



Minutes With Messiah

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Zoë's Bible

In times past it was not uncommon for a family to write the names of newborn children or of people newly married into the family in the family Bible. These family Bibles are of importance to genealogists because they are often more accurate or complete records of a family than the government records. Often there was a special ceremony when someone's name was entered in the family Bible. It was a significant event, because once you were written in, you knew you were truly part of the family. That practice has gone away for the most part. But there is one Bible I want my name written in. I want my name in Zoë's Bible.

Now, I don't personally know anyone named Zoë. Although it has again become a reasonably common name, I doubt that I will ever know anybody named Zoë. If I did, I doubt that I would be welcomed into her family. Nevertheless, I want my name written in Zoë's Bible.

What is so important about that Bible? Why do I want my name in it? Because without my name in that Bible I can't get into heaven! How can that be? Why would my name not being in Zoe's Bible keep me out of heaven? Because that is what my Bible says.

"And whosoever was not found written in Zoë's Bible was cast into the lake of fire." (Rev 20:15) Maybe I had better translate the Greek words in that sentence. Here is how it is most commonly rendered in English: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." You see, Zoë's Bible translates into "the book of life."

Why is that book so important? Besides the fact that if your name is not in it you get cast into the lake of fire, that is. In a way it appears in scripture to be somewhat like the old family Bible. If you aren't found there, you aren't in God's family.

In the only New Testament use of that phrase outside of the book of Revelation, Paul said that those with whom he worked toward the spread of the gospel had their names there. "And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me

in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life." (Php 4:3) He thought it important to mention that his name and others in his spiritual family were in Zoë's Bible.

Revelation 21:27 mentions certain things which could keep one out of the Holy City. "And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life." So those who practice such things as defile a man will not be written in Zoë's Bible, but those that are will enter that city.

Perhaps it is the same as the book of remembrance mentioned in Malachi 3:16, where God records the names of people "that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name." Maybe it is the same book that Moses referred to in Exodus 32:32-33.

Moses, in that latter passage, mentioned one of the important aspects of Zoë's Bible. It is erasable. Jesus told John the same thing. "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." (Rev 3:5) How horrible the thought, to be blotted out of that book! That would be equivalent to being disinherited, to being cast out of the family who had recorded your name in their Bible.

I don't want my name erased from Zoë's Bible. Let us all work to keep our names recorded there.

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Balaam or His Ass?

In Numbers 22 through 25 we find the story of Balaam. His story is familiar to our children because of his talking ass, but the story covers much more than that one incident. So much is written, in fact, about him that we should wonder why God devoted so much of the narrative to this one man.

The Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land after forty years in the wilderness. They came to the plains of Moab. Balak, the King of Moab, feared Israel, so he sent for a man who had a reputation as a supreme curser—Balaam. Never in anyone’s memory had Balaam failed in his blessings or cursings. Balak figured this was the “go-to guy” for cursing the invaders. He sent the elders (think vice-consuls) with a great deal of money to hire him. When Balaam was told by God not to go with them he sent them home. Balak may have thought he had insulted Balaam, so he sent princes (think ambassador level officials). This time Balaam chose to go with them.

As Balaam went on his way God sent an armed angel against him. Three times Balaam’s ass saw the angel and reacted. Three times Balaam beat him, not seeing the angel. After the third time “the Lord opened the mouth of the ass.” When Balaam finally saw the angel he fell down in fear, but was told to go on his way.

Balak took Balaam to a high place and offered sacrifices. God caused Balaam to bless Israel. So Balak took him to a different place. The same thing happened.

The miracle of speech is
the miracle of creation.

Likewise in a third place. Balak was angry, but Balaam had blessed Israel instead of cursing them. But that was apparently not the last word from Balaam. He advised the Moabites and Midianites that they could cause Israel to sin by sending them their women to draw them away from God into idol worship (Num 31:16). This they indeed did, bringing a curse of a plague on Israel which was only stayed from destroying the nation through the quick action of one of Aaron’s sons.

