

ESTHER 3

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND AMALEK

The events described in chapter 3 of the book of Esther take place probably a number of years after Esther's coronation as queen of Persia. The chapter begins with the words, "After these events...", indicating a new series of occurrences, and the time frame is about four to five years. We can base this on the fact that Esther became queen in the seventh year of Xerxes' reign (see 2: 16), and Haman, we read in verse 3: 7, casts the lot to destroy the Jews in the twelfth year of Xerxes.

IN THE KING'S GATE

Things have settled down somewhat in the life of the new queen. We do not know how royal relationships were organized in those days, but it was not uncommon for the queen to remain in her quarters for a relatively long period of time, before the king called her. From the next chapter we learn that Esther had not seen the king for thirty days (4: 11). It was, as we find out later, dangerous to take the initiative to visit the king, and Esther did not at random come swishing in and out of the throne room. She very well knew her place and stuck to it.

We find Mordechai still spending his time in the "king's gate", the area before the palace where many transactions took place and where government officials conducted their business. Some explainers conclude that Mordechai is by this time also an "official" in the service of the king, for in verse 2 we read that "all the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman.....But Mordechai would not kneel down or pay him honour." This may indeed suggest that Mordechai was among the royal officials also. But then it is a matter of gross insubordination for a lower official not to honour a higher official.

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

In this chapter we are introduced to the other main person in this book, Haman, son of Hammedatha, also known as the Agagite. The exact identity and background of Haman are much-disputed. The names "Haman" and

“Hammedatha” appear to be genuine Persian names, so Haman was born in a family that perhaps had lived in Susa for some generations already. It is the addition, “the Agagite” which gives some problems. Such an addition often refers to a place name, but in this case there is no place known which comes close. Then it has to be a reference to someone’s *descent*, his family line.

The name Agag is first mentioned by Balaam in Numbers 24: 7, “[Israel’s] king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be exalted.” In Exodus 17 we read how Israel had defeated the Amalekites, the first enemy to come out and challenge Israel after their exodus from Egypt. Therefore God curses the Amalekites, “I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” It is quite possible that already in those days the Amalekite kings carried the name Agag, for Balaam refers not to a future event but to one that has taken place. The defeat of the Amalekites, a fierce, nomadic nation, made a great impression on all the peoples in that area. First Egypt was defeated, and then Amalek, who’s next? “Agag” is then the official name of the royal dynasty of the kings of Amalek.

The only other place where we read the name Agag is found in I Samuel 15. Agag is the Amalekite king whose life was spared by Saul. This was against the Lord’s express command, who ordered that all Amalekites be destroyed. Samuel himself had to execute Agag. As mentioned, the reason for this severe treatment is that Amalek was the first nation who had come out to battle Israel on the way to the promised land, and the LORD had at that time decreed: I will completely blot out the memory from Amalek under the sun (Exodus 17: 14).

Saul had not completed this mission. In fact, he lost his kingship because of his failure with Amalek. Is it coincidental that Mordechai happens to be a Jew of the tribe of *Benjamin* (to which also Saul belonged) and is even associated with a certain Kish, who is known to us also as the father of Saul? We may safely conclude that there is here a deeper struggle and a bitter history that again comes to the fore. Amalek is still out to destroy Israel, and the Jews must still take effective counter-measures.

I see no other way to explain the name “Agagite”. Somehow direct descendants of Agag had survived, and their hatred of the Jews was understandably fierce. The feeling was mutual, for Amalek was Israel’s arch-enemy of old. Through Mordechai’s refusal to acknowledge Haman, the LORD revives the age-old conflict between Israel and Amalek to fulfill his Word to his people. We see how the conflict becomes apparent, how the conflict is intensified, and how the conflict is made official.

MORDECHAI OR THE LORD?

One might again wonder here at the theme that was chosen, the mentioning of the LORD in this case. What has this matter to do with the LORD? It seems to be more a case of human pride and stubbornness on the side of Mordechai. He brings all the trouble upon himself and his people by refusing to pay homage to

Haman, the highest official, who can be compared, perhaps, to our Prime Minister. Are we not obliged to give honour to whom honour is due? Is this not the demand of God in the fifth commandment: show love and respect to all who have been placed over you, even the ones you do not like?

