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## CHAPTER SIX

# A MESSIAH FOR ALL PEOPLES

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

Every time I read that sentence I can almost hear father Abraham's patriarchal laughter echoing through the centuries! But who uttered that sentence? Whose "day" is it that filled father Abraham with anticipation? The speaker was Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of Abraham born 1,900 years after Abraham's time. Incredulous Jews, startled by such an awesome claim, objected: "You are not yet fifty years old ... and you have seen Abraham!" (v. 57).

His second even more daring reply blew the doors off their minds: "I tell you the truth ... before Abraham was born, I am!" (v. 58).

*I Am* was another Jewish name for God!

Thunderstruck Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus eluded them (see v. 59). Not many months later, that same Jesus, "carrying his own cross ... went out to The Place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him" (John 19:17-18).

Where was Golgotha—The Place of the Skull—located? Just outside the wall of Jerusalem and within, at the most, 1,600 meters of the tip of Mount Moriah. King Solomon, centuries earlier had erected the first Jewish Temple on Mount Moriah, probably to commemorate the exact spot where Abraham stretched Isaac upon that pile of wood (see Gen. 22:1-19). It was there that Yahweh placed Himself under oath to fulfill both lines of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Note, however, that the Genesis record does not say that Abraham offered Isaac on Mount Moriah, but rather in "the region of Moriah." Clearly, if Abraham had stood on the very peak of Moriah (more pronounced in those days than it is now), it would have been easier to describe the location as such. Smaller spurs or ridges below the main peak would not have been as easy to name. But if the event had occurred much more than 1,600 meters away from Mount Moriah, it would more readily have been associated with other nearby hills, some of which were more prominent than Moriah.

It is possible, therefore, that Golgotha could have been the very site of Isaac's ordeal. If indeed Yahweh intended that Jesus' agony also should occur on that very site, it was essential that He leave Jewish historians with an inexact record of its location, otherwise commemorative shrines would surely have been built there, making it impossible for Roman soldiers to use the site for Jesus' crucifixion.

In any case, a descendant of Abraham named Jesus—though innocent of any crime—was slain while fastened upon wood which He Himself carried to His execution site. Isaac, also having no crime charged against him, carried wood to his execution site and then was laid upon the wood. He was spared only by the intervention of God. And the site in both cases was approximately, if not exactly, the same.

Many other parallels between Isaac and Jesus could be cited, but most important of all—Jesus' entire life, death and resurrection were inextricably linked with Yahweh's age-old promise to share the "blessings of Abraham" with all peoples on earth.

As if to emphasize this fact, Matthew, a chronicler of Jesus' life begins his account by tracing the Lord's ancestry back across 42 unbroken generations to none other than Abraham himself! Jesus' physical lineage, however, was merely foundational. Millions of Jews throughout history could trace ancestry to Abraham. Jesus' own mother, Mary, proclaimed in her famous song of praise that Yahweh, through Jesus' advent, was bringing forth far more than just another physical descendant of Abraham. That advent was a sign that Yahweh, in Mary's words, was "remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:54-55).

Also Jesus' Uncle Zechariah cited his nephew's coming as proof that Yahweh had remembered "his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." Then Zechariah heightened anticipation still further when he likened Jesus' advent to a "rising sun . . . come to us from heaven to shine on *those living in darkness and in the shadow of death*" (Luke 1: 72-73,78-79, italics added).

References to people "living in darkness" and in "the shadow of death" were commonly understood by Jews as designating Gentiles (see Matt. 4:15-16). We are getting closer to that bottom line of the Abrahamic promise! Finally. . .

Aged Simeon, a devout Jew who met Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem, articulated ever so eloquently that wider purpose of Messiah's coming, declaring before Yahweh: "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in *the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*" (Luke 2:30-32, italics added).

Likewise Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, constantly quoted Isaiah 40:3-5 as justification for his ministry of preparing "the way for the Lord" by making "straight paths for him." For what purpose? That "*all mankind will see God's salvation*" (Luke 3:4,6, italics added).

The implication of John's words stung some Jews; they, God's chosen people, were guilty of making their ways "crooked," thus preventing the rest of mankind from "seeing God's salvation," as God's promise to Abraham required.

Some Jews apparently bristled with resentment, suggesting it was not proper to bring such accusations against "children of Abraham." But John's response to their using Abraham as an excuse for indolence was swift and sharp. "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree [including those called 'Abrahamic'] that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:8-9).

With these words John the Baptist foreshadowed the new thing Yahweh was about to do through Jesus—call a new kind of Abrahamic offspring out of rough "stonepiles" of the Gentile world. Those thus called would become "living stones" in God's spiritual temple. And this time God's basis for selection would not be mere physical descendancy, but repentance and faith providentially engendered.

"A light for revelation to the Gentiles!" A "Sun" to rise upon people "living in darkness and in the shadow of death!" A bringer of "salvation . . . prepared in the sight of all people!" All the pointers were

unmistakable: Jesus was destined to be not merely a man for all seasons as the Jewish Messiah, but also a man for all peoples—the Light of even the Gentile world!

How fitting then, that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, should have some Gentile blood in Him.

