



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 10, Issue 11

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

September 2009

## A NAIL IN HIS HOLY PLACE

A nail is a little thing. While they have their function, we generally consider nails to be of little individual value. When a carpenter is working on a house, he does not even take the time to pick up a dropped nail. To pick up the nail would take more time than the nail itself is worth. There are many more nails readily available. When my brother-in-law was building his house, my job was to examine the underside of the floors and pound up any nails that were visible. Particularly if the nail was right on the edge of a beam, rather than properly in the beam, it could eventually cause the floor to squeak. So the nails had to be removed, and thrown away. You don't reuse a nail. In light of this, Ezra makes an interesting statement about the returned Israel.

And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. (Ezra 9:8)

While we may consider nails to be of little value, sometimes where they are located makes a difference. Apparently, a nail in God's holy place has special value, as compared to a nail anywhere else. There might be a couple of reasons this would be true.

The nail is made valuable by the structure in which it is placed, if that structure is holy in itself. A nail in God's holy place is made holy just by being there. Jesus understood that a part of the whole inherits the holiness of the whole.

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him

that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (Matt 23:16-22)

God's people have value because they are part of his holy temple. As we are "built together for a habitation of God" (Eph 2:21-22) we inherit the glory of that into which we are built. That is not to say that an iron nail is transformed into one of gold. Rather, an iron nail has its place in the building. As it performs its assigned function it gains in value. A nail made of gold has little value as a nail, because it is too soft to function as a nail. A golden nail in the fence of a pigpen is just a nail, and not much of one at that. But any nail that fulfills its function in the house of God is of surpassing greatness compared to that nail in the pigpen. God's nail has value, regardless of its composition.

That may lead to the second reason a nail has value in the house of God. Not only do we inherit the holiness of that into which we are built, but also the nail gains value because of the honor of being associated with the building. Anyone who honors God must honor his people. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (1 Jn 4:20) If man is made in God's image, then all men, not just those in God's temple, have intrinsic value. Just our association with the image of God gives us value.

You and I may be mere nails. But God is not one to leave a dropped nail to be swept away with the trash. We are worth the time it takes for God to lift us up. God gives his nails honor, because he gives them a place in his holy dwelling.

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# A MYSTERY

Of all literary genres, I think I like mysteries best. The mystery is the thinking-man's novel. While most good novels leave you wondering what is going to happen next, the mystery, more than any other, asks why it is going to happen and who is acting behind the scenes to make things happen. There is no greater pleasure than being able to identify the culprit before the author reveals that person's identity (even if you can't always identify the motive). There is something immensely satisfying to man to bring to light something that is hidden. That is why the police procedural is a staple of television. That is even why archaeologists do what they do. If there is any doubt about that, read the articles that came out in 1922 and 1923 about the discovery of the tomb of Nebkheperure Tutankhamun (King Tut).

## The mystery religions

The mystery is seemingly as old as time. It is unquestionably old in terms of religion. From ancient times religions consisted of knowledge that was hidden, and that only the initiated could know. These "Mystery Religions" gained in popularity in the Late Greek and early Roman periods. Perhaps this popularity was given a

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boost when Alexander the Great visited the Oracle of Ammon at Siwah. If a celebrity like Alexander could be "in the know," why should not others?

The mystery religions had certain common characteristics. The most prominent is the idea of "mystery." Unlike the modern mystery novel, this word signified something that was revealed to only a few, select individuals. This, in fact, was the appeal of the mystery religions. There was always the possibility that a common person could be blessed to become one of the illuminati. The expectation of revelation held many in thrall. Only the special ones were blessed with initiation into the mysteries.

