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PAYING DEBTS

One way of determining a theme of a book, biblical or otherwise, is to look for repeated words. After eliminating common words (the, and, of) what words appear more frequently than others, especially if they are scattered throughout the writing. For instance, the book of Matthew uses a phrase similar to “that it might be fulfilled” at least fifteen times. He was writing to a Jewish audience, using the prophets to prove that Jesus was Messiah.

Many teachers will tell you that the key verse of Romans is found in chapter one, verse sixteen. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” It establishes the “Jew first, then Greek” thesis that is expanded on throughout the letter. It is Paul’s thesis statement, but the key word in Romans may just be “debtor.” It appears at the beginning (just before the thesis statement), the middle, and the end of the book. The idea of obedient faith, another key concept, appears at the beginning and end, but this word is also found in the middle. So what does Paul say about debtors?

I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. (Rom 1:14-15)

This statement is immediately followed by verse sixteen. “I am a debtor. I am ready to preach. For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Paul felt an obligation. It went beyond obeying the great commission. A debt had been placed on him. Remember that Paul was a Pharisee. He had been zealous in persecuting those who followed the Way, and yet he had been forgiven that. “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (1 Cor 15:9) He embraced the principle of Luke 7:47, that one who is forgiven much loves much. Because he was forgiven and then given a mission to the Gentiles, he felt that obligation very deeply.

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. (Rom 8:12-13)

Paul was not the only debtor because of forgiveness. Everyone who is forgiven gives up any debt to live after the flesh. The debt is not laid on God. He does not owe us salvation because of our good deeds. Rather, the debt is laid on us to live after His Spirit. We all share in Paul’s debt.

But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things. (Rom 15:25-27)

After showing how both Jews and Gentiles are sinners, and both have been saved, Paul says that the Gentiles specifically have a debt owed to the Jewish people. It was the Jewish people who prepared the way for the Messiah. The Jews were the first to receive the gospel. Paul says the debt extends not just to the spiritual, but to the physical. The Jews in Palestine were in need of financial support. Paul was collecting support in Corinth and other places where he had been, and proposed that the Romans had a debt to give aid as well. Since that time the church has become almost exclusively Gentile. Nevertheless, we still owe a debt to the Jewish people, both spiritual and physical. Not necessarily to Israel because that is a secular, political organization, but to the Jewish people as we are made familiar with them.

Paul gives three instances of debts, throughout the letter to the Romans. It seems he felt his debt deeply, and expects no less of all Christians.

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MANY MIRIAMs

Everybody has a name. While everyone is unique, their names may or may not be. Unless the holder of the name becomes famous, a Moon Unit or Shaquon may go through life never meeting anybody who shares their moniker. Some names, though, are quite common. For instance, if you were born in 2019, when you grow up your contemporaries are likely to share your name if it is Liam, Noah, Oliver, William, or Elijah (for boys) or Olivia, Emma, Ava, Sophia, or Isabella (for girls). If you were born twenty years ago, you are finding that you know a lot of people named Jacob, Michael, Matthew, Joshua, Christopher, Emily, Hannah, Ashley, Madison, or Sarah. Going back to biblical times you might find a few women with the name of Miriam or, in translation, Mary.

Sister of Moses

The first Miriam we encounter, and one of two mentioned in the Old Testament, is the older sister of Moses. We aren't sure if she was the oldest child in the

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family or the middle child. Frequently we think of her in conjunction with her other brother, Aaron. She may have been the older sibling, although it is hard to tell since she and Aaron died nearly together. (Num 20) In either case, she was several years older than her famous brother. She was of marriageable age when Moses was born, because the scripture calls her a maid, using a word meaning a virgin old enough to marry. (That would, incidentally, put her age at 95 to 100 at the time of the Exodus.)

We first meet Miriam, although not by name, in the reeds on the banks of the Nile River. Her mother had given birth to a late-born son and managed to hide him for three months. When she felt she could hide him no longer she waterproofed a basket, put the baby in it, and put it in the river. Older sister Miriam was tasked with watching what would happen to the child. Pharaoh's daughter found the basket.

Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that

she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. (Ex 2:7-8)

Eighty years later, Miriam is a prophet and a leader of the women of Israel. After the crossing of the Red Sea, the other women look to her to lead them in song, probably because of her advanced age and not because of her relationship to Moses.

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. (Ex 15:20-21)

One other significant incident in her life is recorded, and it shows her in a less-than-favorable light. Miriam, it seems, was somewhat racist. "And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman." (Num 12:1) Her racism didn't manifest itself directly. Instead she and Aaron said, "Has not the Lord spoken by us also?" As a result, Miriam was struck with leprosy.

If she and her brother said the same thing, why was Miriam the only one to become leprous? The rabbis say that leprosy was a miraculous disease that came to separate those who were guilty of evil speaking from the congregation. It may be that Miriam was the one to actually speak the words, and Aaron said, "Yeah, what she said." Be what may, she was the leprous one, and had to wait outside the camp the required time after her cleansing.

Although she was not the mother of Moses, she serves as a surrogate tie to a later Miriam who was the mother to a child destined to save his people.

Mother of Jesus

The next significant Miriam we find in the Bible is in the New Testament. As the sister of Moses was important to the upbringing of the savior of the Israelites, so the next Miriam was importing to the upbringing of the savior of the world.

When this Miriam, now more commonly called Mary, gave birth to Jesus she was probably about the same age as Moses's sister at the Nile. The earlier Miriam faced the potential killing of her baby brother; the later Miriam faced to potential death of her son. (Matt 2:13)

Miriam the mother of Jesus gets just about as much press as Miriam the sister of Moses. We see her at the beginning of Jesus's life on earth, and at the end, and only a few incidents in between.

It's hard to say which was more shocking: to be greeted by an angel, to find out that you were pregnant though a virgin, or to learn that the child would be the Messiah. Three consecutive shocks in one day, but Miriam took it well. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." (Lk 1:38)

When it came time to have the baby Miriam was far from home and relegated to overflow housing in her husband's ancestral town. Forty days after his birth two prophets in the Temple predicted sorrow for her and her son. (Lk 2:25-38) Some time (a few days to two years) later, the family has to flee to Egypt. Shortly thereafter, probably within a year, they move back to Nazareth. That is a lot for any woman to take in.

Joseph and Miriam probably made annual trips to Jerusalem as required by the Law. Most were uneventful until the child was twelve years old. On the trip home, Miriam could not find her son. Have you ever seen a hysterical woman in Walmart who can't find her child who is two aisles away? This was Miriam, except her child was two days' journey away. When that mother in Walmart finds her child, the kid is probably thinking, "What's wrong; I'm right here." When Miriam found her son, that was pretty much the same reaction Jesus had. "Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" (Lk 2:49)

About eighteen years later Miriam is invited to a wedding. It must have been for a dear friend, because when the host was about to be embarrassed for running out of wine, she tells her son to take care of it. It is not clear exactly what she expected, because he had apparently performed no miracles up to this time. (Jn 2:11) Nevertheless, Jesus turned water into wine at her request.

Another time Miriam went to see her son. She did not get priority seating; in fact, she had to wait outside. Jesus said, "My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it." (Lk 8:21) The implication is that Miriam and the rest of his family were at that time not willing to listen to his words.

Multiple Miriams

His mother was not the only Miriam in Jesus's life. There were several. Jesus seemed especially fond of Miriam of Bethany, along with her sister Martha and brother Lazarus. He stayed in their house sometimes. This is the Miriam whose brother Lazarus was raised from the dead (Jn 11) and who later anointed Jesus's feet with expensive perfume. (Jn 12:3)

There were several Miriams watching the crucifixion. Matthew lists "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children." (Matt 27:56) Mark lists "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome." (Mk 15:40) Luke doesn't list the

women observing the crucifixion, but does list "Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them" (Lk 24:10) as the ones who told the apostles about the empty tomb. At least two of them had been at the cross, and had observed where he was buried. John gives the names of three Miriams at the cross: "his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene." (Jn 19:25)

How many Miriams does that make? Some scholars try to limit the number of people listed. Taking Matthew's and Mark's accounts, Salome would be the mother of Zebedee's children (James and John). If John is listing only three people and they are the same people as Matthew lists, then we have a problem. Salome, the wife

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of Zebedee, must also be Miriam the wife of Cleophas. It is more likely that each writer listed some women named Miriam at the cross. Miriam of Magdala is, of course, the same in all accounts. Miriam the wife of Cleophas could be the mother of James and Joses. Or the mother of Jesus could be the mother of James and Joses. She is so described in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. That would mean, though, that James the Less (in Mark's account) is not the second James among the apostles, or that Joseph had died and Miriam remarried a man named Alphaeus.

