–Save This Page as a PDF–

Mordecai Put On Sackcloth and Ashes 4: 1-3

Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes 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 (**to see link click 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 they were defeated by the Greeks in the battle of Salamis.



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; Daniel 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)**.

Dear Heavenly Father, Praise Your Almighty power and great love for Your children. Praise You that Your power is always greater that all the puny power of all the kingdoms of the world. Your power protected Your people at the time of Esther and Your power will again protect your children at the end of the seven year Tribulation, at the battle of Armageddon. Messiah will come riding out of heaven on a white horse with the armies of heaven following Him.

The world should have learned it's lesson of Your supreme sovereignty and protection of Your children, by Your protection of Your people at the time of Easter. Again at the end of the Tribulation the world will think it can attack and defeat you-

but by the sword coming out of Yeshua's mouth the battle will be over and won by God. Though sometimes it may appear that evil is winning, it never does. Yeshua always wins! He has won the ultimate victory, even over death itself. At the end of Messiah's thousand year reign, the world again tries to defeat Yeshua, and again the evil world leaders and their followers are utterly destroyed. ***When the thousand years [of Messiah's reigning on earth] has ended, satan shall be released from his prison, and he shall come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for the battle. Their number is like the sand of the sea (Revelation 20:7-8)****. Your children can have perfect trust in Your power and they can rest in Your wonderful love for them. Praise your love and your power. In Yeshua's holy name and power of his resurrection, Amen*

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). Evidently 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 in Persia 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 Old Covenant that would have been familiar to the their readers. But there were also similar *echoes* like these within the Old Covenant 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** (*shuv* means *to return* and is the key word in the book of **Jeremiah**) **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 *shuv*, 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]