



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 8, Issue 7

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

May 2006

MISCONCEIVED RELIGION

Someone recently told me they believe religion to be an invention of man, and one of the oldest lies in history. This same person said they went to churches to hear the word of God. This seems to be a variation on the “Jesus yes; church no” movement of a few decades ago. Another variation is the person who said religion has done more harm than good throughout history. Yet a third variation is the question, “which church/religion should I belong to in order to be saved?”

What all three of these questions share is a misconception about religion, the church, and the role of each in a person’s life. Let’s look at the last one first, because it brings what many people will believe is the most shocking response.

“What church should I belong to in order to be saved?” The answer is “none.” Religion does not save anyone; the church does not save anyone; only the blood of Jesus the Messiah can save anyone. “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) In fact, people are not in the church to be saved; people are in the church because they are saved. “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:47) It is true that Christians are then required to live a certain way, but even then the requirement is based on what they have become rather than a set of rules. A Christian lives like Christ because he has been saved (had his sins forgiven) rather than to achieve salvation.

Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. (Rom 6:11-13)

I would also question anyone who says religion has done harm. There may be some religions that advocate evil rather than good. Nevertheless, in most cases the real harm comes from selfishness in religious clothing. The wolf enters the flock, in the old fable, by wearing a sheepskin. Selfish men use religious fervor to accomplish non-religious ends. “From whence come wars and

fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” (Jas 4:1) I challenge anyone to show one war fought in the name of religion that had its real impetus in religion. There may be religious people fighting for a propagandized religion, but the war is always started for economic or political, rather than religious, reasons. The crusades, the conquest of California, the Irish Problem—all happened under the guise of religion, but had economic roots. Religion, and Christianity specifically, when not corrupted by ambitious men, abhors all the injustices perpetrated in its name. I wonder if God has a special punishment in hell for those who blaspheme his name by hurting people in the name of religion.

Can one really say “Jesus yes; the church no”? Religion in the form of the church is an essential part of who Jesus is and what he accomplished. Jesus is inseparable from his church. “And he is the head of the body, the church.” (Col 1:18) Separate the head from the body and the result is death. The blood of Jesus is the lifeblood of the church. The problem is that many have established their own churches in the name of, but without the authority or power of, Jesus. No wonder people think religion and God can be separated. They are looking at façade religions without seeing if there is a building behind the set. Why is it so easy for movie and TV producers to make religious people look ridiculous? It is because they have such ridiculous models to work from, without checking to see if they are truly religious people. These models are no more representative of Christ than Job’s friends were of God.

God yes; religion yes. But only if the religion is from God.

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THE CAMP OF ISRAEL

I am a fan of logic problems. I know many people have difficulty with this kind of puzzle, so this may not be for you. It is intended strictly for fun and not necessarily for learning, so those who can't handle this kind of puzzle may choose not to try it. You won't be missing anything, except maybe some fun, and some frustration. I have tried to make this relatively easy, but my easy may be someone else's hard.

Instructions: Read each clue. In the grid on the next page, mark any items you know to be true (i.e. Judah is on the east side, from clue 1) with a dot or fill in the box. Anything you know cannot be true (i.e. Eliab is not the prince of Judah, from clue 1) mark with a — or an X. After reading all the clues, you may have to go back and examine them again in the light of additional information from other clues.

Introduction: During the wanderings in the wilderness after the exodus, the tribes of Israel were to camp around the Tabernacle in a set order. From the clues below determine what direction from the Tabernacle each tribe was to camp (there are three tribes each direction), the name of the prince of each tribe, and the number of people in each tribe. All the tribes, princes, and numbers are listed on the grid on the next page.

