



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 15, Issue 11

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

September 2014

JOAB'S SHOFAR

It is not unusual to read about trumpets in the scriptures. The *shofar* was an important communications device in the ancient Jewish world. Two silver *shofarim* were designated for the priests to signal assemblies to the nation of Israel. (Numbers 10) Of course, the most well-known use of trumpets is the holiday of *Rosh HaShana*, known in the Bible under the name the Feast of Trumpets. (This holiday occurs on September 25 in 2014.) There are other uses of the *shofar* that might teach us lessons, though they may be less obvious.

In 2 Samuel 2, David's army, under the leadership of Joab, was facing the army of the tribe of Benjamin, under Abner. Abner had been a leader under King Saul of Benjamin, and now led the resistance to David's becoming king over all Israel. The two armies were camped on opposite sides of the pool of Gibeon. They engaged in a battle in which Abner killed Joab's brother, Asahel, but was soundly defeated. Abner begs Joab to end the fighting before more people die. "So Joab blew a *shofar*, and all the people stood still, and pursued after Israel no more, neither fought they any more." (2 Sam 2:28)

Several years later, after David had been established as king, Absalom, his son, led a rebellion. It seemed that he had gained the support of much of Israel, and so David had fled the capital. Absalom followed him and the opposing troops engaged in battle. Again, Joab led David's army. During the battle, Absalom was guilty of inattentive driving of his mule (texting his general, perhaps), and ended up getting his head caught between the limbs of a tree. His mule went on and he hung suspended between heaven and earth. Contrary to David's orders, Joab and his armor bearers killed the young upstart. "And Joab blew the *shofar*, and the people returned from pursuing after Israel: for Joab held back the people." (2 Samuel 18:16)

We often hear of the trumpet signaling the attack, but sometimes there is value in restraining the urge to fight. Sometimes we should be like Jubilation T. Cornpone (in the play *Li'l Abner*) who "led the charge that took us straight to the rear." When is it good to listen to the *shofar* of retreat?

The first time Joab blew the retreat was when the victory had been established, and to fight further would have brought greater harm than good. We face these situations on occasion. Those who are prone to debate the scriptures, particularly those who do so with the intention of showing others how wrong they are, sometimes should listen to Joab's *shofar*. There is a time for showing people what the scriptures say. There is a time, even, for demonstrating the error of their ways. If a person is unaware of his sin he will never repent. When one crosses the line between correcting another and begins giving them more than forty lashes, then they should retreat. Getting one to the point of repentance may bring salvation; continuing to beat him beyond that point tends to bring resistance. Quit while you are ahead, as Joab did.

The second time Joab blew retreat, he did so too late. He had the situation in hand, but waited to recall the army until after he had crossed the line. The time to blow retreat is before being overcome by sin, not after. Too often there is a tendency to "rush in where angels fear to tread." We attack sin as if it is something to be embraced rather than conquered. A good general knows that a timely retreat may give him an opportunity for victory another day. Joab had known that against Abner, but failed to practice it when tempted to kill Absalom.

Listen for the *shofar*. The whole point of the blowing of the instrument on *Rosh HaShana* is to call one away from sin and toward repentance. Listen to the *shofar* while it can still give an advantage. Learn the right time to give up. Be like the younger Joab, rather than the older one.

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A HIGHER COURT

I have been called to jury service three times, in two different jurisdictions. At municipal court I was selected for a trial that ended up being dismissed because the plaintiff contradicted her own statements during cross-examination. The next time I was called for jury duty at municipal court I was never even selected for a jury. In federal court I was in the jury pool for a very high profile case that ended up taking several weeks to decide. I was not selected as a juror because of my military service. They said that there would be military officers testifying for one side, and asked if I could impartially weigh their testimony. When I said that over twenty years of obeying officers would prevent that, I was rejected as a juror. In the United States there are also appellate courts and the Supreme Court, which have no juries. The Jewish court system also consisted of several levels and jurisdictions.

Originally, Moses served as the only judicial court, which meant he had no time to do anything else but hear cases. His father-in-law had to point out that this was not a good situation. He made a suggestion.

Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers

Anger, in itself, is not a criminal matter. Anger without cause may be.

of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee. (Ex 18:21-22)

Thus began the system of judges. Occasionally one judge would gain prominence and lead the people in their fight against invaders. Some of these are told about in the book that bears the name Judges. Generally, though, the judges of lower courts continued on their way without much notice.

