



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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AT THE FEAST

“You’re not going to the feast?” We were incredulous. Everyone went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths. They might celebrate the other feasts at home, but for this feast Jerusalem was “the” place to be. How could the Teacher not go to the Feast of Booths? And what did he mean by saying, “I’m not going yet, because my time hasn’t come.” Surely anyone with whom he had an appointment would be at the feast.

Granted, we had had some problems in Jerusalem. Some people didn’t seem to like the Teacher, or what he said. But what could they do, with all the crowds that would be in town? Anybody could disappear in Jerusalem during this feast.

I always enjoyed the feast. What was not to like? After the Days of Awe we were all tired of doom and gloom. We were ready to party. And what a party! Eight days of visiting friends and relatives, eating and drinking. Not having to worry about finding an inn to stay in; who stays in an inn when everyone is sleeping under the stars? Then there is the last, great day of the feast, the Great Hosanna. The high priest leads a procession to the pool of Siloam, where he gathers some of the water in a gold pitcher. He then leads the people back to the Temple. He pours the water into a special bowl on the south side of the altar to symbolize the final sealing of our atonement for the year. The people shout, “Hosanna, please save us.” Oh what a shout! God has saved us for another year!

How glad I was, then, when the Teacher changed his mind after his brothers had left. We might be late, but we were going.

As I walked around Jerusalem I saw and heard some things. The temple guards were everywhere, looking for anyone who looked like the Teacher. Sure, they tried to be unobtrusive, but have you ever seen a temple guard trying to look unobtrusive? You might as well try to hide a camel in a sheepfold. The people were taking sides, too. Some called the Teacher “a good man;” others called him a liar. Because of the guards, nobody said either thing above a whisper.

Even when he taught in the Temple nobody seemed to recognize him. Some asked how a Galilean could know how to read. A few asked, “If this is the man

the rulers a looking for, might they not think he is the Messiah? After all, they let him speak openly.”

About that time the guards came for him. He disappeared into the crowd. That, and the rumors that he might be the Messiah, angered the rulers, but the Teacher just appeared somewhere else and taught.

On the last, great day of the feast we went to the water ceremony. All was going well until after the priest poured the water behind the altar. Imagine our surprise and embarrassment when the teacher stood up. He had the right to get up and teach. It was just what he said.

“If any man believes on me, from within him shall flow rivers of living water.” Such *chutzpa!* By saying that he was claiming to be Messiah. Zechariah, talking about the Feast of Booths in the Messianic Age, said living waters would go out from Jerusalem, and here the teacher was, saying that they went out from him. He was comparing himself to the water ceremony. I later found out that he had said the same thing to that Samaritan woman we had seen him talking to.

Many people thought he might be Elijah, or even Messiah. Others, forgetting Jonah, asked if a prophet could come from Galilee. Still others tried to hold him for the Temple guards. Nobody was able to hold him.

That was a long time ago, now. We know he was Messiah. The living waters of the Spirit came from him, as we know so well. We couldn’t grasp it then, as the people couldn’t grasp him. Now we can. And *that* was a Booths to remember.

Taken from John 7.

The Feast of Tabernacles this year is October 11-17.

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BIBLICAL RAVENS

Raven: a member of any of fifteen species of genus corvidae, noted for black plumage and intelligence. Ravens have been taught to count to six and have been taught to say several English words. (The source at which I read that last fact didn't say whether they would have been more, or less, intelligent if they had learned French or Russian words.) They have been known to make and use tools. They follow wolves and polar bears to scavenge off their kills. They are naturally monogamous, mating with the same raven for life, which may be up to fifty years. Ravens appear in Norse and American Indian mythologies, as well as such literary works as Poe's *The Raven* and Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*. Most importantly, at least for my current purpose, they can be found in the Bible.

Miscellaneous Ravens

Although the raven is featured prominently in only two incidents in the Bible, it is mentioned with more or less importance in several passages. Among the minor

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references to ravens, mention is made of their color and their habits.

