

# A Modest Pilgrimage

by  
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“Through the Grace of God, His flock has now had the benefits of jump-gate technology for almost thirty years, and what has mankind done with this God-given boon? He has used this gift of inexpensive and instantaneous transport around the globe not to send forth missionaries to the Godless; but to spread sin, the Devil’s lure; and secularism, the Devil’s handbook. But while the tools of God can always be subverted to the plans of the Devil, the Faithful can use those tools as they are intended—to bring the glory of God to all mankind through a life given to us by his Son, Jesus Christ, who died so we could be saved.

“I have promised you that this ministry would make a difference and be like no other ministry of God on this Earth, and I have received a message from God that has told me how to do it. He has not only told me what to do, but has given me the means to do it through your offerings over the last few years. And I am here to tell you today that I have put God’s plan into action. I have used your offerings to purchase a gateway to earthly paradise for each of the members of this ministry. An earthly paradise that will give us all a chance to lead a life worthy of entry to the Eternal Paradise in heaven. An earthly paradise that will be free of the distractions and temptations of Satan. An earthly paradise that will let us cleanse our minds, our hearts, and our lives in the purity of Jesus. An earthly paradise that will return to the government envisioned by our forefathers but stolen by the Godless that now run this country.

“I have used the hard-earned gifts of salvation that pour into our ministry to purchase one of the new jump-gates to a solar system much like the one we live in now, with a yellow sun and a planet that is rich in plants and animals that are much like our own and that can sustain a colony of Pilgrims. Pilgrims of God. You and me!

“We will go to this new solar system and its green and blue planet of mild temperatures, warm oceans, rich soil, and gentle rains. We will build a true Kingdom of God—not on this worn-out world of sin and corruption but on a world that is still as pure as the Garden of Eden itself. A world that knows nothing of the Devil. A world that we will barricade against the Devil by living lives that are pure and chaste. A world where the laws will not be those set down by some secular atheist but God’s laws as set down in the Scriptures. A world where our children’s morals are not those slyly presented by some humanist teacher or slickly displayed in the Devil’s media but those that are cherished by their parents and their church. A world where “science” isn’t some uncaring view of a mechanical universe but where all things are seen as the true workings of God.

“Every staff member of The Ministry of God’s Coming Kingdom is working full-time to plan the details of our great pilgrimage to the true Promised Land. We all feel the power of the Lord surging through us day and night as we open ourselves to the Word of God and He directs us in our planning. As that plan unfolds, it will be available online to all. And we want to hear from you, if you too have received the Word and can provide your personal revelation to us to further guide our efforts. The information on our new Eden is free to the faithful, but if you feel the same joy and enthusiasm for a pilgrimage to this new Promised Land, to the creation of an earthly Kingdom under the laws and guidance of the Lord, you may send a gift to help bring this mission to life—a mission that will bring all of us closer to the day of Rapture.

“May God bless you all through the teachings and the blood of Christ. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen and goodnight.”

The image on the monitors faded-out, and the lights of the sound stage shut off their carefully tinted and angled highlights of Bat Balderson. Not his real name of course. That was Mathew Patrick Balderson, and he had grown up in the bedroom community of Saluda, Virginia responding to Matt. But high school sports had been good to him, and by the time he had progressed from his only farm club to the major leagues, he was being called Bat instead of Matt. When he moved to the Yankees, he was almost exclusively Bat, or sometimes “Hellbat” for the dissolute swath he cut across the high-living society of the Big Apple.

All of that dissolution came to an end in the bottom of the ninth inning, Yankee Stadium, seventh game of the World Series. There were two outs and two runners on base, the Red Sox were ahead four to two, and the crowd was screaming for a home run as Bat Balderson advanced

from the warm-up circle to the plate. He waved to the crowd, tapped the brim of his hat while giving a slight nod to the crowd, and pointed to the centerfield fence.

Fingers Ferguson bent low, staring at the Sox catcher's sign buried in his half-closed glove. He shifted his grip on the ball in his glove, rocked back into a full windup, glanced over at first, and fired his hundred mile-per-hour fast ball toward the plate, high and inside. It was tight, way too tight. In fact it was wild.

Bat, in his crouch over the plate, saw it coming and started to straighten and back out of the box. He should have fallen forward and let the ball pass behind him, but the hitter's reflex is to back out of the batter's box. The ball was rising and curving further out. It hit him on the protective helmet just above the ear and halfway to his left eye. He dropped like a pole-axed cow, and the game ended with a pinch runner on first and an infield popup.

Bat Balderson revisited the long litany of his sins. He walked down the fabled tunnel toward the brilliant light and was bathed in its glory. He felt washed clean. He felt the power of God suffuse him. He was saved. He woke up on his fourteenth day in the hospital, looked up at the nurse that responded to his insistent button jabbing and greeted her with a hearty, "Praise the Lord."

The doctors convinced him he was out of baseball, but he wasn't without direction. In fact, he found he was more popular than ever with the media. The talking heads were in virtual fistfights over who could lure him to tell his story to the billions watching and listening to mass media. He told it again and again, each time remembering some new episode that had eluded him until that moment. And when the story of his near-death experience began to lose its interest, he added a bit of repentance over his previously dissolute lifestyle.

And when that began to lose its bite, he added a growing sense of piety and self-effacing outrage over his earlier moral laxity. And when that began to take hold, he increased his scantily remembered childhood knowledge of the bible and began to throw in a little preaching and quoting from the scriptures. The Ministry of God's Coming Kingdom just seemed a natural place to go next.

His ministry grew and his delivery improved as he moved a bit of his interest bearing, sports insurance bonanza into the better investment of media evangelism. His additional investment in hiring Barry Jewel, the recently successful publicist for the re-election of the Fundamentalist Party's Senator Flora Speltorn, didn't hurt his success either. He became the new patriarch of televangelists, and the electronic funds transfers were choking ministry bandwidth.

