



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 3, Issue 1

Web site: www.geocities.com/riversidecoc

November 2001

A Dark and Stormy Night

With apologies to Bulwer-Lytton and to Snoopy.

It was a dark and stormy night. Perhaps the fishing boat shouldn't have been out on the lake. When they had started out before sunset everything had seemed promising for a quick trip. They hadn't even expected it to be a three hour tour. But things had gone wrong from the beginning. The wind had come up against them. Now it was midnight and they were maybe half way across.

Simon, the boat's owner, was livid. His orders and complaints could be clearly heard by other captains at even a great distance. Of course they had heard it all before. They were just a little surprised that Simon was back on the lake. Hadn't he gone off and left the family business to join a *yeshiva* run by some no-name rabbi? Now here he was, back on the water and as loud and obstreperous as ever.

Simon's companions in the boat were less angry, perhaps, at their slow progress. They were also less vocal. His brother, Andy, had long ago adopted a policy of silence. After all, he needn't say anything; Simon said it all for him. Their partners, Jake and John, were known for their outbursts, but even they sat silent in the face of Simon's outbursts.

As midnight approached even Simon got suddenly quiet. Something was approaching the boat. They were struggling to make any headway, and yet something, or someone, was coming steadily, inexorably closer. Soon it was close enough that it looked like a man standing in a boat. No sails, no oars. After a few minutes they even saw that he was approaching with no boat. He was walking toward them!

These were fishermen, raised on the water. They had no doubt spent hours some nights trying to relieve the boredom with ghost stories. Now here was a real ghost coming for them! They bent their backs to the oars to help the sails, but the ghost came ever closer. Now, Simon may have been as superstitious as the rest; he may have been as afraid as the rest; but he was also more curious than the rest. Instead of helping speed the craft along he was in the stern, peering at the visitor on the water. As it began to pass the boat it was close enough that Simon could make out a face. Not just any face. This was the face of his rabbi, Joshua. (Some called him Josh behind his back, perhaps, but Simon always used his given name.)

Simon's companions said, "It is his ghost. He went into the wild to pray. Maybe he met up with a bear or a lion and was killed."

But Simon said, "No. It is him. It is really him." Then turning to his teacher he shouted, "Master, if that is really you, ask me to come to you on the water."

Andy was surprised to hear Joshua reply, "Come on, then." Jake and John tried to hold Simon back, still thinking this was some ghost's trick to kill Simon, too. But Simon climbed over the gunwales and actually walked toward the teacher. If John and Jake had been afraid of their cousin's "ghost" they were now terrified at what Simon was doing.

Simon was almost to his rabbi when his fisherman's instincts overrode his trust. Maybe he felt some sea spray blown in his face. Perhaps it was just the smell of the wind. Whatever it was, he looked up and saw big, black clouds scudding across the sky, and his weather sense said there was a nasty storm coming. Then he felt the water up to his knees and he knew he was sinking.

His sudden cry for help was answered as Joshua reached down and took his hand. Simon didn't remember getting back to the boat. Suddenly he was just there, with his rabbi saying "Oh, what small faith you have!" He had *walked on water*, and yet he was being chided for not having much faith. He wanted to ask, "then what could I do with a lot of faith?" But he knew it wasn't the right time to ask that. It was time to get the boat to the Gennesaret coast, even though the wind had suddenly died down.

He didn't get to ask his question then. But maybe Joshua had heard it in his mind, because some time later he told his students, "If you have a little faith, even a mustard seed's worth, you can tell a mountain to move out of your way and it will. Imagine what you could do with a lot of faith. You might even move the world."

This account may have been slightly embellished. The original telling of the story can be found in Matthew 14:22-34 and Mark 6:45-54.

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| A Dark and Stormy Night | 1 |
| Abraham: Two Comments | 2 |
| Why Antioch? | 4 |

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Abraham: Two Comments

Abraham is, of course, one of the principal characters of the book of Genesis. His generosity and faith are well known. His ancestors, legitimate and illegitimate are beyond number. (And I won't go into the Judeo-Islamic argument over which of the two sons was the legitimate one.) So much of the book of Genesis is involved in relating the life of this great man that the lessons learned from his biography are numerous. Throughout Jewish, and even Christian, scriptures and literature much has been taught about Abram/Abraham. I don't pretend to add anything startlingly new to that body of writings. I do, however, want to look at two seemingly minor statements of Abraham to see whether we might observe some things about ourselves and our relationship with God.