It is not uncommon even today to hear descriptions of "raven-haired beauties." They say that blondes have more fun, but some people consider the deep black of the raven's plumage to be more beautiful. This dates back even to one of the great love songs of history, the biblical Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon). "His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven." (SOS 5:11)

Perhaps the same biblical writer picked up on their habits as scavengers. A warning is given to those children who would rebel against their parents. "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." (Prov 30:17) This description of ravens picking at the corpse of the

rebellious child is perhaps a more poetic rendering of one of the Ten Commandments. "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." (Ex 20:12) The rebellious child will not live long, and will not be accorded the honor of burial. Thus, the ravens will feed on him.

Isaiah prophesied against the nation of Edom. He told of their utter destruction. To show the completeness of that destruction, he called upon the example of the solitary raven. "The owl also and the raven shall dwell in it." (Isa 34:11) The city of Petra would become good for nothing but birds' nests. And so it remained until it became a tourist destination and the setting for an Indiana Jones movie.

Unclean Ravens

Ravens are among the birds that are unclean for the Jews. "And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: Every raven after his kind." (Lev 11:13, 15; also Deut 14:12, 14) Some have speculated that they are considered unclean because they are scavengers and carrion eaters. However, other birds on the list, such as the eagle or the owl, eat live prey. Another suggestion is that they are meat eaters. Although all the forbidden birds are carnivores not all insect eating birds are on the list. In fact, chickens are omnivores, eating grubs as readily as grain, and they are obviously not on the prohibited list, not being found in the Bible at all.

Some have contended that the unclean animals are all prohibited for health reasons. They point to the prohibition against carrion eaters among the birds and bottom feeders among the fish. Most rabbis are quick to point out, though, that not all the prohibitions can be traced to health concerns. Some animals appear to be on the list simply because God wanted to put them there. Herman Wouk made the point in his book, [This Is My God](#), that if the requirements of kosher foods were simply for health reasons everyone in the world would have adopted them long ago. Instead, the prohibition on ravens and other animals appears to be simply to set the people of Israel apart as a people. Unclean animals were unclean simply because God said they were unclean.

We do not know why God included the raven in the list of unclean birds. We do not know for certain why God did or said a lot of things. It is not for us, the subordinate creature, to question the superior creator. All we can say is that God included the ravens on the list, and that is that.

Fed Ravens

“Who provides for the raven his food when his young ones cry unto God?” (Job 38:41) A psalmist answered God’s question to Job. “He [God] giveth to the beasts his food, and to the young ravens which cry.” (Psalm 147:9)

Yes, God feeds the young ravens. But what does that mean to us? Jesus put it best in Luke 12:24. “Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?” How much more, indeed? The ravens have enough; why do some of us think we don’t? God always gives us everything we need. God sometimes gives us more, and therein lies the problem. We sometimes confuse God’s generosity with our necessity. Often “I need that” is really only “I want that.” God feeds the ravens, and he gives us even more. Let us instead be thankful.

Noah and Elijah and the Ravens

Ravens figure prominently in two incidents in the Bible. Although they are seemingly unrelated, the rabbis have found a link between the two.

Noah was a righteous man in an unrighteous world. God told him to build an ark because he was going to save the world by destroying it with water. Noah was told to build an ark to save man and animal. As soon as the barge was finished, God sent the original of what we in the American Southwest call a “gully-washer.” A month and a half of rain lasted almost a year. After about eleven months on the ark, Noah tested the waters by sending out birds. The first bird he sent out was a raven. Some suppose he did this because the raven was expendable. After all, you can’t eat a raven. You can’t sacrifice a raven on the altar. Unless, as the Midrash (the Jewish explanation of the scriptures) suggests, the ravens were the only animals on the ark to get pregnant, this was the only male raven left in the world. If he didn’t survive, no more ravens. Noah may not have swatted the pesky mosquitoes, but he was willing to risk the only ravens. No wonder the raven never came back. He “went forth to and fro until the waters were dried up from off the earth.” (Gen 8:7) A couple of weeks later Noah left the ark, and apparently released the raven’s mate.

