

Esther 3

The Great Attack

A. The Rise of Haman

Mordecai's budding career suffers a big setback due to God's plan. This ambitious man had made such a promising beginning. His cousin Esther was in the palace and his name written in the chronicles of the state for saving the life of the king. However, amid the intrigues of the palace court, another star arose. Haman became the most powerful man in the empire, second only to the king (3:1).

B. The Great Attack Provoked by Mordecai

Haman was also an extremely enterprising politician. Unsatisfied with being the most influential counselor to the king, he also wanted to receive homage from the people. As a result the courtiers who served in the gate building were required to render royal honour to Haman (3:2).

Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, not just once but every time. Why was he so stubborn? The people in the gate building discovered that it was because "he was a Jew" (3:4).

While Israel was the name God gave to the Jewish nation (Genesis 32:28; 35:10), the name "Jew" originally referred to a resident of the nation of Judah. Later "Jew" became the name by which an Israelite was known, particularly outside of the country. This is also seen in the book of *Esther* (2:5; 3:4,13; 4:3,etc.).

What was Mordecai's purpose in admitting that he was a Jew? Many have been misled by the wrong information given in the apocryphal appendices to *Esther* (see Outline 1, B2). They claim that Mordecai was willing to bow only before the Lord, the king of kings, and not before a man. This conclusion stands in contrast to many biblical examples of people bowing down to others. David fell down before Saul and rendered him honour (1 Samuel 24:8); Bathsheba and Nathan bowed before David (1 Kings 1:16,23); Jacob's sons bowed before Joseph (Genesis 37:9,10; 42:6; 43:26,28); and Ruth bowed before Boaz (Ruth 2:10). Therefore, to kneel and bow down was a common means of giving honour to people. This was not idolatry and Haman was not an idol. (A contrasting example can be found in Daniel 3, where the Babylonians were told to bow before the image of gold.)

Furthermore, Mordecai, who lived in the royal residence (2:5), who was often found in the gate building (2:21), and who could even stroll near the court of the women's house (2:11), must have been fully aware of the court's ceremonies. Likely he would have bowed low before his majesty the king quite frequently. Later Esther also fell at the king's feet (8:3). Thus, it cannot be assumed that Mordecai held long-cherished feelings of conscientious objection to bowing down before a man.

No, it was Haman whom Mordecai refused to honour. His Jewish blood revolted against Haman the Agagite. Haman was the son of "Hammedatha," a descendant from the royal

house of the Amalekites. Agag was the name of the king of Amalek (1 Samuel 15:8,9,20,32,33). The Amalekites had attacked the Israelites on their trek through the desert at Rephidim (Exodus 17:8ff.). This was a low, cowardly attack, whereby they cut off the rear - the weaker ones - from the front line, where the soldiers were (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). The attack was resisted, but the Lord decided to annihilate Amalek in the future (Exodus 17:14,16; Deuteronomy 25:19). This would take place when Israel had taken possession of the Promised Land.

During the time of the judges, the Amalekites undertook plundering raids in Israel's territory, together with Eglon of Moab, the Ammonites (Judges 3:13), the Midianites and the tribes from the east (Judges 6:3; 7:12). Under Saul, the punishment and judgment commanded by the Lord took place. Amalek was condemned to total destruction including their king Agag. Saul disobeyed God's command and spared the king of Amalek. It was Samuel who faithfully carried out the sentence on Amalek by killing Agag (1 Samuel 15). David again fought Amalek (1 Samuel 27:8) after the attack of the Amalekites upon Ziklag (1 Samuel 30). The remainder of Amalek, which had escaped until then, was conquered by the Simeonites in the mountains of Seir (1 Chronicles 4:42,43). Haman, the Agagite, belonged to the clearly insignificant remnant of Israel's traditional enemy.

Although Mordecai may have become worldly, he still knew something about this ancient enemy. "The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:16) The thought of this antithesis made Mordecai's blood boil. Though he gave little attention to his history and race, and had even hidden it, (Esther 2:10,20) - this put his heart on fire. He, the Jew, would not bow down on his knees before that Agagite. Never! Not even if it meant the loss of his career or of his life!

However, Mordecai exhibited his sinfulness by wrongly interpreting the biblical antithesis. God had not instructed him to resist in this manner. Exodus 17 reads, "The LORD will be at war...", but Mordecai deduced from this that he could provoke a fight. In fact, he should have been obedient to the command of Xerxes (Esther 3:2,3), no matter how bitter this was for him (Romans 13:1ff.).

Mordecai should have remembered that Xerxes had been given power over him because of his sins as an exile. Nehemiah recognized this in his own situation (Nehemiah 9:37). Instead of Messianic consciousness, Mordecai's resistance is rooted in a false nationalistic zeal. This was the same emotion that, in Jesus' time, drove many Jews into becoming rebellious Zealots. Mordecai acted provocatively from a purely political viewpoint.

C. Haman's Hatred of the Jews

Great was Haman's rage and desire for revenge. As an ambitious man, he felt that Mordecai had gravely offended him (3:5). He had also been informed of Mordecai's motive (3:6). Consequently his hatred against the Jews, a suppressed fire that simmered under cover of Persian civilization, flared up – "Annihilate the Jews". The sentence God had once pronounced over Amalek, complete destruction under the wrath of the Lord, must now be turned back on the people of God. And this by Haman, who in his ancestry must have barely escaped God's punishment!

D. The King and the Law as Instruments in the Enmity Against the Jews

In spite of his power as king, Xerxes was weak. He agreed to the murder of an unknown nation among his subjects (3:11; cf. 3:8ff.). Without any serious reason, he reversed the policy of tolerance that had, since the rule of Cyrus, characterized the Persian Empire. He feasted with his prime minister while the people of Susa were in uproar (3:15). What was the source of momentum pushing this death knell along? It was Haman, and his hatred of the Jews.

