



# Minutes With Messiah

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## Sewing, No Machine

I just finished sewing two blouses for my wife's birthday. Well, one was finished three weeks late, on our anniversary. Still, sewing is something I enjoy. With a machine, of course. I find it hard to fathom what it was like before Mr. Singer's invention. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Motel the tailor brags about a new piece he has sewn because the stitches are so even, "made by a machine."

Samson posed a riddle to the Philistines. The wager he made was for thirty cloaks and thirty garments. In his time that was quite a bet. Because of the difficulty of hand sewing (not to mention making the fabric and the thread), the average person might be able to afford only one or two sets of clothing. The wager was only moderately expensive for Samson's thirty companions, because if they won each would only have to pay for one set. Samson was betting a lot, though, because he would theoretically have to bear the expense all by himself. They say never to wager that the jack of spades won't jump out of a deck and spit in your eye, because as soon as you make the bet, he will. Samson thought he had a sure thing and wouldn't have to pay. He lost. In the end, those garments were very expensive, because they cost thirty men their lives.

The Bible mentions a number of people who sewed, or at least made items out of cloth or skins. Sewing is almost as old as mankind. The first tailors were our ultimate ancestors, Adam and Eve. "They knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves loincloths." (Gen 3:7) Ever since the need for clothing, there has been a need for someone who sews.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, was one who sewed. Every year after she had given her son into the service of the priesthood, she "made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year, when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice." (1 Sam 2:19) It is entirely possible that it took the greater part of each year just to make that garment for her son.

One of the first men known specifically for his tailoring skills was named Betzalel. He was a gifted craftsman, known for more than just sewing, but was tasked with making the "beautifully stitched garments—the sacred garments for Aaron the priest." (Ex 31:10) He

and his assistant Oholiab were tasked with teaching others in the crafts that they knew. Thus, the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness may be the first example we know of a Jewish garment district.

As with anything, some people turned the honorable craft of sewing to sinister purposes. Ezekiel pronounced a woe on "the women that sew amulet bags" and veils used in idol worship. (Ezek 13:18)

Jesus was a carpenter, not a tailor; nevertheless he knew of the craft. In his parables he uses shepherds, fishermen, merchants, farmers, and others in order to teach lessons. Those who sew are not exempt from that list. "No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse." (Mk 2:21) This was his explanation that his disciples should not fast while he was alive. The time would come when they would mourn, but to do so while he was with them would be destructive.

The book of Acts tells of three people who made a living sewing. Paul sometimes had to supplement his income by other means in order to be able to preach. In Corinth he chose not to be a burden on the young congregation, and so spent some time sewing. He joined himself to a couple named Aquila and Priscilla. "And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers." (Acts 18:3)

It took me three weeks to find time to complete a hem, five buttonholes, and sew on five buttons, all by machine. The Preacher said there was "a time to rend, and a time to sew." (Eccl 3:7) Sometimes I wish I had more time for the latter.

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# *Sin in Heaven*

The Bible is a simple book, easily understood. A simple reading of the Bible has taught many people the truth, without the need for human intervention. Left to their own understanding, many people have come to believe in God, to understand sin and repentance, and to know that immersion in water based on trust in Jesus is for forgiveness of sins. In fact, it often takes the intervention of a preacher to misunderstand the Bible. Nevertheless there are many passages that are difficult to understand. Even Peter admitted that.

This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him—speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. (2 Pet 3:15-16)

Some of the more difficult passages have led unbelievers to assert that there are contradictions in the Bible. Most of their supposed contradictions are not contradictions at all. In reading through the Skeptic's Annotated Bible, which lists many of these passages, one is quick to note that many of the apparent contradictions are not with the Bible itself, but are places where orthodox

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Once, in the incident with Balaam and his ass, the angel of God is called the Adversary or Satan.

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doctrine differs from what the Bible actually teaches. Some passages are truly difficult to reconcile with other passages in the Bible. That does not mean they are contradictions; nor does it negate the reliability of the Bible. It just means that sometimes we don't fully understand what is being said. This is especially true of those passages that talk about sin in heaven.