Balderson purchased the ministry's jump-gate from Galaxy Unlimited, one of the newer and smaller enterprises that had taken the free technology provided by the United Nations Consortium backing Dr. Ian McKay's blind gate development program and started exploring new worlds discovered through the use of blind gates.

Dr. McKay's original research was centered on trying to develop a tunable gate that didn't require the super-expensive twinned-crystals normally used to lock the space fold that made jump-gates work. He wanted to eliminate a crystal on at least one end of the jump and both of them if possible. He achieved that goal and in doing so found that his tuner could lock on to natural gates in the universe that subsequent experimentation revealed as being points of gravitational anomalies. The hooker, however, was that these gates had changing frequencies, probably due to constant changes in the conditions that caused the anomalies, and stayed locked for just a few seconds or minutes.

The trick was to tune around and find natural gates that stayed locked long enough to determine if they were close to a planet or asteroid belt that could be profitably exploited. Should the tuner lose its lock while initial evaluations were being conducted, the equipment being employed would be lost forever—since there had never been a provable reacquisition of a found and lost natural gate. If the equipment wasn't lost before it could evaluate the potential of the area around the natural gate and if the risk seemed worthwhile, a very expensive, twinned-crystal gate

was pushed through before the frequency was lost. If the evaluation of potential profit turned out to be wrong, an expensive jump-gate was lost.

Experience showed that a high percentage of exploration and evaluation equipment was lost to the shifting frequencies of natural gates when their locks were lost before sufficient data was collected. That same experience showed that there were quite a few gates that didn't live up to their quick assessments and had to be abandoned. Suffice it to reiterate that the potential rewards were high enough to justify the risks, and business homed in on a new bonanza.

The high-risk but potentially extreme profitability of such discoveries initially attracted only the mega-corporations that had the capital to make such huge investments, but the smaller entrepreneurs soon joined the rush, selling nothing more than a stable, crystal-locked gate to a new system with as little telemetric and robotic exploration as possible to prove its value.

Galaxy Unlimited was a small-capital corporation specializing in quick turnover sales. Their business model was to minimize risks and capital expenditures and to make their sales to a growing niche market—groups looking for habitable planets where they could escape persecution and oppression or preserve their cultural heritage or indulge their pioneer spirit or for any other reason that might occur to them. And business was good. With the discovery of the blind gate, the human diaspora was in full swing.

The gate ultimately sold by Galaxy Unlimited to The Ministry of God's Coming Kingdom was the kind the corporation was making their best margins on. The natural gate in the system was at a Trojan point for the new solar system's only gas giant—a long way out from the earth-type star's chlorophyll zone. However, a spectrographic analysis of the second planet during the original blind gate tuning indicated a lush biosphere, moderate temperatures, and ample water. The other instruments indicated a modest axial tilt, a two percent variance from Earth-normal mass, a planetary spin within five percent of Earth-normal, and an orbital radius and velocity within twenty-three percent of Earth-normal. It was a keeper, and Galaxy United pushed through a small, twinned-crystal gate.

No equipment was lost, and a robotic mission was launched in-system to the fourth planet. A full-boost but economical trajectory was used, and a successful orbit was achieved in 106 days. The orbiting ship carried a large-frame gate which was deployed and used to bring through six, gravity-lens equipped, landers. Five of the landers were dispatched to the moderate temperature areas of the planet where they sampled the full range of the biosphere's parameters. The sixth lander held another twinned-crystal gate and was sent to the site determined to be the "best seller" location. The sixth lander also carried a portable fuel gate and two plastic bladders.

After the surface gate was deployed inside a quick-erection tensegrity structure, the fuel gate was activated in a nearby clearing and the bladders were filled with fuel pumped directly from Earth. All six landers were fueled and returned to the orbiting gate. The landers gated back to Galaxy Unlimited's Jupiter-Trojan habitat and were followed by the orbiter ship 178 days later. There was now a gate on the planet's surface and a gate at the gas giant's trailing Trojan point.

Joel Caine was reviewing his list of prospective sales customers when the vidcom chimed. He pushed the receive key on his desk screen and got the logo for The Ministry of God's Coming Kingdom and then a smiling face. He knew who it was instantly. After all, it was Bat Balderson himself who appeared on the screen when he keyed the connection. "I wish to inquire about the purchase of an extra-solar gate that has been fully explored and found suitable for human colonization."

Joel Caine responded with no hesitation. "Of course, Mr. Balderson, can you tell me what you're looking for beyond the usual close match to Earth's environmental conditions?"

Balderson answered like he normally expected people to recognize who he was and to address him by name. After all, he was Bat Balderson. "I'm looking for a planet that's extraordinary, one that will be referred to by all who see it as a Garden of Eden, not just another planet with grass and trees. I'm told that there are a few of these available from various, proven gate sources that can be

purchased for fifty to sixty million dollars—complete with full UN health inspections and that would require no quarantines for gate transit. Is this possible?”

First Joel gave him the hook in his best and most animated sales persona. “We have three solar systems with planets that meet those criteria. The first is in the constellation Virgo as seen from the Earth. The second is in the constellation Sagittarius, but its sun is not visible by eye. The third is just approved by the UN’s Extraterrestrial Health Organization as Class 1, no known pathogens, but has not yet been located.”

