



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 9, Issue 11

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

September 2008

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

One time Jesus said, "A man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matt 10: 36) At another time he said, "Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matt 12:49-50) These can be viewed as interesting comments, considering the makeup of the group most closely associated with him.

We often think of the apostles as twelve individuals with little in common besides a devotion to Jesus. We tend to forget the family ties among these twelve men. Most people remember that Peter and Andrew were brothers. Of course we remember that James and John were brothers; they were the sons of Zebedee. Some may even remember that those four were business partners. (Lk 5:10) Beyond that we generally look at these men as unrelated. It is possible, however, that there were other relatives in the group.

When Matthew introduces himself it is as "Levi bar (son of) Alphaeus." Another of the apostles is always called "James bar Alphaeus." Now it is entirely possible that these two had separate fathers who shared a common name. Considering that Jesus had also selected two sets of brothers, it is just as likely that these two were brothers.

Thomas is called "the twin." None of the other apostles is specifically called a twin, but it may be that the twin brother of Thomas was also among the twelve. In the lists of the apostles, Thomas is twice listed with one called the son of Tolmai (Bartholomew in English), who is probably also called Nathanael. In John 21 a number of disciples were together. Those mentioned by name are Peter, James and John, Nathanael and Thomas. Because of these close associations it is likely that Thomas the Twin and Nathanael were Thomas and Nathanael bar Tolmai.

One apostle, called variously Lebbeaus, Thaddeus, or Jude (Judas), is called the brother of James. James is a common name, but because it is singled out here he was likely the brother of a specific James that was known to those to whom Luke wrote. It is possible, but unlikely, that he was brother to the sons of Zebedee. He might be brother to the other apostle James, which might make him brother to Matthew, but Matthew gives no hint of such a relationship. The other well-known James in Luke's writings is James the son of Mary. This is the most

likely James to whom Luke relates Jude. That would mean that one of the brothers of was also one of his apostles. Although the scriptures mention his family doubting Jesus, it is still a strong possibility that he had a physical brother among the apostles.

Nor is this last speculation too farfetched, when others have speculated that he also had a cousin among the twelve. In the descriptions of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, three accounts list three women who were present. Mark 15:40 lists them as "Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the less and Joseph, and Salome." Matthew lists "Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons." John lists "Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister Mary wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala." This has given rise to two theories. One is that Mary the wife of Clopas is Salome the mother of Zebedee's sons. Mary the mother of James the less and Joseph would then be the mother of Jesus. That would make James and John cousins to Jesus. The other theory is that Salome is the wife of Zebedee, but Mary the mother of James the less is not the mother of Jesus but rather the wife of Alphaeus, father of James and possibly Matthew. That necessitates that Alphaeus is also known as Clopas. This theory says that only John mentions the mother of Jesus (thus making three Mary's). That would make the apostles James bar Alphaeus and possibly Matthew Levi bar Alphaeus cousins to Jesus.

With so many relatives among his apostles it is indeed strange that Jesus would prophecy that brother would turn against brother. (Mk 13:12) But then, maybe he figured that such a prophecy would cause the brothers among the apostles to draw closer together so it would not happen to them.

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| It's All Relative | 1 |
| What Does It Matter? | 2 |
| Crown Him King | 4 |

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WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

The classic example of meaningless argument is a supposed debate over how many angels can dance on the head (or point) of a pin (or needle). (This argument may not be “point”-less, but it is meaningless.) Whether such an argument ever took place is doubtful. Still, Thomas Aquinas did spend a lot of words discussing whether angels could share the same physical space, which amounts pretty much to the same thing. But medieval scholars like Aquinas are not the only ones guilty of such arguments. They exist even today, and may be more hotly debated than that question.

Consciousness after death

People often ask whether the dead have consciousness, or whether they sleep until the resurrection. Long articles (and web pages) have been

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written arguing for or against consciousness after death. Most center on two passages. Psalm 6:5 seems to indicate that there is no consciousness because “in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?” On the other hand, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 seems to indicate awareness. The strongest arguments seem to be in favor of consciousness.

