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AN AGE-OLD ARGUMENT

Birthdays are important to many people. The anniversary of the day or our birth has significance to us because it gives us a feeling of significance. I was born on October 6, so I am of a select group of people, roughly 1/365th of the population born on that day. We even sometimes try to determine if any famous people were born on the same day. In my case that includes the inventor of the air brake, George Westinghouse; explorer Thor Heyerdahl; football coach Tony Dungy; actresses Carole Lombard and Janet Gaynor; and architect Le Corbusier. More importantly to me, my granddaughter was born on my birthday.

For some reason some people find it important to determine the date Jesus was born. It almost certainly was *not* December 25; but when was he born? The Bible offers us some clues, and some complications.

The first step in determining when Jesus was born would be to determine when John the Baptist was born. This is because Gabriel's announcement that Mary would bear a child came in the sixth month of John's mother's pregnancy. (Lk 1:26) The assumption (uh-oh, now there is some uncertainty) is that Elisabeth conceived immediately after the announcement that she would have a child. If we don't make this assumption, all bets are off.

John's father performed his duties as a priest in the course of Abijah (Lk 1:5). Shortly after such duties, we assume, John was conceived. (Lk 1:23-24) If we can determine when he served we may determine when John was conceived (using our assumption), when Jesus was conceived, when John was born, and when Jesus was born. Since we know he was a priest in the course of Abijah, we can narrow it down considerably.

The priests were assigned duties in the Temple in courses by family. There were 24 courses, each serving a week at a time, twice a year. In addition, everyone worked three weeks in each year (the weeks of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles). The first course served at the beginning of the month of Nisan (March/April in the Gregorian calendar). Allowing for Passover and Pentecost, that means that the first time Zechariah could have served would be the week after Pentecost (late May). Some scholars have calculated only from this date, and determined that Jesus was born on or

about the first day of the feast of Tabernacles. (John conceived in May; six months later is Hanukkah in December; nine months after that is September/October and Tabernacles.) That is very good, assuming the events in Luke 1 take place during the first course of Abijah.

But what if John was conceived after the second course of Abijah? That takes place in the week before Hanukkah (our December). Then John, rather than Jesus would have been conceived on or about Hanukkah. Jesus would then, by our assumption, have been conceived approximately six months later, in the month of Sivan, shortly after Pentecost. Jesus would then be born nine months later, in the month of Adar. That doesn't make as neat a solution, because the holiday in Adar is the rabbinic holiday of Purim. (But there is no reason to assume Jesus was born on a holiday.)

Now for the next complication. The Hebrew calendar does not correspond directly with the Gregorian calendar. If we figure that Jesus was born on Purim, or even on Tabernacles, we are using the Hebrew calendar. Since that calendar actually adds a month on a regular basis, we still could not determine a specific date on the Gregorian calendar to celebrate his birthday. Tabernacles may start in September or October, and Purim may come sometime in February, March, or April.

Now, somebody may be asking, "What difference does it make?" That is a very good question. We like to celebrate birthdays, but the point of Jesus being born is only as a prelude to the date of his death. It is significant in that the son of God appears as a human. Nevertheless, we memorialize his death and resurrection every week in the Lord's Supper. It seems a triviality, in comparison, to argue once a year about when Jesus was born.

CONTENTS

An Age-Old Argument	1
The Perfect Swarm	2
Identity Theft	4

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THE PERFECT SWARM

Locusts. Grasshoppers. There are places where just the mention of those creatures causes people to cringe. Even in places where they do not come in huge swarms they are not the most popular of animals. Children, though, are often fascinated by them. Sometimes it is their defense mechanism of spitting “tobacco” or “blood” that fascinates people. Others catch them and hold contests to see whose can jump the farthest. Whether your reaction is fascination or repulsion, the Bible has a little to say about locusts and other orthopterae.