Then he gave him a lot of line so he wouldn’t feel the sinker when he got to the price, since everything he got above fifty million figured significantly into his sales bonus. “While the first two meet your criteria, the latest find is exceptional. It is at a stage of natural development that is ideal for Terraforming, with a wide variety of plant life, but with nearly all the animal life confined to the sea and a few amphibious species. There are few crawling or flying species to infest the lush semi-tropical forests and no animals to compete with any animal species you might want to take from Earth to feed a new population of colonists. The soil is rich in nutrients that are fully absorbable by Earth-type plants. As if that weren’t enough, the oceans are filled with a vast variety of lower order sea creatures that are nutritionally compatible with humans or that would fit the food chain for Earth imported species.

“As for the physics of the planet and its position in its solar system, the axial tilt is slightly less than that of Earth, resulting in milder seasonal variations. The sun’s radiation frequencies and levels at the planet’s surface are so similar to Earth’s as to be of no significant variation. The oxygen content of the atmosphere is one percent higher than that of Earth, the carbon dioxide content about the same, the nitrogen content about three percent lower, and the noble gases slightly higher. The planet is twenty percent larger than Earth in surface area, with three fourths of the surface covered by water. The mass of the planet, even though larger, produces a gravity that is two percent less than Earth-normal. The days are about twenty-six Earth hours long, and the year is three hundred twenty-two of those days. There is no moon but the closer orbit of the planet makes the sun’s tidal effect larger than that of Earth’s sun. The nights are not all that dark, however, since the new system is located in a globular cluster of stars, producing a nighttime ambient light level about equal to Earth’s on a clear, night with a full moon.”

Joel was at the end of his line and he had been watching Balderson’s reaction to the spiel. It was apparent that something was bothering the evangelist, and Joel couldn’t think what it could be after the carefully redacted description of the planet he had just delivered. It was nothing but positive information. It made no mention of the fact that the planet’s low density meant that there was a scarcity of heavy metals available, that the planet was still in a phase of active plate tectonics, and that the fern-like ground cover that substituted for native grasses was low on nutrients needed for Earth-type grazing animals—even goats.

But Joel didn’t have to guess what was bothering him. Balderson simply asked him. “Did you say that the location of the planet is still unknown?”

Joel was relieved it was a problem he could solve. “Oh, yes. That’s a normal problem for blind gates found in star systems inside globular clusters. The star densities make it extremely difficult to locate the new sun’s position in the galaxy and there are even those who think the few blind gates that have been found without being located might even be extra galactic. But it really doesn’t matter where the gate is located, as long as the gate is twinned-crystal locked and the energy requirement for gate transfers is low. Wherever this new system happens to be located, within or without the galaxy, the energy requirements for a gated mass from the Earth are about the same as those for a gated mass from the Earth to Mars. Of course, in both cases this means using the best Trojan gates in each of the systems as the transfer gates for the interstellar distance transfers.”

Balderson looked even more puzzled. “You mean the distance has nothing to do with the amount of energy it takes to move something through a jump-gate?”

Joel mused that Balderson was like most potential clients and knew little about jump-gate technology. Keeping all condescension from his voice, Joel gave his no-frills explanation while

closely watching Balderson's reaction. "Before Dr. McKay discovered blind gates, he researched jump-gate energy requirements and found that distance sometimes had an effect but was not as important as gravitational effects. That's why all people and materials now moving out of the solar system are relayed through a Trojan point gate, although most people don't even know this is happening since the gates are sandwiched to look and feel like a single gate."

A quietly murmured "Oh," was all he got from Balderson as the frown of perplexity faded from his face.

Joel waited for the inevitable question of price to occur to Balderson, but he was surprised. "Since you're pushing the third choice, I assume it's the most expensive, but cost alone will not be the deciding factor. I must have a planet that is truly exceptional. Can you squirt me a vid on each of the planets you mentioned, with all the specifications you have to go with them? There are many scientists and businessmen in the ministry that will know more than I do about what facts are important to establishing a thriving colony. And of course, I'll need to know the prices for my financial advisor."

"Of course, Reverend. I've already sent them to you as I was talking, along with contact information. Please feel free to call me at any time or to have your analysts call. It was a pleasure talking with you."

Joel's screen went blank with no further word ~ ~ ~ from the celebrity evangelist.

Balderson remembered looking at the vids sent to him by the Galaxy Unlimited salesman. He had agreed with the salesman that the new system was exceptional. The planet was glowing blue with patches of green from orbit, and as the ship carrying the camera slowly descended through the atmosphere to skim above the verdant forest that covered the two primary land masses, the images were truly amazing. Most of the larger plants were visibly simple in their structure, having frond-like limbs rather than those like the trees of Earth, but they were large, some as high as thirty meters and having diameters up to five meters. Where there were patches in the forest, the ground was covered with green that he took to be grass, but could be some other type of ground cover. Suffice it to say that everything was green except the brown trunks of the larger plants.

Both continents showed the scars of plate tectonics and volcanic activity with mountain chains and lakes in old volcanic calderas. He had watched all the tri-vids as they provided high and low images of the continents, the oceans, the lakes, and the thousands of islands in their globe-circling transits. Only then, after he had made up his mind which one he wanted, did he look at the prices. The exceptional planet was one hundred million, and he didn't blink. He would simply call in Barry Jewel and tell him to find the money and start his campaign to recruit the ministry's flock to become pioneers of his new planet, Abraham, circling the sun, Grace.

And now, with his recent announcement of the plan to take his ministry to a new planet where the faithful could build a world that was based on the Word of God, he was being overwhelmed by the response of the ministry's faithful and the new members being added to the roll every day. It was truly a sign from God that so many wanted a chance to live their lives and bring up their families in Godliness rather than in the wanton secularism that the world had embraced in the last fifty years. He felt vindicated in the dedication of his life to Christ following his accident—another true sign from the Lord.

He would rededicate himself by making this an emigration for God that called millions, not just thousands to participate. He would rise to the obvious mantle bestowed on him by God. He would become a new prophet befitting the name he had given to the planet.