In a practical sense, however, this is a pointless argument. Nobody is going to come back from the grave and tell us whether they had consciousness or not. Those examples of resurrections in the gospels did not bring up this question. More to the point, what difference will it make to us, now or then, if there is consciousness or not? In either case, there is nothing that we can do after death to change our eternal destination. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” (2 Cor 5:26) If we are to be judged based on the things done in the body, what happens after we leave the body has no bearing on judgement. If we are conscious after death, then we

just have longer to enjoy or suffer the results of our lives. If there is no consciousness until the resurrection, that would be such a minor portion of eternity that we would probably not notice it.

That does, though, bring up an issue that does matter, even though it has nothing to do with whether we are conscious between death and the resurrection. Many people think the consciousness argument is important because at least one group believes that the unrighteous dead lose existence. They say that only the saved will continue to enjoy life for eternity, and everyone else will cease to be. That issue really has nothing to do with whether people will be conscious between death and the resurrection, because it is more of a question about existence after the resurrection.

While the passage in Luke 16 may have some bearing on that issue, there are others that are more to the point. In the scene Jesus describes in Matthew 25, those that are on the left hand, who did not do good to others in their lifetime, are promised “everlasting fire” (v. 41) and “everlasting punishment” (v. 46). Besides these verses, Jesus also talked about everlasting punishment at Matthew 18:8 and Paul did so in 2 Thessalonians 1:9. Some might argue that that last verse mentions “everlasting destruction” which implies annihilation. Actually, if it meant annihilation then the word “everlasting” becomes unnecessary. Paul was too precise a writer to use this phrase if he was not talking about eternal punishment.

Dispensational Premillennialism

I have written, and will probably continue to write, about the error of dispensational premillennialism. This is a doctrine that dates back only to about 1843. It was made popular in the 1960’s and has maintained its popularity since that time. A simple summary of the doctrine is that Jesus will come again at some future but predictable time and “rapture” the saints by taking them off the earth. There will then be a period of tribulation (sometimes listed as seven years) in which Satan is loosed upon the earth. After that period there will be a great battle (Armageddon) and Jesus will bring the righteous back to reign with him on earth for a thousand years, after which time the final judgement will take place. There are variations on this doctrine, most of which have as little biblical basis as this version.

Some writers have gone to great lengths to show that this doctrine is not only non-biblical but even anti-biblical. We show scriptures that prove that Jesus will not reign on earth. We show that the Revelation is about the Roman persecution of the first and second centuries AD.

We show that it is not only ridiculous but downright dishonest to try to put 1,007 years between the “caught up” (raptured) part of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and the “ever be with the Lord” part. We cringe every time someone speaks of “the” antichrist or talks about one antichrist (or two in one theory) creating a “new world order.” We point out that there have been antichrists (according to 1 John 2:18) in the world for almost two thousand years. To some of us the doctrine of dispensational premillennialism has become almost an obsession.

But, really, what does it matter? It is true that the scriptures almost universally disprove this doctrine. It is true that the proponents of the doctrine violate almost every rule of interpretation of prophecy. But if God were to decide that he would demote Jesus and make him rule on earth for a millennium, who am I to argue with God? If in the end God chooses to take this method of ending man’s time on earth, what difference does it make? I may not live to see it, and if I do I will be among the saved. So from a practical standpoint it is really pointless to argue the issue.

On the other hand, what should be, must be, argued is the infallibility of scripture. If truth be told, this doctrine and many others will simply disappear if people can be convinced to let the scriptures speak for themselves, without external interference or modern prophecy. What is hard to understand is how people can believe a doctrine that makes the scriptures contradict themselves and then say that they accept the Bible as the infallible word of God. If you pit one scripture against another, then one must be wrong. If one is wrong, how can you determine which ones are truth and which are not? The premillennial doctrine may not matter, in and of itself, but it does have far-reaching consequences in one’s attitude toward the scriptures as a whole.

Immersion

There are many that tell me that baptism (immersion) is “an outward sign of an inward grace.” Since you cannot earn your salvation by anything you do, immersion must be a work of man, and is therefore not necessary for salvation. Since we are saved by grace through faith, you can be baptized if and when you want. Although “immersion...has always been the rite of purification” (Chaim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew*, p. 126), God has changed and now no longer requires it. So what difference does it make if a person is immersed or not?

