



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 9, Issue 8

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

June 2008

A ONE GAL GUY

Many people have commented that one of the great things about the Bible is that one can read the same thing several times, and suddenly get an insight one has never seen before. So it was recently with me. Even though I had written recently about elders, and included a section on how we sometimes look at the marriage requirement through legalist's eyes, something recently made me look at the passage in a different light.

In writing of elders, Paul says the bishop should be "a one-woman man." Many see this as reading "husband of one wife." Certainly that is a valid thought. But there may be more to what Paul was saying.

Too often, perhaps, we look at the scriptures through twentieth century eyes (or sometimes 19th or 21st century). We interpret the scriptures based on our own societal norms rather than those of the initial audience. That can lead to problems when our viewpoint is significantly different from those to whom Paul, John, James, or the others were writing. Thus we get people who think that the beast like a lion in Revelation 4:7 must represent England, since we now symbolize that country with a lion. They ignore that England did not exist at the time John was writing the Revelation and telling his contemporaries to understand it. That is not to say that the Bible is not relevant in this century. Just because it doesn't say anything about Islam, or smoking, or America (because those things post-date the Bible by centuries), doesn't mean that the principles and the message of the gospel don't apply today. The atoning death of Jesus is just as relevant today as it was when it happened. The relationships between the body of Christ and God, and that body and those surrounding them, are still as vital today as in the first century.

I say all that to point out that sometimes we make the same mistake with Paul's letter to Timothy. Someone recently asked me whether Christians ever practiced concubinage, like the Jews, Persians, and Romans. In my answer I pointed out that there were probably some in the early years of the church who had concubines in addition to full wives/husbands. Others may have had more than one full spouse at the time they came to follow the Way. Paul urged the Christians at Corinth not to divorce their spouses, although it was acceptable for an unbelieving spouse to end the marriage if he or she objected to the

other spouse becoming a Christian. If a man had more than one spouse (including concubines—who were wives, not mistresses), he was urged not to put away any of his wives. To do so would subject the released wife to extreme hardship because she would have no means of support. This may have affected his comments about "widows indeed" (1 Tim 5), as well as his description of what a bishop/elder/pastor should be.

Thus, when Paul tells Timothy that a presbyter should be a "one gal guy" (to use a Cole Porter phrase) perhaps he was saying what the King James Version has him saying. A bishop should be the husband of [only] one wife. While his statement limits the eldership to only married men, and while that may have been part of the consideration, in the society of the day it is likely that Timothy and anyone else who read the letter would see it as a distinction between men married to one woman and those married to more than one. Rather than separating the married from the unmarried (as we tend to read it today) he was separating the monogamous member from the polygamous member. Preparing the people to accept a new norm, he made that the norm for the leaders in each congregation. If the leaders were expected to be monogamous, and if men were expected to aspire to leadership, then it would not be long before polygamy was considered to be unacceptable.

When we look through Roman eyes, perhaps we won't argue about whether divorced or widowed men can be elders. In most places we no longer have those who practice polygamy (Texas and the Four Corners notwithstanding). It may be that this characteristic of an elder has practically outlived its reason for being. Maybe it just worked to do what God wanted it to do.

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BUT IT'S SO LONG

In the New International Version (NIV) it is 2,337 words long. It takes almost thirty minutes to read aloud. At 176 verses, it is the longest chapter in the Bible. It is Psalm 119.

Why is this Psalm so long? Why does the psalmist seem to say the same thing over and over? And what is this Aleph, Beth, Gimmel stuff that some Bibles put between sections of the song?

The 119th Psalm is intriguing in many ways. Some of it has to do with the nature of Hebrew poetry. Some of it has to do with the nature of God. And some of it has to do with human nature.

It's human nature

People like to know the best, the most, the least, the first, the last, the middle. Because Psalm 119 is so long, it lends itself to the interest of those seeking obscure and possibly unimportant facts.