Now we know that the LORD is in control of all things. Here also we must see his divine providence at work and his sovereign grace made apparent to his children. For Mordechai could have taken the way of the least resistance, or not offered resistance at all! Is that not how we sometimes react in extreme situations? We realize that resistance is hopeless, and we grudgingly comply. How many times, for example, does it not happen that we must acquiesce in a certain matter, like it or not. The verb to acquiesce means that we do not agree with something, but must let it be because it cannot be changed.

Why does Mordechai not follow the way of acquiescing? Go with the flow and accept things as they are. All the royal officials at the gate, as we read in verse 2, knelt down and paid honour to Haman. For this was the king's command. The only exception is Mordechai. He refuses to honour Haman. In the verses 3 and 4 we find that the (other?) officials asked Mordechai why he did not honour Haman, and they even argued with him about it "day after day". But we read: he refused to comply.

"I AM A JEW"

Mordechai has to come up with a plausible explanation to justify his actions. You cannot simply refuse to do something that is required of you, but you must give a reason. Mordechai's reason (see the end of verse 4) is simple: he had told them that he was a *Jew*. Remember the man who warned Esther not to disclose her origin or race? He is not afraid to identify *himself* as a Jew! In fact, he has to speak the truth about his origin, because there lies the reason why he can not and will not bow for Haman, the Agagite. Some suggest that Mordechai simply means that Jews do not bow for people, but only for the LORD. But that is not the point. Abraham was not too proud to bow down before the Hittites, the people of the land (Gen 23). The matter goes much deeper.

Mordechai will have explained how the Amalekites were the first enemy to attack a defenseless people who had barely escaped slavery, and how they almost succeeded in destroying Israel, were it not for the LORD's strength and help. Perhaps he told them about Saul's expedition to Amalek, and how Samuel executed the brutal king Agag. It is a bitter fight to the finish, and shall Mordechai now bow before this Agagite? Serving God and bowing to an Amalekite are incompatible.

When God leads things so that Haman is elevated to chief official, he places Mordechai before a difficult decision: go with the flow or keep on saying no! Therefore I formulate indeed: *the LORD* revives the age-old conflict between Israel and Amalek. This is not a story about two stubborn people, but this conflict lies at the heart of the history of redemption, the never-ending enmity set by God

(Gen 3: 15): the destroyer against the people of God, Satan versus the Saviour.

THE REAL CONFLICT

In the big melting-pot of nations that was the Persian empire, there were many constant rivalries, perhaps much sectarian violence, and even two world wars involving Greeks against Persians, but there is only one basic conflict in this world, and it becomes apparent here in the confrontation between Mordechai and Haman. This conflict is between Satan and Christ, and there is on this point no compromise! The church that lives in the expectation of advent may never forget the conflict that rages until the end, when the glory of the LORD is revealed.

Now Haman apparently does not himself notice that Mordechai refuses to bow. Perhaps Mordechai was standing farther at the back, near the wall of the gate, in the shade, and Haman had his nose in the clouds so high that he did not see Mordechai standing all alone in defiance. In verse 4 we read that the officials report to Haman about Mordechai. They wanted to see whether this kind of behaviour would be tolerated, especially now that Mordechai had told them he was a Jew. Can Jews get away with this kind of thing? Do they have a special status in the empire? Do age-old conflicts still play a role in the present? Will the Agagite allow such blatant insubordination?

We sometimes tend to forget that there is a struggle going on. The antithesis between Christ and Satan, church and world, can easily be forgotten. We are told to leave old issues behind. Don't drag old cows out of the ditch. Indeed, if bitter disputes are resolved or have little bearing on the present or the future, forget about them, do not revive such useless controversies. We should not fight for our own right, but only for the honour of the LORD. This is also important advice to office bearers today. Avoid useless controversies (cf. Titus 3: 9). But never forget the main issue, never step back when the challenge comes to stand up against those who would destroy the church. There is a line which cannot be stepped over and Mordechai had reached that line. He could not in good conscience bow before an arch-enemy of God's people.

THE CONFLICT INTENSIFIED

Mordechai did not cause this conflict. The people of Amalek did, when they sought to annihilate Israel in the desert, and maintained that attitude throughout. We see that the same element also comes to the fore in this chapter. Amalek has not changed. The conflict is immediately intensified! The next time Haman rides through the king's gate, his eyes search everywhere, and yes, there is this man, this cursed Jew, Mordechai, refusing to bow. It says in verse 5: he was enraged! He felt deeply insulted, and his pride was wounded, and it led to a deep rage. This means: counter-measures are already in the works.