Besides Jesus' mother, Mary, only four women are mentioned in the male-dominated genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3. And all four are Gentile women who share in Messiah's lineage. Tamar, Judah's wife, came out of a Canaanite background (see Gen. 38). Rahab, the harlot of Jericho who gave shelter to Hebrew spies just before the famous fall of that ancient city, married a Hebrew named Salmon, and with him shares the lineage of Jesus Christ (see Matt. 1: 5). Likewise Ruth, a woman of a despised Gentile region called Moab, married Salmon and Rahab's son, Boaz, gave birth to a son, Obed, and thus also became a "mother" of Jesus (v. 5). Finally, Bathsheba, whom King David married, is thought to have come from among the Hittites (2 Sam. 11:3).

How fitting also that God should use a decree of a Gentile emperor, Caesar Augustus, to guarantee that Jesus would come to birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, fulfilling a prophecy of an Old Testament prophet named Micah (see Mic. 5:2). How fitting again that apparently non-Jewish scholar-magicians from the Middle East were among the first to celebrate Jesus' birth (see Matt. 2: 1). And that Jesus found refuge from the wrath of Herod, a merciless Jewish king, in Gentile Egypt (see Matt. 2:14)!

Finally, how appropriate that Jesus began His public ministry in a sector of Galilee bordered by Gentile Syria on the north and Gentile Decapolis on the east! Actually, Galilee bordered disreputable Samaria with its half-breed population as well! Galilean ground was definitely not considered prime real estate! Yet Jesus honored that region with His first public sermons!

Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples, recorded this fact as a fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's comment about "Galilee of the Gentiles": "The people living in darkness have seen a great light: on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matt. 4:15-16; see also Isa. 9:1-2).

"Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed" Him, Matthew comments (4:25). "News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill . . . and he healed them" (v. 24).

The die was cast! In spite of heavy pressure and criticism (including some from His own disciples) Jesus was to keep His ministry true to the open character thus established at the beginning. A man for all peoples, His eyes, ears, hands and heart would always be as attentive to Gentiles and Samaritans as to Jews, His own kinsmen. And He expected His disciples to learn from His example!

Millions of Christians know, of course, that Jesus, at the end of His ministry, commanded His disciples to "go and make disciples of all [peoples]" (Matt. 28:19). We respectfully honor this last and most incredible command He gave with an august title—the Great Commission. And yet millions of us deep down in our hearts secretly believe, if our deeds are an accurate barometer of our beliefs (and Scripture says they are), that Jesus really uttered that awesome command without giving His disciples ample warning.

Read cursorily through the four Gospels and the Great Commission looks like a sort of afterthought paper-clipped onto the end of the main body of Jesus' teachings. As Dr. Winter pointed out, it is almost as if our Lord, after divulging everything that was really close to His heart, snapped His fingers and said, "Oh, yes, by the way, men, there's one more thing. I want you all to proclaim this message to everyone in the world, regardless of his language and culture. That is, of course, if you have the time and feel disposed."

Did Jesus hit His disciples with the Great Commission cold turkey? Did He just spring it on them at the last minute without fair warning and then slip away to heaven before they had a chance to interact with Him about its feasibility? Did He fail to provide reasonable demonstration on ways to fulfill it?

How often we Christians read the four Gospels without discerning the abundant evidence God has provided for an entirely opposite conclusion! Consider, for example, how compassionately Jesus exploited the following encounters with Gentiles and Samaritans to help His disciples think in cross-cultural terms.

On one occasion (Matt. 8:5-13), a Roman centurion, a Gentile, approached Jesus with a request on behalf of his paralyzed servant. Jews, on this occasion, urged Jesus to comply. "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue," they explained.

In fact, walls and pillars of a synagogue built probably by that very centurion still stand two thousand years later near the north shore of the Sea of Galilee! But notice the implication of the Jews' reasoning. They were saying, in effect, that if the centurion had not thus helped them, neither should Jesus help the centurion or his pitifully paralyzed servant! How clannish of them! Little wonder Jesus could not help sighing occasionally, "O unbelieving and perverse generation . . . how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matt. 17:17).

Jesus responded to the centurion, "I will go and heal him." At that moment the centurion said something quite unexpected: "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me . . . . When Jesus heard this, he was astonished," wrote Matthew. What was so astonishing? Simply this—the centurion's military experience had taught him something about authority. As water always flows downhill, so also authority always flows down an echelon (a chain of command). Whoever submits to authority from a higher level of an echelon is privileged also to wield authority over lower levels. Jesus, the centurion noticed, walked in perfect submission to God; therefore Jesus must have perfect authority over everything below Him on the greatest echelon of all—the cosmos! Ergo! Jesus must possess infallible ability to command the nerves and muscles of the sick servant's body to return to a state of health!

"I tell you the truth," Jesus exclaimed, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith!" As in many other discourses, Jesus exploited the occasion to teach His disciples that Gentiles have just as great a potential for faith as Jews! And they make just as valid objects for the grace of God too!

Determined to maximize the point, Jesus went on to say: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west [Luke, a Gentile writer, adds in his parallel account: 'and from the north and the south'], and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom [this could only mean the Jews as God's chosen people] will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:7-12; Luke 7:9; 13:28-29). What would you guess that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be celebrating with that host of *Gentile* guests? The fulfillment of Yahweh's "bottom-line" promise to bless all peoples, of course!

