore assured them with this word picture about a house. The word ‘mansions’ is the only place in the New Testament where the original Greek word is translated in this way. The original meaning is somewhere to abide, dwell, continue or remain. Other modern versions translate it as ‘many rooms’ [e.g. NIV and RSV].

It was an effective way of comforting the fearful disciples by giving them the prospect of security and permanence; something far more
enduring than their existing homes which they would shortly return to. As yet the disciples did not fully understand the need for the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was only when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection that they realised how many times the Jewish Scriptures had spoken, not only of this future prospect, but also of his death and resurrection.

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES

One thing however, would have been clear to them. No Jew would have thought that the fulfilment of the promises to their ancestors and the kingdom of God, would be anywhere but on the earth. There are many passages which describe this future time and all of them speak quite plainly of a literal kingdom on the earth. For example, we read:

‘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. Many people shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us of his ways, and we shall walk in his paths”. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem’ [Isaiah 2.2, 3].

The Bible records the promise to Jacob who was one of the Jewish forefathers, Jacob the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. From him were descended the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what God said to Jacob whose name God changed to Israel:

‘...I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; and you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you
and in your seed all families of the earth shall be blessed.’

[Genesis 28.13,14]

THE NEW TESTAMENT

When Jesus was born, his mother Mary would have understood perfectly well what the angel was saying when she was told by the angel Gabriel:

‘He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’

[Luke 1.32,33]

Mary would have had no difficulty in understanding that these things would be fulfilled literally on the earth.

Early in his ministry, Jesus set out the qualities of the people who would eventually be rewarded with an inheritance in the Kingdom of God. ‘Blessed are the meek’ he said, ‘for they shall inherit the earth’ [Matthew 5.5]. Later on, he spoke of a judgement. The righteous would pass to the right side of the judge:

‘Then the King will say to those on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ [Matthew 25.34].

A TIME TO WAIT

However, although that kingdom was being prepared ‘from the foundation of the world’, there was to be a delay until the promise was ready for fulfilment. Jesus never said it would be fulfilled while he was with the disciples on the earth. He gave a long and detailed prophecy about the state of the world immediately prior to his return, from which we can recognise our own world, nearly 2,000 years later
(See Matthew chapter 24). He also told them a number of parables, which emphasised the need for them to prepare for his coming during a period when he was absent. Parables such as 'The Ten Virgins' and 'The Talents', both found in Matthew chapter 25, describe a time when the followers of Jesus would face the temptation of paying more attention to the affairs of this life than getting ready for the Kingdom of God on earth.

JESUS WILL COME AGAIN

The disciples would have heard all these parables. However, even after the resurrection and after Jesus had cleared up the premature expectations they had, we find the disciples anxiously questioning him just as he was about to ascend into heaven: 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' [Acts 1.6] This time, Jesus was taken away before he could give the answer. Although he had left the disciples the angels did give the answer to their question, for they said:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven' [Acts 1.11].

The angels did not go on to say that when Jesus returned, he would then gather together his followers and take them back to heaven. Such a statement would have contradicted all that he had said in his ministry and all the things which the Old Testament Scriptures tell us so plainly about the kingdom of God. Neither does this contradict the statement which Jesus made about his 'Father's house'. He said he would go and prepare a place for them and come again and receive them to himself. We know from the Scriptures that the 'house' will be on the earth when the Kingdom is set up.

THE WAY TO THE HOUSE

The disciple Thomas then asked the question which we must now
answer, ‘how can we know the way?’ [John 14.5]. The answer to this question can be found in the Gospel message that the disciples continued to preach after his ascension into heaven. They went forth, now as apostles with their understanding greatly improved, to preach the good news of Jesus’ eventual return, and to proclaim how we can have an ‘abiding place’ in God’s house. They talked about the resurrection of Jesus and of the need for a new way of life. They drew attention to the fact that David, the ancestor of Jesus, had not gone into heaven but expected to be in the Kingdom of God on earth [Acts 2.29-36]. They reminded their Jewish hearers how foolish they had been to reject and crucify their Saviour whom God had sent them and yet God was still prepared to forgive them:

‘You are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, “And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed”. To you first, God, having raised up his servant Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities’ [Acts 3.25,26].