But note how God's enemies always take things *one* step farther. Mordechai simply refused to bow. Haman wants to kill. You'd think he would want to kill only Mordechai, who alone is the culprit. But we read these telling words in verse

6, “Yet having learned who Mordechai’s people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordechai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordechai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes”.

This is how the conflict is intensified by Haman. Not against one man, but his entire people. Haman says: the Jews got away once, in the desert, and they even killed my fore-father Agag, but they will not escape this time. Now I will kill them all! There is a deep hatred between Amalekite and Jew, an unresolved conflict, and it needs to come to its climax and resolution. Haman’s rage is racially motivated, but his anger is not just against Israel. Haman stands up against Israel’s God, who has protected Israel throughout the years and given them the upper hand over Amalek.

THE CASTING OF THE “PUR”

The fact that Haman here does see “higher powers” at work is shown in what is described in verse 7, the casting of the *pur* or the lot. Haman needs to consult the “gods” for the proper opportunity and the exact timing. Everything must be carefully planned: the gods of Persia and Amalek must indicate when they will prevail over the LORD of Israel. Haman seeks divine reassurance. This again emphasizes that the struggle here is not between people only, but between their deepest convictions: trust in the LORD or go by superstitious and idolatrous signs? Let us never forget that the antithesis between church and world always has “religious” connotations.

It is indeed remarkable that Haman would cast the lot in this matter. You’d think that as Prime Minister he would be confident enough of his own abilities to convince the king. After all Mordechai (and his people) lived in open defiance of a royal Persian decree, and this was simply intolerable. Not only was Haman’s position challenged, but also the glory of the king was at stake here. And yet Haman needs to cast the lot to find some surety from above, to involve whatever gods may be. At bottom, the conflict is *spiritual*, between the only living LORD and the dead idols of this world, the true faith and the many superstitions. I think that this must also always be the perspective of office bearers: the battle is spiritual and must be fought precisely with spiritual means. No other means will suffice.

CONSULTING THE KING

The plan of Haman is of such magnitude and consequence that he must first consult the king. Only then will it be official, sanctioned by royal decree and binding throughout the empire. The matter is not as easy as it may seem. For the Jews were a peace-loving and politically-correct people, who honoured the Persian government in every way. It is interesting that the NIV footnote directs us here to a letter which Jeremiah wrote to the exiles many years earlier: this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel says to the exiles: seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you in exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for if

it prospers, you too will prosper (Jer 29: 7). Jews were to be peaceful and cooperative, a reminder of the LORD that was not unnecessary seeing the zealous attitude of many Jews. To prove that the Jews were rebellious would not be easy.

In the verses 8-10 we discover how Haman became a high official. He uses half-truths, ruthless innuendo, and outright lies to present a picture that is false, a terrible caricature. Let us note how he goes about this. It says in verse 8, "Then Haman said to king Xerxes, 'There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, whose customs are different from those of all other people and do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them'"

The Persian kings followed a domestic policy of tolerance. People were, on the whole, allowed to live in freedom in their own places and continue their own customs and practices. Usually this did not make much of a difference, for all people were idolaters who followed their own "gods" and also worshiped the Persian deities. There was much syncretism (mixing of religions) going on.

A BLATANT CARICATURE

Haman does not bother identifying which people he means, as if the king is not to be burdened with such trivial details. They are, he says, scattered and dispersed, and which means that as a people they are not united and cannot put up much of a fight, but as law-breakers do form a bad example everywhere. Haman says: their customs are different from those of all other people. And that is true. Which people is there under the sun like Israel to whom the LORD has revealed himself in his sovereign grace? But here this difference from others is put in a negative light. Haman suggests that the Jews are "different" in the sense of dangerous. And he makes an outright accusation: they do not obey the king's laws. They are trouble-makers, he says, and it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. Here the policy of tolerance does not work, for these people abuse it!

This is an ugly caricature, far from the truth. Mordechai does break one law, but the Jews are not law-breakers. They are very careful to keep the laws wherever they live. So half-truths are mixed with outright lies, and this is typically the personal work of the devil! You can almost visualize the devil behind this man, in the way he operates, in the words he chooses, in the picture he paints.