Intimations of the Great Commission to follow could hardly have been clearer! Wait, there is much more.

Still later, a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon begged Jesus' mercy on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus at first feigned indifference. His disciples, glad no doubt to see their Messiah turn a cold shoulder to a bothersome Gentile, concurred at once with what they thought were His true feelings. "Send her away," they argued, "for she keeps crying out after us" (see Matt. 15:21-28).

Little did they know that Jesus was setting them up. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," He said to the woman. Having already manifested an apparent insensitivity toward the woman Jesus now manifests an apparent inconsistency also. He has already healed many Gentiles. On what basis does He now reject this one's plea? One can imagine the disciples nodding grimly. Still they did not suspect. Undissuaded, the Canaanite woman actually knelt at Jesus' feet, pleading, "Lord, help me!"

"It is not right to take the children's bread"—metaphor for God's blessings upon Jews in accord with the "top line." Then He added the crusher—"and toss it to their dogs!" "Dogs" was a standard epithet Jews reserved for Gentiles, especially Gentiles who tried to intrude upon Jewish religious privacy and privilege. In other words, Jesus now complements His earlier "insensitivity" and "inconsistency" with even worse "cruelty." Notice also that Jesus' words stand in direct contradiction to the "bottom line" of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Was this really the Saviour of the world talking? No doubt His disciples thought His reference quite appropriate for the occasion. But just when their chests were swollen to the full with pride of race, the Canaanite woman must have caught a twinkle in Jesus' eye and realized the truth!

"Yes, Lord," she replied ever so humbly, not to mention subtly, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!" (Matt. 15:21-27; see also Mark 7:26-30).

"Woman, you have great faith!" Jesus glowed. "Your request is granted!" No, He was not being fickle! This was what He intended to do all along. Immediately preceding this event, Jesus had taught His disciples about the difference between *real* versus *figurative* uncleanness. This was His way of driving the point home.

"And her daughter was healed from that very hour," Matthew records (v. 28).

When on a later occasion Jesus and His band approached a certain Samaritan village, the Samaritans refused to welcome Him. James and John, two disciples whom Jesus nicknamed "sons of thunder" for their fiery tempers, were incensed. "Lord," they exclaimed indignantly (stamping their feet?), "do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy them?"

Jesus turned and rebuked James and John. Some ancient manuscripts add that He said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:51-55, including a footnote).

With those words, Jesus identified Himself as a Saviour for Samaritans!

Still later, Jesus healed 10 lepers along the border between Samaria and Galilee. Nine of them hurried off to enjoy their restored health. The tenth alone came to Jesus "praising God in a loud voice." Then the newly cleansed man "threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."

Luke adds pointedly, "And he was a Samaritan!"

Again, Jesus made sure His disciples did not miss the cross-cultural significance of the occasion, He asked: "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (see Luke 17:11-19).

Jesus' penchant for holding up non-Jews as examples of righteousness for Jews—who, of all people on earth, were supposed to be leaders in righteousness—is even more dramatically illustrated, however, by His Good Samaritan story, narrated in response to a question by a testy, self-justifying expert in Jewish law! The question was, "Who is my neighbor?"

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho," Jesus began, "when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side . . . . But a Samaritan. . ." (imagine the expression on that legal "expert's" face beginning to sour) ". . . a Samaritan," Jesus continued, "as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him" (Luke 10:30-34).

Telling stories like that, Jesus could hardly be accused of currying favor with His fellow Jews! In fact, multitudes of people through the centuries have viewed His absolutely consistent refusal to stoop to political expediency as one of the surest evidences for His sinlessness! Muhammad, as we shall see in a later volume, tragically and utterly failed this test.

Here is another instance in which Jesus pushed directly against the stream of popular prejudice in His time. "Now he had to go through Samaria," reads an account in John's Gospel. "So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar . . . Jacob's well was there and Jesus . . . sat down by the well . . . . When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' . . . The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?'"

From that seemingly unpromising beginning, Jesus went on to pierce the armor of that Samaritan woman's resistance to everything Jewish. He even managed to make the statement "Salvation is from the Jews" and get away with it! The Samaritan woman believed Him. Totally enthused she left her water jar by the well, ran into Sychar, rallied the townsfolk, and brought them en masse to meet Jesus.

Meanwhile His disciples, who had been shopping for food in Sychar, were shocked upon their return to see Jesus conversing with a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman! They themselves while shopping in Sychar had been careful to keep everything on a "business only" basis even with Samaritan men! For as John explains in his account, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."

Still they hesitated to criticize Jesus. They just frowned and said, "Rabbi, eat something."

"I have food to eat that you know nothing about," Jesus replied. While they were wondering what He meant, the Samaritan woman reappeared, leading a host of her fellow Sycharians to Jesus. Perhaps nodding toward the Samaritans, Jesus continued, "My food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (see John 4:4-34).