He spoke to his office AI, "get me Galaxy Unlimited, and after I finish with them, get me Barry Jewel." He was impatient. He wanted to do more to swell the ranks and get the logistics of his religious pilgrimage on the move. He was eager to have his pilgrimage be the greatest of the growing religious diasporas into the galaxy. ~ ~ ~

The inner circle of The Digital Temple of God sat in the Aerie. Officially, it was the Aerie of God, the top of their 512-meter tall skyscraper in the heart of Atlanta. The Aerie had a solid hemispherical dome made from a single crystal of gem-quality, silicon dioxide that was thirty-two meters in diameter and eight centimeters thick. The crystal had been grown at L2 and set in place by four gravity cranes two years ago.

The Digital Temple of God had spread like wildfire around the globe. In fifteen years it had grown from a cult following of computer geeks to one of the richest religions in the solar system. It had nowhere near the numbers of faithful as the old-line religions or the new fundamentalist movements, but its members were among the most visible and wealthy in society. They came from entertainment, sports, politics, arts, science, and professions of all types, except business management, who proved strangely immune to the Digital message. They dominated the media simply because of who they were.

But almost as if it were trying to fit the definition of organized religion, the people in control of The Digital Temple of God had their own agenda, distinct from the message they promulgated. Fifteen years was long enough for Niccolo Smith to surround himself with a cadre of false piety who cared not a whit for the iniquities suffered by the masses. Their sole interest was in domination. Power and all that went with it.

Niccolo Smith started his adult life as a computer analyst, that is, a person who uses the computer to analyze data and draw conclusion therefrom. It took him about two years in corporate backwaters to realize that, if the data set were large enough, the conclusions to be drawn were controlled by the analyst.

His meteoric rise in the corporate world began with guessing the conclusions desired from the analysis he was performing and going on to produce statistics and computer graphics that showed those conclusions. As he moved up the ranks of corporate control, he learned to give them not only what they desired as a conclusion, but what they should have desired, as a serendipity-cloaked bonus.

To conclude what would be best for the corporation was a task that took prodigious amounts of creativity and analytical skills. To encapsulate it all in an easy to swallow pill for people who had long passed diminishing returns in their collective capabilities was sheer genius.

But Niccolo's glass ceiling was oppressively low. His social pedigree was non-existent. His formal education was meager. His personal appearance was ordinary. Regardless of these shortcomings, he longed for the power that came with being at the top of the pyramid, and he had no concern for the shoulders he would need to stand on to be there.

It was a simple analysis, really—compared to the complexities of which he was capable. He started with an identification and categorization of human society's most powerful persons over the last one hundred years. He then compiled a detailed list of accomplishments and other points of recommendation that were remarkably like the points on a detailed résumé. And as an inveterate hacker, he had no trouble including items that wouldn't normally be listed when applying for a new job.

In the final analysis, so to speak, he didn't even need the computer's massive data crunching. The answer was intuitively obvious. The category of the powerful that was unconcerned with social pedigree, education, appearance, and intelligence was religious leader.

Since he was not and had never been religious, there were many more than seven paths open to him. He had only to choose the quickest and easiest path for a person of his own capabilities. And that was easy—computer-based analysis.

He started collecting the religious documentation of all the major religions of the world at nights and on weekends. Almost all of them were available in digital format and in database format as well. Where digitization or translation were necessary, there were plenty of programs for that, and he had total access to the computer assets of the major corporation in which he currently worked.

In less than six months, Smith had his basic compilation completed. He now needed to shred the million or so “utterances of God” he had collected by sifting it all through a historical database of critical religious analysis. This database, he soon found, was ten times larger than the computer extracted material being critically reviewed, even when eliminating redundancy of conclusion and obviously self-serving sophistry. This took him another year and a half.

To do this critical paring of the “utterances of God,” he had to rank the veracity of each historical analysis he was using as his sifting screen. As his one stroke of genius, he ranked them not by the actual veracity of the analysis but by its publicly perceived veracity.

After all, he had zero interest in real truth. His sole purpose was to convince the public of his version of the truth. He had produced a synthesis of mankind’s total output of religious thought, a synthesis that stripped away the distortions to revelation brought by whims of nature, demographic and racial realities, mechanics of hand-copying, ignorance of science, vagaries of translation, competition for converts, political machinations, and the many other external forces on every religion.

It also sought to at least neutralize the influence of internal power struggles inherent in the concept of organized religion. Smith’s opinion was that the very idea of organized religion was self-negating, since religion had only one logical principle: faith. Faith is a state of being that is restricted to the individual by definition and is so simple that any attempt at organizational structure is needed only by the organizers; it is also a state of being that implicitly denies logic. But as with truth, he had no need for real logic, either. His chosen path was to follow at least ten thousand years of positive reinforcement by using the tool of faith to gain power. He would merely shape it in the guise of logic.

His ambitions were greatly hampered by his lack of money, but he had his computer skills, his hard won mastery of statistical flimflam, his large body of experience in using computer graphics in the presentation of complex information, and a lot of free computational power.

All of his savings and everything he could borrow went to hiring geeks. He needed a splash on the WorldNet to jumpstart his ministry. His goal was for every search engine to show a hit on his database in its first page of results. He wanted as much exposure as he could get, and he wanted it as quickly as he could get it—and he got it.

But while his approach and analysis were touched with genius, he failed in his efforts to find a religious base that would appeal to the masses. It was a ministry keyed to presenting the true Word of God, a purified Word, a Word that was free of the extraneous miscellany incorporated by other religious beliefs. It was a ministry led by the Sword of Purity—the man known to the WorldNet as Nic.

