

## The Elusiveness of Knowledge—Part One

*Does it make any sense that knowledge is so easily gained and lost and that not everyone comes to have the same knowledge at any given time—especially about the Bible? Why should it be this way? Why wouldn't God make all knowledge, including what we find in the Bible, available at the same time to everyone in the world?*

Many people might suppose that in our modern world we possess a greater amount of knowledge than the generations that preceded us. Many in the developing nations would probably consider themselves to be more advanced as a society and better educated than their ancestors.

But how many of us today could fill the shoes of the architects of the Great Wall of China, and design the famous castles and palaces of the world? How many of us personally could build a ship that could cross the Atlantic Ocean? And how many of us could steer a course across the oceans using the winds, and navigate across the vast deserts of Africa using the stars?

We might believe that the methods and deeds of people who lived long ago were crude and

archaic compared to how things are done today. However, most people would feel helpless if they were suddenly thrust into these situations.

This causes us to think about how strange it is that an advancement into the Modern Age doesn't necessarily mean an advancement in all knowledge for all people. When we think about it, the knowledge that each of us has is relative to our known world. Each of us may know a lot about some things, but very little about most things.

Why should it be this way? Why wouldn't God make all knowledge, including what we find in the Bible, available all at once for everyone?

Knowledge seems to have an elusiveness about it. It rises to shine brightly from place to place, then it is gone as if it were never there.

We can take an example from a man named Eratosthenes (c. 276-196) who was the librarian of Alexandria, Egypt. He was a man of some learning who set out to reform a map of the world. This was no small task because his first problem was to determine the size of the earth.

Now, it had been observed in the city of Aswan, Egypt, that on the longest day of the year the sun was directly overhead. Observers noted that a well in the city could be seen all the way to the bottom because of the sunlight shining straight down.

Eratosthenes knew that the city of Alexandria was about 500 miles away from Aswan. So, he took a sundial, which was only a stick mounted on an overturned bowl and measured the shadow cast by the stick in Alexandria. He saw that the shadow, on the longest day of the year, was one-fiftieth of the circle and computed that it represented about 500 miles. It was a simple matter after that to multiply 500 miles times 50 to arrive at the remarkably close number of 25,000 miles for the distance around the earth.

It was a simple task that created a great advance in knowledge and people's ability to describe the world.

Then, some years later, another man named Posidonius (c. 135-50 BC), a respected traveler, recalculated the distance around the earth to be several thousand miles less than Eratosthenes' calculation. This had a negative effect on those who navigated the seas, and for those who dared to brave a voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules, now known as Jebel Sidi Moussa and the Rock of Gibraltar.

Thus, by a simple calculation, one influential person had negated a great advancement in knowledge about the earth. Knowledge about the earth that would have affected the outcome of future knowledge in a positive way was in a sense "lost" to the world.

In time, the library at Alexandria was eventually destroyed by successive invasions over several centuries. This renowned center for Greek learning, with its thousands of notable volumes, was gone.

We can take another example of how elusive knowledge can be from the time of the Roman Empire.

There is an old saying that "All roads lead to Rome." These roads were built for the sake of military control and commerce as Rome became a center for trade and wealth in Western Europe.

Knowledge of the world also traveled along these Roman roads, and some of these ancient roads still exist to this day.

Now, the Romans first learned of an expensive fabric called silk during the first century BCE. But most people didn't know exactly where it came from, and fewer still knew how it was made.

Eventually, as people's knowledge of the world expanded they learned that it came

from Seres, a place somewhere in the Far East. Those who traveled the roads and waterways of commerce knew that silk could be bought in the area of the Ganges River. From there they learned that it came from a country in the north and to the east called the country of Thinae, sometimes called Sinae.

This, of course, was the land of China. It was for a time a place of some mystery to the Romans, and also later for many Europeans.

Then, as it was with Alexandria, so it was with Rome. It too fell apart at the center of an empire, and with it went a major center for commerce and knowledge about the world. However, these were not the only places in the world where knowledge expanded and increased. There were many other places over time, such as in Spain, in China, in Russia, in Iraq, in Turkey and in England.

However, none of these were the first, nor were any of these the last.

If we look back further in time, we see that the ancient Sumerians were developers of commerce and a people who valued knowledge. Here in the region of the ancient Fertile Crescent we find the suspected birthplace of writing as a means to preserve acquirable knowledge.

We also find that one of the earliest cities in this part of the world eventually became a

prominent city for learning—the city of Babylon.

Here is said to have been one of the great wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, built by King Nebuchadnezzar II. It was Nebuchadnezzar who understood in some measure the value of knowledge and the power and influence it could bring, even if it was to be found among those taken captive by the armies of Babylon.

Notably, certain people from the captives of Israel, including members of the nobility, were selected to be a part of the king's court. "Children in whom was no blemish, but well favored, and skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace" (Daniel 1:4).

Nebuchadnezzar also considered his Babylon to be a center for knowledge. We get a small glimpse of Nebuchadnezzar's perspective from a portion of a letter he wrote that is recorded for us in the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar opened his letter by writing: "unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you" (Dan. 4:1).

Such an opening salutation may reflect Babylon's position in the world at that time. Or it might be better to say that it was simply

the king's view, and so much so, that the king himself was seduced by its glory (Dan. 4:30).

Now, the prophet Daniel was one of King Nebuchadnezzar's trusted counselors taken captive during the long series of sieges of Jerusalem. His experiences in Babylon were influential on him, and his observations of Babylon gave him an important perspective on how the world's knowledge would develop. While in Babylon, Daniel was also given added wisdom and recorded it for our admonition when he wrote: "Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" (Dan. 12:4).

Thus, as it was then, as it is now, knowledge came and went by the traveler, the adventurer, the pioneer, the trader, the merchant, and men of learning kept it closely guarded. Their knowledge—a mixture of fact and myth, truth and falsity—about the lands and peoples they met was brought to the centers of learning of their day. Knowledge traveled along the routes of commerce, and commerce was largely driven by people's desire for goods that were only found in certain places.

Just as knowledge of some things was only found in certain places.

We might say then that one of the greatest driving forces through time has been humankind's desire for knowledge and the power and wealth that it would give them.

But like wealth and power, knowledge would wax and wane, move from place to place, be discovered by some, and lost by others, and increase through time as the world changed and expanded via commerce and conflict and the desire for more knowledge of the world.

This brings us to ask a question.

What kind of knowledge are we talking about?

People like to know things or learn about things that other people know about things. They have spent much time and money in an effort to know more. At times, they have been willing to risk their lives or take great expense in the quest for more knowledge.

We can learn a lesson of this from the Queen of Sheba.

Now, there was a time when the Queen of Sheba came to visit King Solomon to confirm the stories that she had heard about him.

Expectedly, the Queen of Sheba was a woman who understood protocol and economics. She brought with her many gifts that were known to have great value in the world. She also knew how to get to her destination, and she knew enough to rule her own kingdom. She was also knowledgeable and wise enough to know what to do to prove and test Solomon.

Notably, the Bible records for us that the queen had come to challenge Solomon with “hard questions,” and to her astonishment the king was able to answer all of her questions—with no known exceptions.

Bringing us to another question.

What kind of questions did the Queen of Sheba ask Solomon?

Scripture does not tell us.

Nor does it tell us what all the others who came to Solomon wanted to ask him. For it is said that “all the earth sought to Solomon, to hear his wisdom” (I Kings 10:24).

How then could it be that only Solomon, in his time, had the answers to the kind of questions that people were asking?

 **(Continued in part two of this series.)**