The psalm is the longest of the psalms, and the longest chapter in the Bible. It is two psalms after the shortest chapter (and psalm) in the Bible. It consists of 176 verses divided into twenty-two sections. (But more on that later.) In most English Bibles (consisting of both the

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Old and New Testaments) the Psalms are in the very middle of the book. If you open the pages approximately half way you will be in the Psalms, and very near Psalm 119. This, of course, does not hold true if the books are arranged in the Jewish manner, in which case the Psalms come very near the end.

All the verses of Psalm 119 relate to one central theme. Almost every one contains one or more of nine different, but related, words. Those are, in English and Hebrew:

Law (Torah)	26 times
Commandments (Mitzvah)	24 times
Word (Dabur)	24 times
Judgements (Mishpat)	23 times
Precepts (Pikkud)	21 times

Statutes (Chok)	21 times
Testimonies (Edah)	14 times
Way(s) (Derech)	14 times
Truth/faithfulness (Emunah)	6 times

Part of what intrigues us about the book, and maybe drives some of the facts above, is the nature of Hebrew poetry. The Psalms, and especially number 119, are not like English poetry.

The nature of Poetry

In English poetry, and some in other Western languages as well, rhyme is king. There are some types of poetry in which rhyme is minor or non-existent. The greatest of all English poets, William Shakespeare, only used rhyme in the closing couplets of each scene, in his plays. But when we think of poetry in English we most often think of rhyming poems, like those of Robert Frost or Edgar Allan Poe, of Tennyson or Coleridge. Hebrew poetry does not emphasize rhyme.

Psalm 119 is a prime example of two aspects of Hebrew poetry. Those aspects color both its structure and its message.

One of those aspects is repetition, and boy does Psalm 119 use this. A quick reading of the Psalms and the Proverbs will make even the most casual observer note that the author frequently repeats a thought in slightly different words. "Thy word is a *lamp unto my feet* and a *light unto my path*." (Ps 119:105)

Sometimes this method is used merely to show two ways of looking at something. Sometimes it is used for emphasis. Sometimes it serves as clarification. If you read something in the Hebrew idiom, especially in the poetic books, and have trouble understanding exactly what is meant, check within a few verses forward or backwards. Sometimes you will find a parallel sentence that will clarify the thought. This is true not only in the poetics; it may hold true in the Law as well. For instance, there are those who argue that the fruit of the vine used at Passover must be unfermented, because alcoholic wines are fermented with yeast. Since there is to be no leaven in the house, the argument goes, there must necessarily be no alcoholic wine. A look at one verse, which uses this parallelism, may suffice to show that wine does not fall under the prohibition. "Ye shall eat nothing leavened; in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread." (Ex 12:20) Moses' use of the poetic form here explains that "leaven" in the first part of the verse is specifically a reference to leavened "bread." Thus it applies to leaven (which is not necessarily yeast) in any of the five grains from which bread was made (wheat, oat, barley, rye, and

spelt—and some add rice and corn/maize), and does not apply to grapes, from which bread is not commonly made. Thus it is not uncommon for Jewish families to use kosher wine during Passover. The repetition explains and limits the first phrase.

The 119th Psalm is, essentially, one massive repetition, in which there might be other parallelisms. Every verse repeats, modifies, or explains every other verse of the psalm.

The second aspect of Hebrew poetry most evident in this psalm is the use of an acrostic. It normally does not come across clearly in translation, but some translators have made it more obvious in this one psalm. In an acrostic, the first letter of each line or group of lines either spells out a word or phrase, or consists of consecutive letters of the alphabet.

Let me tell you
Of my feelings;
Very much,
Emotions flow.

This is a very crude acrostic in which the first letters of each line spell out the emotion that the poet wants to express. Of course, this would not translate well because the English word “love” might translate as “amor” or “lyublyu.” That would destroy the effect. Most of the acrostic psalms, however, are alphabetic rather than linguistic. Some are twenty-two lines long, with each line beginning with successive letters. Psalm 119 consists of twenty-two groupings of eight lines, each grouping beginning with the same letter. That is why some translators put the appropriate Hebrew letter at the beginning of each section. The poet could even have made each alphabetic section contain a separate thought, had he so chosen. Thus the structure of the poem dictates its length, as well as constraining its language.