As food

Chocolate covered grasshoppers are sold in novelty stores throughout the American Southwest. Some people actually buy them to eat them. Those in the Bible would not have been chocolate covered, since cacao was a New World plant. Nevertheless, people of the Middle East did eat locusts and grasshoppers. Sometimes they ate them raw. Others fried them with a little salt. Still others may have had a variety of recipes for locusts. One could probably come up with almost as many varieties of locust food as Bubba listed for shrimp in “Forrest Gump.”

Of insects, locusts and their relatives (and henceforward locust will generally mean all varieties)

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oppose God, because
God is all our strength.**

were among the few allowed to the Jewish people as food. They met one specific characteristic that made them clean flying creeping things.

Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth; Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind. But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination unto you. (Lev 11:21-23)

We even find record of at least one man who regularly ate these creatures. “And John was clothed with camel’s hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey.” (Mk 1:6)

There are those who try to say that John was a vegetarian. They claim that the locusts he ate were the beans of the locust tree. If the Bible had been written originally in English that might be possible. It was, however, written in Greek, and the Greek word for what John ate is specifically the animal, and not the plant. The same word is used in the Revelation (see below), where it is clearly not the beans of a tree. John ate grasshoppers, and he probably ate them raw with honey for flavor.

Like the locust

There are a couple of passages that make comparisons to locusts. In describing his weakness before God, a psalmist said, “I am tossed up and down as the locust.” (Ps 109:23) Locusts are relatively light. While they are strong jumpers, once they are off the ground they are at the mercy of the wind. And so are we at the mercy of God. We have no strength to oppose God, because God is all our strength. If we do not surrender to God’s way, we will be tossed to and fro like a locust in a strong windstorm.

Where do locusts go when it is cold? In Palestine they apparently nest in the bushes or warm crags in fences. When it gets warm enough that they can move about, they scatter. This is the picture Nahum has for the kings of Assyria. They were to be scattered like locusts after sunrise. “Thy crowned are as the locusts, and thy captains as the great grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun ariseth they flee away, and their place is not known where they are.” (Nah 3:17)

In the Proverbs, locusts are held up as one of four things that are small but wise. “The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands.” A swarm of locusts has no head, but it moves as a unit. Christ’s church has no earthly head, the only head being Jesus himself, and yet Christians worldwide work toward a common goal. Love for all and love for Christ are unifying factors that can take the church through many hardships on our journey home. But it is this characteristic of locusts (no ruler) that also makes a swarm something to be reckoned with.

A destructive force

Among the great destructive forces of nature one might list the hurricane, tornado, and earthquake. For sheer destructive power and economic impact, many parts of Africa and the Middle East might place the locust toward the top of the list. Those other disasters may

destroy buildings and take a few lives, but a locust swarm destroys crops and denudes an area of all vegetation. Looking from the distance like a sandstorm, and sounding up close like a freight train amplified by a heavy metal band, a locust swarm eats everything in its path, sometimes including animal flesh.

It is for this reason that locusts, or the threat thereof, became one of God's strong motivators. God ordained that certain blessings and curses were to be read to the people of Israel upon entering the Promised Land. The list of curses is longer than the list of blessings. These were things that would happen if the people of Israel would not obey God's commands. Among threats of illness, drought, conquest, and disaster, God warns his people that if they do not obey him, "Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it... All thy trees and fruit of thy land shall the locust consume." (Deut 28:38, 42)

On the other hand, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he asked God to save his people even from locusts. All they would have to do is pray toward the Temple.

If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be; What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;) That they may fear thee all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers. (1 Kings 8:27-40; 2 Chron 6:28-31)

The best known example of God's use of locusts as a destructive force is probably the plague on the Egyptians. "For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt." (Ex 10:15) In Psalm 105:34-35 it is described thus. "He spake, and the locusts came, and caterpillars, and that without number, And did eat up all the herbs in their land, and devoured the fruit of their ground." After the hail had destroyed the earlier crops, the destruction from the locusts was devastating. Only one plague followed, and that was the death of the firstborn. The locusts were nearly the pinnacle of all plagues. Perhaps for that reason, locusts also serve a figurative role in prophecy.

