



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 5, Issue 5

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

March 2003

HIDE AND SEEK

Why is the book of Esther in the Bible? Sure, it is a rollicking good story about the Jews. So is *Exodus* by Leon Uris, but nobody claims biblical status for that book. Unlike some other stories of the Jews, *Megillat Esther* (the book of Esther) doesn't even make mention of God. It appears that the Jews were saved by coincidence and luck.

The modern book, *Exodus*, tells of great events. Like Esther, it even tells of events that have become a holiday for the Jewish people. So why is Esther given extra status?

The main argument some might have that Esther should not be in the Bible is the aforementioned lack of reference to God. Shouldn't God be included in any book considered part of his revelation to man? Shouldn't the book itself at least claim that it came from God?

If that is the most potent argument against including Esther in our Bibles, then we can see why it is included. None of God's names can be found in the book, but He can be. The book of Esther is God's game of "hide and seek."

The world that doesn't know our God makes a god out of coincidence. The right conditions happened to occur for life to begin. Over a period of time, certain mutations happened to occur, coincidentally at the same time that the opposite gender of the same mutation happened to appear. Suddenly coincidence has created the male and female of a species. After a series of extremely forgettable Presidents of the United States, a strong man was elected coincidental with (as well as causing) a civil war in that nation. Everything that we see, know, and are is supposed to be the result of a long chain of coincidences.

In the case of Esther, the coincidences just piled up at the same time. Some men plotted against the king, which Mordechai coincidentally heard and reported. The king needed a new head wife, and Mordechai's niece was coincidentally available and desirable. An Amalekite, of all people, had, coincidentally, been named the king's chief advisor. This man, Haman, was already mad at Mordechai, and coincidentally walked into the king's chamber when the king realized that he hadn't rewarded Mordechai. (This coincidence led to further humiliation for Haman.) The Amalekite decided to destroy his

traditional enemy, the Jews, when a Jewess coincidentally had the king's favor. When Haman was pleading his case before Esther, the king coincidentally came into the room at the one moment that it looked like Haman was seducing the queen. Perhaps the only true coincidence in all this was that Haman completed a gallows just in time to be hanged on it.

Of course, those all could be coincidences. Esther had not, as Mordechai put it, "come to the kingdom for such a time as this." God either does not exist or does not intervene. That *could* be true. But it takes as much faith to believe those coincidences as it does to believe that God was behind all those "just happened." For those of us who see the hand of God in a youth being sold into slavery, a burning bush, ten plagues over a year's time, the parting of the sea and the river, a never-ending pot of oil, and countless other occurrences, there is no difficulty in seeing the hand of God in *Megillat Esther*.

Yes, God is hiding in the book of Esther. He is holding the hand of Mordechai, and Esther and even Haman, from the first moment to the last. He is there to be found by any who will seek him. He will know the seekers from the suckers by whether or not they find him.

God is just as present in our lives. Do we look to find him there, too? Or did you just coincidentally lose your car keys for that five minutes that kept you out of the accident you later passed on the road? Did you just happen into the employment office when the perfect job opened up? If you see God holding your hand you can be like the author of Esther, and hope that others find God hiding. Or you can use his name, and give him the credit directly. The main thing is to seek, and he will be found.

The holiday of Purim falls on March 7, 2004.

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FED BY THE TEACHER

It is amazing how a small thing can become big. I know you are probably thinking I am speaking figuratively. But in this case I am speaking literally, and about more than one occasion.

I had heard about the teacher. I knew he lived somewhere the other side of the sea, and that he had spent some time in Jerusalem. I heard that he spoke wonderful things, and that they said he was unlike any of our normal teachers. I had even heard that he could perform miracles, just like the prophets of old. But I had never had the chance to see or hear him.

When I heard that the teacher had come into our area, I knew I had to see him. Someone said he was in town, but by the time I heard about it and could get away they said he had taken a boat and headed toward the wilderness. (I later heard that he had left because the crowds were so big around him he couldn't even find time to eat. But I didn't know that yet.) A large crowd was

He said the law was all about love, and not about doing all the right things at all the right times.

gathering, with the intent of following him by traveling along side the water. I wanted to see the teacher, so I joined this crowd.