From a practical standpoint, this one makes all the difference. The consciousness of the dead has no bearing on their salvation. The rapture and millennial reign with Christ would make no difference to one’s salvation, especially since a person may never live to that time. The question of immersion, though, is one essential to salvation. If the above statements are true, then immersion

has no bearing on salvation. If they are false, it may have great bearing.

From the first day on which Christ was preached as the risen savior, the apostles preached immersion as an essential part of forgiveness of sins, which is salvation. When people asked the apostles what they must do to be saved, Peter gave a definitive answer. “Repent, and be immersed every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 2:38) (This same Peter would later say, “immersion now saves you.” (1 Peter 3:21)) Paul immersed people everywhere he went. He even says that without immersion there is no new life. One cannot be born again without it.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were immersed into Jesus Christ were immersed into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by immersion into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. (Rom 6:3-5)

Some will say that immersion is essential to obedience, but not to salvation. That is, one must be immersed, but only as an act of obedience after having been saved without it. It is interesting that many who take such a legalistic position are those who argue that when

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God required immersion before salvation he was being legalistic himself. Unfortunately, the only way to state this position is to propose that salvation and forgiveness are two unique and mutually exclusive propositions. Some take pride in being “born again Christians” (as if there is any other kind) but deny that which brings the new birth.

What difference does it make? None, if you want to keep your sins and continue in your old life. None, if you don’t care to be in Christ. None, if you believe you can be saved without having your sins forgiven. But if you want to be saved from sin and walk in a new life it makes a great difference.

We sometimes argue so much about things that don’t really affect our salvation. Some people even do this to avoid arguing about those things that do. Eventually we need to step back and look at our discussions. The really important ones are the ones that do matter to our salvation. The rest just become exercises in debating.

CROWN HIM KING

Rosh HaShanah (September 30 in 2008) is characterized by the blowing of the *shofar*, the ram's horn trumpet. Leviticus 23:23-25, which mandates the blowing of the *shofar* on this date calls it a memorial of blowing, but gives no details about what is being memorialized.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

Some point out it is on that day that man was created. It was also the day on which Abraham offered Isaac (which is why the *shofar* is specifically a ram's horn). Some say that since man is the crowning achievement of creation, the blowing of trumpets memorialize his creation, just as it also announces the crowning of a new king.

While man is the crowning achievement of creation, and while man is worthy of a certain degree of honor, there is one for whom we should blow the *shofar*, figuratively or literally, before we celebrate man. After all, what is man but the clay in the potter's hands? "But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." (Isa 64:8)

In New Mexico, each of the pueblos has a distinctive style of pottery. A casual visitor to the state might stop outside the Governor's Palace in Santa Fe and comment about how lovely a pot is, and may even choose to buy it. A more discerning shopper might be

able to distinguish between an Acoma pot and a San Jon pot. A true connoisseur will know a black-on-black San Ildefonso from a similar Santa Clara, and may even know a Maria Martinez from one of her copyists. As with much art, the question is often not only how well it was made, but also who made it. So it is with man.

We honor kings and presidents, athletes and artists, and sometimes rightfully so. No matter what a man's accomplishments are, however, he is still a clay pot, destined to be broken. He who is to be honored is the potter himself. What are we but what God makes us? Some of us have been created for great things; others of us are mere chamber pots. Whatever we are, we are exactly what the potter created us for. Just as no collector asks the purpose of a Maria Martinez San Ildefonso, so we must honor each other, but for the God who created us.

Our creator is the king; men are merely his subjects. God is sovereign; we are subservient. The king is sitting in judgement. He is deciding in what ways to bless us, his subjects. He is our creator and sustainer. He gives us what we need to live, and more.

On Rosh HaShanah, when you hear the *shofar* sound (or even if you don't), crown God as king. Honor him with the honor he deserves. When the *shofar* blows a hundred times on the holy day, make God the king of your life. And every day, when you wake up, hear the *shofar* with your mind's ear, and crown him again. Daily make sure God is on his throne. He will be on his throne in heaven. Make sure he is on the on in your heart.

"Blow the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day." (Ps 81:3)

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