He thought he had failed completely during the first three days of his Net blitz, but there were contributions coming in to his online account. How bad could it be? By the end of the week there were over a hundred thousand dollars in his account, and he immediately spent most of it. He concentrated his new resources on expanding his WorldNet presence and determining who the people were that had sent him the money.

At two weeks the data had firmed, and he had a handle on who was buying his message. It wasn’t the masses. It was the pseudo-intellectuals, the hundreds of millions of people that had strayed from their religious heritage in the face of science but still had a need for something more than a mechanistic universe. A piece of the mass, the upper-middle class and the nouveau riche that craved the safety-net of a logical religion and wanted to display it for their egos. He had found the ersatz Jeffersons and the ersatz Franklins. He had found the cocktail party, private club, gate-set version of the Unitarians.

It was with the unbounded egoism built on this record of success that Niccolo Smith spoke. “Brothers, It is now clear that the Kingdom Comers are really going to spread their socially debilitating version of God to other planets. They have signed a hundred-twenty million dollar contract with Galaxy Unlimited for an Earthlike Planet that will drain their treasury like a slashed wrist into the sand. Blood money that was legally extorted from millions of his poorly educated,

downtrodden, and desperately old followers. Money that required great but false sacrifice. If Balderson succeeds, it will encourage the other mountebanks to do likewise, and once again human progress will grind to a halt in the name of one false God or another but this time throughout the Galaxy.

Smith paused while he surveyed the round table seating the inner circle of Digitalians and flashed the half sneer-half smile he had practiced with a mirror and a clip from the 20<sup>th</sup> century movie, “Elmer Gantry.” “More importantly, Ladies and Gentlemen, we will loose millions of suckers that could be lining our Lauren Piccard pockets instead of the clown-suit pockets of the televangelist Bozos.”

Burt would have been proud.

~ ~ ~

Barry looked out at the hundred acre suburban lake behind The Ministry of God’s Coming Kingdom, known among the trash talkers as the Kingdom Come Church. His office windows gave an excellent view of the fifty-year old houses and their overgrown ornamental trees and bushes that ringed the lake. The lake itself was green with summer algae bloom, no doubt caused by callous flaunting of the home owner’s association rules for the application of fertilizer to the grass and other greenery choking the neighborhood.

Fortunately, the lake was created by providing fill material for the Continental Highway System, the last hurrah for rubber-tired, hydrogen-burning automobiles in North America. The lake was deep and would have been deeper if the springs they struck hadn’t been so powerful as to force the closing of the borrow pit. The sheer volume of the lake and the flushing of the springs had so far succeeded in defeating the residents’ efforts to kill it, and the lake would be clear again by September.

His salary was excessive. His office was great. The job was challenging. The man he was working for was a loose cannon—at best.

Bat Balderson frequently operated like he believed the bullshit he spouted on the vids. It was a phenomenon Barry hadn’t encountered in the political arena. All of the good religious politicians were phony for the media but stubborn realists about how the world worked, or didn’t work, as the case may be. They told their fundamentalists what they wanted to hear in order to garner their support, but they schmoozed, bought, threatened, traded, cajoled, took, wiled, stole, and lied to gain another organizational step or another piece of silver. They weren’t dewy-eyed idealists when it came to power and money. God got the co-pilot’s seat at best, but they preferred He just ride shotgun.

Balderson, on the other hand, thought that the very fact he was alive meant that God would personally take care of the details. All he had to do was have divine inspirations, and they would happen, since their veracity was Pre-approved and their success was Pre-ordained. For Balderson, it was ipso facto truth. For the fundamentalist followers, it was faith. For Barry it was management by tautology.

That was what he believed on the days he thought Balderson was an idiot, when things were going badly because Balderson refused to listen to reason in dealing with business details. On other days when some preposterous idea of Balderson’s actually seemed to be working, he thought he might be working for Beelzebub himself.

An example of Balderson at his best was the formation of the Corporation of God to handle the financing of the pilgrimage. He somehow managed to convince more than six thousand of his ministry faithful families to become pilgrims that would sell their houses and most of their belongings to emigrate. Each family pledged one hundred thousand dollars per household adult and fifty thousand for each child to the ministry to secure their family’s place on Abraham. All of their monies or easily convertible assets from savings, retirements, and insurance, went into the Corporation of God. The non-liquid assets like homes and vehicles, another half million or so in value that would not be going to Abraham, were signed over to the Corporation to be sold on exodus with the resulting money going into their Corporation accounts. The pilgrims pledged the

interest from their Corporation accounts to the ministry, but the rest, minus their pledged amounts, would be available to them after three continuous years on Abraham.

The vidcom broke Jewel's fugue. "Jewel here."

"Barry, I decided to buy the expensive planet—the one that looks greener and bluer than Earth in its satellite photos. I know it's a little over our budget figures, but He told me it was the right choice."

Barry wasn't about to pick up that ball. "How much?"

"A hundred-twenty million dollars, US, but that includes the installation of . . ." Balderson picked up hard copy off the desk in front of him. "Uh, 'twelve crystal-locked jump-gates, six cargo-sized and six personnel-sized. One of each at our world headquarters, two of each sandwiched at a Jupiter Trojan point, two of each sandwiched at the GU-184 gas-giant trailing Trojan point. And one of each on the surface of GU-184-2, in the facility of our choice. All gates to be fitted with . . .' etcetera, etcetera."

The etcetera was Barry's responsibility, he knew. "How much was it without the package deal for the gates?"

"A hundred million, but I got them to do the turnkey installation for only twenty-million more. Jump-gates are their area of expertise, after all, and we would have had to contract separately for that anyway. Turnkey was the right way to go."

God only knew how much that had cost them, and he meant that either literally or figuratively depending on your religious orientation. Oh well, he might as well see if there was anything he could salvage out of this revelation. "Is the contract signed yet?"