We went the direction the teacher had gone. We had only figured he would go a little way outside of town, and were surprised when it took us quite a while to catch up to him. When they said he was headed into the wilderness they weren't kidding. When we found the teacher, we must have been over a half-day's journey outside Bethsaida. But we did find him, and his students.

One of his twelve students, I don't remember which, told us that the teacher had left town to try to get some rest. Some of us were ashamed that we had hounded him so, and were about to leave when the teacher, himself, appeared. He told us to stay and he would speak with us. He did not have to do that. If he was tired, we would have understood. At least, some of us would. Maybe he figured that many would stay anyway. Maybe he felt sorry for us and how tired we had to be. Maybe he had gotten enough rest as we were

trying to find him. In any case he sat down and we crowded around to hear him.

It wasn't easy to hear him, either. As we had gone along the shore, others had joined us. We formed a large crowd. I wasn't sure how many of us there were, but it must have been a few thousand. The teacher sat down in front of a large rock, so his voice would carry more, and we stood around to listen. There were so many of us that we couldn't all hear everything he said. The crowd kept moving, so that some in the front were forced to the back and eventually everyone had a chance to hear some of what he said. Somehow I managed to stay within hearing distance for quite a while once I got up toward the front.

I can't remember everything he taught that day. Obviously he said a lot, although he may have repeated himself frequently because of the nature of the ever-moving crowd. I have heard him a few times since, and his message didn't change a lot. He spoke about fulfilling the Law. He told us that he came to us to teach us righteousness. There were a lot of good people there, but he told us how to follow the Law better. He said the law was all about love, and not about doing all the right things at all the right times. There were a lot of not so good people there, too. He told them that life was not hopeless; that they could turn back to God, too. He talked a lot about what he called "the kingdom of God." We had been taught that the Messiah would bring an age of peace and prosperity, when all men would live together under God's law. I got the impression that he was talking about that kingdom, but he said that the kingdom was near. Did he mean the Messiah was about to come? But then he would talk about being sent by his Father and about coming from God, and I began to wonder if maybe he was saying that he was Messiah.

While he was teaching, people kept coming up to him having all sorts of ailments. Some had to be carried to him; some had to be guided to where he was because they could not see. Every time someone came to him with a complaint, be it a sore throat or blindness, he spoke a word or touched them. They all walked away healed! Now I can understand the ones with sore throats or runny noses saying they were healed. But people actually saw blind men they had known all their lives, who had to be led to the teacher so they wouldn't step on someone, walk away through the crowd without running into anybody. People who had to be carried to the teacher because they couldn't walk left his presence running to their relatives and friends! If his words had made me wonder whether he was claiming to be Messiah, his miracles made me wonder if he truly was Messiah, or at least his prophet.

I happened to be near the front late in the afternoon. One of the teacher's students went up to him as he paused in his teaching. I overheard what he said.

"It's getting late. It is well past suppertime. Send these people away so they can go to the nearest villages to buy food."

I realized then how late it really was, and how hungry I was. We had all been so busy listening and watching the healings that we had forgotten our hunger.

The teacher's response was, "Feed them yourselves."

"Even if we had forty weeks' worth of wages we couldn't find enough bread to feed all these people," answered another of his students.

"What do you have; how many loaves?" the teacher asked.

Among all his students they could only find five loaves of bread and two pieces of fish. They gave them to him.

The teacher took the food, then passed the word around for everyone to sit on the grass in groups of fifty or a hundred. When we had done so he looked up to heaven and said the blessing for bread. "*Baruch ata adonoi elohainu, melech ha olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.*" [Blessed art thou, o Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.]

Then he started breaking the loaves and fish and handing them out. We all figured that the first group of people his students carried them to would be the only ones eating that evening. Instead, they kept going back to the teacher and getting more to hand out. Soon (that being a relative term with the large crowd we had) everyone was eating their fill of bread and fish. It reminded us of the stories of the manna, and how everyone had just enough, no matter how little they collected. There was one difference this time, though. With the manna there was never any left over. When we were through eating they came through with some large baskets somebody had found. Each of his students filled up a basket with leftovers. I don't know who took a count, but one of his students said there were five thousand men in the crowd, not counting women and children.

After we all ate, the teacher told his students to get into their boats and sent them across the sea. He stayed around long enough to send us all home. Then he went up the nearest mountain alone. He sent us away just in time, too. I had barely gotten back to my small village when a powerful storm broke. We expected it to last until morning, but it stopped suddenly in the middle of the night.