A lesson from an ass

As noted above, three times Balaam’s ass saved his life from an angel at the cost of a beating. After the

third time “the Lord opened the mouth of the ass.” (Num 22:28) This was obviously a miracle designed to cause Balaam to repent. Did it have its intended result? Hardly! Instead of repenting, or even indicating anything was unusual, Balaam started arguing with his ass (leading one to wonder which was the true ass). It was only after God let him see the angel that he fell down in repentance.

Obviously “opening the mouth” is used to mean granting speech. There is one other scripture that talks about the Lord opening the mouth. Psalm 51:15 says, “O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.” Faithful Jews quote this daily in their prayers. Some Rabbis have commented on the similarity in language in these two passages.

Anytime the Lord opens anyone’s mouth it is a miracle. It is just that in the case of Balaam’s ass it was an unusual one, while in humans it is a daily occurrence. Yet it is miraculous nonetheless. Why did it seem a miracle in Balaam’s ass? Because God had not previously given animals the gift of speech. Yes, they communicate on a very basic level, but this was complex speech as He had only given to man. But that should make us realize even more the miracle that God has given us.

Some have even said that we are “in the image of God” because we have the power of speech. We have accomplished much as humans, and it is because we have the ability to speak. Even God feared what would result from man speaking to one another without any barriers (Gen 11:6-7) and so he gave us many languages. The miracle of speech is the miracle of creation. When God created the world (Genesis 1) it was through speech. When we “create” boxes or bombs, it is a result of speech. When Samuel F. B. Morse initiated “speech” across telegraph wires the first message was taken from the story of Balaam: “What hath God wrought.” (Num 23:23)

It was a miracle when the Lord opened the mouth of the ass. It is a miracle when the Lord opens our mouths. Sometimes it seems even more of a miracle when the Lord opens our mouth and we “show forth praise.” This ought not be so unusual. Balaam’s ass was given speech to make him repent. Maybe we should use the miracle of speech for the same thing, repentance and praise. Balaam was later forced to open his mouth in blessing. But God would rather that it not be forced. We should pray for God to open our mouths, and the natural result should be “and [as a result] my mouth will show forth praise.”

Three walks

When Balaam's ass did speak, his first words (Num 22:28) were, "What have I done to you that you have hit me these three times?" Those who know Hebrew better than I say that the word translated "times" is not the usual Hebrew word for occurrences or time; instead it is from *regalim*, the word for walking. This is the same word used for the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar, commonly called the "Pilgrim Festivals." What is the significance of this choice of words?

The simple explanation, in the context, is that Balaam had hit him three times, each time after he had "walked" a little further. He had walked out of the path and Balaam hit him. He had walked between two walls and crushed Balaam's foot in trying to avoid the angel, and Balaam hit him. He had walked into a narrow space and had to sit down to avoid the angel, and Balaam hit him with his staff (apparently not having used that implement before). So now he is saying, "I walked out of my way three times to save you, so why are you hitting me?" Maybe we can learn something more than the simple meaning from his words, however.

One interpretation may show Balaam's true character, as recognized by the angel. That angel called Balaam "perverse." His actions in going with the ambassadors of Balak show him perverse, but it was in the context of the beatings that the angel uses the word. The ass had always done as Balaam asked (Num 22:30). But had Balaam always been kind to him? Perhaps his choice of the word used for the yearly festivals indicates that Balaam had been beating him without cause for at least a year, for three festivals. Balaam is ready to curse a nation that had done him no harm. It would be like him to curse and beat an animal for a period of time for less reason than he had to curse Israel.

Others have used the words of the ass to contrast the pilgrimage to the annual festivals with the pilgrimage Balaam was on. The one was a walk to do good, while Balaam's was a walk to do evil. It seems that the means is as important as the end; the walk as important as the destination. If the angel chose to block not just the cursing but the travel to the cursing, the ass was right to complain about being beaten for his three walks away from the evil path. If that is true, then how much more should we watch the way we walk? If, in a sense, the means *is* the end, then walking in God's way is that much more important.

