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Evidence from Bethlehem

A clay seal found during archaeological excavations at the City of David, in Jerusalem, bearing the name of the city of Bethlehem in ancient Hebrew script, dating to the First Temple period (1006 – 586 BC), is the first tangible evidence of the city of Bethlehem in ancient times. The artifact, a "bullā," is an imprinted piece of clay typically used as an official seal on documents or objects, proof that documents had not been tampered or of royal ownership.

The bullā, measuring around 1.5 cm, was found in soil taken from in the City of David, underwritten by the City of David Foundation. The three lines of ancient Hebrew script include the words "Bat Lechem," an ancient name for Bethlehem. Bethlehem itself has yet to be excavated, making the bullā the only proof of the city's existence outside of the Bible.

Elik Shukron, director of the excavation on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority: "It seems that in the seventh year of the reign of a king (it is unclear if the king was Hezekiah, Manasseh or Josiah), a shipment was dispatched from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. The bullā belongs to the group of administrative seals used to mark tax shipments in Judah during the late eighth and seventh centuries BCE," said Sukron. The find "proves that Bethlehem was indeed a city in the Kingdom of Judah, possibly also in earlier periods."



Baruch's Biography

(continued)

Previously, we described the Modern Hebrew Bible Project.

"Small" Victories that Really Count

One of the special privileges associated with the pastorate is that of loving people in Jesus' name, sharing their joys and their tears, partnering with them in their struggles and witnessing first-hand their wonderful victories. Having had the privilege of pastoring a church for almost 33 years, I was honored to walk alongside some of the congregants from the moment of their birth, through their school years, their conversion, baptism, courtship and marriage.

Of course, it is not all joy, nor are one's efforts always acknowledged. I had the privilege of serving one of the most wonderful congregations in the country, comprised of really special people. But they are people: they have strong opinions, and a Pastor always seeks to encourage that because he does not want to create a body of suppressed, obedient, unthinking individuals; he wants to equip, motivate, enable and enlist the gifts of every individual in the church.

Sometimes the strength of their opinions carries over to areas in which they understand very little: musicians are often persuaded that, because they can sing, play an instrument or read notes, they are particularly endowed to lead in worship, including the determination of the nature of worship. Elders versed in theology think they have the right to pronounce on matters such as a choice of a house or a profession. Strength of personality is mistaken for spiritual gifting and an ability to articulate, as just about all that is needed to lead a Bible study.

Sometimes, even when individuals take up a stance on a matter in which they are less than qualified, they are liable to be right. Pastors make mistakes too, misjudge situations and succumb to sin. It is as useful as it is painful to serve a congregation of people who dare to think for themselves, and who will follow your lead only insofar as they trust your motives, your knowledge and your judgment. That means that, as a Pastor, you need to be open to scrutiny, to be questioned, challenged and corrected while maintaining high spiritual and moral standards and demonstrating an ability to lead that is not the product of brute force, strength of personality, vested interests or executive power. Pastors are shepherds, not Chief Executive Officers.

As a Pastor, your sacrifice is often taken for granted, utilized to the extreme and then castigated as a self-serving effort to ingratiate yourself with some or express your dislike toward others. You need to be very sure you are serving the Lord, not some hidden psychological need or unworthy interest. You need to be sure you are willing to pay the lonely, often painful cost of spiritual and moral leadership for the sake of serving God and his people, that your sincere desire is that God would be glorified through the sanctification and edification of his people.

It has always been my conviction that pastoring a congregation involves more than preaching; it requires frequent and regular visitation, being available, caring, listening,

praying, advising, sharing tears and laughter. Happily, the Elders of Grace and Truth held to the same conviction. A large portion of our weekly Elders' meetings was devoted to visitation reports, and to prayer and consultation regarding to how best to deal with situations. Administration and the handling of finances were in the hands of the Deacons. One of the Elders served as the Diaconal Board's contact person, and we received minutes of the Deacon's decisions, but avoided all intervention except in the few occasions when information on hand and which could not be shared with the Deacons indicated that a different approach might be called for.

Graham and Andy arrived at the church somewhere in the early-1980's. Graham had two avid interests: missions and botany, which he was now to study in the Faculty of Agriculture of the Hebrew University, situated in Rehovot. Andy was studying soil science. He had gained his Doctorate in Oxford and came to the Volcani Institute of Agricultural Science in Rishon LeTzion for his post-doctorate research. Graham came from a Christian family. Andy enjoyed no evangelical background prior to his conversion and had dabbled in mind-changing drugs, from which he was still to some extent rehabilitating. They both professed a Christian faith and soon joined the congregation, where they were welcomed with open arms.

Andy was tall, dark-haired and carried himself with a slight hint of hesitation. Graham was cheerful and outgoing. Since both were from England, they found much common ground and soon formed a close friendship that has lasted to this day.