Common also to these religions were priesthood and special rites or ceremonies. Since only the initiated could be elevated to the higher grades or levels of the mystery, one man or one group

necessarily held power as the keeper of the mystery. Knowledge breeds power. The priests, having knowledge, took power, and held it by limiting those who knew what they knew. When Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) declared to the Egyptians that there was one god, Aten, he immediately alienated the priests of Amun Ra, who held power by keeping the god hidden in the recesses of Karnak. Akhenaten declared that everyone could know the sun god, Aten, as seen in his representative on earth (himself). This idea that everyone could have access to the god threatened the power of the keepers of the mystery, eventually leading to the overthrow of Akhenaten (and the change of his son's name from Tutankhaten to Tutankhamun, by which he is best known today). If there is a special priesthood, then there must be a special ritual. Ritual is what keeps the common man at bay. When only the initiates know the rituals, the masses cannot participate in leading the worship of the god. But ritual also fascinates the common man, who thinks that by observing the ritual he might learn the secrets.

A final common thread among the mystery religions was missionary zeal. Even those who were not among the intelligentsia of a religion might be expected to spread the word about the faith. Some cults worked on the theory that would later be called a Ponzi scheme. If you brought enough people into the religion you might be allowed a share of the knowledge, and therefore some control over those you brought in. So the hope of enlightenment became the impetus for evangelism.

## Mystery in Christianity

Early Christianity could hardly be called a mystery religion, as will be discussed shortly. However, there are certain characteristic elements that can be found in either early Christianity or the later developments within Christianity. Certainly the evangelistic zeal of the early church was equal to that of the proponents of the mystery religions. Even the theology (one central God, creation, redemption, and resurrection) held much in common with the older mysteries.

It was not long before the mysteries moved in on the church. A group later known as the Gnostics took center stage. The Gnostics taught that only certain people could know the mysteries of God. Because they claimed to be the ones who knew, they came to be called Gnostics (from the Greek word *gnossos*, to know). The best-known feature of their belief was that man is of a dual nature—flesh and spirit—neither of which interact with the other (and, therefore, Jesus was totally divine and totally not in the flesh). Because of this belief, the ones in the know

could take either of two paths. The one said that Jesus was the only person who could unite the two natures, and be sinless in body and in spirit. Therefore, to be like Jesus man has to overcome the body and beat it into conformity with Jesus. These people became ascetics, often separating themselves from the temptations of the flesh, and sometimes literally buffeting their bodies daily (in keeping with one interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:27). The other path said that since the body and the spirit did not interact, one could remain pure in spirit regardless of what happened in the body. These took the opposite path of indulging in the lusts of the flesh, having the “knowledge” that nothing they did would affect the salvation of their souls. As time went on the Gnostic beliefs either died out or were emphasized. Gnosticism in one form even came down to modern times in the doctrines, championed by John Calvin, of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

Other aspects of mystery religions became prominent in the church. By the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church in 1054, the ideas of priesthood and laity and the need for priestly interpretation of the scriptures were firmly entrenched. The common man was not allowed to read the Bible (if he could read at all) because he was not initiated into the mysteries of biblical interpretation. The pomp and circumstance that surrounded the mass, which was entirely absent in the early church, harks back to the ritualism of the mystery religions.

The most prominent feature of the mysteries in the early church, however, is one particular writing. It is the mystery into which many claim initiation today, and which has led many either to exalt that one writing to supreme prominence or to shy away from study of it altogether as being impossible to understand. That, of course, is the book of the Revelation. Although the central meaning of the book is obvious to all, the Revelation was certainly written in the form of a mystery. Only those who were knowledgeable in early Christianity were able to interpret the symbols and apply to them their true meaning. Interestingly, the one writer who most vocally opposed the infiltration of the mysteries into the church (probably) wrote this book. It is for this reason that some believe that John intentionally wrote so that nobody who was not a Christian could understand the book, but that all Christians at the time it was written were familiar with the symbols he used. Unfortunately, twenty centuries later we can only make reasonable (or, more often, unreasonable) guesses as to their meaning.

## Opposition to the mysteries

Two writers in the Bible stand out as opposing the mystery religions and their incursion into the church. These were Paul and John. In fact, of the 27 times the

word mystery is used in the Bible, John uses it four times, other writers use it twice, and Paul uses it the remaining times.

