

The Conversion of Cornelius

The prophet Malachi foresaw how that in years to come, Gentiles would embrace Israel's Hope, and worship Yahweh as their God:

“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, My Name shall be great among the Gentiles; and *in every place incense shall be offered unto my Name, and a pure offering*: for My Name shall be great among the heathen, saith Yahweh of Armies” (Mal. 1:11).

The time of offering incense coincided with the offering of Prayer: we read in Luke chapter 1 that “the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense” (Lu. 1:10). These were Jews, but Malachi spoke of how Gentiles would commit themselves to the worship of Israel's God. Cornelius the Centurion who we come across in our current Daily Readings (according to *The Bible Companion*), is an example of this. He was “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2). At the 9th hour, the time of the offering up of Incense and Prayer (Acts 3:1), he was given a vision of a heavenly messenger, come to answer his petitions:

“He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy Prayers and thine Alms are come up for a memorial before God” (Acts 10:3-4).

There were two qualities of Cornelius that God noted him for: his prayers and his “alms”. These characteristics match those found in the centurion whose servant Messiah healed. He brought his petitions to the Master, and the Jews testified to the Alms that he did, saying: “that he was worthy for whom he should do this: for he loveth our nations, and he hath built us a synagogue” (Lu. 7:4-5). This Centurion is unnamed: some have concluded that he was actually Cornelius himself, but that cannot be proven. Certainly he was a man of like mind who showed his faith in Israel's God, by doing “alms” to His Chosen Nation.

Cornelius' prayer was answered by the preparation and sending of Peter to meet with him. As a Gentile, let alone a Roman Centurion, Cornelius was racially separated from Israel's Hope: yet the time had come when through Israel's fall (Rom. 11:11), the way of Salvation was come to the Gentiles. Peter had to learn that lesson first, in order that he could instruct the roman Cornelius what he must do to be saved.

At the sixth hour (or Midday), Peter prayed upon the housetop, and as he prayed, he was shown a vision. His differed from Cornelius: he was shown a great sheet tied by it's four corners, and containing a mixture of living animals: “all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air” (Acts 10:12). He was then invited to “kill and eat” the animals – which under the Mosaic commandment was prohibited. “but Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (Acts 10:14).

Clean and Unclean Beasts

Peter's reference to having never eaten unclean animals is to the requirements of Mosaic Law which restricted which animals could be eaten. We shall consider that aspect shortly, but we need to

appreciate that this principle existed long before the Mosaic Law, to the time of Noah and the Flood. Genesis chapter 7 recounts the commandment to Noah in this regard: “of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and the female: and of beast that are not clean by two, the male and his female” (Gen. 7:2). Here, the distinction of Clean and Unclean animals is apparent, but since man did not have permission to eat flesh until chapter 9 and verse 3, it cannot be a reference to a dietary discrimination. Verse 20 of Genesis chapter 8 provides the answer:

“Noah builded an altar unto Yahweh; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings upon the altar”

Here it is clear that the clean beasts were those which could be offered in Sacrifice, whereas the unclean animals were those that would not be accepted. There was a point to be made: in terms of Worship, there is a discrimination to be made between that which Yahweh would accept, and that which he will not. The point is brought home when we read the exhortation of Romans 12 that believers should present themselves as “a living sacrifice”. Only those who show the required characteristics will be accepted as “clean” sacrifices: all else will be rejected.

At a national level, Israel were to show this principle in their diet. Unclean animals represented the Gentiles around them – unclean persons (Eph. 5:5), who were dead in their sins and trespasses. These are the “unbelieving” who Paul spoke of to Titus, that “even their mind and conscience is undefiled” (Tit. 1:15). These are not accepted by He who art of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab. 1:13), and this principle was to be displayed in the lessons of clean, and unclean beasts. So in Deuteronomy chapter 14, immediately before speaking of this, the people were exhorted to separation and holiness:

“Thou art a holy people unto Yahweh thy God, and Yahweh hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth. ***Thou shalt not eat any abominable thing ...***” (Deut. 14:2-3).

Indeed, later, when Israel adopted the ways of the heathen they were reprov'd for not making this distinction (Ezek. 22:26).