Haman's line of reasoning (3:8) has also been used by various significant persecutors of the church. The Jewish people were accused of disobedience to the king's law, and thus of revolution and rebellion. This accusation could not be considered fair even to Mordecai who violated a single command of the king to greet Haman (3:2) while to his credit he had also protected the king's life against criminal turmoil (2:22).

Since Haman did not reveal the name of the nation which he portrayed as revolutionary, he could hardly have given concrete evidence for his allegation of rebellion. No honest judicial inquiry was made. Well-known slogans must have resounded from Haman's propaganda trumpet, that of "one state, one law." The church has its own laws, and, since she was spread out over the entire empire, she was seen as a threat to the beautiful unity of Persian law. The integrity of the king's laws was at stake.

This was a satanic lie. Those who want to live according to God's law are compelled to render unto the king what belongs to the king (the fifth commandment). Only when royal decrees compel people to sin, will there be a conflict. For God's people must be more obedient to God than to human government.

Meanwhile, using this 'armour' of abomination, bribery (3:9,11) and deceit, Haman managed to obtain full and unrestricted authorization from the king. The monarch who, in the greatness of his realm, possessed the ransom of God for the liberation of Israel from exile (see Outline 1, A), allowed the Israelites to be declared outlaws.

E. Satan's Strategy

Since Paradise, when he had succeeded in dragging man along in his fall, Satan has waged his war against God. Through Adam and Eve's fall into sin, he had almost gained the victory and drawn God's people over to his side completely. Nevertheless, the Lord graciously gave the 'mother promise' (Genesis 3:15). God proclaimed the age long war between the seed of the woman (by grace on the side of the living God) and the seed of the serpent (on the side of Satan), which shall end with the complete victory of the seed of the woman. As if his back is against a wall, Satan fights hard, but his defeat is certain.

Times may change, but this struggle remains to the end. Satan was behind Pharaoh when he aimed to kill all the baby boys in Israel (Exodus 1:15,16), and he was there when Haman wanted to annihilate all the Israelites, both children and adults. He does his work with cruel hatred. As far as Satan is concerned, he must destroy God's people from the face of the earth: "you (the serpent, Satan) will strike his (the seed of the woman's) heel" (Genesis 3:15).

The Amalekites were a very potent instrument in the hands of the evil one. They had ambushed Israel in the weak rear guard (cf. the serpent bruising the heel, Genesis 3)

during their desert trek. Though many of Haman's ancestors had been killed (1 Samuel 15:8,33; 1 Chronicles 4:42,43), he, as one of the last of the Amalekites, was thrown into this battle of the centuries, in an attempt to execute Satan's curse over God's people.

Therefore, this hatred of the Jews was not an anti-Semitic action, nor a pogrom, nor a conflict of blood and race. (In contrast, the Nazis spoke of "a struggle between races". They practiced this horribly, beginning with the 'Aryan paragraphs' - laws against the Jews - and ending with mass murder and gas chambers.) No, this was war against the church. In spite of all appearances and divergences, this is always Satan's strategy and focus.

The struggle between Haman and Mordecai should not be seen as a conflict between two nations (nationalism), nor between two races (as with the Nazis), nor between "capitalism" and the "common people" (e.g. Karl Marx, communism). Rather, what dominates here is the antithesis between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). This antithesis forms the only true front lines of the war, and it shall also be the last front line: the one of the antichrist against the Christ (Revelation 13; 20:7-10).

When we study this age-old war, we must never forget to look at God's clock and ask ourselves the question: what era or what phase of this struggle do we encounter here? The war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent has two main time periods:

- a. From Paradise to the coming of Christ
- b. From Christ's first coming to his second coming.

The second period is called "these last days" (Hebrews 1:2). The apostle John saw an image of this era in a vision (Revelation 12). He saw the church as a "woman" who gave birth to a child (to the seed of the woman, that is, the Christ). As a people, the 'seed of the woman' (referring to her offspring, Genesis 3:15) will only be able to arrive at the promised victory by means of the one seed, who will bring Satan, 'the serpent', to his decisive defeat.

Opposite the woman, John saw the dragon, "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." (Revelation 12:9) The name 'serpent' reminds us of the deception in Paradise. The dragon was ready to swallow up the child of the woman as soon as it was born. He wanted to destroy or tempt the Christ who has come. Think, for example, of Herod who murdered all the little children of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the young Lord Jesus (Matthew 2). There was also the Jewish Sanhedrin, who arranged the Saviour's arrest and pressured Pilate into pronouncing his death sentence.

However, in *Esther*, we are still in the first period before Christ's birth. Satan could not yet harm a hair of Christ's head. However, to become a human, the Lord Jesus was to be born of the line of Abraham and of David, out of the people of Israel. Therefore, when Satan made an attempt against the life of an ancestor (e.g., David) or against the entire 'mother nation' of the Lord Jesus, he put everything in motion to prevent the birth of the Saviour.

If Israel had been destroyed, the work of redemption by the Lord Jesus - from cradle to cross to crown - would have been impossible. All of God's promises would become like useless paper, and the salvation of all people would become impossible. Thus, Satan had a twofold aim in Haman's action:

- a. God must no longer have a nation where his word will dwell (cf. Psalm 147:19,20).
- b. The "woman" (Revelation 12) had to be swallowed up *before* she brought forth the child, for where there is no mother, there is no new birth.

We must remember the comfort we have, since we live after Christ's ascension: Satan can no longer harm a hair on the head of Christ, our victor (Revelation 12:5,7-12). Christ has already won the victory, and Satan has suffered the decisive defeat. The final victory is now in sight for everyone who keeps the testimony of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:13ff.).

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