The way Paul writes of the “mystery of God,” “the mystery of Christ,” or the “mystery of the gospel” one would almost think that he subscribed to the idea of the mystery religions. He claims to have been initiated into these mysteries by God himself. (Eph 3:3) He claims the mystery has been hidden from the beginning of the world. (Eph 3:9) The difference, though, is that while the initiates into the mystery religions were sworn to secrecy, Paul declares openly what the mystery is. He says everyone can know the mystery. In fact, the mystery is no mystery at all. It is obvious to everyone. (Paul would be one of those people that, when he hears that you are reading a certain mystery novel would ask if you have figured out yet that so-and-so is the killer. I hate when people do that.) In modern terms, Paul should preface his letters (especially Ephesians) with the warning “spoiler alert.”

John never, except in the Revelation, uses the word mystery. Instead, all of his writings key on the word “know.” If the Gnostics are those who have special

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knowledge, John says we can all have that knowledge. Whereas the Gnostics would “know” that Jesus could not be totally divine and yet have come in the flesh, John says the true knowledge is that he is totally divine and totally human. In fact, to deny that is to be antichrist. (1 Jn 4:3; 2 Jn 1:7) Both his gospel and 1 John begin with the idea that Jesus came in the flesh and could be touched, heard, and known.

The difference between the mystery religions and Christianity is inclusiveness. Everyone can know Christ. It does not take any special knowledge or revelation to understand the Bible. We don’t have to study with a prominent theologian before we can know what God says to us. It is no wonder that John is the one who quotes Jesus. “I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing.” (Jn 18:20) The one whose name we wear spoke openly. There is nothing mysterious about him.

# AWESOME GOD

The ten days between *Rosh HaShanah* (September 19 in 2009) and *Yom Kippur* (September 28 in 2009) are sometimes called the Days of Awe. This is understandable. The period starts with a day on which people blow the *shofar*, the trumpet made from the horn of a kosher animal, over a hundred times. (Anyone who has tried to blow one of those things is in awe of anyone who can make it sound impressive even once, much less a hundred times.) The period ends with a day of fasting. In between are days of introspection. People think of what they have done wrong over the past year. They seek out others that they may have wronged and ask forgiveness. After all, God will not forgive a person who is not willing to ask his fellow man for forgiveness; if you don't make it right with your brother you can't make it right with God. Unlike many human holidays, this is not a time for thanksgiving, or for giving. This was a time for the Jewish people to correct their relationship with their God. This is not something we normally do often, or well.

Ten days of retrospection, and introspection. While that might explain the other appellation for these days, Days of Repentance, that does not explain the awe. When we look at ourselves deeply, awe is often one of the least of emotions. We are more like a giant in a story by Patricia McKillip who got hit in the eye with a stone, which turned his eye inward and "he died of what he saw there." When we look at ourselves we are more in fear or disgust than in awe.

When we consider, though, the purpose of the introspection we can understand the awe. We look at ourselves to see what God sees. Ten days of thinking about God, his judgement and his provision, should be

days of awe. Consider the God with whom we have to deal. He created everything we can see, and much that we cannot, with just a word from his mouth. (Genesis 1) He is our judge. And not just any judge. "And he shall judge the world in righteousness, he shall minister judgment to the people in uprightness." (Ps 9:8) He is the only truly righteous judge, because he is not influenced by our greed. He is a God beyond understanding. (Read Job 38-41)

In today's world, though, we seem to have lost awe for God. In fact, we seem to have lost a true sense of awe entirely. Take, for example, the word "awful." From the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the word meant "inspiring awe." Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it began to lose any connection with the concept of awe, and has now even taken the opposite meaning from its origins. Today people would wonder at one who said we have an "awful God," even though it still has the same dictionary definition as "awesome."

But then, even awesome has lost its meaning. The word is used to describe dudes, sports catches, waves, and even drugs. Even in the first paragraph of this article it was used to describe trumpet-playing. A person who can leap high in the air and snatch a baseball from the far side of a fence may display exceptional skill (or may be exceptionally lucky). Even if he does it on a regular basis, though, he is not deserving of the awe that we should have for God. That catch will be forgotten in a week. Our truly awesome God is ever before us. We cannot look around without being aware of him, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.  
(Ps 33:8)

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