A few weeks later I was visiting relatives near Capernaum when I heard the teacher was in the area. After

what I had seen on the other side of the sea, I naturally went out to see him. Again, it was a long walk to the mountain where he was. By the time I got there another large crowd had gathered. This was almost a repeat of the previous time. He taught, but mostly he healed. There were the usual lame and blind people, along with other ailments. I saw him heal a couple of people who had been unable to speak, even to ask him to heal them. They went from group to group in the crowd, shouting praises to God. Another man was deaf, and thus couldn't speak well. The teacher took him aside, put his fingers in his ears, spit, and touched his tongue. The man walked away able to hear, and to speak clearly.

This time I had thought to bring some food of my own. We stayed out there with the teacher for three days, however, and I ran out of what I had. Apparently so did most everybody else. As we ran out of food, we considered whether to leave.

On the third day, the teacher told his students, "We can't send these people off without food. They have been with us three days, and some are so hungry they would faint before they got to the nearest village." His

Unlike with manna, in this case there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

students asked how they could feed all these people, apparently forgetting the previous time. At the teacher's insistence they found seven loaves and a few fish. The teacher again blessed the food and divided it. This time there were only seven baskets of leftovers. Of course, this time there were only about four thousand people in the crowd, instead of eight or ten.

After that, I started following the teacher around, figuring I didn't have to work because he could feed us with the rocks of the road, if necessary. That is what I meant by small things becoming so big. A little bread can feed thousands. A few words can give hope of the coming of the Messianic Age to so many. If God can do so much with so little, surely he can do much with little old me.

[Adapted from Matthew 5-7, 14, 16 and Mark 6-8]

RELIGIOUS JARGON

A recent e-mail conversation I had reminded me that what we say is not always what the other person hears. This seems to be especially true when both are using a specialized language, or jargon. For instance, if you say “secure that door,” a sailor may just close it, while a soldier will guard it. Different primary meanings attach to the word “secure” depending on experience and context.

This phenomenon seems to be especially true when we use “religious words.” There has grown up a considerable religious jargon, part of it based in the English of the King James Version of the Bible. Some are everyday words used in a new context. Others are words that have been transliterated from another language, rather than translated. Each of us interprets those words by what we have been taught.

The conversation that started this thought was a case in point. The other person stated that one can be saved without being baptized. After three e-mails each way, I finally asked for his definition of salvation. He answered that salvation is believing. I had been arguing from a position that salvation is forgiveness of sins. We had wasted thousands of words because we used a religious word, “salvation,” for two different concepts.

There are at least two dangers in using such jargon without defining it for the listener. The obvious danger is that the listener will misunderstand, or not understand, what you are saying. The second is that the listener may have an emotional content to a word that you don't have.

My e-mail experience was one example of the first danger. Salvation was open to a misunderstanding. The same could be said of the word “baptism.” King James' translators chose not to translate the word as immersion. If they had chosen to translate the word we

wouldn't have people saying, “but I was baptized years ago,” when they were sprinkled with a little water rather than immersed. It makes teaching them much harder. Another such word is “repent,” which now often means to feel sorry for something without committing to a change in one's life. Different people understand how that is done in many different ways, from belief to prayer to immersion in water.

Other words mean nothing to the hearer, and so we do ourselves a disservice to use them. Outside Jewish and Christian circles, and maybe even inside them, few people would understand the phrase “propitiation for sin.” What is propitiation? It's hardly an everyday word. (It means a covering.) Even the related word “atonement” often meets blank stares. Without teaching about Romans 6 first, most people would not understand the phrase “buried in baptism” that is so popular in the churches of Christ. If we intend to teach others about God's word, we need to teach at their level. Often that level doesn't include our religious jargon.

The second problem may be less prevalent, but more damaging. Certain words contain an emotional content that is not easy to overcome. The classic example would be the use of “Jesus Christ” in teaching Jews. After almost two thousand years of persecution the term “Christ” bears such a negative connotation that we would be better served to speak of Jesus the Messiah instead.

Any time we talk to people about religion, we should be speaking on their level, in their terms. There is nothing wrong with religious jargon, if we define it. When we just toss it out expecting people to know what we mean, we have lost them from the first word. We may actually harm our own cause by doing so.

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