Cleansing the Unclean

Peter recognised the import of what we have just considered; he was told in his vision:

“What God ***hath cleansed***, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15)

And he understood that to mean:

“God hath showed me that ***I should not call any man common or unclean***” (Acts 10:28)

This confirms what we have just shown: the clean and unclean animals represent men, clean and unclean. But Peter was told that the “unclean” had been “cleansed” by God. How is this so? The application is plainly made to Cornelius who though he offered prayers and alms oft, was not baptised yet. Ephesians chapter 5 describes the cleansing of Christ’s Ecclesia, in terms of the living parable of marriage:

“Husbands love your wives, even as Chris also loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it; ***that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word:*** That he might present it to himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot, nor

wrinkle, or any such thing; so that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

The Gentile Ecclesia at Ephesus was thus exhorted to be cleansed by a continual application of the Word, and its sanctifying effect. In like manner, Cornelius was cleansed in his heart, and expressed his purity of heart by prayer and blessing God’s people. Psalm 24 speaks of those who do this:

“Who shall ascend into the hill of Yahweh? Or who shall stand in His Holy Place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from Yahweh, and righteousness from the God of his salvation” (Psa. 24:3-5).

The exhortation is plain: by cleansing our hearts and hands by the application of The Word, we, formerly the Unclean, can be cleansed by God, and be accepted blameless before him.

Being in a different dispensation, the food laws applicable to Israel are not to be observed by Gentiles. As Peter saw the unclean being cleansed, so it is written of the formerly unclean foods:

“every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the Word of God and Prayer” (1 Tim. 4:5).

And again, it is written:

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself ...” (Rom. 14:14).

The Linen Sheet

In beholding the variety of animals, Peter saw them descending in “a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth”. According to Strong, the word “sheet” speaks of *linen*, and in this regard can be seen to represent the righteousness of Saints – those who have been made clean. So we read of the Lamb’s Wife:

“his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints” (Rev. 19:8).

It would appear therefore, that the linen sheet in which the animals were contained, speaks of that system of righteousness provided from Yahweh (i.e. from heaven), in which Jew and Gentile meet together. This application is further strengthened by the reference to the “four corners” which were “knit,” or “tied” up so that the sheet could be so used. In Scripture, “four corners” speaks of the extremities of a thing: compare the following testimonies:

“And after these things I saw four angels standing on *the four corners* of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree” (Rev. 7:1).

“And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (Isa. 11:12).

“also, thou son of man, thus saith Adonai Yahweh unto the land of Israel; An end, the end is come upon the four corners of the land” (Eze. 7:2).

The “four corners” of the linen sheet therefore, speaks of the all-embracing nature of the Truth, how that anyone – Jew or Gentile - who desires to cleanse themselves for suitable inclusion in Messiah’s collective bride, whichever of the four corners of the earth they may be from can be included, and brought together, enfolded in a sheet of righteousness.

The Ecclesia at Rome

We read of Cornelius, that he was “a centurion of the band called the Italian band” (Acts 10:1). It logically follows that in deciding to be a disciple of Christ, he would have to leave his occupation as soon as the opportunity permitted. One suggestion that has been made, is that being from Italy, if and when he left his station, he may have been the instigator for the formation of the ecclesia at Rome. It is impossible to prove conclusively that this was the case, but when we consider the themes of Paul’s later inspired letter to the Romans, there are a number of aspects that would be particularly fitting if Cornelius was the founding member.

“.. Nay, in all these things, we are *more than conquerors* through him that loved us”
(Rom. 8:37)

We can see a comparison here: Cornelius, leaving his worldly station became a soldier for Christ, and became more that being a conqueror for the Roman army.

“... that if thou shalt *confess with thy mouth* the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

Acts 10:46 speaks of Cornelius and the men who went with him were heard to “speak with tongues, and magnify God” just before they were baptised, and so made a confession before Yahweh.

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? *And how shall they hear without a preacher?* And how shall they preach, *except they be sent?*” (Rom. 10:14-15).

We can see a very clear application to Cornelius’ circumstances here: a “preacher” was especially “sent” to him, that he might hear the Gospel preached.

And finally, in speaking of dietary matters:

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that *there is nothing unclean of itself ...*”
(Rom. 14:14).

We have already shown the application of this passage to the case in hand.