Shiri was a Dutch young lady with a distressing background in a highly-manipulative cult, leaving her with a well-grounded suspicion of authority and a shattered but absolutely delightful personality. She had been worshipping in an excellent church in Haifa and transferred to our area after finding work in a nearby hospital as an occupational therapist – a work in which she excelled. Naturally, she joined our little congregation. Like Graham Shiri was a very engaging individual, and we all thought she and Graham would soon be courting. Nothing happened.

Over the course of time, we gained Shiri's trust. Bracha, the girls and I would visit her, eat the cook she prepared for us and spend time chatting, praying and in wholesome Christian fellowship. Graham and Andy would sometimes be invited. On other occasions, Bracha and I had them over for a meal and for fellowship and Dudu, my fellow Elder, and his wife, became quite close, especially with Graham. He and Andy became valuable congregants, lending an eager helping hand wherever needed.

One day Shiri asked to pop over for a visit. She wanted to talk. She and I sat in the living room, with Bracha nearby, in the attached kitchen. In a short space of time, Shiri was in tears. She longed to be married, to have a family, to be a loving wife and a nurturing mother. But no one (presumably, Graham in particular, or so we thought) showed interest in her! Soon she would be too old to wed!

We talked and prayed. God's will is always best, always wiser than our own. He loves us better than we can love ourselves. It is natural that we would want to wed. God pronounced it "not good" – even in Eden – for man to be alone. But there are those to whom God, for the best and holiest of reasons, did not apportion the joys of marriage. He reserved for them other joys.

Of course, I had no access to God's mind. Nor did Shiri. But she and I both needed to trust him with our lives. If he ordained marriage for her, his time would come. If not, she should not kick against the pricks. Her duty right now was to find rest in the confidence of God's goodness and to accept whatever he determined for her.

Shiri's sobs were heart-breaking, but a short while after she left us, she called to say she had made her peace with God and would willingly embrace whatever he saw fit to bring into her life.

Some time later, Shiri called again, surprised and elated: Andy had asked her out. They married in 1983, now have four children and serve the Lord with loving gusto in their local church, making a mark for the Lord. Looking back, these are the kind of privileged experiences that mellow the pain and enrich the joys of a pastoral ministry.

Shiri adds:

"I remember I was suspicious of the lack of charismatic teaching in the church when I arrived, but there were no busses on Saturday so I could not attend worship anywhere else. I expressed my concern to you, and your reply was something like: "Shiri, we are not anti charismatic, but just not charismatic and I hope that you will profit with the teaching and the fellowship which we can offer." After a few month of teaching in Grace and Truth I wondered what I had been talking about- there was more than enough to digest and feed upon, and it was so wholesome. I slowly got grounded in the scriptures, not in my feelings, people or circumstances. What a relief! What a liberation!

"When I was desperate for a husband, and none of the few male believers in Israel were interested, I shared my sorrow with you as you described. I was aware of your and Bracha's love for me, and also your understanding of my need to love, and be loved. You said once: Your loss is our gain, as you pour out your love in the church (hospitality, childrens work, etc.). This really helped me- I could see my sadness could have a purpose.

"You also said: "Perhaps you want to go back to Holland, I can find a church for you, there are more believers there". It made me think: Would I leave a job where I can serve the Lord and I love it, and there might not be somebody to replace me (Occupational therapists preferred to work with young people as they naturally show progress, unlike the elderly as in the hospital, where I worked with the elderly). Would I leave a small church, where I have a role, for a big church where I do not know anybody, just for the greater likelihood of finding a husband? I remember being a bit miffed to think you would find a church for me in my country, how would you know?

"It was a real struggle but I am so thankful I got through it, realizing our main aim in life is not happiness but sacrificing all to God, seeking his kingdom first. So I decided to stay in Israel, saying to myself: If God will give me a husband: hallelujah! If He will not, hallelujah! Even if I shed tears now and then, I am His 100%. He can decide what He sees fit for the progress of His Kingdom. We have but only a few years on earth anyway.

"The surrender evoked in my heart a wonderful feeling: I am His and He is mine. It felt like a love feast. I bought a new dress and new shoes, and would not have wanted to have missed this experience. A few weeks later, perhaps months, Andy brought me blue irises ...

"I had to undergo the same exercise again, following medical tests, when my doctor informed me I could not have children. Andy was away for a conference when I was given this

devastating news. I rang you and you asked me over. I shared the news. You sat behind your desk. We both shed tears. Bracha came in with biscuits. We prayed, and as I again surrendered, to our loving God, I felt his embrace, almost physically. You asked, Gideon (a member of the congregation, BM) to take me to Andy in your car, so that I did not have to take the bus. I found Andy in his little room at the conference and told him. He was sad, but reacted so lovingly: what would the Lord then have us do? The teaching we received at church enabled us to work through these things.

