



Minutes With Messiah

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THEY ARE RELATED

Leviticus 10 tells of the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, for offering strange fire before the Lord. Following that chapter there are chapters delineating clean and unclean animals, laws mandating a period of separation for a woman after giving birth, laws concerning leprosy, and laws about personal uncleanness. Then chapter 16 describes what is to happen on the Day of Atonement, now commonly called Yom Kippur.

Chapter 16 begins with an unusual statement. "And the LORD spake unto Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered before the LORD, and died." While it does speak to the ultimate in purification, it does not refer back to the previous five chapters. Instead it goes back to the historical event. Not everything in the Bible is necessarily in chronological (or even logical) order. When the scripture makes a statement like this, however, there must be a correspondence between the two narratives. The chapter listing all the holy days, including the Day of Atonement, does not come until later (chapter 23 by our division). The chapters concerning the details of how every other offering is to be made are earlier. So what does the Day of Atonement have to do with the deaths of Nadab and Abihu?

It actually harks back to what God said after His fire destroyed Aaron's sons. "This is it that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified." (Lev 10:3) A little later He added, "And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean."

Nadab and Abihu (we always seem to lump them together as one) offered alien fire to the Lord. We are not given specifics of what constituted this alien fire. Had God told them to take the fire from one source, one "eternal flame"? Had they used the wrong incense? We don't

know. What is apparent is that their actions went against what would sanctify God in them; they did not put a difference between the holy and profane.

God is holy. Several times in the succeeding chapters God tells Israel to be holy, for He is holy. There is nothing that man can do to sanctify God. But that is not what He said through Moses. He said "I will be sanctified in them." There is something of God in each of us; after all, He breathed into us the breath of life. We can either sanctify that part of us, or we can profane it. We can be clean or unclean.

This, perhaps, is the reason that God chose this occasion to spell out the exact steps of the Day of Atonement: the sin offerings, the casting of lots to determine the scapegoat, the ceremonial washings. The two sons of Aaron served as an example of the unclean, so God took the opportunity to show how Israel could be made clean.

Therefore shall ye keep my commandments, and do them: I am the LORD. Neither shall ye profane my holy name; but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel: I am the LORD which hallow you. (Lev 22:31-32)

What constitutes sanctifying God within us? Keeping and doing what God says. For the Jewish people that involved the details of the Day of Atonement, as well as the details of what God had told Nadab and Abihu, and the rest of the Law of Moses. For gentile Christians it is primarily summed up in one command. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." (Jn 13:34)

Yom Kippur begins at sunset, October 8 in 2019.

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Minutes With Messiah has been published monthly since November, 2009. This issue marks the completion of twenty years of publication. Most of the articles and songs have been of my own invention, but guest articles are always welcome. Thank you, my readers, for sticking with me.

Tim O'Hearn

EIGHT TIMES ALAS

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, we have a street called Ouray (pronounced like hooray without the h). There is also a city in Colorado by that name. In Biblical Greek there is a word that sounds very similar. It is *ouay*, without the r. In English we have a word that is almost an exact transliteration: woe. In the Greek the word is almost a sigh, expressing deep emotion. It is usually translated either alas or the English equivalent, woe. When we read the eight woes Jesus pronounces in Matthew 23 or the three woes in the Revelation, we often think of them almost as a curse. This is not what the original intent was. It was an expression of deep sorrow. In the case of Matthew 23, Jesus was expressing how aggrieved he was at the actions of, primarily, the scribes and Pharisees. It wasn't an "I'm going to blast you to hell" sort of grief; it was an "I wish you would see your error and repent" sort of grief.

Kingdom Issues

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for

They come before God
seeming to believe they
have done nothing
wrong.

ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Matt 23:13-15)

The first two woes decry how the scribes and Pharisees deal with people that would like to enter God's kingdom. Essentially this is how they react to his own teachings.

First he points out the hypocrisy of knowing how to enter the kingdom, but not even taking advantage of it. The Pharisees knew who Jesus was; they just did not want to accept it. They may or may not have known he was Messiah, but they knew of his teachings about the kingdom of God. They knew that the crowds were following Jesus because he spoke with authority that they did not have. (Mk 1:23) They were jealous, and like many jealous people they decided to "take their ball and go home." If the people would not listen to them, they would prevent the people from listening to Jesus.