Jesus went to heaven to ‘prepare a place’ for those who believe. He is a priest and a mediator between God and believers. These are things that apply to believers today, for the promises given to the Jewish fathers have been extended to all who truly seek God. It requires a firm commitment to follow Jesus and like those early disciples, it may be a difficult decision to leave behind present comforts and apparent security. But it makes no difference who we are or where we come from. There is no ‘respecting of persons’ or discrimination so far as the Gospel is concerned. The Apostle Paul told the believers in Galatia and Rome that the only criteria is that we believe and are baptised into Jesus, confessing our sins and resolving to obey God in our lives:

‘For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 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 3.26-29]

THE HOUSE COMPLETE

In their later letters, the apostles continued to use the term ‘house’ to refer to the community of faithful believers who will inherit the kingdom of God:

‘Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone, in whom all the building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit’ [Ephesians 2.19-22].

This tells us that, not only will the faithful have an ‘abiding place’ in God’s house but they would also be part of the spiritual house where God would dwell. This was a concept which David had very clearly in his mind [2 Samuel 7.12-29; 1 Kings 8. 15-20]. The same things are confirmed by the Apostle Peter in his first letter [I Peter 2.1-10].

And so, far from being misled by ideas that faithful believers will be taken away into heaven to receive a reward of which the Bible tells us nothing, Jesus has told us that he is making our future inheritance on the earth certain, if we believe the Gospel preached to the Jewish forefathers. God will establish his ‘house’ on the earth, in conditions that are clearly described and if found faithful, we can dwell in it forever.

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Religious Groups in Bible Times

The Herodians

A sect is usually thought of in terms of religion, and in practice the word is often used in that context. However, a sect is actually any group of people who are followers of a particular school of thought or who share a common interest, whether those thoughts and interests are religious or secular. The Herodians were a group of people with a common interest - but their interest was more political than religious, and our only interest in them from a Biblical viewpoint is to see how their political views impinged on Jesus and Christianity in the first century.

They were a Jewish group in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus who favoured the Herod dynasty of rulers over Palestine. There is not much information about them and what there is does not always quite agree. However, the general impression is clear. One Bible dictionary describes them in this way: ‘The Herodians probably were Jews of influence and standing who were well disposed to the Herodian rule and consequently also to the Romans, who supported the Herods. They were on the side of Herod in a land where many people were definitely opposed to that regime’ [Westminster Dictionary of the Bible].

A POLITICALLY MOTIVATED GROUP

‘Helps to the Study of the Bible’ is the title of a small book packed with information. In the section on Jewish sects and parties of New
Testament times it refers to the Herodians as a politically motivated group. It has this to say about them and the Herod dynasty which they supported (the wording is old fashioned but very expressive): ‘The Herodians were...the partisans of the Idumean Dynasty [the Herods]...their distinctive principle was that of concession to the reigning power. Supported in authority and position solely by Roman might, they endeavoured to repay their benefactors by performing their part of the compact (or agreement) by leavening the Jewish nation with laxity of moral tone, religious indifferentism, and the policy of temporizing under Roman ascendancy. Hence they vied with the Sadducees in scepticism, and the Greeks in licentiousness, pandered to the vice and cruelty of the Herods and truckled (or were submissive to) to the Romans. Their natural opponents were the Pharisees, who held tenaciously to all that was Jewish, and resisted all Gentile contamination’.

THE HERODS

The Herod family was extensive and was dominant in Jewish politics for almost 100 years (37 BC to AD 60). Family trees show that there may have been as many as thirteen prominent members of the Herod family and eleven of them are mentioned by name in the New Testament (see chart on page 25). The founder of the dynasty - Herod Agrippa I (also known as Herod the Great) - was not himself a Jew but an Edomite, or Idumean, who developed close links with the Romans. He and the next three generations of his family were given extensive political influence by the Romans, and ruled Palestine on their behalf. The Herods were great builders and many of their constructions were named after Roman emperors.