Three Failures

The ass—the breed, not just Balaam's—has acquired a reputation for stubbornness. In the story of

Balaam, however, we find the king and the sorcerer to be more stubborn than the ass.

Balak takes Balaam to a high place where he can see all of Israel. He makes offerings on seven altars. Balaam goes to inquire of God, then comes back to curse Israel. Instead of a curse, though, he says, "Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Num 23:10) Balak is a little disappointed, but does he hear when Balaam says, "How can I curse, when God has not cursed?" No. He thinks it is because Balaam could see all of Israel.

Balak takes Balaam to another high place (where Moses would later view all the Promised Land),

It seems the walk is as important as the destination.

where he can only see part of Israel. He makes offerings on seven altars. Balaam goes to inquire of God, then comes back to curse Israel. Instead he says, "the people will rise up as a great lion." (Num 23:24) Now Balak gets mad and tells Balaam if he can't curse them, at least don't bless. But he is still a stubborn man. Twice he took Balaam to curse, and twice he blessed. Does he give up? No. The third time, maybe, is the charm.

Balak takes Balaam to a third high place. He makes offerings on seven altars. Balaam, who has learned what Balak hadn't, doesn't even go to inquire of God. He faces Israel and lets God speak through him. "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, thy tabernacles, O Israel." (Num 24:25) He concluded, "Blessed is he that blesses thee and cursed is he that curses thee." (Num 24:9) At this point Balak threatens Balaam's life, but Balaam points out that he is just doing what he had told Balak he would do.

Balaam's ass saw the angel the first time and turned away. Balaam finally saw the angel, but took two more figurative beatings to show partial repentance, although he died with the Midianite kings fighting against Israel. Balak got burned three times and still didn't repent; he just gave up. Which of the three am I? Which are you?

God calls upon us to repent. Some hear him, and repent right away. With some people it takes a death or a terminal illness to wake them up to God's message. Others never listen. Some are Balak, some Balaam. Some are the ass. In this context maybe we ought to pray, "Lord, make me an ass."

There's No Afterlife

When asked about the "after-life" a great Rebbe once said, "There is no "after-life". There is only continuation of life as it was lived here in another dimension." He had an understanding of the "after-life" that many Christians could emulate. We don't have this life and that life. We have but one life that continues.

Some people choose to live as if there is this life and when it ends it is over. These are the people who have to grab everything they can in this life. Good and evil are judged by a standard of "how does it affect me?" If the consequences of my actions are all received in this life, then life is unfair and I should act accordingly. To some that means ending their lives prematurely. To others that means doing as much good to others as possible, under the theory that "what goes around comes around." To yet others the idea that there is no continuation of life beyond what we see and know in this body reveals itself in unscrupulous conduct—he who dies with the most toys wins, no matter how he got them (as long as he isn't caught). There is no reason to live beyond living.

Others live under the idea that it doesn't matter what we do in this life. Either God will forgive everybody or God has already chosen those who will be rewarded and nothing anybody else does can affect their salvation or lack of it. The first ignore the warning of Hebrews 10:26-27: "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." The latter ignore Peter's warning (2 Pet 1:10-11), "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and

election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." In either case, the attitude is that this life is distinct from the "afterlife" and has no bearing on it.

Then there are those who agree with the Rabbi mentioned above. What you do in this life not only has bearing on the afterlife; it is merely the beginning of that afterlife. Whatever good people do in this life is not, in Bill Shakespeare's words, "interred with their bones." It is merely deposited to receive interest which will become "treasures in heaven." Whatever evil is done in this life will be punished in the next, unless the debt is forgiven through God's grace.

Truth to tell, Jesus seems to indicate that we have our views all backwards. It's not that we have this life and an afterlife; we have this "beforelife" and then comes life. In Matthew 18:8-9 he said, "Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." Notice that he says whatever happens here is prior to entering into life.

Paul told the Romans (Romans 6) that we are raised to walk in a new life. That life is now and for eternity. The key thing is to remember that if we love God and walk in his way here, we won't have to worry about liking it there.

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