"A done deal. I wasn't going to let them have time to start chipping at me over the details. Turnkey, and that was it."

Barry's smile matched Balderson's, but he knew the Devil was in the details, and he hoped that was just figuratively.

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Barry Jewel stood under the bright yellow sun of Abraham, its spectral output indistinguishable from that of Earth's sun. Balderson had decided to call the sun Grace and it went into the UN charts under that name, but to the natives of Abraham, it would probably just be, "the sun." Habits were hard to break.

The construction activity around him was impressive. He was standing on the asphalt streets of Abraham's first city, Salvation. The surface tar pools had been found by satellite survey six thousand kilometers away along a major fault-line near the west coast of the continent. It wasn't a thick tar like another million years or so would eventually produce, but it was adequate with a little help.

A gravity lens hauler had been dispatched with a construction jump-gate, and then a portable processing unit had been gated to the site. Using sand and gravel that were available near the tar pits and heavy tar from Earth, meter-sized cubes of asphalt were produced and gated to Salvation City. Barry felt good about the streets, because his idea to use the tar had saved a bundle over what they had budgeted for bringing all the road paving materials from Earth.

He was here for the dedication of the pocket fusion plant. Balderson would arrive at dusk to throw the symbolic switch, but the system had been on for days of tests and calibrations. All the light switches in the city were in the "on" position. Salvation City would blink on like a garishly trimmed Christmas tree. Balderson and the media would love it.

There were still about a thousand paid construction workers finishing the utilities and larger municipal buildings, but the permanent housing had been done primarily by the colonists themselves. Barry had been amazed but pleased that many of the colonists were skilled construction workers, mechanics, farmers, and ranchers that knew their way around both hand and power tools.

Most of the first thousand single-family homes were finished. The prefabricated sections for their construction coming from factory jump-gates on Earth right to the sites by having Abraham's

cargo jump-gate mounted on a gravity lens pallet they could easily tow. Each construction crane and crew could erect at least ten houses per day, and all the finish work and utility hookup was done by colonists riding the high of religious fervor.

They were terrific workers, Barry would have to admit, almost fifty percent more efficient than the hired help in those jobs where both were used and could be compared as to output. In his role as project manager, he was happy to have them, but he also felt somehow creepy about it, like they were being taken advantage of by Balderson. But then that didn't make any sense, since they were obviously thrilled to be here and working their collective asses off.

As he walked down the street he walked past an opening in the buildings that let him see the original barracks they had used when they first got started. The barracks had housed over two thousand people made up of both families and construction workers in the initial phases of the construction effort. They were about a click away, but he might as well see first hand how they had held up. Balderson was dogging him to get as many colonists on the planet as soon as possible. He had a couple of hours before Balderson would show up.

The Sword of Purity, as he was touted to and by the media, stood in Aerie. The inner council was assembled yet again to discuss the Kingdom Comers with Nic, as he was known to them.

So far The Digital Temple of God's six-month media campaign had been a flop. The plan had been to conduct both an overt and covert psycho-smear of the Kingdom Comers' colonization plan. It was portrayed as an elaborate confidence scheme to make the church and Balderson wealthy at the expense of the very citizens who could least afford it.

The Temple's influence in the media got them plenty of coverage, and The Sword himself appeared on numerous talk shows. But they failed to impress the fundamentalist masses they were trying to save from exploitation by the Kingdom Comers so they would be more conducive to exploitation by the Digitalians. Of course, the Kingdom Comers mounted a counter-campaign to attack the attackers which was equally ineffective, since they had no idea of the real reason for the Digitalians' attack. It was the blind attacking the blind.

Stopping religious exploitation by unenlightened churches of all stripes was a message that the self-righteous Digitalians heartily endorsed. It was clear to any logical person that the clergy of all illogical religions had been selling an invisible and intangible product for uncounted centuries. It was the kind of scam that would get you jailed in most cultures when it wasn't hiding under the cloak of religion. But the faithful of the World's unenlightened religions remained immune to logic as they had for the same uncounted centuries.

Nic didn't bother smiling. "We haven't made a dent in the enthusiasm with which millions are allowing themselves to be bilked. Not only has Balderson had to happily raise his initial colonization quota for next year from thirty to fifty thousand, The Shepherds of Shiva, The al Majanan Faithful, the Bantu Spears of God, and Christian Soldiers of God have all bought gates to habitable planets in the last six months.

"Our AI projections show that this could finally be the beginning of the secular Earth that has been predicted for the last three centuries. If all the religious nuts leave on their own initiative and take their families with them, the seemingly endless cycle of religious indoctrination of the children will be broken. In a few generations, that could lead to a real control of political power by secular idealists. And long before then, as religious power begins to decline in all governments, the bite will be right in our pocketbooks. The IRS and their foreign counterparts will pull the rug out from under all religious tax breaks. Give that a little thought and you'll see how important this is."

There was a timid hand up on the right side of the round table and Nic nodded her way. It was Milly Armbruster, the household design tyrant of the vids. "Won't all this take so long that it'll have little effect on us, the people sitting at this table?"

"If you're planning on dying in the next fifteen to twenty years, you'd be right. Personally, I can afford the current rejuvenation therapies and anticipate that the new ones will be even better. All the more reason to make sure I can still afford them when they hit the market."

Milly looked suitably deflated, so Nic moved on. “I know we’ve been unsuccessful in our efforts to recruit the pocketbooks of the general public, but the fundamentalists, in particular, are the foil we need to look like a rational alternative. Without a large and vocal opponent, I’m afraid the gloss will be off our self-righteous appeal. Since we operate under the banner of religion, we should expect to find ourselves out in the cold if the voting power of religion experiences a steady decline on the Earth.”