And what is the will and work of Yahweh? To make His promise to Abraham come true—including that "bottom line" about all peoples on earth being blessed through Abraham's descendants! And as Jesus saw that crowd of Samaritans coming toward Him, He knew His promise to Abraham was one step closer to being fulfilled. Another people was coming in!

Swaying as they walked like ripe wheat heads in the wind, the Samaritans reminded Jesus of a field of grain. "Open your eyes and look at the fields!" He told His disciples. "They are ripe for harvest" (v. 35).

Samaritans? Wheat for God's harvest? Some wheat! many Jews would have scoffed. *Weeds* perhaps, but not wheat! But in the eyes of Jesus, Messiah for all peoples, Samaritans could be wheat!

One day Jesus proclaimed, ever so provocatively, that three Gentile cities—Tyre, Sidon, and even disreputable Sodom—would fare better on the day of judgment than three Jewish cities named Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum! Why? Because the Gentile cities mentioned, had they witnessed the miracles Jesus performed in Galilee, would have "repented long ago sitting in sackcloth and ashes" (Luke 10: 13).

Likewise He warned Jews of His time that Gentile men of Nineveh would "stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it!" Why? "They repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here!"

In the same vein, Jesus warned His contemporaries that the Gentile "Queen of the South" would "rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it!" On what basis? "She came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:41-42).

Luke is the chronicler who records for us how intensely Jews in Jesus' time resented this particular sort of comparison.

People in Nazareth, Jesus' own hometown, had heard astonishing reports detailing miracles He worked in other places. Every Nazarene, we may be sure, stood tiptoe with expectation when at last Jesus returned to Nazareth for the first time since He began to display His previously unsuspected talent for working wonders. If He lavished so many miracles on strangers, who could guess what wonders He might perform for His own townsfolk!

Folks said He had so many miracles in Him He could even afford to waste some on Gentiles and Samaritans! He would have to exert Himself in a very special way among His own Jewish acquaintances to make up for that! Luke tells us what happened: "On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.'"

One can imagine Jesus emphasizing the word "poor" and then looking around to take the measure of this audience of people who considered themselves so deserving of special privilege. He continued reading: "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . ." Did He utter that word "prisoners" in a manner that suddenly charged it with a meaning far wider than just "jailbirds"? ". . . And recovery of sight for the *blind*, to release the *oppressed*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:16-19, italics added; see also Isa. 61:1-2).

While the weight of Isaiah's profound statement was still settling upon his fellow Nazarenes, Jesus "rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue," Luke adds suspensefully, "were fastened on him, and he said to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (vv. 20-21). Whispers of approval rustled through the synagogue. "All spoke well of him," Luke wrote, "and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22).

That, of course, was because they still did not understand why He chose to read that particular passage from Isaiah. No matter; they were so eager to see Him work miracles that they hardly cared to ponder the meaning of His speech. His words were simply a prelude to His miracles, were they not? Of course! Miracles must be the main business of the day.

Jesus continued, "you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician heal yourself! Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum!' I tell You the truth . . . no prophet is accepted in his home town" (vv. 23-24).

This latter sentence, spoken very likely with a sigh, was but a transition to the solemn point of His text. To illustrate what Isaiah meant when he foreshadowed Messiah as ministering selectively to people who were poor, imprisoned, blind or oppressed, Jesus drew masterfully upon two other well-known Old Testament narratives. The first: "There were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time when . . . there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath in the [Gentile] region of *Sidon*" (vv. 25-26 italics added).

If air inside the synagogue turned sour with this first illustration, it actually curdled with the second: "There were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the *Syrian*" (v. 27).

Hell broke loose. "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this," Luke recorded. "They got up, drove him [not merely out of the synagogue but even] out of the town." Still not satisfied, they took Him "to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way" (vv. 28-30).

So much for Jewish interest in the bottom line of their own Abrahamic Covenant! The suggestion that Yahweh might even bypass needy Jews to fulfill that special clause for Gentiles was totally obnoxious and unacceptable, even if it could be supported with Scripture! How lonely Jesus must have felt to be perhaps the only one in the entire Jewish nation who cared about the full text of Yahweh's ancient covenant with Abraham! And how hard it must have been to keep trying to share that lonely vision with people who should have been interested, but weren't.

Even His own disciples took, as we shall see, decades to comprehend Jesus' "all-peoples" perspective. Yet how patiently Jesus bore their seemingly endless rejection of this, His most far-reaching and deeply compassionate design. How patiently He still waits for our full compliance with that design today! He had, of course, to keep working toward that end. It was His mission. And it still involves His personal 4,000 year-old commitment to God and to Abraham.

And Jesus alone knew how wistfully peoples like the Karen, the Lahu, the Wa, the Lisu, the Kachin, the Mizo, the Naga, the Gedeo, the Santal, the Incas and thousands of others were waiting. He would not fail them (or us!) by letting that vision die. But there was an even stronger reason which caused Him to persist.

Immediately after the near sacrifice of Isaac, Yahweh confirmed His covenant with Abraham with that famous oath! Notice: "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you [Abraham] have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you . . . and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen. 22:15-18).

The writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews comments on the above Genesis passage as follows: "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself . . . *Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.* God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Heb. 6:13-19).