Although the Herods were closely involved with the Jews and with Palestine, as the above quotations show, they had little allegiance to the Jewish religious way of life unless it suited their political ambitions. They were inclined to support anybody of any faith if that would preserve or promote their powerful position. Because of their
patronage by Rome, and their co-operation with the Roman emperors they were despised and hated by many Jews.

Nevertheless, some Jews shared the viewpoint of the Herodians in seeing the Herod family as a useful intermediary between themselves and the Romans who ultimately controlled Palestine, as it was part of their empire. They regarded the local rule of the Herods, with their wide knowledge and practical experience of all things Jewish, as being more acceptable than having Rome rule them directly. In particular, the Herodians acknowledged the good that Herod the Great had done for Jerusalem by building a new temple. In religious terms the Herodians ‘held that the hopes of Judaism rested on the Herods and...almost looked to that family for the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Messiah’ [Life and Epistles of Paul: Conybeare & Howson].

It seems strange that anyone would expect the Herod family, with all their evil characteristics, to fulfil the Old Testament dreams of the Jews about their Messiah but that was the public stance that the Herodians took. It was probably not a genuine belief; more likely it was a ploy to increase their following among their fellow Jews. One author hints at this when he writes that ‘for purely selfish reasons the Herodians stood for the fullest cooperation possible with the authorities. Some even went so far as to declare the Messianic prophecies fulfilled in the role of Herod the Great and his sons’ [Studies in the Gospels: H.A Whittaker].

In summary so far, we can say this about the Herodians:
❖ They were probably prominent Jews.
❖ They were a small but influential group.
❖ They were politically motivated.
❖ They accepted the Herods as a compromise between direct Roman rule of Palestine and full Jewish independence.
❖ They welcomed building projects undertaken by the Herods.
❖ For reasons of self-interest they promoted the idea that the Jewish Messiah might come from the Herod family.
❖ They had no strong moral or religious beliefs.
They would use any means and would make use of any other political or religious group to maintain their own importance and further the political influence of the Herod family.

A QUESTION FOR JESUS

There are just three brief references in the New Testament to the Herodians. Two of them are parallel records of the same event and the third is about a very similar incident. Matthew records a particular day in Jesus’ life when he suffered a great deal of antagonism in the form of aggressive questioning from the Pharisees and the Sadducees as well as the Herodians. One of these questions was put to Jesus jointly by the Pharisees and the Herodians:

“They went and plotted how they might entangle him [Jesus] in his talk. And they sent to him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do you care about anyone, for you do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money”. So they brought him a denarius. And he said to them “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s”. And he said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him and went their way.”

[Matthew 22.15-22]

This incident is also recorded by Mark (chapter 12) and by Luke (chapter 20), although Luke does not mention the Herodians by name.

A CAREFULLY WORDED TRAP

The first thing we notice from the above verses is that the question
The Pharisees and the Herodians put to Jesus was not put honestly. They were not genuinely seeking knowledge. Their motive in asking the question was to 'entangle him in his talk'. The NIV says that their intention was to 'trap him in his words'. J B Phillips rendering is that they were trying to 'trap him in argument'. The Living Bible paraphrase says that they were trying to 'think of some way to trap Jesus into saying something for which they could arrest him'.

The idea behind these words 'entangle' and 'trap' is the snaring and capturing of wild animals, normally with a noose. These Pharisees and Herodians were not just playing political games with Jesus. They were seriously intent on provoking him to say something which would give them grounds for arresting him, prosecuting and punishing him, probably with the death penalty. They were also doing this in a public place with many people listening so that they would have plenty of witnesses. Luke's Gospel record, says that 'they watched him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on his words, in order to deliver him to the power and the authority of the governor' [Luke 20.20].

The governor was Pontius Pilate [Matthew 27.2] who was the leading Roman official in Palestine and who had the power to authorise the death penalty. (He was the man who did in fact eventually sanction Jesus' death by crucifixion - see John 19.10). This evil planning will come as no surprise bearing in mind what we have already seen about the Herodians; they were ambitious political strategists of the worst sort and the permanent disposal of a man who got in their way would not cause them a problem.

