



Minutes With Messiah

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Purim: Why Not Bow?

In chapter three of the *Megilla*, the scroll of Esther, King Ahasuerus decrees that all should bow down to his courtier, Haman. All the servants in the king's gate follow the decree except Mordechai. Even after the other servants nagged him, he would not obey the king's decree. As a result, the servants inform Haman, who convinces the king to destroy all Jews.

Why did Mordechai choose this particular command to disobey? Was it because he would not bow down to any man, but only to God? I think not. He had sat in the king's gate for some time, but it was not for failure to bow to the king that he was singled out. Yet his obedience is directly related to his being a Jew, "for he had told them that he was a Jew (Esth. 3:4)"

Obviously there was something about Haman, himself, that prevented Mordechai, as a Jew, to bow down before him. Whatever it was obviously was not unique to Mordechai, because Haman chose to try to exterminate a whole nation because one of the king's servants, a Jew, would not bow to him.

The answer can be found in Haman's name and lineage. He is called "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite" three times in the book and "Haman the Agagite" twice. We come upon the name Agag previously in two places in scripture? In Numbers 24:7, as Balaam is blessing Israel he says "his king shall be higher than Agag." In and of itself, this means little to us. But in 1 Samuel 15:8-33 we read of "Agag, king of the Amalekites." While it may be that Agag was his personal name, the likelihood is that it was a family name or even a title. So Agag was the king of the Amalekites, and Haman was an Agagite. Therefore, Haman was an Amalekite. This explains Mordechai's refusal to bow, and Haman's hatred of the Jews.

The enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites had been going on even from the beginning of the Jewish nation. After Israel had come out of Egypt with the equivalent for that time of the atom bomb (the crossing of the Red Sea), no nation wanted to face them in battle. No nation, that is, except Amalek.

Exodus 17:8-16 tells of the battle and concludes "the LORD hath sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." As Moses said farewell to Israel he reminded them that the Amalekites had attacked the weak and the stragglers and said, "thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget. (Deut. 25:19)" No wonder Mordechai would not bow to this man, specifically. He was a sworn enemy of the Jews.

Haman was probably equally aware of the history. That is why he was not content to destroy one man, but went after all the Jews in the empire.

What does this mean to us today? Without a meaning for us, this is nothing but a scholarly exercise in genealogic research (sorry, Mom). I think the lesson for us is that God is in control of history. He promised enmity between the nations for as long as they both existed. At least one Amalekite had survived to the time of the Persian Empire. And that one man "happened" to come face to face with a Jew, and was destroyed thereby.

Through a series of "coincidences" Haman was brought to death. The old queen coincidentally opposed her husband. The new queen was coincidentally a Jewess. Her uncle coincidentally sat in the gate of the palace and refused to bow to an Amalekite who was coincidentally in the king's court. This man coincidentally had built a gallows that just happened to be handy when the queen revealed his treachery. When coincidence piles on coincidence, it is no longer a coincidence. Coincidentally, God is still in control.

(Purim falls on March 9, 2001)

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On the Interpretation of Prophecy

It's all around us. You see it at the discount stores, the newsstands, and the bookstores. You hear it on the internet, television and the radio. It's coming to your neighborhood theater soon, and has been there before. It is prophecy! Jean Dixon and Nostradamus, "Weekly World News" and "The Star," Herbert W. Armstrong and even Billy Graham—all have been involved in prophecy, and most in specifically prophesying the end of the world. Perhaps the most popular book of the New Testament right now is the Revelation. Don't worry about what Jesus taught, or James giving advice for practical Christian living. What's important is not love or doctrine, but eschatology, the study of the end of all things.

Study of prophecy is not a bad thing, unless it is the prophecies of people who have been wrong before, like Jean Dixon and Billy Graham, or those whose prophecies are so vague as to be practically worthless, like Nostradamus. The problem is, most people don't understand some of the basic concepts necessary to understand prophecy. They go off into

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flights of fancy because they are don't understand the flight plan.

Prophecy is not what you think.

One mistake many people make is believing that prophecy is strictly telling the future. While future events often form the core around which a prophet speaks, the message is not what is to come. The message of the prophets is "God said." A prophet, by definition, is one who speaks for God. His job is not foretelling, but "forth-telling." The burden of his message is what God wants from the people to whom he is speaking. If in delivering that message he gives out some word of what is to come, that is merely to support his word. The only

foretelling the prophet Jonah did was in his one line message: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." But the real message, the message the Ninevites heard, was "Repent." If a prophet is judged by whether his foretelling comes true, Jonah is the worst prophet in history. If a prophet is judged by how many people pay attention to his message, Jonah was the most successful ever.

The problem many people today have in their attempts to interpret the book of the Revelation is that they mistake the message. To many, Revelation is all about the future. It is about the "rapture" and "tribulation" and the final judgment. Even assuming (and it is a stretch to do so) that the book tells of a future "rapture" and millennial reign of Christ on earth, the message of the book is to the Christians under Roman persecution (and all persecution since) that God is in control and we will overcome. Whether you think the things in the book happened long ago, are happening today, or are yet to come, the message is the same. But people emphasize the incidentals and ignore the message. If Nineveh heard Jonah like many today hear John the city would have been empty in forty days, rather than being allowed to live in relative comfort and security for several more decades.

Prophecy and time.