There was no way, then, that Jesus the Messiah could have abandoned the "all-peoples imperative"! God had already staked His very name and character upon its fulfillment! What's more, His very name and character are still staked upon the fulfillment of that imperative today! Anyone who does not understand this cannot possibly understand what God is doing in history.

Not only in small towns like Nazareth, but also in the big city of Jerusalem, Jesus' unswerving loyalty to the "all-peoples imperative" kept Him in constant tension with His fellow Jews. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that Jesus, near the end of His ministry, entered what was almost certainly the court of the Gentiles—one of the precincts of Herod's famous Temple at Jerusalem. Why was it called the court of the Gentiles? There was only one reason—it was the only part of the Temple designed exclusively to remind Jews of their ancient obligation to honor the bottom line of the Abrahamic Covenant! Apart from that courtyard, Jews might more easily forget that they were blessed to be a blessing—to Gentiles!

It was also the only part of the Temple that Gentile tourists or even devout Gentile "God-fearers" were allowed to enter. It was God's purpose that Gentiles entering that sacred precinct would hear Jews praying for them, and would know unmistakably that the God of the Jews was truly the God of the whole earth, a God who desired to bless all peoples.

To His utter indignation, Jesus found the court of the Gentiles dedicated instead to Jewish commercial enterprise. Oxen and sheep pens, dove cages, and money changers with their scales and abacuses, filled the court of the Gentiles from gate to wall. Clatter and clutter, niggling and haggling were everywhere—more noxious perhaps than even the stench of animal dung.

Originally, Temple-related enterprises of this type—if they existed at all—were located outside the Temple precinct. Then, gradually, businessmen realized how much greater their profits would be if only they could be nearer to the inner court of the Temple where animals were actually sacrificed. It occurred to them that the area called the court of the Gentiles was not really being put to much use. After all, who really prays for Gentiles any more? And if anyone wants to pray for Gentiles, he can do it anywhere. Was it really practical to tie up an entire area of high potential real estate for a pursuit as unpopular as praying for Gentiles? "Rezone the court of the Gentiles for commercial use!" thus became a popular campaign issue. Eventually, the proposal won the day and became law—with perhaps a shekel or two passing under the high priest's office desk.

In came the animal sellers, followed by the money changers, eager to exploit Gentile visitors who came to the Temple. Visitors from afar, unfamiliar with currency exchange rates in Palestine, might not know when a money changer was ripping them off through an unfair rate of exchange, not to mention an inaccurate balance scale.

Jesus saw it all and took action. He "drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Matt. 21:12). To those who shouted, "Just what do you think you are doing?"

Jesus responded not so much with angry denunciation as with teaching based upon Scripture.

What did He teach to justify His decisive action against His fellow Jews' vile prostitution of the court of the Gentiles? He chose a masterful combination of quotes from two Old Testament prophets. The first came from Isaiah: "My house [God's temple] will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11: 17; see

also Isa. 56:7). Then Jesus placed a phrase from Jeremiah in tandem: "But you have made it 'a den of robbers!'" (See Jer. 7: 11.)

The context of this quotation from Isaiah bears strong relationship to the "all-peoples imperative" of the Abrahamic Covenant. For in that context, Isaiah quotes Yahweh as saying: "Let no foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people' . . . and foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:3 6,7).

Let all Gentiles take note that Jesus drove out the money changers not merely to defend the sanctity of the Temple itself, but also to defend our right to have our spiritual need represented in it! Moreover, that act cost Him dearly, for "the chief priests and the teachers of the law [who probably sold commercial franchises to those money changers, or at least agreed with those who did] heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching" (Mark 11:18).

Such blatant rejection of the profoundly open spirit of the Abrahamic Covenant caused Jesus to extend a grim warning to Jewish leaders. The first portent of that warning came the very day after He cleansed the Temple. Spending the night in Bethany . . .

"Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this, they were amazed" (Matt. 21:18-20).

The real point of this incident did not emerge, however, until later that day. As Jesus taught in the Temple, jealous Jewish leaders glowered on the edges of the crowd, racking their brains for some way to upstage Him. Jesus, however, took the initiative against them with various parables, including one about a landowner (Yahweh) who planted a vineyard (Israel), rented it out to tenant farmers (Jewish religious leaders) and went on a journey. After harvest, he sent his servants (the prophets) to collect his share of the crop (their obedience to the conditions of his covenant) as rent. The tenant farmers beat, stoned or killed all the landowner's servants. Finally, the landowner used his ultimate persuasion—he sent his own son. But the tenant farmers killed him too!

"What, " Jesus asked, "will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," the Jews replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus replied: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (see Matt. 21:33-43). Surely Jesus' disciples must have remembered immediately the incident of the fig tree which withered under His curse because it provided no fruit when He approached it! Clearly, they must have guessed that the withered fig tree foreshadowed a tragedy soon to befall Israel itself!

No warning could possibly be plainer—Yahweh was about to table the spiritual franchise once entrusted to the Jews and open a new administration among Gentile peoples who were Willing to honor the spirit of the Abrahamic Covenant! But just in case they missed the point, Jesus followed this parable immediately with a second.

