

Charge It To Me!

*If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything,
charge that to my account!
I, Paul, have written it with my own hand: I will repay it.
(Philemon 18-19a)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 30, 2017**
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Dining at an expensive Manhattan restaurant, a man overheard three young ladies arguing at a nearby table. It was a polite argument, each insisting she was picking up the tab. One ended the debate with a tone that seemed to possess mature authority. Reaching into her purse and flashing plastic she said, "*I insist that you let me pay for this entire ticket!*" Then she added with a grin, "*With my mother's credit card!*"

I know I only recently arrived in the Village and that this is my first foray into *The Gathering*, but let's pack our bags this morning and be on the move! I want you to join me on an adventurous journey? Don't worry about the cost. "*Charge it to me!*" I insist on picking up the tab! Ours, after all, will be an imaginary excursion. You'll rack up plenty of fantasy frequent flyer miles this morning on our journey through Space and Time, so fasten your seatbelts and prepare for a jaunt halfway around the world and 4,000 years into the past. Ready? Wheels up!

On a biblical time-line 4,000 years will take us roughly to the time of Abraham, 1800 years before the birth of Jesus. Our destination is the Persian Gulf region known as Mesopotamia, a Greek word meaning "*land between the rivers.*" Those rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates, mentioned in the second chapter of the bible, Genesis 2. Here the story of our faith began with Abraham's call from the city of Ur.

Our destination, though, will be farther north along the Euphrates River, in today's Syria, just inside their modern day border with Iraq. As you know, that's quite a hotspot in today's geopolitical realities, but since our journey is imaginary there is absolutely no danger, so buckle up again as we prepare for landing. Welcome you to the city of Mari!

Here's an artist depiction of how Mari might have looked in Abraham's time, a bustling metropolis on the Euphrates. He would have known it well and likely traveled through it on his way to the Promised Land.



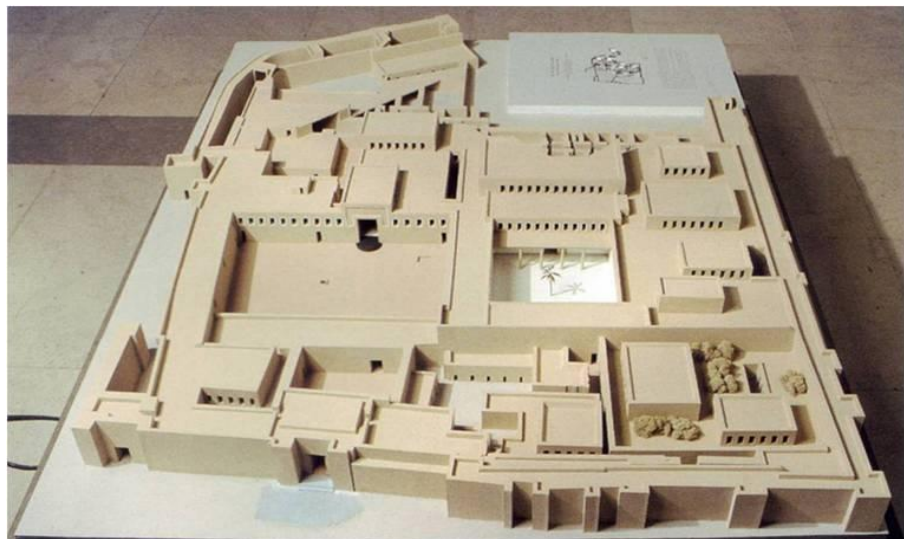
Between the two cities of Ur and Mari lay an even more important city, Babylon, probably the largest city in the world at that time with at least 200,000 inhabitants and ruled by King Hammurabi, whose famous law code took civilization to a new level in which law regulated government. It was this same Hammurabi whose army destroyed Mari in 1759 B.C., ending a golden period for that city-state which had lasted for over a thousand years.

This triad of cities formed the easternmost part of the caravan route that followed the Fertile Crescent, the arch of land following the course of the rivers and curling at last down the easternmost edge of the Mediterranean toward Egypt. The famous highway was known as the Via Maris, the Way of the Sea.

Let me tell you a bit of Mari's history. After its destruction Mari lay forgotten and undisturbed under the sands of time until 84 years ago, when in 1933 a fragment of an ancient

statue was stumbled upon by locals as they scratched the soil to find a stone to use as a marker for a funeral. It caused quite a stir in the archaeological world, and later that year excavations began at the site under French archaeologist Andre Parrot, unearthing the city of Mari, one of history's most momentous archaeological discoveries.

Among the key discoveries at Mari is the palace of its last ruler, King Zimri-Lim. Here is a model of the palace in the Louvre in Paris. The palace covers 258,000 square feet with close to 300 rooms. His entire royal library, yielding over 20,000 cuneiform tablets, is one of the most exciting finds of all times.



Hard for me to believe it was nearly 30 years ago, in 1989, that I presented the results of my research on Mari's socio-economic conditions, a study focusing on thirty-eight administrative texts discovered in the temple area. I was a bit dismayed, honestly, when my team at the University of Michigan was assigned what I considered to be essentially a study of bank records from the past, like some future archaeologist in Arkansas discovering a stash of car loan documentation tucked away in an obscure filing cabinet that somehow survived the ravages of time. I would have preferred to have been assigned remnants of ancient literature in order to study Mari's religion, the stories of its gods and goddesses, those the very divinities Abraham left to enter relationship with the deity who introduced himself as El Shaddai, *God Almighty*.