Another hand snaked up from the table’s occupants. It was Biff Holiday, a three-time academy award winner from Hollywood—a pretty face stuck onto an apparently hollow head.

“Yes, Biff,” Nic encouraged.

“Is there anything at all we can do? We tried the media blitz and it didn’t work. Can we up our campaign contributions here and in other countries?”

“We have a plan for upping our political contributions, since that always seems to work for the short term, but a long enough term solution is probably going to take some more direct action. I have a plan that might work.”

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Carl Willis was a very expensive hit-man with a reputation well known to only the few that counted and were likely to use his services. He was dressed in the work clothes of a maintenance specialist from the JumpTech Automation Corporation. Ten minutes ago he had been inspecting the compact jump-gate at the Manhattan headquarters of The Ministry of God’s Coming Kingdom.

This was a small gate connected directly from Earth to the planet Abraham that took ten times the power of the much larger cargo and personnel gates connected through gravity anomaly points when any appreciable mass was involved. However, for a minor mass connection like that of a fiber-optics communications cable cross-section, the small gate exhibited power efficiencies greater than the much larger, gravity anomaly gates. It also served as an emergency gate that provided triple redundancy to the Earth-Abraham link. Should the statistically minute possibility of the two big gates failing simultaneously occur, the pieces of a larger gate could be passed through the compact gate and assembled on Abraham.

At the moment, Willis was one of the few people that knew the triple redundancy of jump-gates from Earth to Abraham would be inadequate. The gate key he had stolen from the dead technician along with his clothes worked once again, just like the hacker had guaranteed when the funds transfer to his account had been verified—only a tenth of his own price to the Sword of Purity.

Willis floated out through the gate and did his best not lose his dinner. He had been in no-gravity situations before, but it wasn’t his favorite environment. He was aboard Galaxy Unlimited’s habitat at some Jupiter Trojan point favorable for jump-gates. His research had revealed it was a PAUCH, a pressurized, automated, un-spun, cylindrical habitat. The acronym made no reference to the habitat being without artificial gravity, but he had now confirmed that point first-hand.

He had come through the gate with a firm grip on a handhold right at the gate. As he looked into the crowded space of the small habitat, he could see handholds welded to the bulkheads practically everywhere. His diagram showed two rows of gates in the cylinder, one for personnel gates and one for cargo gates. The gates were supposed to be individually tagged with identity numbers, bar codes, and transponders. He pulled himself along on the handholds between the two rows of gates.

He had no trouble getting himself to the jump-gate marked MGCK-JTP-Z38-P. It was the third one in line. Willis pulled off his backpack and removed one of the explosive devices. He stuck it in the middle, on the top of the gate. This was supposed to be the location of the twinned-crystal that provided the frequency lock for the gates. He checked that the explosive was secure, set the timer for one a.m. like he had set the compact gate’s explosive, and started looking for the cargo gate. It turned out to be right beside the personnel gate, and he went through the same routine with the explosive.

Willis pulled himself back to the gate, stuck his card in the lock again, and walked out into the deserted JumpTech gate room on Earth. He crossed quickly to the public gate linked to Chicago’s

main terminal. Two more jumps, an aircab ride, and he was home. The scotch was going down easily as he contemplated another job well done and the second half of his fee being deposited in his account.

And it was well done. At least until one a.m. when the bombs went off. The compact gate at the headquarters of The Ministry of God's Coming Kingdom was demolished along with twenty-seven windows, five walls, and large chunks of ceiling and floor. The two gates on the habitat were likewise destroyed, but there was a complicating factor. The Baghdad explosives expert had calculated a charge large enough to completely destroy a cargo-sized gate and its gate crystal, but without causing too much collateral damage. However, he had failed to contemplate that the bombs would be close together during detonation.

Consequently, the concentrated explosion also breached the hull of the cylinder and the sudden depressurization ripped nearby gates from their mountings and tried to squeeze them through an opening in a welded seam that was smaller than the loose gates. When the damage was assessed by the insurance company, seven twinned-crystals were found shattered, seventeen gates were declared scrap except for their surviving crystals, and nineteen gates needed repair before being put back into service.

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The vidcom chime pulled Barry up from the depths of REM sleep where he had been experiencing his recurring nightmare of being greeted at the Pearly Gates by a smiling Bat Balderson. "Vid on, no picture."

"Mr. Jewel?"

"Yes, this is Barry Jewel. I suppose this is some kind of an emergency."

"Yes sir. This is Nixon Security. We regret to inform you that there has been a bomb explosion and a small fire at the headquarters of The Ministry of God's Coming Kingdom. The fire is extinguished and there were no injuries."

"No injuries is good news, but where was the bomb? What was blown up?"

"The bomb was located in the ministry's gate room. The five gates on the insurance registry appear to have been destroyed in the blast."

The first thing that raced through Barry's mind was his recollection of the argument he had with Balderson on putting all three gates in the same building, much less in the same room. The damn emergency gate was small enough to have been put most anywhere. His next thought was about the panic that was bound to happen to the colonists that were suddenly cut off from communications with the rest of humanity for however many days it would take to get another set of gates working at the Jupiter Trojan and Earth. So much for triple redundancy.

"Can I get in if I go to the Ministry now?"

"I'm not sure, sir. The police have sealed the bomb site for now, but you'll certainly be able to get close enough to see the damage."

"Okay, thanks. I'll be there in a few minutes if anyone asks." Then he thought better of how quick he could get there without the public gate in operation. "Uh, I guess I'd better say I'll be there as soon as an aircab can get me there."