In the second case, Jesus says that even if one makes it into the kingdom in spite of their efforts to the contrary, the scribes and Pharisees pervert his conversion. They teach the new convert to follow their own doctrines thus spoiling him for the kingdom.

If Jesus was so sorry for these actions by the religious people of his day, would he not weep also if it happened today? And does it happen? How many people are kept out of the kingdom by the way Christians approach them? Some have taken "hate the sin but love the sinner" and turned it into "hate the sin and antagonize the sinner." With the manner in which some people approach potential converts, it is a wonder that they teach anyone at all. And those that do listen are often the ones who do so because the message fits their hatreds.

Worship Issues

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. (Matt 23:14, 16, 23)

In all things he calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, but in these three matters they seem worse than in the others. Perhaps that is because these matters concern their relationship to God.

The first concern is prayer. "Devouring" widow's houses could encompass a number of offenses. Most literally, the Pharisees appear to have made loans to the most vulnerable in society, and then demanded their houses to pay the debt. Before the Babylonian captivity, Amos and some of the other prophets blamed Israel for their mistreatment of the poor. That sin is bad enough, but they compounded it by trying to appear more religious. "They love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." (Matt 6:5) They come before God seeming to believe they have done nothing wrong.

Jesus spends a lot of time discussing the matter of vows. This woe is about one's attitude toward God's law. The scribes (lawyers) had developed a complex set of rules about vows. These were expressed in a sort of legalese that tended to obfuscate rather than clarify. Most of all, they were intended to allow loopholes so that the

informed could get around their obligations. One could say “by heaven” and be safe, but “as God is my witness” was binding. Thus it was incumbent on the one to whom the vow was made to listen carefully. The Pharisees were like the man who said, “I swear on my mother’s grave,” until it was pointed out that the hearer knew his mother was still alive.

Jesus points out the ridiculousness of all of this. What makes the sacrifice holy? The altar. What makes the gold holy? The Temple itself. What is the sin? Making vows to God or man without ever intending to keep them. Instead, a vow should be a vow. If you don’t intend to keep it, don’t make it. Especially, don’t think you can lie to God and excuse it by some hair splitting.

The third matter is the tithe. In Israel, the tithe was essentially the same as the taxes we pay to the government today. They were used to pay the officers of the government (the priests) and for social aid programs. The scribes and Pharisees were diligent about paying taxes. They even set aside a tithe of the least of their agricultural products—the herbs and spices. Jesus does not say there was anything wrong with this. Paying the tithe was a good thing. Where they went wrong was believing that observing the details made up for ignoring the broader picture. Strict religious adherence is of little value without the “weightier matters.” One can drop money in the contribution trays without faith; it happens all the time. Religious practice without religious feeling is a woe, something much to be pitied.

Appearance Issues

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. (Matt 23:25, 27, 29-31)

The mysterious “they” say that reputation is what others see but character is what you are when others are not looking. If that is true, then the lawyers and the Pharisees had reputations that did not match their character. They carefully cultivated the reputation of being the set apart, the holy ones. They were probably successful for the most part. What upset them about Jesus was that he was able to see character. Jesus called them out when their reputation was really a façade.

Who would buy a dishwasher that advertised that it sterilized just the outsides of dishes? When you fill a coffee cup, is it not the inside that gets dirty? (I’ve seen coffee and tea cups that were not washed, and the inside was where the stains were.) If you wash the dishes, you wash the whole dish; or at least you wash the inside. Nobody wants just the outer appearance of cleanness.