Over time this system evolved into a system whereby several men would judge together over various levels. Today, since there is no Temple, the ultimate authority resides in a *beit din*, consisting of three judges (which may include women) on the community level. At least one of these must be well-versed in *Halacha*, Jewish law. In earlier days the *Sanhedrin*, consisting of 71 men, served as the high court. There was a lower court of 23 men, the *Sanhedrin ketana*, in the larger cities, and under

them courts of 23 (or seven according to some authorities) in each city over a certain size (120 or 230 in population). Each smaller town could have a court of three, which developed into the *beit din* of today. The courts of three could not pass any verdict binding beyond the specific case.

It is in this context that Jesus makes a statement in the Sermon on the Mount that has baffled some people. It may become more clear when they understand the levels of the court, and the manner of punishment.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing. (Matt 5:21-26)

The basic premise is that the arbiters of the law claimed that anyone who murdered another was in danger of judgement. Because murder is a capital crime, this judgement would be administered by the *Sanhedrin ketana*. Only the *Sanhedrin ketana* or above could sentence a person to death. In response to this premise, Jesus says that the law goes far beyond this simple capital case.

Angry

Anger, in itself, is not a criminal matter. Everyone gets angry. Sometimes the anger is great; sometimes it is trivial. Sometimes the provoking cause is significant; sometimes it is minor. Paul acknowledged that anger was an emotion, and emotions are neither good nor bad, they just are. “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil.” (Eph 4:26-27) It is generally not the anger that is the sin, but what we do as a result of that anger.

The anger that Jesus addresses in this passage, however, may be a sin, or at least a crime. This is being angry “without a cause.” The Greek word for that phrase is generally translated “in vain.” Anger in response to a

stimulus is natural and expected. Anger without provocation, however, is indicative of a deeper problem. As with the other things Jesus addresses in this section (lust, oaths, vengeance, and hatred), the anger of which he speaks manifests itself in action. A court can take no action on what a man is thinking; it can punish what a man does.

Anyone who is angry with a brother without cause, and therefore has harmed his neighbor unexpectedly, is subject to the same court as a murderer. This would be the *Sanhedrin ketana* that can enforce any penalty up to the death penalty. Murder, as opposed to manslaughter, is the ultimate expression of causeless anger. But the same motivation to murder may result in lesser offences, each of which may be tried at the same level of the courts.

Raca

Most versions of the Bible do not translate all of the next phrase. They retain the Hebrew word, *Reykah* or *Raca*. This word is generally understood to mean “empty-head.” Thus Young’s Literal Translation reads, “Whoever may say to his brother, empty fellow.” Some versions say “insults his brother.” The New American Standard Bible says “good-for-nothing.” Holman uses the word “fool” here, and “rebel” in the next phrase. Perhaps the modern equivalent is, “He’s so retarded.” (I personally object to that phrase as the parent of a truly mentally retarded person; as they say in the movie *The Giver*, “precision of language!”)

Perhaps Jesus is accusing a person of slander. That would mean the person would be calling another empty-headed falsely. Perhaps the veracity, or lack thereof, of the statement is irrelevant. Whether slander or merely publicly calling attention to another’s failings, this accused is subject to trial by the full *Sanhedrin*, the high court of 71 men in Jerusalem. It is a more serious crime than baseless anger, or even murder.

Why is the use of this word worse than murder or baseless anger? This may be speculation, but perhaps it is because casting doubt about one’s mental state may do more damage. Once a murder occurs, no more direct damage may be done to the victim. That is not to say that the damage done is excusable, or any less serious. It is merely more final. Furthermore, if someone acts on causeless anger, the victim is not abused by society; the perpetrator may be. In most cases, people understand that it was not the victim’s fault. It was the fault of the person who acted without provocation. But in the case of slander, or in the case of bringing undue attention to the failings of another, the victim continually has to live with people believing that what was said is true. Calling someone an idiot (to use the New Living Translation wording) plants a seed in the minds of other people that this just might be so. Especially if it is false, the one who makes such statements is liable to a court. One of the elements of the

legal definition of slander is that the untruth will harm the reputation of the victim.

Because of the ongoing nature of the damage to the victim, this crime goes before a higher court. Rather than a small *Sanhedrin*, this crime is subject to judgement by the full supreme court.