A king (Yahweh) prepared a banquet for His Son's wedding and invited His friends (the Jews). They, however, totally rejected His invitation, even to the extent of abusing or slaying some of the servants the king sent as bearers of the invitation! The king's response was twofold: First, He sent an army to punish the wretches who abused or slew His servants; secondly, He sent still other servants out into streets and lanes to gather masses of previously unprivileged people (Gentiles) to enjoy the banquet with Him. Thus our Lord foreshadowed an impending invitation of Yahweh's grace soon to be extended to Samaritans and to Gentiles of every stripe through the ministry of His own apostles and their successors!

Missiologist Ralph Winter once startled an audience by affirming, "Jesus did not come to *give* the Great Commission! He came to take it away—from the Jews who had already possessed it in prototype for nearly two thousand years and had done almost nothing with it! It was time for the world to see what believing Gentiles, entrusted with that same imperative in New Testament form, would do with it."

The idea that Yahweh might punish their gross disobedience by annulling their spiritual franchise for an age or two was, to the Jews, unthinkable! How mad Jesus must have seemed to suggest such an incredible thing! Yet their own lawgiver, Moses, had already warned of that very possibility! "They made me jealous by what is no god," he quotes Yahweh as saying, "I will make them envious by those who are not a people" (Deut. 32:21, quoted by Paul in Rom. 10:19).

What was the immediate response of the Jewish leaders to Jesus' warnings? "They looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them" (Mark 12:12). Some of them, however, skilled in debate through rabbinical training, tried to trick Jesus into verbalizing political impropriety against Rome. Alas for His interrogators, He handled this and other questions with the ease of a veteran infielder scooping up grounders and catching the runner at first every time!

What was their question? "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Matt. 22:17). What would Jesus, the man for all peoples, advise in the extremely sensitive matter of Jews paying taxes to a *Gentile* emperor?

He began His reply: "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?" On what basis did He call them hypocrites? Simply this—they professed to stand for both the Abrahamic Covenant and its later extensions in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, yet they frustrated the intent of that Covenant in almost every vital way!

Jesus continued: "'Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'" (vv. 18-21).

With these words, Jesus the Messiah for all peoples, acknowledged the right of even unbelieving Gentile kings to reign over the Jews, presumably until a period He later called "the times of the Gentiles" was fulfilled. (See Luke 21:24.)

His enemies were "unable to trap him," wrote Luke. "Astonished by his answer, they became silent" (Luke 20:26).

Meanwhile Jesus, though still ministering blessings to Jews on every hand (as required by the "top line" of the Abrahamic Covenant), kept informing His disciples that they themselves must shortly minister to Gentiles as well. Once, for example, He sent them out on a training mission explaining that although at the moment He was sending them, not to Gentiles or Samaritans, but to "the lost sheep of Israel," later they

would be "brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them *and to the Gentiles!*" (Matt. 10:5-6,18, italics added).

Jesus most likely placed this temporary restriction upon His disciples, not to encourage disregard for Gentiles and Samaritans, but because His disciples were still spiritually and mentally unprepared to undertake a cross-cultural mission.

Later Jesus, explaining metaphors from His now famous Parable of the Weeds to His disciples, identified the "field" in the parable as "the world," not just Israel (see Matt. 13:24-30,36-43).

In the same context, Jesus dropped a one-sentence parable about a woman who mixed yeast into a large amount of flour and let it "work all through the dough" (Matt. 13:33). By analogy with Jesus' own interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds, the large amount of flour in this mini parable seems also to designate the world, and the yeast accordingly becomes the gospel's pervasive witness throughout the entire world.

Elsewhere Jesus forewarned His disciples that the end of the age could not happen until the gospel had first been "preached to all nations" (Mark 13: 10). The Greek phrase *ta ethne* should, according to many scholars, be translated "all peoples," rather than "all nations," which erroneously implies that divine interest centers upon transitory political structures rather than ethnically distinct human communities. India, for example, is one "nation," but India embraces 3,500 "peoples." One would have to say there are 3,500 Indias, if *ethne* is translated as "nations."

Later on, some Greeks came to a feast at Jerusalem and sought audience with Jesus. Philip and Andrew, two of Jesus' disciples, relayed the request to Jesus who, as usual, exploited the occasion to get another wedge in for the "all-peoples perspective": "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself" (John 12:32, italics added). This prophecy foreshadowed the manner of Jesus' death—crucifixion! But it also foretold the effect! All men—not merely in spite of Jesus' humiliation, but because of it—would be drawn to Him as God's anointed deliverer. On the surface this statement could be interpreted to mean that everyone in the world will become a Christian. Since we know that this is quite unlikely, the statement probably means instead that some of all kinds of men will be drawn to Jesus when they learn that His death atoned for their sins. And that is exactly what the Abrahamic Covenant promised—not that all people would be blessed, but that all peoples would be represented in the blessing. Jesus' disciples thus gained still another fair warning of the Great Commission soon to follow!

Jesus' keen preoccupation with the future evangelization of Gentile peoples emerged in still another context through an indirect statement. When Mary, a woman, poured a jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, symbolically anointing Him beforehand for burial, Judas Iscariot rebuked her for wasting expensive ointment (see John 12:4-5). Jesus Himself took up Mary's defense. Explaining her motivation, He added a comment that revealed much about His own deep inner purpose: "Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (Mark 14:9).