Is This Faith?

And, behold, the word of the LORD *came* unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness. And he said unto him, I *am* the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.

What is Abram's response
to this promise of God?
"Show me."

And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. (Gen 15:4-9)

Here is something interesting. God promises Abram that from his own child his descendants would grow into a great nation. The scripture says Abram believed, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Then God makes him a promise that he will inherit the land that he had moved to from Ur. What is Abram's

response to this promise of God? "Prove it." Is this faith? Is this in character for a man who was just commended for his faith? He now wants God to prove that his promise is true. Not even a new promise. This was a repeat of an earlier promise (Gen 13:14-17), yet now, this time, Abram says "show me."

Scholars have made several suggestions about why Abraham here questions God. One of my favorites points out that the earlier version of the promise followed a description of his descendants as being numbered like the dust of the earth. Here they are compared to the stars. The argument is that Abraham realized this was a promise on a higher spiritual plane than the earlier one. He knew his faith was on this level, but it was his descendants who would actually inherit the land, and he questions (rightfully) his descendants' ability to remain on that high plane. Thus, when God, as proof, told him to bring a sacrifice he was telling Abraham that the *korbanot*, the tabernacle/temple sacrifices that would be set up, would atone for their sins and bring them up to the same level as Abraham.

I think, though, that we can learn another important lesson from Abraham, and others, who questioned God. Sometimes we hear people question our religion and we say, "If only you had more faith you would understand." Perhaps it wasn't a lack of faith. Perhaps God is telling us through the story of Abraham that it is OK to question.

Don't get me wrong, there are questions that are not of faith. Sometimes we lose our faith because we don't really want the answers. But several people in the Bible argued with God, and their faith never wavered.

The fact that God did not reply angrily when Abraham questioned him here may have led to an incident three chapters later. God tells Abraham of his intentions toward Sodom. Perhaps thinking of God's willingness to answer here, Abraham there tries to bargain with God, even to the brink of angering Him. Had God shut Abraham down the first time he showed any inclination of questioning what God said, he would not have convinced God to save Lot and his family.

Maybe it is like the father of the two year old. The son asks, "Why is the sky blue?" and the father answers, "I don't know." The son asks why dogs don't have kittens and the father replies, "I don't know." The son asks why he can't fly like the birds, and the thousand other little questions two year olds ask, and the father answers, "I don't know." Finally the son asks, "Daddy, should I stop asking you these questions?" To this the father answers, "No. If you don't ask questions,

how will you ever learn anything?" Sometimes God wants us to question. But he also wants us to listen to his answers, which will certainly never be "I don't know."

We talk of the patience of Job, who didn't curse God in the face of sickness and destruction. But a casual reading of the book would make one wonder about his faith. His friends make argument after argument, to which Job says "show me God, so I may question him." He and Jeremiah both curse the day of their births, and yet God doesn't question their faith, just their understanding. Habakkuk says to God, "what's the big idea here, bringing a more wicked nation to punish Judah." God doesn't question his faith. He shows him the "big picture" and then shows him God's power. Sometimes maybe we can't see the theophany of Habakkuk 3 without the questions of Habakkuk 1.

No fear.

The second statement of Abraham for us to look at comes in Genesis 20. This chapter tells how Abraham traveled to Gerar and Abimelech, the king, took Sarah as a wife. Abimelech found out in a dream that Sarah was Abraham's wife, and so gave her back. The exchange of conversation between Abimelech and Abraham has an unusual question and answer.

Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing? And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. (Gen 20: 9-11)

One would expect the king to ask, "Why have you done this?" But then he asks, "What did you see, that you did this?" Somehow he recognized that Abraham, whom God had said was a prophet, had "seen" something, either naturally or prophetically, that caused him to pass Sarah off as only his sister.

Abraham answers that he thought that these people did not fear God. What was it about a lack of fear of God that would cause him to withhold the truth about his wife? Why would a fear of God have made a difference? And was Abraham right in his assessment?

