



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 18, Issue 1

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

November 2016

The Day of the Lord

How easy it is to misunderstand someone by taking a phrase that means one thing and interpreting it differently. Sometimes that is because the person uses the phrase ironically or sarcastically. “Love that dress” could mean that the person thinks it is a really nice dress. When said differently it may mean that the person really hates it. Written or texted communication makes it worse, because voice inflection that usually conveys meaning is lost. At other times, the listener may just have a different perspective based on what they have been told by someone who didn’t understand the phrase. That seems to be the case when people today use “the day of the Lord.”

Many times when you hear that phrase today, people are talking about the end of the world. Of the 23 times the phrase is used in scripture, maybe three have that meaning. But because those who hold to some of the various premillennialist or “rapture” theories use the phrase exclusively that way, many people believe it must be interpreted that way every time.

A similar phrase, “the Lord’s day,” is used only once, and that in Revelation 1. Almost nobody interprets that in the same way, most taking it rather to mean Sunday. If anything, John most likely meant it to mean Saturday. At least one person, however, has read the verse as “I was, in the Spirit, on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.” The added commas around “in the Spirit” make it read that John’s vision actually took place “on the Lord’s day” regardless of what day he actually saw the vision. This person, then, believed the vision that is the book of the Revelation to be at the end of the world or at some significant event in Roman history later than John wrote. That person takes “the Lord’s day” to be equivalent of “the day of the Lord.”

When the prophets used that phrase, what did they mean? Only five of the uses of the phrase come in the New Testament, and one of those is a quote from one of the prophets. In the Old Testament, the 18 times it is used, the phrase only appear in the writings of the prophets. It never appears earlier than the book of Isaiah (or possibly Joel or Obadiah if you give them the early dates for their writing). It never appears in the historical or poetic works. So if we can understand how the Old Testament prophets used “the day of the Lord” we can get a more accurate understanding of its meaning.

Eight times the prophets say that the day is “near” or “at hand.” Of course, to some people that means nothing because they think the Revelation is in our future even though five times it says its fulfillment is near or at hand. But to a normal-thinking person, the idea is that the day may have had several fulfillments over time, none of which were in our future. If so, then what is that day? It is a day of God’s judgement. The terms the prophets use include “destruction” and “to lay desolate” (Isa 13; Joel 1), “vengeance” (Jer 46), “darkness and not light” (Amos 5), and “dreadful (Mal 4). It will come upon the proud (Isa 2); sinners (Isa 13), God’s adversaries (Jer 46), and the heathen (Obadiah). While this could apply to the end of the world, the contexts of these prophetic utterances show that it applies to many times. Obadiah, for instance, was speaking against the Edomites in what is now Petra, Jordan.

Joel uses the phrase four times, more than any other prophet. Peter quoted him on the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death. Does he say that Joel is speaking of the destruction of the physical world? No. He says he is speaking of the beginning of the church. The day of the Lord, at least in that instance, arrived almost two thousand years before today. That same Peter later used the phrase, perhaps, to mean the destruction of the physical world. Even then, though, he was using it as an extension of what began on that Pentecost.

Ultimately, then, the day of the Lord may be any day the Lord chooses to judge sinners. It may be individual (the day of death) or collective (when a government chooses to disobey). The final day will be the end of the world, but there may be many days of the Lord before then.

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Near Damascus

He was my friend. He was the type of person you would follow anywhere, and do anything for. If Saul said to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple, you hoped a legion of angels would catch you, because you were going to jump. Not that he would ever abuse his power in that way. But you understand what I mean.

Saul was not your usual Jewish zealot (not meaning to use that word in its political sense). Most of true defenders of the faith were born in or around Jerusalem, at least in Roman Judaea. Saul wasn't native-born, though. He came from Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, Central Asia Minor. Saul's home was no minor city, though. Not as large as some, it still had a famous history and reputation. Just a few years ago it was the place where Marcus Antonius met Cleopatra VII Philopater, the famous Egyptian beauty. It was from that city, or rather its nearest seaport, that they launched the fleet that took part in the battle of Actium. That is where Marcus Agrippa defeated Antonius for Caesar Augustus. Herod Agrippa was named to honor that admiral.

Tarsus is known for some other things as well. It is a city known for the beauty and durability of its tents; indeed, Saul learned that craft in his home town. But it is perhaps best known for its intellectual pursuits. Even

Saul. I think he was in line for one of the next vacancies on the Sanhedrin.