1. The three tribes on the east of the Tabernacle were Judah, the tribe whose prince was Eliab, and the tribe whose population was 54,400.
2. No prince who did not share an initial with any other prince camped on the east side. Nor did any such prince camp on the same side as another prince who did not share an initial with any other prince.
3. The prince of the tribe with the lowest population does not share an initial with another prince. His tribe camped to the west, between the other two tribes with the lowest population.
4. Benjamin, Eliasaph, Issachar, and the tribe with a population of 53,400 each camped on a different side of the Tabernacle. Benjamin camped on the opposite side from Issachar.
5. The two princes that share an initial camped on the same side of the Tabernacle. Two of the three princes who shared an initial camped on the same side as the tribe that shared their initial. The other of those three camped on the west. The two tribes with the highest populations in the 40 thousands camped on the fourth side, and their princes also share an initial.
6. Gamaliel's tribe has a lower population than the tribe with 45,650 people. That tribe has a lower population than the tribe of Dan, which has a lower population than Nashon's tribe. None of these camp on the same side as any of the others.
7. Nethanael, whose tribe has already been mentioned by name in a previous clue, was prince of a tribe with a population in the 50 thousands. So did the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, and only one tribe camped to the south of the Tabernacle. All tribes with populations in the 50 thousands are mentioned in this clue. Ephraim is not one of them.
8. Reuben, the prince that shares an initial with his tribe but with no other prince, and the tribe with 45,650 people all camped on the same side of the Tabernacle. Reuben's camp was not on the same side as, but was next to, Eliab's tribe. Gamaliel's tribe, which had a population of 32,200, camped on a different side from any of these.
9. The populations of Ephraim, Pagiell's tribe, and Eliasaph's tribe have populations in consecutive order, with Ephraim's population the lowest of the three. None of these have the two lowest or two highest populations.
10. Abidan's tribe camped to the west of the Tabernacle. He did not camp on the same side or opposite any prince or tribe that shared his initial. The prince of the tribe of Asher did not share an initial with the name of the tribe.
11. The tribe of Benjamin, population 35,400, had a prince who shared an initial with only two other princes. The tribe of Issachar, population 54,400, had a prince who shared an initial with only one other prince.
12. Elizur camped to the south of the Tabernacle. He ruled a tribe with a population in the 50 thousands. Shelumiel and the tribe of Gad were in the other two camps on the same side as Elizur.

13. Eliab, prince of Zebulun, ruled over fewer people than the population of the tribe of Simeon, but more than Ahira's tribe.
14. Nashon was prince of the tribe with the highest population.

Solution can be found at <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com/minutes/logicsolution.html> or in Numbers 2.

	74,600	62,700	59,300	57,400	54,400	53,400	46,500	45,650	41,500	40,500	35,400	32,200	Shelumiel	Pagiel	Nethanael	Nashon	Gamaliel	Elizur	Elishama	Eliasaph	Eliab	Ahira	Ahiezer	Abidan	N	W	S	E
Asher																												
Benjamin																												
Dan																												
Ephraim																												
Gad																												
Issachar																												
Judah																												
Manasseh																												
Naphtali																												
Reuben																												
Simeon																												
Zebulun																												
32,200																												
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62,700																												
74,600																												
Abidan																												
Ahiezer																												
Ahira																												
Eliab																												
Eliasaph																												
Elishama																												
Elizur																												
Gamaliel																												
Nashon																												
Nethanael																												
Pagiel																												
Shelumiel																												

COUNTING UP

Last year, when my son that has a seizure disorder went for a long time without any seizures, I woke up every morning and prayed to thank God for a certain number of days he was seizure free. Every day the number went up until it was over 240 days. Had he remained seizure free there would be no upper limit to my count. Every year, beginning at Passover (or in the tradition of the Sadducees beginning at the Sabbath following Passover) the Law of Moses required a similar count; only this count had an upper limit of fifty.

And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the LORD. (Leviticus 23:15-16)

This period of time has come to be known as “counting the Omer.” An *omer* was a dry measure of grain. After the Passover, the barley harvest was celebrated by bringing an *omer* of barley to the Tabernacle/Temple. This began the count until the fifty days were complete and it was time for the wheat harvest. Thus the mandated counting became associated with the first measure of barley brought to the priests after the Passover.

What is the value of this counting, and the holiday (Shavuot/Pentecost) at the end of it? Why did God mandate such a count? He could have said “fifty days after Passover you shall bring a grain offering.” Instead he specified, “count unto you” fifty days. There must be some value to the counting.

In the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides, a great Jewish thinker in Spain, proposed that the counting of the

days from the release from Egypt (Passover) to the giving of the Law on Sinai (Shavuot) showed that freedom without law was an empty promise. The fifty day count was a commemorative count down (or technically a count up) to the completion of freedom in the giving of the Law. It was an anticipation of better things. True freedom was acceptance of the Law of God, and it was necessary to count the days until the true freedom could be celebrated.

In this way it differs slightly from my count of seizure-free days. There the count was open ended and was a count from a last event. In the counting to Pentecost it is a finite count; even though it is a count up, every day points out how close the counter is getting to the end. Furthermore, it is a count in anticipation, not in celebration. My count celebrated each day, hoping for no end; counting the *omer* anticipates the end of the count. God’s mandated count was a means to an end, not a means from a beginning.

We know the end of the fifty days. It is a time of celebration of the giving of God’s Law. But there is a different counting we should be making. Every day should be counted as one day closer to our end. Whether that end is our death or “the World to Come,” we should be anticipating that event. We don’t know how high the count will go. Only God knows. Nevertheless, we must count each day not as an accomplishment (though it is), but also as one day closer to glory. We could dwell on our past, but that gains us nothing. Even the appearance of freedom is worthless until we celebrate true freedom. So we count the days until we are truly free. Because we don’t know how high the count is, we count up until our freedom.

(Shavuot/Pentecost is May 23, 2007)

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