Immediately afterwards, Judas Iscariot slipped away and secretly arranged to betray Jesus to His enemies. Egocentric Judas by that time was totally disenchanted with his Lord. Jesus' indifference to the possibility of using His power for the political and monetary enrichment of His disciples had brought Judas to the end of his patience. And now, as if to add insult to injury, Jesus had embarrassed Judas openly by endorsing Mary's costly act of worship after Judas had criticized it. This proved to Judas—if he still had any doubts—that Jesus simply did not have a gift for financial management!

Finally, from Judas's ethnocentric viewpoint Jesus' soaring ambition to dissipate Messianic blessings over the entire Gentile world (instead of concentrating the blessing among Jews where it could really count for something) must have seemed entirely impractical! Apparently Judas saw at last that Jesus really was serious about throwing the banquet hall of Jewish privilege open to Gentile dogs! If so, then Judas may have been the most intelligent of the 12 disciples, because the other 11, as we shall see, took much longer to take that emphasis of Jesus' ministry seriously.

Both Judas's clash with Jesus over the value of Mary's act of worship and Jesus' reassertion of the "all-peoples perspective" in His defense of Mary seem related in Scripture as catalysts precipitating Judas's decision to betray Jesus! This apparently was for Judas the final offense that shredded the last vestige of any obligation he still felt toward Jesus.

Suddenly Judas began adding up his score of grievances. He had invested three years of his life hoping to help Jesus set up and administer the new Messianic Corporation. Still, apart from some "advances" he had "borrowed" from the corporation treasury, he was not the least bit better off financially for all his trouble! For that matter, Jesus' far out (literally) management policies aimed at incorporating Gentile peoples into His plans gave not the slightest promise of any financial reward in the future either!

Judas began to feel sorry for himself. Was there no way he could compensate himself for at least some of the wages he had forfeited to follow Jesus during that financially disappointing three-year period?

Suddenly Judas thought of a clever way to regain at least part of his losses. It would require him to betray a friend, of course, but that friend had already demonstrated a remarkable ability to live with danger and survive. There was no chance, Judas thought, that a secret little deal with the chief priests would actually result in Jesus' death! Either Jesus would outwit His accusers in court (He was great with words), or else the same crowds who welcomed Jesus in His triumphal entry would demand His release on threat of riot (He was incredibly popular at the moment!). Failing that, Jesus Himself could easily cheat death by some miraculous escape. True, Jesus predicted on several occasions that He would eventually come to a tragic end; but this was surely not the time. He was still in His prime. His ministry was at its apex. The chief priests would arrest Him, of course, but then they would soon be forced by popular opinion to release Him.

Judas, meanwhile, would slip away to some other part of Palestine with 30 pieces of silver to invest in a bright new future! But not until he had lingered in Jerusalem just long enough to see how Jesus' release would happen!

To Judas's utter horror, it didn't happen that way!

From the moment of the arrest, things started going wrong. Jesus inexplicably stopped exercising His marvelous powers of argument to outwit His enemies. The man who had foiled the most potent debaters of Judaism now stood incredibly tongue-tied before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, saying hardly a word in His own defense. Likewise, Judas listened in vain for some news that Jesus had at last exploited His awesome miraculous powers to slip through the fingers of His enemies. And when the sentence of death was announced, even the crowds did not rise to His defense! Impossibly gullible people, some of whom welcomed Jesus as Messiah only days earlier, now allowed professional agitators to persuade them to clamor for Jesus' crucifixion!

Crucifixion?! Judas must have gasped! Jesus? Pierced with iron nails? Dying in agony upon a *Gentile* cross? That was a method of torture reserved only for the foulest criminals! That was not supposed to happen! Or was it? Perhaps the betrayer recalled in that moment Jesus' words: "And I, if I be lifted up from

the earth . . ." The words had seemed at the time to refer to some future state of exaltation. Now, too late, the real meaning was beginning to emerge. And Judas knew that he—one of Jesus' original 12 disciples—had contributed to this awesomely unjust crime! Matthew the apostle describes Judas's reaction to this unexpected turn of events:

"When Judas, who betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.' 'What is that to us?' they replied . . . So Judas threw the money into the temple . . . Then he went away and hanged himself' (Matt. 27:3-5).

What finally happened to those 30 pieces of silver? Interestingly, the chief priests picked them up and used them to buy a potter's field, which they then converted into a cemetery for guess who? Gentiles! Jewish law prohibited the burial of Gentiles in Jewish cemeteries, but Jesus, even through the money paid for His betrayal, in effect made provision for them (see Matt. 27:6-10).

The crucifixion, meanwhile, took place in that same "region of Moriah" where Abraham—1,900 years before—once stood prepared to offer his only son, the innocent Isaac, at God's command. This time, however, there was no "ram caught in a thicket" to take the place of the innocent Son. Instead, the ancient prophecy—"in the mountain of the Lord it will be provided"—was fulfilled.

And Jesus Christ was that provision. John, one of His disciples, later realized the significance of what happened that day, and wrote: "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, . . . is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:1-2).