The nature of God

The interesting facts and the structure of the psalm are very good, but they don’t primarily impact the message of the poem. That message is the nature of God and his relationship to those of his creation who follow him. Look again at the list of key words in the psalm. They all relate to God’s message to man. Some may refer to things he tells his people without explaining the reason why (chok). Some relate to commands that demand our active attention (mitzvot). Still others relate to his characteristics that man should emulate (mishpat and emunah). All generally fall under the descriptions law, words, and way. God, in accordance with his nature, has communicated his will to man. He is not a creator who has put his toy on the shelf to let it run down and gather dust, as many of America’s founding fathers believed. He did not make man in his own image and then leave him to

blindly grope about, nor did he make robots that must blindly follow him. He gave us his word, and the option to follow it.

And that leads to the second part of the message. God’s communication to man shows in almost every verse of the psalm. So does a reason for man’s acceptance of, and obedience to, that communication. The psalmist shows the benefit of listening to God. Sometimes God’s word helps us to praise him. “I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments.” (Ps 119:7) God’s word helps us answer those who oppose us. “So shall I have wherewith to answer him that reproacheth me: for I trust in thy word.” (Ps 119:42) It teaches us how to avoid sin. “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.” (Ps 119:11) It gives us wisdom.

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.
Thou through thy commandments hast made me
wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers: for
thy testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the ancients, because I keep

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thy precepts.

I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that
I might keep thy word.

I have not departed from thy judgments: for thou
hast taught me.

How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through thy precepts I get understanding:
therefore I hate every false way. (vv. 97-104)

It gives us hope. “Thou art my hiding place
and my shield: I hope in thy word.” (v. 114). Mostly, it
helps us to stand as righteous in God’s presence. By
following the communications that God has given us,
we have the right to commune with him. Just the fact
that the psalmist takes 176 verses to say this shows
how important communion with God was to him, and
should be to us.

WHICH CAME FIRST

We are a people who seem obsessed with firsts. We remember the first man on the moon (Armstrong), the first steam ship (the *Clermont*, although Fulton never actually named the vessel), the first President of the United States (Washington). Sometimes we even break things down into several firsts in one category. The first woman, the first black, the first black woman to do something. We even call people first in their field, even if they are the fourth or the fortieth person to hold that distinction—i.e. the Prime (first) Minister. God also likes firsts. Maybe that is because he properly insists on being first in all things.

Shavuos (Pentecost), which falls on June 9 this year, was God's designated day for the "first fruits." It was a day to remind farmers that their crops were to come from God.

Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year. Thou shalt keep the feast of unleavened bread: (thou shalt eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded thee, in the time appointed of the month Abib; for in it thou camest out from Egypt: and none shall appear before me empty.) And the feast of harvest, the firstfruits of thy labours, which thou hast sown in the field: and the feast of ingathering, which is in the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field. Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD. (Ex 23:14-17)

Actually, the feast of the firstfruits is not the first time in the year when the first of the fruit of the land was to be presented to God. On the day after *Pesach* (Passover)—or possibly the Sabbath after Passover—the Jewish people were to bring their firstfruits.

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest: And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. 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. Ye shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits unto the LORD. (Lev 23:10-11, 15-17)

Thus the feast of the firstfruits was the culmination of a fifty-day celebration of God's bounty. The real celebration began at Passover, was counted day-by-day for fifty days, and ended with Pentecost.

Maybe it is because we are much less of an agricultural society, but we don't celebrate God's bounty to us for fifty days. We are sometimes lucky to celebrate it on any given day. The American celebration of Thanksgiving may serve a similar purpose to that of *Shavuos*, but it really is not the same. Thanksgiving is a celebration after the harvest. It is a thanksgiving for what God has given us. *Shavuos* came before the final harvest. It reminds us before the fact that God will provide. It is easy to thank God for what he has given us. It is harder to thank him for fifty days for what he has not given us, but will.

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