"A few years later I revisited Israel, with my 14 month-old Daniel. I attended a conference in and was assigned the same room where I broke the sad news to Andy ... "

Moving – and a Surprise

The hall we were using for worship and for the HaGefen/CWI offices was increasingly inconvenient as our numbers grew. All we had was the hall – some 30x50 feet of space, with thick two pillars in the middle, and a 10x30 feet storeroom and toilet, that also served as the children's Sabbath School when its primary use was not required; when it was, the children would march out, and wait until they could return to their lesson.

We held on to the hall but began looking for a more convenient structure, finally signing a 3 year contract with the owner of a two-storey house on Weismann Street in Rehovot. The house had a small garden, and plenty of rooms on both floors. We decided that HaGefen would use the upper floor, while the ground floor would serve the church.

The house was in a dilapidated condition, so we all enlisted to clean it up, conduct repairs, make some improvements and paint the walls and woodwork. It was a major project that took a good part of two months until we were ready to move in. We spent time thinking of a color scheme, of the most efficient and most convenient uses of each of the rooms, laid out the offices, purchased some new furniture and began discussing what we would do in the neglected garden ...

Our landlord was extremely pleased, and so were we.

Finally, we moved in. It was sheer comfort: spacious offices, a dedicated larger room for worship, classrooms for the various ages of children—at long last we will be able to have classes for each of the age groups! On the top floor, the graphic artists had their airy, sunlit room. My secretary had an office to herself and each of the translators and editors had a small room. I was even able to convers with people in the privacy of a separate office! We loved it.

On the second week, as we made our way to the building for worship, we were accosted by an angry crowd of black-clad protestors crying "Shame! Shame! "Burn the house down," "Nazis! Child molesters!" The religious Orthodox community, led by the Chief Rabbi, Simha Kook, was out in force to protest the fact that a community of Christians was meeting for worship in "their" town.

They surrounded the building and sought to block our way. When we managed to circumvent them and entered the building, they followed us in and took over the whole of the ground floor, singing, dancing, destroying Bibles and hymnals, intimidating the children. I repeatedly turned to the Chief Rabbi, protesting this disruption of worship and asking that he

lead his followers out of the building. They could protest in the public space as much as they wanted, but this was private property.

When the police arrived, I requested that they remove the Orthodox from our building and that they protect our right of worship. I insisted that the Rabbi was trespassing. The Chief of Police turned to Rabbi Kook and demanded to know by what right they had entered the building. Without a moment's hesitation he responded: "We were invited." When asked why he and his followers had not left when requested to do so, he insisted: "We were never asked." I

I was dumbfounded. He was a Rabbi, a spiritual leader, in the presence of his followers, brazenly lying – and not one of those present had the presence of mind or the decency to protest. Instead, his followers broke out in a mixture of laughter and applause.

Finally, the police cleared the house. The Orthodox remained as close to the building as they could, pelting it with stones and crying out against us. We insisted on conducting a worship service and responded to the taunts by ignoring them.

The following weeks we repeatedly found the locks on the doors of our facility glued, shutters and windows broken and excrement thrown into the garden. We decided we would hold on: it would be wrong to submit to the pressure or grant the protestors their wish. We refused to go away!

In the long run, they contacted our poor landlord, an elderly widow, and threatened her unless she agreed to break contract with us and demand our eviction. Our landlord pleaded with us to forgo the penalty and to agree to her breach of contract. Her livelihood depended on our conceding to her request, which we did because we cared for her, not because the Orthodox pressure exerted on us had any effect. We found a suitable location for the HaGefen offices in Rishon LeTzion, and the church began to meet in the woods, in private homes and in public parks – we could not return to our old location because it was by then far too small for us. Thus began a prolonged saga that ended only some five or six years later, when CWI rented a large enough facility to enable us to use it as well.

In those days, CWI was committed to the welfare of the local church in Israel, particularly to the welfare and progress of Grace and Truth. For that reason, the facility CWI purchased in the Old Industrial Area of Rishon LeTzion was a number of times larger than necessary for the conduct of CWI's activity in Israel. The facility was fitted to serve the church in the first place, and CWI in the second. Grace and Truth still worships there, although it is (hopefully) soon to commence use of its own facility. But that is another story.

To be continued

Ministry and Family News

The Bible Project

We are in the very last throes of work on the final volume of the **Old Testament Modern Hebrew Bible for Youth**! The first draft of that volume has been completed and, by within two weeks of your receiving this letter, we will have completed the second and crucial draft. The material will then be sent to our control groups for review and comment while we tweak the text and finalize minor details in the last of the illustrations.