A ROYAL DECREE REQUIRED

He comes out with his suggestion (verse 9): if it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them. A decree, once made, which cannot be revoked. All those who wish to participate, cannot be stopped by others. Why not go all the way? At this point Haman shows how much of a schemer he really is. He will grease the king's palm, "... and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business".

What is the value of ten thousand talents of silver in today's currency? You can read some particulars in the NIV footnotes. The annual income of the empire (for the king's treasury through taxation) has been estimated by a Greek historian (Herodotus) at fifteen thousand talents of silver. Then Haman offers a huge sum, millions of dollars. This will cover the cost of the operation, and then some. Besides (see verse 13) there is the freedom to plunder the goods of the Jews. While you are looking at verse 13, note that the decree means to include the annihilation of all the Jews, men, women, and little children. This is what the Nazis called "Der Endlösung", the final solution, the holocaust.

Now the king is quite impressed by this plan. He does not appear to ask any discerning questions. He does not need more information. On the one hand, it seems, that the king is pretty gullible, but, on the other hand, he has no reason to mistrust Haman. Bad elements must surely be eradicated from society. He takes off his signet ring (verse 10) and gives it to Haman. It's like handing out a signed blank cheque, but Haman must have room to act in this case of national security.

Notice the phrasing in verse 10: he gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, *the enemy of the Jews*. Remember, the Jews were the people of God, chosen from the nations, exiled because of their sins, but still sharing in the promises of God. But the ancient enemy of the Jews, the people of the living God, finds an opening again in a familiar ally, the Amalekites.

It is puzzling to some that king Xerxes says to Haman: keep the money (verse 11) and do with the people as you please. Keep the money? The imperial treasury was in need of extra funds after the war with the Greeks. The king would not be expected to refuse such a huge monetary sum. Some explainers say: he only said it to sound magnanimous, as if he was suggesting: what's money? If Haman pursued the matter, Xerxes would take the money. Others translate differently, in this way that Xerxes says: well, it's your money, and if Haman wants to give such a huge sum, it's his privilege, the king will not refuse. Whatever the case, the enemies of God's people are willing to spend a huge sum to wipe out the church. Satan has the man-power and the resources in his campaign against God's people.

A PUBLIC EDICT

We know how it went. A royal edict is written, translated into all the languages of the provinces, and couriers are sent everywhere to make the edict known. Also in the city of Susa, the edict is made public. We read in the last verse of the chapter how the king and Haman sat down to drink, but that the city of Susa was bewildered. For the king the matter is finished, and he wants to have some other activity: let's drink on it. To your health! That's how the enemies of God's people enjoy their moment of triumph. The city of Susa is "bewildered". The locals who are used to some remarkable edicts, cannot figure this one out. Why this planned massacre of the Jews? It reminds me of many locals in Germany who were "bewildered" when they saw what had been going on in the Nazi death

camps. If you can't be anything else, you can always be bewildered. As if bewilderment lets you off the hook.

Have the times really changed since then? Is the church not still under constant attack? Is it not true that overall Christians are now being persecuted more than ever before. A more alarming statistic is the lack of church growth, the deserting of the Reformed faith, which can be seen in so many places. This chapter does not give us just a moment in time, but it tells us that the place of the church in the world is never safe and secure. The New Testament tells us that this situation will only worsen. The flock is under constant, increasing attack.

GOD'S COUNTER-MEASURES

In the Form for the ordination of elders and deacons (*Book of Praise*, page 629) we find this mandate to the elders of God's people: care for the flock and defend the sheep against the dangers that threaten them. There are many dangers from within and from without. The elders are called to use all the means of encouragement and admonition, to keep good order, and allow no strange teaching. The deacons must see to it that no one is neglected and lacks the loving care required. The congregation must be able to stand always and everywhere, and especially in troubled times and places. To be an office bearer in the church of Christ is no easy task. Let it never be said that office bearers allowed wolves into the sheepfold or neglected the afflicted.

There is also this immense comfort: when Susa is bewildered, God has already moved forward. His counter-measures have been taken. The Jews need not fear. God's covenant still stands. God is never bewildered by anti-Christian activity. He pre-empts every strike of the devil. Today the situation is even richer for God's people. We may live under the Kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ. Xerxes is long gone, with his multitude of women and his millions of dollars. But Jesus Christ lives and governs all things. His sovereign grace is still shown richly toward his church. His power keeps the world under control. In his service, we can work.