Like a locust

Two prophecies prominently feature locusts. Commentators continue to debate whether the locusts in the book of Joel were literal or figurative. How one accepts them is often dependent on one's mood when reading the prophecy. They may be figurative, standing for an army coming against Israel, because of the similarity of the description of the locusts in Joel 1-2 and Revelation 9. Both passages describe the locusts as being like horses, with teeth like lions, and a sound like many chariots. Both describe the destruction and inexorable nature of these swarms. Both liken the swarms of locusts to conquering armies. And both have the same message. Those that follow God may face persecution for a time, but God will "restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."

The forces of evil are indeed powerful and destructive. Sometimes they seem inevitable and irresistible. They come from every side. They try to eat away our will, our resistance, our hope. They try to

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destroy everything that is growing and good in our lives and leave behind destruction, devastation, and desolation. When Egypt was plagued with locusts, Moses called to God who provided a west wind to remove every locust from the land. We have such a west wind. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Cor 10:13) The message of the book of the Revelation is that victory is guaranteed. Jesus has conquered. The devil is bound, his power broken. Jesus is our west wind. Against him the locusts of sin have no power. They will be, have been, driven into the sea and destroyed. Locusts may be a powerful and destructive force, but we have an immovable object. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matt 16:18)

IDENTITY THEFT

This is a time when a lot of people are worried about identity theft. The radio and television are full of ads about companies that can detect or prevent identity theft. Shredder manufacturers have noted significant increases in sales because people want to shred bills and anything with addresses or other information that can be used to open credit card accounts or access current accounts. Companies have cute songs about how if the singer had a watch on his credit report he wouldn't be in a less than favorable job or living arrangement. Nobody wants their identity stolen.

This is really not a new problem. The Jewish people faced identity theft about 2,200 years ago. This theft, though, was not of individual identity but of their identity as God's chosen people. The Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes tried to convince the Jewish people to give up their distinctiveness. Many Jews had been choosing to adopt Greek (Hellenist) ways. Greek fashion was all the rage. Some Jewish men even surgically reversed their circumcisions in order to compete naked in Greek sports without calling attention to themselves. This was the period in which the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (which Rabbi Saul—the apostle Paul—used extensively), was made. Even use of Hebrew and Aramaic in public functions and documents was on the decline. There was a real danger, in the minds of some, of Judaism dying out completely. Then Antiochus made a mistake. It was the equivalent of someone opening a checking account in the name of a major politician. He set up images in the Temple in Jerusalem, and is said to have even sacrificed a pig on the altar. This was the final straw. This was the line in the sand beyond which some could not cross. As a result a small but militarily savvy army began a

sophisticated guerrilla campaign which eventually drove the Syrians out of Jerusalem.

On 25 Kislev, in the winter of what is now called in the Gregorian calendar 165 BC, the victorious Jews rededicated the Temple. Jewish law and tradition was saved. Jewish identity was restored. From that time forward, Hanukkah, the feast commemorating this event, has become perhaps the most observed of the Jewish holidays.

Why is Hanukkah so significant? Throughout time conquering peoples have always tried to assimilate the conquered. The Inquisition included an attempt to assimilate the Jews. Westward expansion in North America involved attempts to assimilate native Americans into the American culture. American humanists attempt to assimilate American Christianity. And so it goes. The dominant group wants to steal the identity of the smaller group. The smaller group always fights this identity theft. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the David against Goliath, the small against the giant. Hanukkah tells the Jewish people that it is possible to retain a Jewish identity, even in the ghettos and concentration camps of Nazi Europe.

Perhaps Hanukkah could as well be celebrated by more than just the Jewish people. In a time when religious identity is under attack on many fronts, perhaps Hanukkah gives a message of hope to all religions. One does not light a Hanukkah candle and hide it behind a blackout curtain. It belongs in the window. The candles tell all who pass by that here lives a person who will not have his identity stolen. Here lives an individual who will fight against all odds to retain his identity in God, whatever that identity might be.

Hanukkah begins December 22 in 2008.

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