The curious thing about these questioners of Jesus is that they were a mixture of Pharisees and Herodians. The reference from Matthew 22 (page 20) indicates that the Pharisees were the instigators of the question about the payment of tax. They had obviously thought carefully about how they could best achieve their objective of trapping Jesus. This was no casual question but a carefully planned operation.
We read from Matthew that they 'plotted how they might entangle him' and they decided that, because of the nature of their question, support from the Herodians would be helpful on this occasion.

This was unusual because normally the Pharisees and the Herodians were poles apart in their thinking. In ‘Helps to the Study of the Bible’ the two groups are described as ‘natural opponents’. The Pharisees, with their entrenched views about Jewish national rule, and the Herodians, with their political support of the Rome-sponsored Herods and their provocative name, were not natural friends or allies. Some while before, they had met to agree how, despite their differences, they might co-operate to destroy Jesus on a suitable occasion [Mark 3.6].

‘IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR?’

Now, on this question of paying taxes to the Romans they seem to have found an issue on which they could work together to achieve his downfall. The Pharisees were, of course, naturally opposed to anything that supported the Romans and the Herods, and the Jewish historian Josephus records this as a fact [The Antiquities of the Jews XVII:II:4]. He records there that on one occasion the Pharisees plotted against the Herod family and, as a result, a number of them were executed for treason. In terms of the question to Jesus, the Pharisees would have been strongly opposed to paying taxes to Rome. Conversely, it may be supposed that the Herodians would have been in favour as it was to Rome that they looked for support both in political and financial terms.

So we can see the cunning scheme that the Pharisees and the Herodians had hatched. When they asked Jesus that question ‘Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ he was bound to fail in their eyes whether he answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and there was certain to be an uproar among the listening crowd. If he answered ‘yes’ he would attract even more anger and hatred from the Pharisees, and he would also risk alienating the many people who thronged to listen to his teaching almost every day; while if he answered ‘no’ the Herodians would accuse him of treason. It seems clear from Luke’s comment to
the effect that they hoped to deliver him to the Roman governor, that they expected him, along with most of the Jews, and in line with his own claim to be the King of the Jews, to support the non-payment of taxes imposed by Rome.

In fact, his answer confounded everybody. The Herodians’ plan to accuse him of treason and deliver him to the governor fell apart when, with a coin in his hand, Jesus drew attention to the head of Caesar inscribed on it, and to the writing on the coin which referred to Caesar as the head of the Roman Empire.

There was no doubt that the coin had been minted and circulated by Rome; and there was no doubt that the Romans had done much good for the Jews.

The Herodians knew this well. Jesus was in no doubt that the taxes demanded by the Romans should be paid, even by the Jews who thought that God alone should be the recipient of their tribute.

LESSONS FOR BELIEVERS

So, to the surprise of his questioners, Jesus commends the payment
of tax to Rome by Jews but, in doing so, he did not deny their obligations to God. By all means ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ but be careful also to render ‘to God the things that are God’s’. The word ‘render’ means ‘give back’ so Jesus was effectively saying to his accusers ‘Give back to Caesar some of your coins because they are his and because Rome has done so much for you; but also give back to God what rightly belongs to Him’.

The Apostle Paul brings out the same lesson and applies it to Christians whose priority is to render to God the things that he quite properly demands of them. But Paul reminds us that one of the things that God requires is that the followers of Christ should also obey the authorities of their day – ‘Every Christian ought to obey the civil authorities, for all legitimate authority is derived from God’s authority...to oppose authority then is to oppose God...it is right for you...to pay taxes...give everyone his legitimate due, whether it be rates, or taxes, or reverence, or respect’ [Romans 13.1-6 J B Phillips].

When he and some of the other apostles were in a dispute with the authorities about what they could and could not do, Peter made it clear that where a requirement of a ‘legitimate authority’ conflicts with God’s law then God’s law must take precedence – ‘We must obey God rather than men!’ [Acts 5.29 NIV]

As we leave the Herodians, it is perhaps thought provoking to realise that we know so little about them. What we do know seems to make it clear that they were a selfish and unprincipled group of people with little to commend them to the people of their day, and apparently nothing at all which appealed to God. Jesus quite rightly gave them extremely short shrift. He highlighted their failings, left them with a very firm exhortation on how to improve, and then moved on to more productive things.