Obviously at least the king actually had a fear of God. When Abimelech recognized that his dream was from God, he immediately reacted. Whether it was that he was in awe of God or that he was in terror of what God had promised to do to him, he feared God.

Perhaps what Abraham had seen related to the populace in general. Obviously the nation of Gerar had some form of law. Because they had a king, and an apparently strong one, they followed some sort of code of law. Whatever else may have been part of that law, prohibitions no doubt existed against murder, adultery, theft, and robbery. On the face of matters, then, Abraham should have been confident nobody would kill him and take his wife. But that is exactly what he feared.

As he entered Gerar, or maybe in dealings with them previously, he apparently noticed that some people, while paying lip service to law, were willing to disregard the law for their own advantage. He recognized that the law was insufficient to prevent

Somehow Abimelech
recognized that Abraham
had "seen" something
about his nation.

someone from taking what he wanted, by force if necessary. Had the people possessed a fear of God, they would have honored their own laws.

Is anything different today? Surely in a "God fearing" country like the United States, laws are sacred because they ultimately come from God. That is why my home state doesn't need policemen, jails, or courts. That is why the daily news is free of violence, crime, and sudden death. That is why everyone on the highways is courteous, and ever hand gesture must be a friendly wave. And if you believe that, I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I will sell you at a serious discount!

Truly is it said, "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." (Prov 14:34) Had the nation of Gerar been righteous, Abraham would not have had cause to reproach them by his actions. Did our nation not have such a high crime rate, Abraham might have openly said that his beautiful wife was his wife. Would he instead have told us that she was his sister?

Abraham was a man of faith. His faith in God told him that there were times he could question God. His own fear of God made him able to recognize a lack of that in the people around him. Does our faith approach that level? Or are we questioning God without cause? Are we of Gerar, or of Abraham? When people look at us, can we stand to ask, "What is it you saw, that you reacted to me the way you did?"

Why Antioch?

I have often wondered why Paul chose Antioch as his home base. Surely the great city of Jerusalem had more to offer. After all, that was where the apostles were. Why, in my mind I would ask, a little town like Antioch? And therein I find the answer.

I always thought of Syrian Antioch as a small town, perhaps along the scale of Antioch, Illinois. How mistaken can one man be!

Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey) is situated a few miles from the mouth of the Orontes River. It was founded in 301 BC by Seleucus I Nicator, one of the four generals to whom Alexander the Great bequeathed his empire. Naturally, Seleucus made it the capital of the Seleucid Empire. As such, it became the principal city of what is now western Turkey and Syria. Four of Seleucus' successors took the name Antiochus, perhaps from the city.

Antiochus III (the Great) expanded the Seleucid Empire by capturing land formerly under the rule of the Ptolemies, who were centered in Egypt. Among the lands he captured was Palestine. Thus Jerusalem came under Seleucid rule. It was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Antiochus III's uncle, whose attempt to hellenize the Jews led to the Maccabean revolt and the celebration of Hanukkah.

With the addition of territory, the importance (and size) of Antioch increased. By the

time Cleopatra VII Ptolemy went there to capture the heart of Marc Antony the city had become the third largest in the Roman Empire. Rome and Ephesus were larger, Alexandria smaller, and Jerusalem a mere backwater.

When Paul and Barnabas worked out of Antioch it was much like evangelizing America from Chicago or Los Angeles. The church in Antioch was probably larger than that in Jerusalem. It could afford to send out missionaries more readily. And to say one was from Antioch probably held more weight than saying he came from Jerusalem. Add to that Paul's unpopularity in Jerusalem and one can understand why it became his home base.

When one realizes how large Antioch actually was, one can readily understand why Paul later chose Ephesus as the center of his Greek/Asian ministry. He just continued using the largest cities as his natural bases.

Like Ephesus and Alexandria, Antioch *did* not last as a center of commerce and government. The Roman government was centered in the mother city. Earthquakes devastated the city. The trade routes changed. Even to archaeologists Antioch has become a forgotten city. Forgotten, that is, except as the most mission-oriented city of Christian history. After all, it was in that city that followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

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