Sin in heaven? That alone seems to contradict the belief that God cannot abide sin in his presence. That, though, is one of those doctrines that cannot be proved by the Bible. At no point does the Bible specifically state that. God cannot sin. God cannot abide sin. But that does not mean sin cannot be in his presence. In comparison to God, in the presence of God, sin would be shown to be more sinful. There are some passages that seem to teach that sin can be in God's presence. How do we reconcile those?

## **Satan in the book of Job**

One of the common questions relates to the first two chapters of the book of Job. In those chapters the "sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them." (Job 1:6, 2:1) Many have asked how Satan could have come before God if he was sinful. Actually, this is possibly the easiest of these passages to reconcile.

On the face of it, using current doctrine, it would appear that evil can come into the presence of God, and did so on at least two occasions. But is current doctrine correct?

Often today preachers, and others, use the terms "Satan" and "the devil" interchangeably. In the New Testament this often appears to be the case, although not always. In the Hebrew scriptures, however, there is no clear scripture equating the two. Genesis speaks of the serpent as the tempter, but never calls it Satan. It appears that equating the two did not occur until the period between the testaments.

In the Old Testament, the word Satan or "the Adversary" appears in several times, although the King James Version uses the term Satan in only four passages. Several times actual people are called adversaries or Satan. Once even King David is called that. (1 Sam 29:4) Once the "angel of God" (which is often a reference to God himself) is called the adversary; this occurs when the angel opposes Balaam and is recognized by his ass. (Numbers 22)

The first passage in the King James Version that uses the term Satan is 1 Chronicles 21:1, when Satan was said to have provoked David to take a census of Israel. In a parallel passage in 2 Samuel 24:1, God is said to have provoked the census. Some have seen a contradiction here, but a proper understanding of Satan in the Old Testament resolves the issue.

Another passage can be found in Zechariah 3. Joshua the High Priest is seen standing before God, with Satan at his right hand "to accuse him." This is when God says, "The Lord rebuke thee, Satan," which Jesus quotes in reference to Peter. (Matt 16:23) Here, Satan is seen as an angel who stands in the role of a prosecutor, as also in Psalm 109:6. These are references to legal proceedings in which someone has to stand as the accuser or prosecutor. Apparently this was a role held by one or more of God's angels, not as an evil one but in a merely judicial role.

Thus it appears in the early chapters of Job. The sons of God come before God. The Satan (as a title, not a person) comes before him and presents the charge that Job

cannot help but be righteous because of God's protection of him. God permits him to prove his case, which he fails to do. That does not make him evil or sinful, just less than competent. His title as the Adversary is a judicial one, not an accusatory one. If this be true, then there is no problem with Satan coming before God. As in Zechariah also, he is merely fulfilling his role in heaven.

## Fallen angels

Can one who is in heaven sin? Both Peter and Jude inadvertently raise this question. Both those writers have very similar thoughts. The question has long been which copied from whom? (That assumes that God did not give them the same message independently.) Both were writing against false teachers in the church. Both give examples of the results of false teaching. Both begin their examples with "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment..." (2 Peter 2:4)

When did this happen? How did it happen? Scholars have debated this for centuries; we are not likely to resolve the issue today. Peter and Jude probably expected their immediate audiences to understand exactly what they were talking about. We are removed by two millennia, and have lost the cultural reference.

One possibility is that they are not talking about heavenly beings at all. Angels are messengers, and sometimes refer to human beings. This is probably the case in the Revelation, with the letters to the angels of the seven churches. Without any additional evidence, we can't tell whether they are talking about human or heavenly beings. Jude could offer some help, because he says they "left their own habitation." (Jude 6) But this is really no help, because that habitation or dwelling place could have been heaven, or it could have been some earthly place where they were supposed to be preaching God's message.

Nor does it necessarily help to know that they were cast down to the abode of the wicked dead (the Greek word is Tartarus and it is the only use of that word in the Bible), and reserved in chains under darkness. This could apply to humans who had died, or to heavenly beings.

If these were heavenly beings, we don't know when, where, or how they sinned. Did they sin in heaven? Or did they sin while on earth? Were these the "sons of God" that married daughters of men in Genesis 6:1? Was this before the creation of man? Was the devil among those angels, as Milton would have us believe? Unfortunately we have lost the answers to all these questions. We don't even know if this passage implies the possibility of sin in heaven.