Let me give you another example of the kind of caution our work entails. Scripture describes ships built for long voyages as “ships of Tarshish,” because Tarshish (most likely Tartesus near modern Spanish Barcelona) was at the farthest end of the Mediterranean Sea – the extremity of sea ventures to the west. An Israelite colony is known to have existed in Spain at least since the destruction of the kingdom of Samaria, and it is likely that Israelites traded with Tarshish long before, with some Israelites possibly living in the country. We know that Jonah, fleeing the presence of the Lord, went to Joppa, on the west coast of the country, and there engaged a ship about to sail to Tarshish. Since Samaria was destroyed in 586 BC and Jonah preceded that Kingdom’s destruction, the book of Jonah testifies to commercial contact with Tarshish no later than some decades prior to that date.

However, the term Tarshish cannot have always referred to the ancient city in Spain. For example, when spoken of in connection with the Queen of Sheba and the gold of Ophir (II Chron. 9:10, 21), we are obviously being referred to an area to the south of Judea (incidentally, note the length of the voyage three long years!). So too when Jehoshaphat built a fleet in Ezion Giber, by the mouth of the Red Sea, “to go to Tarshish.” Thus, in the course of translation, one needs to be cautious enough to identify the differences between the Tarshish of the west and that to the southeast; and between “ships of Tarshish” and ships sailing to a city of that name.

Once this fifth OT volume is completed, work will commence on the NT, estimated to take some three years to completion.

Revision of Baruch’s **thesis** has been completed and the thesis submitted to his two supervisors, to await either acceptance or further comment. Baruch has now returned to work on his **commentary on Romans**. This month, Presbyterian and Reformed is scheduled to publish his book on the Messianic Movement, under the new title **of Come Let Us Reason Together**. Shepherd Press is expecting to publish his devotional commentary on the book of **Jonah** very soon, but no date has yet been given. Sales of the devotional commentary on **Malachi** are encouraging and Baruch is now considering the possibility of producing an English version of his devotional commentary on **Hosea**. Reviews of these books on the Barnes & Noble or Amazon websites are welcome; such reviews help promote the books.

Avital and family visited us in Israel. It was a wonderful time, with the house full of children’s chatter, fighting, laughing, running about and playing. Young **Nadav** has taken to “dressing up” for occasions. He chose the hat you see him wearing and insists on wearing a tie and a “button up shirt”. Here he decided he’d look better with a white moustache, manufactured from chewing gum.... He’s learning to read, but finding it difficult to sit still for long enough to read a substantial page.



Noam is now everything of a twelve-year-old, eager, high-strung and not overly occupied with her diabetes, about to enter junior high school. She loves soccer. **Maya** is all Maya: lively, inquisitive, enamoured with cooking.

Shlomit and Keith have purchased a home in Cleveland. They expect to move in mid to late July. With the four of them living in a cramped, one and a half bedroom apartment, being able to stretch one's legs and not having to look for the extra bottle of ketchup under the bed will be a relief – and Savta Bracha will no longer have to sleep on the floor in the living room when she visits... **Yonatan** remains an affectionate, caring little brother to **Caitlyn**.

Tamar and Marcus's church has united with another, leaving a number of congregants unsure of their congregational future. Another church they attended from time to time has recently undergone a major crisis, with which it dealt with great generosity and a high moral and doctrinal standard. **Yotam's** vocabulary is fast-expanding, and he is repeatedly socially challenged by his vivacious, mischievous little brother, **Avishai**.

Rose is now working as a dental assistant, and doing well. She is to commence her pre-College studies in September and is still hoping to find an *au pair* or volunteer position in some solid Christian context in the US. I am eager to help her in this, to broaden her life experience and provide her with an opportunity to discover, try out and hone her talents and her Christian aspirations. If you are aware of any such opportunities, do let me know.

Our house requires renewed plastering on the south side before winter: cracks created by the heat of the sun expose the walls to erosion from the rain unless plastered. We will probably use a higher-quality plaster that is better able to cope with the sun's effect on the building.

Bracha and I plan to embark onto our annual tour of the States toward the end of July, to visit friends, and minister at a number of churches and conferences. Your prayers will be appreciated. We will remain communicado via email.

Thank you for praying for us!

TAX-deductible **support for our ministry** should be written to the order of **Berean Baptist church, P.O. Box 1233, Grand Blanc, Michigan 48480-3233**. Direct bank transfers may be made to **Franklin Bank, 24725 West Twelve Mile Road, Southfield, MI 48034 USA, Routing Number 241271957 Berean Baptist Special Account No. 567495976**. Please inform **Max Sharp** of the details of the transaction (date, transaction number and sum) at maxsharp@earthlink.net

All contributions are tax deductible. Receipts are sent at the end of the calendar year or at the donor's request. Please do not send contributions directly to us – we consider accountability extremely important.

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We reserve the right to use for the ministry funds sent for personal use.