Because of his learning in Jerusalem, he became eager to help stamp out "the Way," the followers of a Galilean rabbi some call The Teacher. He had started early. Some time about four years after the beginning of the Way, Saul became involved in the judgement of a teacher named Stephen, a Greek convert who then followed the new sect. It seems this Stephen taught that the Teacher had come back from the dead, an idea that Cohen Gadol (High Priest) Caiaphas could not tolerate. (After all, Caiaphas had been intimately involved in the trial and execution of the Teacher.) Stephen was sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin, in spite of Roman law to the contrary. Saul, while not part of the court that sentenced the man, was of the party of Pharisees that advocated the sentence. That shows how eager Saul was, because anybody who participated in the execution, even the ones like Saul who held the robes of the executioners, could have been tried, convicted, and crucified by the Romans. Even Saul's Roman citizenship would probably not have saved him. That didn't seem to faze him.

And now, here it is, two or three years later. I am following my friend on another quasi-legal adventure. For the past couple of years Saul has made a name for himself in Jerusalem as the Cohen Gadol's chief enforcer. He has ferreted out many of the secret followers of the Way, and prosecuted them at trial. He has grown tired of Jerusalem, though. Or maybe he just fished that stream clear. There is a new High Priest, named Jonathan. Maybe it was the coincidence of names, Jonathan having been the son of King Saul. Maybe it was just that the new man was ambitious and Saul took advantage of it. Whatever the reason, Saul convinced the new Cohen Gadol to give him letters of authority (basically arrest warrants) to go to Damascus and bring back in chains followers of the Teacher.

Why Damascus? Well, why not. It is a bigger city, and of similar antiquity. It was a center of commerce and learning, and therefore probably had many of these supposed heretics. The problem was that Damascus and Jerusalem are in two different provinces. It wouldn't have done any good to go to the Governor in Jerusalem. Even if he had wanted to interfere in Jewish affairs, he had no authority in Damascus. Some would argue that even Jonathan did not. Saul, however, argued that the High Priest of the Jewish people had authority over all Jewish people. Even Rome accepted the separation of religion and state. Emboldened by escaping Roman justice in the stoning of Stephen, Paul used his stoic training as a logician to extend the authority of the priesthood. As long

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today the university at Tarsus is presided over by the Stoic philosophers. Perhaps even more than Athens, Tarsus is the current home of stoicism. Sometimes even Saul shows that he was influenced by where he was born.

He didn't live there long, though. He was born Jewish. His parents both spoke Hebrew, and that is his heart language, although he is fluent in Greek and has a good knowledge of Latin. As a Tarsinian Jew, he was not truly a stoic. At a young age his parents sent him to Jerusalem to learn from the great Gamaliel II. It may be that he could learn no more of Judaism at home. Certainly when he got to Jerusalem he applied himself. Young though he was, he exceeded all of his classmates, and even some of the older boys. He was as proud of his learning as he was of being from the same clan as his namesake, King

as the people he arrested were all Jews, and every follower of the Way was one, then he was merely enforcing religious necessity, which was allowed by the Romans.

So here we were. Walking the 1500 stadia from Jerusalem to Damascus. We'd been on the road for days, and when we arrest these people we will walk back. But like I said, when Saul says go, you go. And he never seems to get tired himself. Besides, we were almost there. The walls of the city were in sight.

It was approaching midday, so we were preparing to stop and fix a short lunch. The sun can get very hot here, so some of us were thinking of finding shelter and maybe a nap during the heat of the day. Ah, plans. Somehow God has a way of changing what man plans. So it was this day.

Suddenly a bright light shone on us. Really bright. It had to be to outshine the midday sun. It was almost a physical brightness; so much so that we all fell to the ground. Most of us stood up again, but Saul stayed on the ground. Along with the light, we heard a noise. More like a voice than a noise, but we couldn't hear what was being said. Apparently Saul heard, because he was responding. This is what we heard.

“Who are you, rabbi?”

“What will you have me do?”

Whatever the voice said to him, Saul got up and asked to go into Damascus. The light had not blinded us, but whatever he saw in the light had taken his sight. We had to lead him by the hand into the city. Something told me our original mission was no longer valid.

We found lodging for him in Euthys Street. Damascus had been laid out in a grid pattern, unlike most cities that grew up willy-nilly. The longest and widest street was a colonnaded thoroughfare appropriately called Euthys, or Straight. As the major street in the city, it was not difficult to find lodging there. We stayed with a man named Judas, who was apparently well-known among the city's Jewish population.

For three days Saul stayed in the house, blind. He refused food and drink. Instead he devoted himself to prayer. It wasn't unusual for him to pray through mealtime, but three days was exceptional.

After three days we were visited by a man named Ananias. He was one of the people we came to put in chains, although he was well thought of by all of the Damascene Jews. How had he found us? He explained that God had given him a vision. He had been directed to the house of Judas in Euthys Street, and told to ask for a man named Saul. This Saul, my friend Saul, would be expecting him because he had also had a vision and seen him coming. Now this was news to me, because Saul had said nothing about it, but that was his way when praying. Annanias had an interesting message to relay. But first he laid his hands on Saul. Something like the scales on a butterfly wing fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.