Instead, I studied bank loans. How unexciting! So this morning as we disembark I invite you to pay a visit with me, not to the palace or the theatre or a shopping district, but the banking district. Let's stop in at First National Bank of Mari. Banking was much different in those days. No camel-back-high drive-thru windows (though it's fun to imagine Abu Kasem fumbling through his leather purse for his ATM card while balancing on his camel). In Mari, banking was temple-based, centralized around the worship of deities such as Marduk, Dagan, Ishtar, and Shamash.

Can you imagine the church doubling as America's chief financial institution? In Mari, the temple was Wall Street. One would think if there's an advantage for the church doubling as the bank, it might be that more grace would be extended toward those having a hard time making payments. Hardly! Oy veh! In Mari those who "couldn't leave home without it" paid a hefty price. The interest rate for the region was standardized at 33 1/3% annually, though unquestionably there are examples of interest rates as high as 50%, and some evidence that these ancient bankers were adept enough mathematically to calculate interest in a way that compounded monthly, concurrent with the cycle of the moon.

There were similarities, though. Despite the span of four millennia separating Mari from Hot Springs Village these ancient loan records, like our own, were highly formulaic. Today, the loan officer has a standardized form for you fill out. Name. Address. Social security number. Amount borrowed. Terms. Date of payoff. It wasn't much different 4,000 years ago with loans of silver and grain. The 38 tablets follow a similar pattern, including, at the end, a list of witnesses. First National Bank of Mari, you see, wanted their money back in a timely manner.

The most fascinating tablet I read among those our team handled recorded a loan to a man named Iarip-ea. It was an interest-free loan and no date was even set for payment! An ancient version of one of those 0% loans for six months on transferred balances? No, this was not a "What's In YOUR Wallet?" competitive loan. Rather, in lieu of interest the temple took his wife, Tabuti-emi, as a servant. The terms were simple. Iarip-ea could have her back when he paid off his debt, but as long as she served the temple, no payment was required. The cuneiform tablet

includes the line, *“if she dies or runs away or becomes ill -- payment is expected immediately.”* Seems then, as now, creditor compassion goes only so far.

Well, I hope you enjoyed your visit, but now let's reverse course. We have some time, I think, so let's stop on our way home through Space and Time in modern day Turkey, a city in Asia Minor called Colossae, and only 2000 years ago. I want to stop here because, having this morning read Paul's letter to Philemon, Colossae is where that letter would have been delivered, to the home of Philemon. I had the opportunity to lead a group of pilgrims there about ten years ago to find Colossae quite unexciting, then an unexcavated tel only a few miles from the extraordinary sites of Laodicea and Hierapolis (both mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians). I would love to return to Colossae, since in the last decade excavations have been ongoing on this city which in New Testament times was vibrant, but was destroyed by an earthquake, perhaps around the very time Paul wrote this letter.



The letter to Philemon tells a fascinating story in which is embedded a financial transaction not entirely unlike what we saw in Mari. Philemon evidently had a servant named Onesimus who had escaped, running away to Rome. In Rome this same Onesimus hears the gospel and is converted, becoming one of Paul's most valued assistants. The financial transaction is an *“I-insist-that-you-let-me-pick-up-the-tab!”* moment. *“Dear Philemon, I appeal to you for your debtor, Onesimus. I am sending him back, though I would have preferred to have kept him with me, but would not without your consent. Perhaps, though he left you as a slave, he might return to you as a brother. If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.”*

One of the hymns of the faith declares this sort of a transaction, *“Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.”* Let's imagine Jesus, our advocate, writing just such a letter to God. *“Dear Father, I write on behalf of my child (insert your name) who owes you much and could never repay their dept. If he/she owes you anything, put that on my account. I, your Son, will repay it.”*

I once heard Chuck Swindoll tell the story of a man who had cheated the IRS. His guilt disrupted his life until at last he wrote the IRS. *“This past year, I cheated on my tax return. I feel terrible about this. I can't sleep at night. So, I have enclosed a check for \$150 to ease my conscience. If that doesn't help and I still can't sleep, I will send you the other \$300 I owe!”*

So it is with the guilt of sin. There's always more to pay. We never gain a sense that our debts are fully paid, attempt as we may to appease God through a weekly or monthly installment of

religious activity. We simply don't have the resources to pay our debt.

Jesus did. Visiting Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv, a tourist admired the magnificent architecture of the grand auditorium, home to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. He asked the guide, *"Is this auditorium named for Thomas Mann, the famous author?"*



"No," the guide replied as they rounded the curve to approach and see the auditorium. *"It is named for Frederick Mann of Philadelphia."*

"What did he write?" the tourist asked.

The guide replied. *"A check."*

On the cross Jesus, in a sense, wrote a very big check. A cancel-the-debt kind of check as Jesus said of our sin-debt, *"Charge that to my account."*

I love the third stanza of Horatio Spafford's *"It Is Well with My Soul,"* for its powerful expression of that thought:

*My Sin, O the Bliss of this glorious thought;
My sin, not in part, but the whole;
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O My Soul!*