## Lying to Ahab

Another difficult passage occurs in 1 Kings 22. Kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat are debating whether to go up to Ramoth Gilead to fight the Syrians. Jehoshaphat wants to consult a prophet of God. Ahab's prophets all say to go up, but a man named Micaiah prophesies that Ahab would die in such a battle. Micaiah says he saw in a vision that God asked "all the host of heaven" how to convince Ahab to go to battle so he would die. Finally, one spirit said he could do it. When God asked how, he replied, "I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." God says that will work, and tells him to go.

Most men who have written commentaries on this passage say that God is not condoning lying, but is simply "allowing" an evil spirit to do what is in his nature. They say that when God says, "Go forth and do so," it is not a command but a permission. There are some problems with

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In the Revelation, the angels of the seven churches of Asia are probably human beings.

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that interpretation. If God allows a spirit to lie after the spirit told him he would, is that not condoning lying? If this was a normally evil spirit, why is he part of the army of heaven? The context seems to imply that this spirit offered up his solution as one possibility, and God selected that as a workable solution. God wanted to destroy Ahab, and the quickest way to accomplish this is to have his prophets lie to him. It almost sounds like the end justifies the means.

But, if it is unsatisfactory to say that God just stood back and allowed a lie to accomplish his own purposes, what is the satisfactory interpretation? Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be one. Unless the prophet's vision was untrue, two things are apparent. This is the only clear place where someone in heaven is capable of lying, and God not only condoned it but gave permission for, or even commanded, the spirit to lie.

Is this enough to cause one to dismiss the Bible as the word of God? No. Is this permission for people to lie if the end accomplishes God's purpose? Probably not, because we can't always tell exactly what God's purpose is. Is this a difficult passage? Certainly it is one of the most difficult.

Yes, there are difficult passages in the Bible. Fortunately, the difficult passages are not those which tell us how to receive forgiveness of sin. Some people make even those passages difficult, but they are really very simple.

# *Answer the Survey*

This past month I sent *Minutes With Messiah* to my printer. I e-mailed it on Sunday so that they would have time to print it by Wednesday. The print version is on 11X17 paper with a single fold. Then I ask that a certain number be hand folded in thirds, “with the space for the mailing label on the outside.” When I went in at lunch time on Wednesday to pick them up, I found that they had not even started on the job. The day manager assured me that they would get the job started right away, so that I could at least pick up the ones that did not require hand folding by 5 p.m. When I got there after 5, I found that the job still had not been started. Another manager was kind enough to start the job and get me the copies I needed that night. She assured me the rest would be available the next day. So in I go at lunch, and the job is completed. Except that the folding was done wrong. I don’t know how common sense can get the folding done wrong. I understand it even less when I had specified, in writing and in person to the manager, exactly how they should be folded. The fold job was so inconsistent that some were folded one way, some another, and two were even folded correctly. Because I was not very pleased, I chose to take the job as it was (without paying for the additional folding), and refold them myself. This delayed getting them mailed out. (That is why it is better to get the issues electronically.) On the receipt there was the standard request to complete a survey. By the end of the evening I, for once, completed the survey.

There is a strange tendency among people, and I am not an exception. When asked to complete a survey,

we tend to ignore the request unless there is a substantial financial incentive. But if the service is very poor, as it was in this case, we are quick to fill it out. Most of the feedback from mailed or online surveys is negative. We are quick to complain, and slow to praise.

If the service is as bad as I received, or if something needs corrected, it is not bad to give a negative survey. Many companies even expect the majority of the surveys to have negative feedback. They count on them to correct problems. Nevertheless, a positive survey does wonders.

The company I work for once had a policy that every manager and above had to write at least five notes a week about good things done by employees. These often became a joke, especially when someone was praised for doing the minimum expected of them. Many people ignored these notes. But if a person “earned the letter” from a customer (was specifically called out in a positive way in correspondence), that was a major thing. Praise from someone when it wasn’t expected—or mandated—was very welcome indeed.

But then, Solomon (or, at least, one of the writers of the Proverbs) said that years ago. A timely praise is a work of art. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” (Prov 25:11) The picture is that of an intricately carved niche in a wall. It is waiting for the perfect complement to the silver carving. Then someone brings simple golden apples; not intricate, just apples. The simplicity of the golden accent completes the setting. So it is with the timely word. A compliment can be the perfect complement for a person’s day.

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