

Mordecai Put On Sackcloth and Ashes

4: 1-3

DIG: The news of the king's decision probably spread quickly throughout the Jewish community. They were all in shock. How did Mordecai and all the rest of the Jews react? What else could he have done? How did the author of Esther *echo* Joel's prophecy saying that with repentance, God may relent the calamity He was about to bring on the Jews?

REFLECT: When you mourn, how do you show your distress rather than putting on sackcloth and ashes? Sometimes we will do the right thing only when it is too painful to continue to do the wrong thing. When you repent, are there any outward signs? How would someone else know that you have repented? If not **with fasting, weeping and mourning**, how do you show your repentance?

Haman got what he desired the most, **the king's** unknowing approval to annihilate all **the Jews** in Persia (3:10-11). The picture of the cold-blooded Haman, biding his time until his lucky day (see **Av - The Lot Fell on the Twelfth Month, the Month of Adar, in the Presence of Haman**), is an obvious contrast with **Mordecai's** immediate display of **mourning**. Even though the ancient feud with the Amalekites was the basis for **him** not bowing down to Haman, **Mordecai** had seemingly brought disaster not merely on **himself** but on all **the Jews** in Persia.⁵³ Haman's plan was way out of proportion to **Mordecai's** offense. Apparently **Mordecai's** behavior had merely given the prime minister an excuse to reveal his anti-Semitism. Haman was displaying the same contempt for God's people that they and the **Israelites** experienced from Amalek on **their** way to the Promised Land (see **Aq - Haman the Agagite: Enemy of the Jews**).⁵⁴

Lest we think that **Mordecai** was being melodramatic, we need to understand that **his** actions were common throughout the biblical period. **Joshua** and **Caleb** **tore their clothes** when **they** heard the people wanted to return to Egypt rather than to enter the Land that ADONAI had promised to give **them** (**Numbers 14:6**). David ripped his clothing on several occasions, for instance, after hearing of the deaths of Saul (**Second Samuel 1:11**), Abner (**Second Samuel 3:31**), and Amnon (**Second Samuel 13:31**). Eliakim and Shebna **tore** their clothing when Jerusalem was threatened by the Assyrians (**Isaiah 36:22**). Ezra did the

same things to express his distress when **the Israelites**, including the priests and Levites, had intermarried with pagan Gentiles (**Ezra 9:3**). The **Persians** in **Susa** would have recognized the significance of **Mordecai's** behavior, for **they too, tore their clothes** in grief when the **Greeks** in the battle of Salamis defeated **them**.

Mordecai's world turned upside down the day Haman's decree went out. Like others before him, he spoke through his body language. **When Mordecai learned of all that had been done he was distraught. He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly (4:1).** Wearing sackcloth and ashes and crying publically was a sign of mourning (**Genesis 37:34; Jeremiah 49:3; Dani'el 9:3; Joel 1:13; Jonah 3:6**). By acting in this way **Mordecai** and all the **Jews** made sure that their protests were seen and heard by the **Persians**. Later, when the tables were turned, they would hold a joyous celebration (**8:15b**).

There is no indication that **Mordecai** was sorry for his actions in refusing to bow down to Haman. His conviction against honoring a sworn enemy of the LORD and the **Jews** was unalterable. Rather, he grieved over the death notice that his people would be slaughtered. This verse is the low point in the story. **Mordecai** knew the amount of money Haman had agreed to spend for the killing spree because he had a copy of the edict (**4:7-8**). Certain death seemed unavoidable. But God was working behind the scenes to deliver His people.

But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it (**4:2**). Clearly the wearing of sackcloth was known also in Persia, but the king probably didn't want to be reminded of blunders by having mourners within his gates.

Jews everywhere reacted as **Mordecai** had done. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the **Jews**, with fasting (see the **Bw - The Fast of Esther**), weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes (**4:3**). In such situations mourning and fasting were certainly physical acts that were accompanied with prayer, but the author deliberately did not mention any plea to God for help. The spontaneous wearing of sackcloth and ashes, so that the **Jews** could prostrate themselves in grief, is a moving example of national mourning, similar to that of Nineveh (**Jonah 3:3-9**), but rarely seen even in the Bible.⁵⁵

Biblical authors often use phrases from other books of the Bible that are known to them, which presumably would also be known to the original readers. For instance, in addition to quoting entire sentences from the TaNaKh, New Covenant writers used summaries from the Hebrew Scriptures that would have been familiar to their readers. But there were also similar *echoes* like these within the TaNaKh itself.

The Hebrew phrase translated **with fasting, weeping and wailing** in **Esther 4:3**, also occurs in **Joel 2:12** as **with fasting and weeping and mourning**. It may be true that the original readers of the **Esther** story would have recognized this Hebrew phrase as indirectly pointing to **Joel's** prophecy, but most modern readers would probably not make the connection. Even though the individual words of this phrase occur many other times in the TaNaKh, it forms a textual link between **Esther and Joel**. Because **Joel** was written first, the author of **Esther** tells this part of his story by using an allusive *echo* of **Joel 2**.

In the threat of impending judgment, God speaks to His people through the prophet **Joel**, saying, "**Even now,**" declared **ADONAI**, "**Tear your heart and not your garments. Return** (*shuwb* means *to return* or *to turn back* and is the key word used by the prophet **Jeremiah**, see my commentary on **Jeremiah Ac - The Book of Jeremiah from a Jewish Perspective**) **to ADONAI your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing - grain offerings and drink offerings for ADONAI your God (Joel 2:12-14).**

Since the same phrase found in **Joel 2** occurs in **Esther 4**, it describes Haman's killing spree as an opportunity for **the Jews in Persia**, in exile for **their sin**, to *shuwb*, or *return* to their **LORD**, who, as a result, may relent from sending Haman's plan of annihilation. The very next statement that **Joel** makes: **Tear your heart and not your garments**, *echoes* with **Mordecai's** reaction to Haman's decree. The author of **Esther** portrays the Jewish response of **fasting, weeping and wailing** in the face of this catastrophe as the repentance called for in **Joel**.

In general, prayer is usually assumed to accompany **fasting** in the Bible. But while the original readers would expect prayer to be mentioned in the same breath as **fasting**, it is conspicuously absent from this request in **Esther 4:3**. Notice, however, that prayer is also not explicitly mentioned in the call to repentance in **Joel 2:12-14**.

If the Israelites **fast**, **weep** and **mourn**, Joel said: **Who knows [ADONAI] may turn and have pity.** Accordingly, **Mordecai's** statement: **and who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?** again *echoes* Joel's, suggesting that **Esther's** royal position is the means by which **God might turn and have pity on His people, relenting from sending calamity.**

The prophecy of **Joel** continues: **Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, and call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly . . . (Joel 2:15-16a).** Whether **Esther** had **Joel's** prophecy in mind or not, **she**, in effect, *echoes the Trumpet in Zion*, by commanding **Mordecai** to call **a fast** for all **the Jews** of Susa, to see if the **LORD** may relent from sending this calamity on **her people**. For the first time in the story, **Esther** identifies **herself** with **the Jews** of **Persia** and responds to the prophetic call to repentance by joining with **them** in the **fast**.⁵⁶