In spite of Noah, God saved the raven. He had a purpose for the ravens, so they had to survive. Some see that purpose in the statement that he went forth until the waters were “dried up” (Hebrew *yevoshet*). The letters of that Hebrew word, when reversed, form the word “*Tishbe*,” which brings us to Elijah the Tishbite, or Elijah

from Tishbe. God needed the ravens to help Elijah survive, and it had to do with the land drying up.

Because of the wickedness of King Ahab and his wife Isabella (Jezebel), God had told Elijah to prophesy a drought. When God prophesies it comes true, so the land dried up. Elijah hid out by a stream. While there, God sent the ravens to Elijah with food, both morning and evening. (1 Kings 17:4-6) Ravens care for their own, but usually have nothing to do with others. This was an unusual thing.

When God provides an unusual thing, we should take note. Why did God use the ravens? Why had he kept them alive just so they could feed Elijah? Perhaps the answer relates to the attitude earlier attributed to Noah. Many consider ravens worthless birds. What good can come from a scavenger? Yet this is the very attitude Elijah had about the people of Israel to whom he was sent. “And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” God needed to show Elijah that this worthless nation had value in itself. If a bird that

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couldn’t even be used as a sacrifice was useful to God in feeding his prophet, then a nation that couldn’t obey God like those ravens might have good in it.

When Elijah complained that he was the only righteous man left in Israel, God told him there were really seven thousand. Should we not learn that lesson? Can we sit back and say that America (or any other group of people) won’t listen to God, and justify our silence. Or should we see the lesson of the ravens? They went to and fro until the land dried up, and when the land dried up again, they showed that good could come from evil. It may appear that faith has dried up, but God can surprise us with where faith really springs up. It may be the next raven, or raven-haired one you meet.

AFFLICT YOUR SOULS

And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you. (Lev 16:29)

Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord. (Lev 23:27)

Some have said the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is the only biblically mandated time of fasting, as determined by the phrase, “ye shall afflict your souls.” Actually, the rabbis interpreted this to mean more than fasting. Afflicting yourself included refraining from food and drink, but also included not wearing leather shoes (a sign of luxury) or engaging in marital relations. The word translated “afflict” usually carries with it the meanings: to busy oneself with; and, to humble or oppress. How do these meanings become the concept of fasting?

The idea of fasting as affliction or oppression is not really so far-fetched. The Israelites were told not to afflict widows and orphans. (Ex 22:22) Within the same context it talks about lending to the same people. The idea is that one who afflicts a widow is one who prevents her from obtaining food—enforcing a fast upon her. In Egypt, the Israelites were afflicted with work. (Ex 1:11) They were given excessive amounts of work with little pay and little time to eat. They were forced to fast for much of a day. Affliction, therefore,

can carry with it the idea of forgoing luxuries, such as food, drink, and fancy clothes.

Normally such afflictions come from without. We, especially we in America, are not very familiar with self-imposed affliction. We prefer luxury to hardship, overindulgence to hunger. God knew his people. So He designated one day a year to remind Israel that they were dependent entirely upon Him. A day without food or drink, spent in the study of God’s word tends to remind one that the Master of the Universe can take it all away. It was also a reminder that atonement, forgiveness of sins against God, was also a gift, like food and water, that was essential to life. Perhaps that gift is not possible without the humbling, the realization that God gives the other gifts as well.

The verses talk about afflicting the soul, not the body. Normally fasting has a more direct effect on the physical than the spiritual. So what is meant, then, by afflicting the soul? Perhaps that brings us to meaning number one in the definition above. On Yom Kippur, one was to “busy oneself with” his soul. If that meant fasting so that one had more time to study and pray, then it can include fasting. But fasting alone doesn’t help busy oneself with his soul. More important is the study of God’s word, the praying for atonement, the reflecting on one’s past year and repenting where necessary. One rabbi said it this way: “Godly sorrow works repentance to salvation not to be repented of.” (1 Corinthians 7:10)

We need to consider our sins constantly through the year. It doesn’t hurt, though, to busy ourselves with our souls in earnest at least once a year.

Yom Kippur falls on October 6, 2003.

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