This, then, was the first of the blessings which Abraham's singular Descendant would share, not only with Jews like John, but with "the whole world"!

As Jesus hung upon that cross, an inscription in Aramaic, the language used by most Palestinian Jews of that day, was nailed above His head: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." But that inscription was written also in two other Gentile languages, Latin and Greek!

And at the very moment when Jesus cried aloud, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," a Gentile soldier was standing near the base of the cross. He saw Jesus breathe His last. His comment? "Surely this was a righteous man."

Just as the disciples still did not believe Jesus' intimations of Gentile evangelism, so also they never really believed Him when He said He would rise from the dead. He surprised them on both counts! Three days after His entombment He resurrected! And one of His first encounters after resurrection began in incognito fashion with two of His disciples on a road leading to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-49). During the opening exchange the two disciples, still not recognizing Jesus, complained: "We had hoped that [Jesus] was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (v. 21); they did not add, "and make Israel a blessing to all peoples." A blind spot in their hearts stiff effectively obscured that part of the Abrahamic Covenant.

"How foolish you are," Jesus responded, "and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (vv. 25-26).

Then, beginning with the five "books of Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." He had covered much of that ground before, but He went over it

again—patiently (see v. 27). And this time, the two disciples' hearts burned within them as He opened the Scriptures (see v. 32). Was a wider perspective at last winning its way into their hearts?

Later they recognized Jesus but at the same moment He vanished from their sight! They retraced their steps at once to Jerusalem, found the Eleven (as the disciples were called for a while after Judas's defection) and recounted their experience. But before they finished talking, Jesus Himself appeared among them, and the Eleven experienced the end of the story for themselves!

As unerringly as a swallow returning to its nest, Jesus returned to the Scriptures and their central theme: "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations* (i.e. *ethne*—peoples), beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things'" (Luke 24:45-48, italics added).

Notice, however, that He still did not command them to go. That would come a few days later, on a mountain in Galilee where—as far as the disciples were concerned—it all started. And here is the wording of the command which the Abrahamic Covenant had already foreshadowed for 2,000 years, and which Jesus for three long years had been preparing His disciples to receive: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey [note the limitation that follows] everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20, italics added).

It was not an unfair command. The Old Testament foreshadowed it. Jesus' daily teaching anticipated it. His frequent prejudice-free ministry among both Samaritans and Gentiles had given the disciples a real-life demonstration of how to carry it out. Now He added the promise of His own authority bequeathed and His own presence in company—if they obeyed!

Still later, moments before He ascended back into heaven from the Mount of Olives (near Bethany), He added a further promise: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses . . ." Then followed Jesus' famous formula for the exocentric progression of the gospel: "... in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, *and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8, italics added).

It was Jesus' last command. Without another word, and without waiting for any discussion of the proposal, He ascended into heaven to await His followers' complete obedience to it!

Jesus knew of course that there was no hope of rescuing the majority of Jews in His time from blind self-centeredness any more than there is ever much hope of rescuing the majority of any people, for that matter, from the same plight! Throughout history the majority of Jews focused so exclusively upon the top line of the Abrahamic Covenant that the bottom line became virtually invisible to them. It is probably not an exaggeration to describe their minds as hermetically sealed against any serious consideration of "the bottom line." That is why many Jews were determined to exploit Jesus' miraculous powers exclusively for their own benefit. But His covenant-based all-peoples perspective clashed constantly with their own "our people" mentality. Even one of His disciples, as we have seen, betrayed Him in the context of this issue! The only hope, then, lay with these other 11. If only Jesus could win them to the all-peoples perspective, the full promise to Abraham, and not just a truncated version, could still be fulfilled.

Question! Could even the Son of Man—without negating human free will—transform 11 men whose thought patterns were programmed from childhood to an extreme *ethnocentrism*? The question may seem

silly. Could not the Son of Man, who is also the omnipotent Son of God, do anything? The answer is yes, but—human free will implies God's prior decision not to tamper with the metaphysical base of that free will. It also implies man's ability to reject the persuasion God uses to influence that free will while leaving its metaphysical base intact!

Persuasion, not compulsion, is what even He must rely upon! And persuasion, by its very definition, must be resistible! Yet the God who thus renders Himself resistible is so intelligent that He can overrule every consequence of His own self-limitation with ease! Working around and even through human resistance as easily as through response, He still achieves His own eternal goals!

Ultimate suspense, then, does not hang upon the eventual success of God's design; for that success is assured. Ultimate suspense hangs rather upon questions like, *Who* among the sons and daughters of men will recognize the day of God's privilege when it dawns around them? And which men and women, among those who discern that privilege, will choose to scorn it as Esau scorned his birthright? And finally, just how will, God accomplish His goal when even the men and women who love Him and make His purpose theirs turn out to be spiritually vulnerable, physically weak, and oh so limited in understanding?

Can any other questions generate more suspense than these?

With that suspense heavy upon us, we shall now see how Jesus' all-out effort to change 11 clannish Jews into cross-cultural apostles fared. Incredibly, this, His finest and most strategic training effort, floated belly up in defeat until . . . Ah, but let us not get ahead of our story!