His first thought was to call Balderson, but he knew that wouldn't be a very good idea without having the details in-hand that Balderson would certainly want. He decided he'd call from the Ministry

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Jewel had forgotten that Balderson was in Bern, Switzerland discussing financial arrangements with the Ministry's bank. He wanted to quadruple the housing on Abraham and put in the infrastructure for another settlement five hundred clicks to the south of Salvation City. He had the money to do it, but it would have stretched their finances. Barry had been the one to point out that, if the Ministry could establish a substantial line of credit with an international bank, the pace of development could be accelerated significantly.

He was due back this morning, and he would be upset when he found out he couldn't gate into the Ministry through his private gate. Getting the aircab to pick him up and take him all the way downtown to the Ministry took him an extra hour. He was clearly not happy when he walked into his office, which was untouched by the explosion and the fire. The odor was still in the air, however, and the police and cleanup crews bustling about were conspicuous.

"What's going on around here, Jewel. I take a day to go to Switzerland and the Ministry has some kind of catastrophe?"

A sleep deprived Barry Jewel wasn't in the mood for Balderson's ego maniacal bull shit. "A bomb. Somebody that didn't care for your message, I take it."

"Don't be flip with me, Mr. Jewel. I'm in charge of your paycheck, which is healthy, I'll remind you."

"There's that. I'm a little short on patience at the moment. I've been up all night, and a few minutes ago I got a call from Galaxy Unlimited asking if we had experienced any difficulty with our gate. I started trying to grab them by the neck through the vidscreen, and they went on to tell me that an emergency beacon on their Jupiter Trojan habitat had triggered. Seems like many of the companies with sandwich gates on the habitat were experiencing difficulties—like they wouldn't work. I told him ours wasn't working either, but it was impossible to know if the problem was on the habitat because someone had blown up the gates at our headquarters."

Balderson looked quizzical but hardly missed a beat. "When will we know the condition of the Trojan gates?"

"They've got a shuttle on the way that will get there in a little over an hour. They'll have some preliminary assessment then."

Balderson turned back toward his office and threw a clear order over his receding shoulder. "Keep me informed."

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It was two days before Galaxy Unlimited could confirm that the Ministry's gate crystals had been destroyed. Barry sat in the conference room waiting for his meeting with Balderson and a few key players in the Ministry. He had done his homework on the possibility of finding the same or another gravity anomaly in the Grace system. The answer he liked best was from Dr. Ian McKay, himself.

He said, "At the moment, I haven't the foggiest idea how to tune the anomalies in our own system, much less those in some system that I don't know the location of. To do it by chance is considerably less than predicting the precise location of an electron. There are *zillions* of possible anomalies that can be tuned into for a short period and companies in the exploration business tune in hundreds of them every day. A zillion divided by a few hundreds is still a very big number of days. I hope the colonists have enough technology in place to ensure their survival."

Jewel was accompanied around the table by a few other staffers, but they were all silent. Mostly they were reviewing their notes in case they had to say something.

Balderson swept in trailing the Ministry's financial advisor, the public relations advisor, and an attorney from the Ministry's law firm. They sat and Balderson started talking. "I'm sure you have all read Barry's report on the status of the colony when we lost contact." He picked up Barry's report and flipped open to a marked page. "There were ten thousand, two hundred, and thirty six colonists and one thousand, six hundred hired workers on Abraham when God decided to stop all contact with the Earth. I have been assured by Bill, that our financial contracts with the colonists have clearly covered this or any other possible calamity in their language. The full range of assets donated to the Ministry is irrevocable. We are obliged to make some of those assets available to the colonists only after three years of continuous residence on Abraham. In the event that fulfilling that obligation is impossible, those assets will remain with the Ministry."

The attorney gravely nodded his head. Balderson went on. "The cash and other worldly assets of the colonists averaged out to about three hundred thousand dollars each, adults and children. That's about three billion dollars, which was our budget. We've spent about two billion dollars of

that to date according to Barry's report. That gives us another billion dollars of colonization budget unspent and another billion in unpledged assets that are not likely to be claimed. Starting today, we will begin our search for a new planet and call on the faithful to join us in founding a new colony of God."

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Niccolo Smith stood ramrod straight, the polarized sunlight slanting in over his right shoulder courtesy of the Aerie's motorized floor. "Our information from inside the Kingdom Comers' organization is that the push is on to find another planet for colonization. The bastard's going to do it again. He's spun up the public relations firm and greased the palms of the right talk show producers. Like it or not, we don't seem to be able to stop him, and we know why. Our hackers have penetrated their Swiss accounts. They cleared two billion dollars on the Abraham colonization. That money should have been ours."

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Balderson's silk suit draped elegantly, but every thread in the cloth had been acid etched to take the shine off that would give it that silk suit look. He smiled across at his host and dutifully answered his questions.

"How can you justify your decision to go ahead with another colony?"

"When I was in Switzerland the day before the gates were destroyed by anti-Christian terrorists, I had occasion to be on its highest mountain top. As I stood there, the wind died down and the sun warmed the air around me as I received a revelation from God. He said that the colony was the right example for all mankind and that He was going to take away all temptation as his way of bringing that message to the faithful. He was going to put aside all Earthly temptations for as long as it took to bring forth a new beginning for those He had made in His image. All those that had strayed so far for so long, even when He had given them His Son to cleanse them.

"He commanded me to go and send forth as many of His people as I could gather to Him. And I have given myself to this commandment. I have found a new planet. It is yet another Eden, and we have named it that, New Eden. I call for the faithful to join me in this new pilgrimage to God, this new turning away from the taunts of the Devil that dominate life here on Earth. God offers them a new beginning, as He offers everyone a new beginning, and I will lead the way."

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The light streamed through countless optical cables. Bandwidth surged through satellites in synchronous orbits around the world. The electronic funds transfers filled the coffers of The Church of God's Coming Kingdom once again. The faithful were unfazed, un-scratched, and undented by reason and simple logic. The faithful had—faith.