The Bringing in of the Gentiles

The bringing in of the Gentiles on equal footing to Jews is an aspect of the Gospel which was not known until it was revealed to and subsequently by, the apostles and first century prophets. So the Apostle Paul spake concerning the “mystery” “which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, *as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles* and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel ..” (Eph. 3:4-6). Peter provides an example of the “mystery” being revealed to an apostle, who became the means whereby the calling was extended to Gentiles. There is an important point that comes from this: the Angel came to Cornelius as a heavenly messenger, to tell him to go to Peter. The question arises however, Why could not the Angel give the instruction that Peter gave, viz. baptism etc, without

having to use Peter? One reason is that Peter also was being prepared in these events. He was to become a preacher to the Gentiles more generally, and needed to be prepared for this. The conversion of Cornelius was used by him as recorded in Acts chapter 11 as evidence of the inclusion of Gentiles into Israel's Hope, as it is written of those who heard him recount his experience: "when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

In considering these things, we have many examples and exhortations laid open before us. But as being Gentiles who come to join ourselves to the covenants of promise, the example of Cornelius is of particular importance and interest to us, for he was the first Gentile to be brought in by the Apostle's preaching, and we come to share in his heritage. From being a warrior for the Roman Army, Cornelius became a soldier for Christ – and the example for us in this regard is plain; the means of his being brought in is most instructive for us, as we have shown. Bro John Thomas wrote of this in *Elpis Israel*, and we conclude by citing his words:

"It would be well for the reader to reflect on the character of Cornelius before the angel visited him. He was not a pagan Gentile, or a wicked sinner in danger of hell-fire; but a proselyte of righteousness, or an outer-court worshipper.

"He was a just and devout man, and one that feared God with all his house; gave much alms to the Jews, among whom he was of good report; and he prayed to God alway."

No better man, lay or clerical, can be produced from any modern sect than Cornelius. He was a God-fearing, "pious," and generous-hearted man. He was not a perverse, hot-headed, ignorant disciple of some sect; but a man approved of heaven, whose prayers and alms ascended before God as a memorial of him. But why dwell so on the character of this excellent man? Because, a special messenger was sent from heaven to tell even this good man, this just and devout Gentile, to send for the apostle Peter, that he might come from Joppa, and tell him what he ought to do. But, as though this were not explicit enough, the angel stated that "Peter should come and tell him words, whereby he and his house might be saved." Now it is worthy of especial note by the religionists of this self-complacent generation, that this just person was not in a saved state under the new order of things: that he had both to hear words, and to do something for his salvation which he had then as yet neither heard nor done.

And let it be observed, furthermore, that the angel of God was not permitted to preach the gospel to Cornelius; or, in other words, to tell him what he ought to do; or, "the words by which he and his house might be saved." He was only allowed to tell him to send for Peter. According to modern notions this was quite unnecessary; for, cries popular ignorance, it would have saved both time and trouble, if the angel had told Cornelius at once what it was necessary for so excellent a man to believe and do, instead of sending three men through the broiling sunshine to fetch Peter to Caesarea. O what a lesson is contained this interesting narrative for the "clergy," "ministers," and people of these times. How it convicts them of infidelity of the gospel, and sinfulness before God; or, if sincerity be granted to them, and, doubtless, there are among them many honest and well-intentioned persons, who "err, not knowing the scriptures;" — grant, then, that they sincerely love truth in the abstract, yet comparing their creeds and preaching, and practices, with the testimonies contained in the second, tenth, and eleventh of the Acts, to

say nothing of others — how condemned are they as vain talkers, and deceived leaders of the blind.

It is really painful to listen to the superficial dissertations of the textuaries, retailed to the people from the pulpits of the day. Theological speculations on isolated scraps of scripture are substituted for the words of Peter and the other apostles, by which alone even the “pious” can be saved. They talk of true religion, of primitive Christianity, of the gospel, of churches of Christ, and of an evangelical ministry; but where, among papist or protestant, church or dissent, are these things to be found, reflecting the precepts, precedents, and morality, of the “pure and undefiled religion” of the New Testament? This New Testament Christianity is the grand desideratum of the protestant world; which, however, we despair of beholding even in theory until Messiah shall appear in his kingdom, and abolish all existing names, and denominations, which serve, indeed, as a kind of ecclesiastical police, but are perfectly useless as institutions capable of indoctrinating mankind with the things which they ought to believe and do, if they would become joint-heirs with Jesus of the kingdom, glory, and empire, of the Ancient of Days.”

Cited from: *Elpis Israel*, John Thomas

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