Ananias said, “I came to restore your sight, and so that you might be filled with the Holy Spirit. The God of our fathers has chosen you to know His will, to see the Messiah, and to hear words from his mouth. This is so that you can be his witness to all men, Jews and non-Jews.” He then commanded him, “Get up and be immersed for the purpose of forgiveness of sins, taking the name of the Lord as your surname. What are you waiting for?”

Upon that command Paul proceeded to the *mikva* to be immersed. Afterward he returned to the house of Judas and ate. We were all glad to see him back in good health, for we had worried about our leader.

The worries were not over, though. We figured we would continue with the original plan. Saul would deliver his letters of authority to the head of the synagogue and we would round up men like Ananias and take them back to Jerusalem. Well, maybe not Ananias, since he had restored Saul's sight, but others like him. So it was no

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surprise that we went to synagogue the next day. The shock came when Saul did not deliver the letters as expected. Instead, he spoke like one of those we had come to imprison.

That left our entourage in a quandary. If we followed through with our reason for being there, we would have to arrest our leader. But he had the letters of authority, if he had not already destroyed them. So we could not arrest him, because without those letters we had no authority in Damascus. And if we were confused, the Damascenes were more so. “Didn't he come here to arrest the followers of the Teacher? Is this some sort of trick to ferret out secret followers of the Way?”

Saul helped us solve our indecision. He was, after all, trained by a master of the Law, as well as those versed in Stoic logic. Every time he spoke he persuaded people, using the Law and the Prophets, that the Teacher was the Messiah. We were used to listening to Saul. We were used to following him. It is no wonder, then, that I am now one of those I came to take back to Jerusalem in chains. Saul is, after all, the type of person you would follow anywhere. Even into the jaws of death. And if we go back to Jerusalem, that is exactly where we will be following him. Maybe his stoicism has rubbed off. If I die, I die happy; if I live, I live happy. Or maybe that can be rephrased. Because of the Teacher, if I die, I die sinless; if I live, I live sinless. And that makes me happy.

(From Acts 9 and Acts 22)

How Old Isaac?

It is sometimes surprising how much we are influenced in our view of scripture by artist's rendering of certain events. Cherubs are cute little fat kids, rather than the fearsome multi-faced beasts of Ezekiel and the Revelation. When people see "Mary" or "Jesus" in a piece of burnt toast or a tortilla it is always some variation on Renaissance portrayals using northern European models. In like manner many people have pictured the *akeida*, the sacrifice of Isaac on the altar, based on the pictures in our Bibles or on our museum walls. But are those pictures accurate?

Most Jews and Christians know the story in Genesis 22. Abraham was asked to take his son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah (in what is now Jerusalem) to sacrifice him. (Some Muslims say it was Ishmael, not Isaac.) Abraham put Isaac on the altar and "stretched out his hand" and took the knife. (Many paintings have him holding the knife high in the air, which is not indicated in the passage.) An angel prevents Abraham from actually killing his son, instead pointing out a ram caught in the bushes, which was sacrificed. Nobody questions how a ram caught by his horns would have been quiet enough not to have been noticed before, but that is a separate question. Most artist renderings have Isaac looking anywhere from five to twelve years old. Is this accurate?

Genesis 22:12 uses the word "lad" (in English) to describe Isaac. The Hebrew word can mean a very young boy, but is more often used for a young bachelor of marriageable age. That still leaves a wide range of possible interpretations, but would probably put Isaac anywhere from twelve to his mid-twenties. Isaac was certainly old enough to be strong enough to carry wood a

long distance. Which means he would have been strong enough to fight off his father, who was well past 100, had he not been willing to obey Abraham and God.

Two incidents recorded right after the *akeida* may shed some light on Isaac's age. The first one less so than the second. It is recorded that "after these things" Abraham learned that his brother had children. This is interesting because God waited to give children to Nahor, apparently, until Abraham had an heir, and had established his faith in God. One of those nephews, Bethuel, was the father of Rebekah, who was to become Isaac's perhaps much-younger wife. This might indicate that Isaac was on the younger side of youth.

Many rabbis make much about the start of the next chapter, which records the death of Sarah, Isaac's mother. Sometimes things recorded within a few verses have many years between them. Nevertheless, some rabbis say that Sarah's death followed immediately after Abraham and Isaac got home. One possibility proposed is that she had a heart attack upon learning what Abraham had done, and how close she had come to losing her son. Now, Sarah was 127 years old. If she died immediately after the incident in question, that would make Isaac about 36 years old. This, anyway, puts an upper limit on his age, although it seems quite high to be called a "lad."

We don't know how old Isaac was, and it probably doesn't matter. He was probably at least in his teen years, and no older than 36. Most likely he was in his late teens or early twenties. Whatever his actual age, the point is that we cannot base our views of scripture on paintings or statues with which we are familiar. Artists can be wrong. The scripture is not.

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