A second mistake is trying to make prophecy apply when it doesn't. A prophecy may have an interpretation for the present and one or more for the future, but unless the scripture says it applies at a future time, we don't know. A simple example will, I hope, suffice. Isaiah 7 tells of a conspiracy against the king of Judah, and the Lord's reassurance that the conspiracy will fall. As a sign to the king that God will be with him, Isaiah says "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings." On its face, Isaiah is just saying that the

kings coming against Judah shall fall before a child yet to be conceived is old enough to know right from wrong. To Isaiah and to Ahaz, that is probably what the prophecy meant. But it had another meaning, one known only to the Holy Spirit and not revealed for another 650 years. Unless the Holy Spirit had told Joseph (Matt 1:22-23) that it applied also to the Messiah, nobody would have ever imagined a second interpretation.

The flip side of this, though, is that one should not take something to be future *unless the Holy Spirit says it is*. There is where many people run into problems in interpreting the book of Revelation. The Holy Spirit says these are things that are “soon to come to pass. (Rev 1:1)” Without express guidance otherwise, we must assume then that most of the events of the book have happened almost two millennia ago. Even without that guidance, many claim these are events yet to come. That’s an interesting view of the word “soon.” If it was to have meaning at all, it was its meaning to those to whom it was originally said. I find nowhere that the Spirit says otherwise.

What is the Lion?

The most dangerous problem with the interpretation of prophecy is that much of it is necessarily couched in figurative language that would be understood by those “in the know” of the time, but to no one else. This was true of Daniel’s prophecy, of Hosea’s prophecy, of Zechariah’s prophecy, and especially of John’s prophecy. There are those who are certain that John was speaking in symbols, but even he could not understand them. And if he could not understand them, how could the people to whom he wrote. The egocentric conclusion is that John’s message was not to Christians of the first century, but only to those of the time of the enlightened interpreter.

A man who worked for me a few years ago knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he understood Revelation 13:2. The passage says: “And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion.” This man insisted that the bear represented Russia, the lion was England, and the leopard was the third world countries of Africa. No matter that Scythia (now part of Russia) was represented in John’s time by a

lion, that England was not represented then by any animal (not being a power at all), and that Africa (primarily Egypt) was represented by the vulture and cobra. My friend went on to say that the twelve stars of Rev 12:1 stood for the European Common Market. Of course, the European Union has now grown to fifteen members. (I grant, however, that their flag still has only twelve stars.) God may live outside of time, but why would he

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use twentieth century symbology to give meaning to a first century message?

I recently read that the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church was the beast of Revelation 13:18, whose number is 666. The reasoning behind this was that the Pope wears a hat that has on it the words “Vicarius Filii Dei,” which would be translated “the Vicar of God’s Son.” The individual claiming the Pope was the beast said that the Latin phrase represented the number 666, using Roman numerals. The letter I is 1, V and U are 5, L is 50, C is 100, D is 500. Leaving out the other letters and taking them individually, you get 5+1+100+1+5+1+50+1+1+500+1, which does equal 666. But using the rules of Roman numerals, I come up with either 662 (iu=4, il=49) or 664 (il taken separately) or even 660 (ic=99). If you are going to interpret according to a symbol, at least use the right rules for the symbol. How easy it is to make something seem to say that which was clearly not the writer’s intent.

I don’t know the meaning of all the symbols of Revelation. I can’t even say for sure what is past and what is future in the book. I know what the message of the book is, however. In any prophecy, if we get the message we understand what God wants. In prophecy, and in everything else, let God’s message show through. Everything else, as Rabbi Hillel said, is just commentary.

Have Faith in Faith

And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. (Luke 17:6)

Do we believe this passage? Do we have faith? I am not asking if we have faith in God. Do we have faith in faith? Do we believe that faith has the power to move trees or mountains? No doubt that faith must be anchored in God, but Jesus didn't say that. He said if you had faith that what you said would happen, it would happen.

Very often we are more like the father who cried "Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mk 9:24)." As honorable as that request is, as necessary as that request is, it is an admission that I don't have faith in my faith. If you asked a hundred people if they pray enough, 99 people would say "no" even if they were regular and earnest in prayer. If you asked the same 100 people if they had enough faith, they would probably give the same answers. No matter whether the answer should be yes or no, we almost naturally don't have faith in our faith.

I recently read a story about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. After teaching a stirring lesson about the meaning of faith, he was approached by a disciple who asked if he meant that if he had perfect faith in God, God would provide all his needs. When the Rabbi affirmed that, the disciple went on to say, "Good. If that is the case I need no longer work. I will devote myself

to study of Torah and God will provide the 20,000 rubles I will need to survive." The man went home and began study, not working. After but a week he returned to the Rabbi with the complaint, "I have the faith, but so far no money has arrived." Rabbi Yisrael said, "I tell you what. I will offer you 8,000 rubles cash today if you will commit yourself to give me the 20,000 rubles that you expect will come because of your faith." The man jumped at the deal. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter replied, "Who in his right mind would give up 20,000 rubles for a mere 8,000 rubles? Only someone who does not have perfect faith that he will receive the 20,000 rubles! Obviously you have more faith in my 8,000 rubles than in God's 20,000!" (Taken from Drasha, ©2001 by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky and Torah.org)

We believe God will solve all our problems. We give them to him in prayer and in faith. But like this man, we give up on our faith after only a week. Our faith says, I will give it to you God, but while I am waiting I will try to fix it myself. We are like the kid who takes a toy airplane to his dad to fix it, but wants to play with it before the glue is dry.

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt 6:31-33)

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