Fool

This third part of the passage is perhaps the most debated. The one who calls another a fool (or a rebel, or, literally, a moron) is subject to the fires of gehenna. There are two things to consider here.

First, what is the crime? It is calling another a moron. Calling one simply empty-minded does not imply a permanent mental capacity. That which is presently empty may be at some future date filled. Calling one a moron, however, is saying that the person will never have the mental capacity of an adult. The *raca* has hope; the *moros* has none. This distinction is even made in the Proverbs. The writers make a difference between the “simple” man and the “fool.” The simple man is merely

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unlearned; the fool is incapable of learning. In that context, he may have the mental capacity but refuses to exercise it. In this context, the accusation may be that he is truly mentally “retarded.” The one using the word is making a snap judgement without evidence. He is therefore subject to an even higher standard.

The second question is the meaning of “hell fire” or the “fires of gehenna.” If it is what we generally refer to as hell, then the court this person is liable to is God himself. If it is literally being sentenced to burn in the Jerusalem city dump, the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, then it is saying this person is subject to being burned like the children who were sacrifices to “Molech,” the king of demons. Rather than receiving a normal burial, he is to be exposed to the animals and the elements. This was an extreme punishment. Many societies bury their dead. In almost every one of those, to be denied burial is the worst insult one can receive after death.

Either way, Jesus is saying that calling a person “a retard” in the modern slang, is serious business. There were three or four levels of court in Jewish society. This person is liable to an even higher court: God.

Different courts, indeed. But what Jesus is bringing home is that our words do more damage sometimes than murder. We must be careful what we say, because sometimes it may take us before what Oscar Hammerstein II called “the highest judge of all.”

A FUNERAL PROCESSION

There are people who can take any circumstance and turn it into a valuable lesson. Anything that happens is fodder for their imagination. The Teacher was one such person. We would be walking down the road and he would see sheep in the distance, and then he would start, "I am the good shepherd." He watched a farmer planting and said, "A sower went out to sow;" and a lesson followed. Why, he could even use a funeral. Such was the case as we entered the village of Nain.

As usual, we had a pretty large crowd with us, so there was no shortage of witnesses to what was about to happen. We were about to enter the city, when we came upon a procession going the opposite way. It was a funeral for the only son of a widow. Once we learned that, we all knew what that could mean. This young man had been his mother's only support. His death would mean that she would have to beg, or starve. If she had other sons they could help her, but he was her only one.

The Teacher had compassion on her. (Indirectly he had compassion on everyone there, because many of these people would be unclean because of the dead body.) The Teacher even touched the bier to get the bearers to stop, thus making himself unclean. Then he spoke to the corpse, and told him to get up. Which, to our surprise, he did. When the young man spoke to his mother, probably asking her what was going on, the whole crowd praised God.

This event had passed from our immediate attention when a few days later a group of John's disciples came up to the Teacher. This was the teaching moment.

They asked on behalf of their master, "Are you the one to come, or do we wait for another?"

Before he gave his typical non-answer, the Teacher gave a demonstration. We never were lacking in

people wanting healing. So the Teacher healed; sickness, demon possession, even blindness. Then he sent the men back to John with instructions to tell him what they had just seen. He added, "And if these are blessed by this healing, how much more blessed will be those who are not ashamed of me."

After John's disciples left, he turned to the rest of us and asked what we had expected of John. Did we expect him to cater to our whims? Did we expect him to be well-dressed like those in palaces? (If we did expect that, we would have been sorely disappointed by his camel hair and leather garb.) Did we expect a prophet. (In that we were not to be disappointed.) The Teacher called John much more than a prophet; indeed he was the promised precursor to the highly-anticipated Messiah. He called John the greatest prophet born to a woman. And yet, said he, the least of the citizens of God's kingdom is greater than John. He was talking to and about us. As great as John is, so much greater are we just by being a part of God's kingdom. What a concept! I am greater than the greatest of the prophets. I am somebody. I am a contender.

Many of the people rejoiced at this thought, because they had been immersed by John. Some of the Pharisees, on the other hand, were not comforted because they had rejected John.

The Teacher even took this as a teaching opportunity. He proceeded to show the inconsistency of these people. They vilified John as demon-possessed because of his lifestyle. The Teacher followed a more liberal practice, and yet they condemned him for being what they had expected of John.

To the Teacher, everything is a teachable moment. He is never afraid to take advantage of those opportunities.

(Based on Luke 7:11-35)

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