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Getting the message: a history of communications

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Abstrak

The history of communications is a branch of the history of technology but, strictly speaking, it is in a category of its own. The goods produced by technology, whether a piece of machinery, a piece of clothing or a piece of furniture, are tangible: they perform some useful function. The goods produced by communications are messages. They are mostly useless but when they are useful they can be very, very useful. For that reason communications has always been regarded as a good thing by all peoples at all times. Even in prehistoric times a tribal chief of average intelligence would have easily appreciated both the military and economic implications. He would have dearly loved to receive reports like ?Scores of heavily armed Mugurus sighted at edge of Dark Dense Forest? or ?Buffalo herd fording Little Creek at Mossy Green Meadow?. The idea was there but the means of sending messages were rather limited until very recent times. The same limitation did not apply to human imagination. A god in Greek mythology could contact any of his fellow gods without much bother and could cover the distance from Mount Olympus to, say, the battlefields of Troy in no time at all. Communications between gods was, of course, not possible in monotheistic religions. On the other hand the single god could easily send messages to any chosen individual. A possible method was first to call attention to impending communications (e.g. by a burning bush) and then deliver messages in a clear, loud voice. Oral communications was nearly always the preferred method but there is also an example of coded written communications in the Book of Daniel. The occasion is a feast given by Belshazzar, King of Babylon. Belshazzar draws upon himself the wrath of Jehovah by drinking with his wives and concubines from the holy vessels plundered earlier from the Temple in Jerusalem. Thereupon a message appears on the wall, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This message is decoded by Daniel, as saying: ?God has numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting?.