



Minutes With Messiah

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Living in Obscurity

Richard M. Johnson. William R. King. Garret Hobart. Sometimes there are people of relative importance or unimportance whose names tend to be forgotten. The three names above were all Vice Presidents of the United States, but few even recognize their names. (These served under Presidents van Buren, Pierce, and McKinley.) The Bible is also full of obscure names. On Purim (beginning the evening of March 11 in 2017), when the scroll of Esther is read, some names will be mentioned that are not as familiar as those of the main characters. And yet, we may learn some things from these obscure characters.

In Esther 2:21-23 we learn of two eunuchs in the king's service, Bigthan and Teresh. Their names don't tell us much. Bigthan may have been the king's sommelier, similar to Nehemiah one hundred years later. The name of Teresh gives us no hint of his position. The passage says they were both eunuchs, and that they were doorkeepers, perhaps of the harem. It also says they sought to "lay hands" on the king, usually taken to mean that they plotted to kill him, because they were angry about something. We also know they were not very smart, or not very observant. Here they are, plotting against the king with a Jew named Mordechai sitting just feet from them. It may be that they figured since he was a Jew, a foreigner, he might agree with them. Or it may be that since he was a Jew he was invisible to them; they may have discounted his ethnicity so much that they could not even see him. Or it may be that he was invisible because he was there every day, and was to them no more than might be a doorknob or a stone kerb. In any case, they plotted in Mordechai's hearing, he reported it, and they were executed.

What can we learn from these men? The obvious lesson is to pay attention, especially when you are thinking about doing something wrong. One other thing might be what Solomon said about opposing authority.

Never make light of the king, even in your thoughts. And don't make fun of the powerful, even in your own bedroom. For a little bird might deliver your message and tell them what you said. (Eccl 10:20)

Hatach is another person about whom we know little, but the little we know may be significant. Esther 4 may be the best-known chapter in the book, but people pay little attention to Hatach, who appears by name only in this chapter.

The king's chief counselor, out of anger against Mordechai, had sent out a decree for the destruction, death, and extermination of all the Jews from India to Ethiopia. Mordechai told this to his cousin, Queen Esther. He couldn't communicate with her directly because he was wearing sackcloth, in mourning, which was not allowed in the palace. Also, he was not allowed into the harem. So he had to communicate by means of a eunuch, who was this Hatach. Esther had not made her lineage known to the king or his court. As Esther's liaison with Mordechai, then, Hatach may have been the only person in the palace to know that the queen was a Jewess. He carried messages between the two cousins that made the queen's ancestry abundantly clear. Some eunuchs were personal servants to the women of the harem, but many were expected to pass on information gained in the performance of their duties. As such, Hatach may have been subject to execution of the king found that he was withholding this juicy bit of gossip. Still, he held his peace.

We don't know what happened to Hatach after the events of the subsequent chapters of Esther. Did he continue to live in obscurity in the harem? Did the king want him executed because he had withheld valuable information? If the latter, we can assume that his life was spared by Queen Esther as a reward.

Hatach serves as an object lesson in loyalty. He did not betray the queen's trust. He is a model of discretion. He did not gossip about what must surely have gotten him much attention. Rather than modeling ourselves after Bigthan and Teresh, we should follow the example of Hatach. Even if nobody knows their names.

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Literate people, by definition, can read their own language. A few people are multi-literate, meaning they can read in at least two languages. A lot of people who were raised on a Romance language can at least recognize the letters of other such languages. English-speakers may be able to sound out Spanish words, and maybe even a few Gaelic ones. With effort and a little training they might even be able to identify some Greek or Cyrillic. When faced with Japanese Kanji or Arabic script, however, they become totally lost. As lost, perhaps, as Belshazzar.

It seems that Belshazzar, the *de facto* ruler of the Babylonian Empire, was having a party. The alcohol flowed freely, and with it inhibitions flowed out the door. Belshazzar remembered that there were some golden vessels that his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, had brought from Jerusalem. He probably knew that these had been temple vessels. He certainly knew that there was a reason nobody had used them in many years. But that wouldn't stop him. He was going to drink from these vessels. He was going to praise his gods while doing so. That proved to be a mistake.

