

Haman was Honored More than all the Other Nobles, But Mordecai would not Kneel Down or Pay Him Honor

3: 1-6

DIG: Who comes on now as the star? Why not Mordecai? Why won't Mordecai kneel? Why is Haman intent on killing all of the Jews? Is this a clash of priorities? Of personalities? Of perception? Of peoples?

REFLECT: As a fellow Jew, would you have urged Mordecai to kneel down and pay Haman honor (see my commentary on **Genesis Jv - Joseph as Prime Minister**) rather than risk the lives of everyone else? Why?

At this point, a new character is introduced into the story: **Haman the Agagite**. The author places the promotion of **Haman** just where the original readers would have expected to see **Mordecai**. This forms an unexpected twist in the plot. **After these events, King Ahasuerus honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite (3:1a)**. Haman is introduced as **the Agagite**, an intentional reference to the tension between **the Israelites** and **the Amalekites**. The Septuagint, or the Greek translation of the TaNaKh, translates **the Agagite** as *the bully*, interpreting the text freely for the Greek readers. Saul's ancient conquest of **Agag** and his army is part of **Isra'el's** tradition, which always lurks behind the scenes of the book. **The rabbis teach that Haman was a descendant of Agag.**

In Hebrew narrative the traits of a new character when first introduced is key to understanding his or her role in the story. When **Mordecai** is introduced in **2:5**. **He** is identified not as a wise man or as an official of the court, but as **a Jew** of the tribe of Benjamin. When **Haman** is introduced, **he** is identified as an **Agagite**. The author implies that the personal relationship of enmity between **the Jews** and **the Amalekites** is mirrored in the personal relationship between **Mordecai** and **Haman**. The original readers would expect the relationship to be characterized by conflict and aggression.³⁶

King Ahasuerus elevated him and gave him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles (3:1b). Although the king owed his life to **Mordecai**, the promotion went to **Haman** who became the prime minister of **Persia**, second only to **the king himself**. We are not told why **Haman** was honored in such a way. But we do know that in this book, others manipulated **the king** too easily.

All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down, prostrating themselves, and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him (3:2a). It may seem odd to have so many people at the king's gate. If compared to the gate at Persepolis, the City of the Persians where Darius built the Apadana Palace, it was guarded by huge lion-like figures, and the entrance measured 30 by 60 meters. This would be enough for all the royal officials and others besides in the recesses of the king's palace at Susa. All who were officially appointed by the king had to stay within the gate of the royal palace. In their culture it was customary to bow down before one's superiors. The fact that the king had to make a royal command for people to do so points to a general lack of respect for Haman.³⁷

But Mordecai would not bow down or pay him honor (3:2b). This develops as a subtheme of the book. Mordecai's refusal to bow down was not an act of worship, such as that commanded of Dani'el and his three friends (Dani'el 3:8-15). But the Persians saw bowing as an act of reverence that bordered on recognizing the official as divine. Needless to say, Mordecai had both political and religious reasons for refusing to bow down to Haman.³⁸ One of the Targums says that no self-respecting Benjamite would show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. Therefore, Mordecai, knowing full well the ancient Amalekite belief that "might makes right" (see Aq - Haman the Agagite: The Enemy of the Jews), wasn't going to stand for it, or should I say, bow to it. As a Jew, he surely wasn't going to bow down to an Amalekite!

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" (3:3) Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Mordecai's determined stubbornness was sure to provoke a reaction. At first Haman did not notice that Mordecai acted differently from the other officials. But some of the other officials apparently reported his behavior to Haman to see if he was an exception to the king's command. Therefore, they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew (3:4). This seems to indicate some tension between Jews and Gentiles in the court of the king. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged (3:5).

Haman became so obsessed with hatred for his nemesis, that even the death of Mordecai couldn't quench his thirst for revenge. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Haman, his pride stung by Mordecai's disrespect, becomes so angry and vengeful that he decides to kill all the Jews. Instead, Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the

whole kingdom of Ahasuerus (3:6). This is another link from Haman to Amalek, who did not fear God (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). The attack of the Amalekites upon the Israelites leaving Egypt was an act of defiance, predicted on the denial of the existence of ADONAI and the assumption that chance rules the universe . . . and so was Haman a thousand years later when he cast the *pur* (3:7). It was no coincidence that Mordecai, like Sha'ul, was a descendent of Kish who also confronted the Agagite.

Here the principle plot of the book is introduced: the attempt to destroy the Jewish people. Haman's name sounds something like the Hebrew word for *wrath*, an apt description of his temperament and role in the book. Once he knew that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman's pride-driven *wrath* was turned against all the Jews in the empire. Although unspoken, the only plausible explanation would be the anti-Semitism that started with the ancient conflict between Amalek and Isra'el.³⁹ Thus, Haman became the prototype of all the anti-Semitic leaders who wanted to destroy the Jewish people.

Now the story begins to fall into place. Esther had been brought to a position of power for purposes not known until now. The threat of genocide against the Jews of Persia was then a reality. Mordecai refused to honor Haman for both political and religious reasons. Mordecai identified himself as a Jew. Because of the ancient defeat and execution of his ancestor Agag by the prophet Samuel (First Samuel 15:33), Haman hated the Jews. Therefore, hatred and bitterness were at the root of Haman's quest for power. For him, power rested in the complete destruction of the Jews. But Haman had not yet encountered the power of their God.⁴⁰