“He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days.” (Num 19:11) Being ceremonially unclean was a big deal. Not only did it mean you were pretty much cut off from other people for a week, it also meant you were cut off from the Temple. Someone who was so concerned about praying where people could see him would not want to risk being away from Temple for that long. Since the Pharisees chose to put a hedge around the Law to make sure they didn’t violate it, they went so far as to whitewash places where people were buried. After all, was not touching a grave the same as touching a dead body, even if swearing by the gold of the Temple was not the same as swearing on the Temple? The

One can drop money in the contribution trays without faith.

problem with whitewashed tombs, however, was that they almost came to be a point of pride. “Look how well I decked Uncle Shlomo’s tomb. Nobody will ever step on it.” Like the tea-stained cup, what was on the outside merely concealed the decay inside. Embalming was rarely used by the Jews. In fact, to save on cemetery space, they came back after the flesh decayed, and reburied the bones in a smaller space. Jesus was mourning the fact that the scribes and Pharisees could have been what they appeared, rather than mere bone-bags.

They took pride in certain tombs, as well. An old saying is that “they kill prophets, don’t they.” Years after they were murdered, however, the Pharisees revered them, and apparently even decorated their tombs. But when called about the circumstances of the death, they would plead, “but that was our fathers, not us.” Jesus says, “like father, like son.” If you are a descendent of a murderer, how do you know you wouldn’t have acted the same way? After all, the greatest of the prophets is among you and you are about to kill him. Appearances may be deceiving. Reputation is not the same as character.

Eight woes. Eight times Jesus says that he is sorry that they acted the way they did. He really wanted the Pharisees to be what they thought they were. If Jesus mourns over the scribes and Pharisees, does he not equally mourn over his own people who claim to follow him, but act differently? If we act hatefully, or more righteous than others, or simply lie to ourselves about who we really are, then we grieve Jesus just as much as the Pharisees did.

NOT REALLY PILGRIMS

"Here, we are but straying pilgrims." This first line of a favorite hymn may not be entirely accurate. The New English Translation (NET) calls *Sukkos* (the Feast of Booths) a "pilgrim feast." Those translators supply the word "pilgrim" although there is no such word in the original Hebrew texts. We like to think of ourselves as pilgrims on a sacred journey. We are on a journey, but is it necessarily a pilgrimage?

A pilgrim is defined as a person traveling to a sacred place for religious reasons. It has been extended to mean a newcomer to the western United States (John Wayne's calling someone pilgrim) or (with an initial capital) the group of people who came to America on the Mayflower. The word, itself, however, implies one going to a place for a religious reason or to fulfil a vow, but with no intent of remaining there. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told by pilgrims on their way to the grave of Thomas Becket (probably at a slow horse's pace now known as a canter, from Canterbury). These people had no intention of staying. Nor did the people making pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Crusades. Nor do Muslims making pilgrimage to Mecca, or Hindus to the Ganges.

It was different with the Israelites in the desert. The Israelites had no intention of returning to their starting point. They were forbidden from doing so. (Deut 17:16) They were not a nation of pilgrims, but rather a nation of refugees. They eventually became an invading army, but were certainly not pilgrims.

The Feast of Booths (October 14-20 in 2019) is a remembrance of the time in the wilderness. As is true of many refugees, it was a time of hardship. The feast is a reminder of how good God was to the wanderers.

Compare with them many refugees today. It matters not whether they are from Central America headed for the United States, formerly from Cuba to Florida, or from Syria to nations in Europe. The Israelites faced similar dangers. People died on the way. Fresh water was scarce. They had to rely on someone else to show the way, although the pillar of cloud/fire was much kinder to Israel than most "coyotes" are to their Guatemalan charges. Even when they spent up to a year in any given place, they made no permanent homes. It was only by the grace of God that they had manna and quail to eat, and "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years." (Deut 8:4) When they arrived at a country that was not their final destination, they were refused admittance. (Num 20:17) Like many refugees today they had to cross a water barrier to get to where they were going. In Israel's case it took a miraculous crossing of the Jordan; in modern cases it is the Rio Grande or the Aegean Sea.

We are traveling toward heaven. We are emigrants, or perhaps refugees. We are not pilgrims, although our destination is a most holy place; we have no intention of returning to this world, even if we could.

These... confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly (Heb 11:13-16)

Sukkos is a feast of remembrance of Israel's refugee status. In this day when we see so many refugees from oppressive governments, might we not remember them as well during this most joyous feast!

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