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the

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plaster of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. (Dan 5:5-6)

The problem was, besides the fact that a disembodied hand did the writing, that Belshazzar could not read what was written. It was in the language of the Jews, which he had not bothered to learn. Translated into American, the hand had written \$ \$ C 1/2d (in Hebrew it was Mina, Mina, Shekel, and Peres). Nobody, it seems, could read this, until the queen remembered an older man who had served under Nebuchadnezzar, who had a reputation for solving these riddles. His name was

Beltshazzar, although in Hebrew it was Daniel. Now, Belshazzar, who may have considered the coincidence of the almost-identical names as an omen, called Daniel, who easily read what was written in his own language. And in those symbols he read Belshazzar's future.

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“MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.” (Dan 5:26) A mina was a unit of currency equal to 50 or 60 shekels. It was so named because it constituted a “number” of shekels. And so Daniel read it is “God has numbered.” He probably also saw the significance of doubling the symbol. In Hebrew, as sometimes in English, doubling a word or thought adds emphasis. Two minas, then, would indicate that this numbering did not double his reign, but rather cut it very short.

We may not be kings; we may not insult God like Belshazzar. But our days are numbered. The number may not be one, as it was for Belshazzar, but we have a number. Life is not infinite for any one person. Immortality on earth is for fantasy writers.

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. (Jas 4:13-15)

Jesus told a parable about a man who ignored this message. Like Belshazzar, he had but the remainder of a day to live. He had had a good harvest, and thought to build bigger barns.

And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Lk 12:19-21)

Paul advised the Ephesians to make the most of what time they had. “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph 5:15-16) As with most things he said to the Ephesians, he wrote something similar to the Colossians. “Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.” (Col 4:5) Because our time is limited, we should not waste it, whether dealing with God or man.

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“TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.” (Dan 5:27) The shekel was a standard unit of currency. But as with most ancient currency, the shekel was a specific weight, although what that weight was differed by metal. A gold shekel was slightly over half an ounce, which would be about \$630 USD at the end of February 2017. A silver shekel was less than a third of an ounce (\$6 USD for the same date). A copper shekel was 1.2 ounces (\$2.68 USD). Since the actual weight of a shekel varied by metal, it was vital to deal with a reputable moneychanger, who used certified-true balances. A scale of the day was usually a balance, since spring scales were not invented until much later. A coin or amount of metal was put in one pan and corresponding weights were added or subtracted from the other until the scale balanced.

An unscrupulous merchant might keep two sets of weights, one for buying and one for selling. If he was buying he would use the heavier weights to make it appear that the seller's coin or product was lighter than it actually was. The seller would have to add more than was proper to his side. If he was selling he would use lighter weights, so that what appeared to be a full shekel was actually less, and he would save the difference. Throughout the Law and the Prophets God condemns the use of two sets of weights.

The ancient Egyptians also used the balance, but not just in commerce. When a person died, his heart would be weighed against the feather of *Ma'at* (justice or truth). If the heart was lighter than the feather, then the person had led a virtuous life and was allowed to proceed to the fields of reeds. If the heart was heavier than the feather, the person had not lived virtuously, and was eaten by the “Destroyer of Souls” (who was depicted with a crocodile head). It was a similar concept to this that Daniel prophesied for Belshazzar. His life was weighed, and what he thought it was worth did not balance with what God thought.

James also talked about those who were found wanting. In fact, it is in the same context as that quoted above. “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.” (Jas 4:17) It is just this lack of balance that separates us from God. Fortunately, the balance is restored when Jesus substitutes his perfect life for ours. Because he steps on the scale for us, when we are weighed in the balance, we are not found wanting, if we trust in him.

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“PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.” The symbol used here is the old British halfpenny. In currency, a Peres or Peras was a half-shekel. The word itself means to divide or split, hence the concept of half a piece of currency.