Maybe we should simply take Luke's lead. At the cross we may have Miriam of Magdala, Miriam the mother of Jesus, Miriam (wife of Alphaeus?) the mother of James and Joses, Miriam the wife of Cleophas, and Salome (and Zebedee's wife if she is not Salome), "and other women." Suffice it to say that Miriam was a common name for women at that time.

There is one other Miriam of note, this time mentioned in Acts 12. "This Mary was the owner of the house which became the first Christian synagogue, or meeting-place, in Jerusalem." (Ronald Brownrigg, *Who's Who in the New Testament*) She was the mother of John Mark, the gospel writer. She was a woman of substance, because she had a servant named Rhoda. It was to her house that Peter resorted after being miraculously freed from prison.

George M. Cohan wrote that Mary is a grand old name. If he were to look into his heritage, he might have written that as Miriam. In either form it has come down to us today, such that until recently it was consistently the most common girl's name. And it is a grand old name.

A RIOT IN EPHESUS

Demetrius is a troublemaker. Those of us who live in Ephesus know that. Apparently, the man called Paul did not.

We Ephesians are a proud lot. After all, we live in the second largest city in the Roman Empire. Our position on the coast of Asia Minor makes us important, and wealthy. Marcus Antonius spent some time here before losing in battle to Emperor Augustus. Most importantly, we are listed in Antipater's guidebook of seven sights of the world. In fact, he wrote, "when I saw the sacred house of Artemis that towers to the clouds, the others were placed in the shade, for the sun himself has never looked upon its equal outside Olympus."

The Artemesia had been destroyed once. It happened on the day that Alexander was born. A man whose name is forbidden to be mentioned set fire to the temple, and some say Artemis was too busy with the birth of Alexander to save her own temple. We rebuilt the temple larger than the first, and that is the one listed among the "seven sights." Demetrius was a troublemaker, but some say he was only defending the honor of our great temple.

This man Paul came to Ephesus, preaching a new message. At first, he went only to the Jews, and that was fine. They keep to themselves anyway and are no threat to Artemis. But then he started teaching anyone in Ephesus about a man named Jesus who had died and come back to life. He argued that everyone was a sinner in the eyes of his God, and this man was the only way people could be saved from their sins.

Demetrius saw that as a threat to Artemis. On a more personal note, Demetrius saw that as a threat to his

livelihood, because he survived by smithing silver images of the goddess. He called the craftsman guild together.

He said, "You see how in not just our city, but throughout Asia, this Paul is convincing people that there are no gods made with hands. He is threatening our whole craft. Not only that, he is bringing discredit on the temple of our great Diana. People will stop coming to Ephesus to see the temple. Antipater or not, the tourism business will suffer as well."

They came marching out of their meeting house shouting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." Diana and Artemis are pretty much the same, you know. They couldn't find Paul, but did find his companions Gaius and Aristarchus, and took them to the amphitheatre. They kept shouting. I doubt that half of us knew what we were shouting about. This went on for about two hours.

Rumor has it that Paul tried to enter the amphitheatre. His friends wisely held him back. He would have been killed by that crowd.

Finally, the scribe took the stage. He was a man who knew law and was respected. People finally got quiet enough for him to speak. He was a reasonable man.

"You all know that Artemis can defend herself. Now if Demetrius has a legal complaint, he should file it. But you all are liable to be fined for breach of the peace. Calm down; go home. Let Demetrius fight his own battle."

In the end Demetrius felt he had won. Paul left town right after this. Of course, he came back, but that was after things had calmed down and there were more converts to the Way. So Demetrius also lost, because he could not fight against the teachings of this Paul. It seems nobody can.

(Taken from Acts 19)

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