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Family Tree of Herod

Notes
1. Ancestor of the Maccabees (see Maccabees’ Family Tree)
2. She danced for the head of John the Baptist
   (Mt. 14:6-12; Mk. 6:21-28).
3. Condemned by John the Baptist for Adultery with
   Herod Antipas (Mt. 14:4; Mk. 6:17-18; Lk. 3:19).
4. Killed the infants of Bethlehem (Mt. 2:13-16)
5. Killed by Herod the great
6. Ruled after Herod the great as king (Mt. 2:22)
7. Tetrarch over Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea, & Panaea
   (Lk. 3:1)
8. Tetrarch over Galilee & Perea
   (killed John the Baptist & tried Jesus along with Pilate)
9. Made King over Judea, Samaria, Galilee & Perea
   (Opposed early Christians Acts 12:1-23)
10. Made King over Judea, Samaria, Galilee & Perea
   (Heard Paul’s defense Acts 25:13-26:32)
COLOURS WITHOUT PAINT

WHITE light is made up of a continuous spectrum of merging colour. Anyone who has had anything to do with colours will assume that they are always produced by substances called pigments or dyes. These chemical compounds reflect the light wavelengths of colours which we associate with them, and absorb the rest. But there is another way by which colour can be generated.

Soap bubbles are a simple example of this. The bubble surface can display a rainbow of colours, constantly changing, until quite suddenly, and just before it pops, the colours vanish and the bubble appears almost perfectly transparent. How does this work?

The light reaching your eye from the bubble has bounced off two water surfaces, inner and outer, and in the process, depending on the thickness of the soap film, some light colours are being diminished or cancelled out. The perceived colours also depend on the angle of the film compared to your eye, which explains the rainbow effect. It also explains the brilliance of the colours. Pigment colours only reflect about 25% of the colour falling on them, while iridescence,
as this phenomenon is known, typically throws back three times as much.

Iridescence, a product of interference, is the cause of many of the bright colourations of the living world, shown for example by butterflies’ wings, beetles’ wing cases, peacocks’ tails and fish scales. Iridescence is even shown by certain rocks – opal being a case in point – and by oil films on water.

The brightest iridescence is arguably shown by the stunning Morpho butterflies which live in the South American rain forests and which can be seen a quarter of a mile away. These butterflies have minute tree-like patterns on their wing scales which cause the interference. The patterns are so tiny that they can only be seen under the electron microscope.

As indicated above, fish also use iridescence. Their silvery skin is designed to provide a reflective surface for camouflage, and one of the tricks employed is that of multiple layers of mirror crystals sandwiched between layers of cells. The catch is that, to be effective, these layers have to be precisely 7 millionths of a centimetre apart! A greater or lesser distance, by an extremely small margin, changes the camouflage into bright colours instead.

Of the accuracy with which the crystals are made and separated,
Richard Milton asks, in his book ‘The Facts of Life’, ‘Does anyone really believe that this precision was achieved by random mutation?’ At least as much to the point is the puzzle of how the fish managed to ‘adjust’ the distance correctly, when vanishingly small variations would actually advertise the presence of the fish to all nearby predators.

The real point of all this is the scale. The structures required to produce these effects cannot be seen with the optical microscope because to work at all they must be as small as the wavelengths of light itself. Cellular processes, working at molecular scales, construct these with consummate ease, but we have not the faintest idea of how the whole mechanism is controlled.

But there is more. There are only certain materials of which these crystals can be made in order to act in this way. Who designed the molecules of those crystals so that they would have exactly the right qualities, who designed the life processes of the fish to manufacture them in the right places, and, just to emphasize the point, who designed light so that it could be acted on in this way?

The Bible’s answer to these questions is very clear – the designer and Creator is God:

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth…Then God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light.’ [Genesis 1.1, 3].

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Editors note: For further information about design in creation send for your free copy of ‘Light on Creation’ (see back cover for details)
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