Here, according to Daniel, God uses a pun. The Hebrew half-shekel was Peras; the Hebrew word for the Persians was Paras. Since Hebrew originally had no vowels, the two words are spelled the same. By saying Peras Paras, God said “I have divided to the Persians.”

The Medes were also involved, but there the pun falls apart. Here, too, the comparison between the handwriting on the wall and our lives today falls apart. This word was specifically to Belshazzar, because that very night his kingdom was indeed divided from him and between the Medes and the Persians. As it turns out, even the Medes lose out and the Persians gain dominance, as seen in the book of Esther.

God spoke to Belshazzar in a language he did not understand, and yet in a language with which he was obsessed. The hand wrote in Hebrew, which he had not taken the time to learn. But it also was written in the language of currency, which related to his feast. He had

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taken the vessels of gold (the most valuable currency in terms of shekels) that had been brought from the Temple in Jerusalem. He incorporated them into his feast. But it was not just to use them to drink from. The passage specifies that “They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.” (Dan 5:4) Wood and stone might not have served as currency, although the currency of the island of Yap consists of large stones. The metals, even iron, were used in trade. One may also compare the gods that Belshazzar praised to a verse about the building of the Temple.

Now I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God the gold for things to be made of gold, and the silver for things of silver, and the brass for things of brass, the iron for things of iron, and wood for things of wood; onyx stones, and stones to be set, glistening stones, and of divers colours, and all manner of precious stones, and marble stones in abundance. (1 Chron 29:2)

Belshazzar had worshipped as gods those specific things that had been used to make the Temple of God. Jesus pronounced a woe on just such a practice.

Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? (Matt 23:16-17)

A Gap in Time

Many people gladly read and relate the stories found in the early chapters of Daniel. Children grow up with the three friends in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lion's den. These are, after all, rollicking good stories that have an obvious lesson. Most people shy away from the second half of the book, though, because it is not as easy to understand. Most of the book, even though listing among the Writings by Jewish scholars, consists of symbolic prophecy. Some of it is not even symbolic, but a blow-by-blow account of Middle-Eastern history from Alexander to Augustus. Some try to interpret the prophecy to fit their own preconceptions, and end up making it even more confusing.

The key to understanding Daniel is knowing it is a unity. What is true of Daniel 2 (Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue) is true for chapter seven and the rest of the book. This idea of unity can be said to hold true to other books of prophecy, as well. When the Revelation says that it is about things that are soon to happen, there is no reason to believe that everything from chapters 4-21 apply to our time. When Daniel is told by God that his prophecy lasts from the Babylonian through the Roman empires, there is no reason to believe that part of it applies outside of those constraints.

In chapter 2, Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's vision as representing four empires, starting with Nebuchadnezzar's own. In chapter 7, Daniel is shown four beasts. In chapter 8 he sees four animals, and the first three are specifically identified as Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. It is not difficult to understand that the four items in each of the three chapters refer to the same thing, and that three of the four are identified by name, so the

fourth must be the next historical empire, Rome.

The problem for many people comes with chapter 9. At the end of this chapter Daniel is told of seventy weeks "to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy." (Dan 9:24) God even told Daniel when the seventy weeks were to begin: "from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem." This is generally held to be a decree issued in 538 or 539 BC., so whatever the seventy weeks symbolize, they begin at about this date.

The prophecy is broken into two periods: sixty-nine weeks, and one week divided in two halves. Almost everyone takes the weeks to be symbolic, and (for no better reason that somebody said it was so) they take each day of the week to be a year. This becomes problematic, though, because that would put the coming of the Messiah at about 57 BC. The real problem, though, is that some people put a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks. Weeks 1-69 begin with the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but week 70 (or in some cases only the second half of that week) either recently started or have yet to start. This goes against everything else in the book.

How do you explain why there might be a gap in the timeline? You can't. Why would anyone try to put a gap in the timeline? Perhaps to try to fit Daniel's seventy weeks into a preconceived notion. Perhaps because they cannot accept that there is such a thing as fulfilled prophecy. Maybe they don't see "everlasting righteousness." Whatever the reason, stopping the clock is unreasonable.

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