

# Purim 2006

## Background (Review from Last Year)

The book of Esther describes the experiences of the Jews in Persia between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, between the first return (under Zerubbabel) and the second (under Ezra). It describes a struggle between two foreign families that have become involved in the Persian court: Mordecai the Jew (whose niece Esther becomes queen), and Haman the Agagite. In brief,

- We find Mordecai in the palace in 2:5 without explanation. No doubt, like Daniel and Nehemiah, he was valued as a member of the court.
- Haman is introduced in 3:1. He is also in the palace, and is placed in the chief position.
- Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman (3:2). He justifies this action on the ground that he is a Jew, 3:3-4, probably because of the religious implications of bowing down to a representative of a king who no doubt made pretensions to deity.
- In revenge, Haman resolves to destroy Mordecai's race, 3:6, and persuades the king to issue a decree to that effect, v.12.
- Haman also resolves to execute Mordecai personally, 5:14.
- The king discovers a forgotten favor that Mordecai did to him, and orders Haman to honor him, 6:10.
- Esther reveals to the king that Haman's plot against the Jews affects her people.
  - The king puts Haman to death, 7:8-10.
  - He elevates Mordecai to Haman's place, 8:2
  - The king reverses his decree against the Jews, 8:5-8.

This struggle between Mordecai and Haman is not isolated. It is the culmination of an ongoing struggle between two ancient families, recorded throughout the pages of the Bible. Today we will probe a bit into the historical and spiritual background of the two families, to provide a context for this climactic struggle.

## A Confluence of Two Families

The writer of Esther makes sure that we know the family background of the two men.

- In 2:5, Mordecai is described as “the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.” Kish was the father of Saul, who became king, and Shimei is the relative of Saul who cursed David as he fled Jerusalem under Absalom.
- 3:1 describes Haman as “the son of Hammedatha the Agagite.” Agag is the hereditary title of the kings of Amalek (just as the kings of Egypt were called Pharaoh, and the kings of the Philistines in the time of Abraham were called Abimelech).

Saul and the Amalekites crossed paths more than once.

- In 1 Sam 14:47-48, they were among his initial conquests as king of Israel.

- It was an Amalekite serving in his own army who claimed credit for killing him, 2 Sam 1:2-10.

The most notable incident is described in 1 Sam 15.

- God commanded Saul to exterminate the Amalekites, because of their treatment of Israel during the exodus.
- Saul was incomplete in his obedience, sparing the king (named Agag), and the best of the cattle, and no doubt many of the people as well.
- This was one of the two events that cost Saul the crown (the other being his unwillingness to wait for Samuel to offer sacrifice in 1 Sam 13:14).

So we can view the book of Esther as the culmination of this struggle. But the struggle went well beyond Saul. Let's review some of Amalek's history.

## Agag and Amalek

The nation was a perennial foe of Israel.

The earliest encounter between the two was at Rephidim, one of Israel's campsites on the way from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Exodus 17 contains the history.

- 1-7, God opened a spring for Israel.
- 8-16, Amalek came to claim it, and the Lord delivered them through Moses and Joshua.

We don't often note the connection between the stories, but we should. Springs were a rare and precious commodity in the desert. Amalek no doubt attacked Israel in an effort to take possession of the spring that God had created for them. Amalek was jealous over the privileged position of Israel.

On this occasion, the Lord revealed to Moses that this animosity was not accidental, but would persist: Ex 17:14, 16.

14 And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this *for* a memorial in a book, and rehearse *it* in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. ... 16 ... Because the LORD hath sworn *that* the LORD *will have* war with Amalek from generation to generation.

And it did, down through Ehud, Gideon, Saul, David, and the men of Simeon, and not ending until the contest between Mordecai and Haman.

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Tribe</i>
<b>Exodus</b>			
Exod 17, cf. Judg 5:14	Contesting waters of Rephidim	Joshua	Ephraim
Num 14:45	Repelling Israel after the spies rejected the land (confederate with Canaanites)		(nation)
<b>Judges</b>			
Judg 3:13, 15	Confederate with Moab and Ammon	Ehud	Benjamin
Judg 6	Confederate with Midianites	Gideon	Manasseh

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Tribe</i>
<b>Early Monarchy</b>			
1 Sam 14:48		Saul	Benjamin
1 Sam 15		Saul	Benjamin
2 Sam 1	The man who killed Saul was an Amalekite	Saul	Benjamin
1 Sam 27:8		David	Judah
1 Sam 30		David	Judah
2 Sam 8:12		David	Judah
<b>Late Monarchy</b>			
1 Chr 4:43			Simeon

## Benjamin

But Benjamin is no sweet innocent, either.

- We have already recalled Saul's disobedience in 1 Sam 15. If he'd done his job, it would have saved Mordecai grief.
- Recall Benjamin's treatment of the Levite's concubine in Judg 19 (cf. v. 16).
- Recall also Shimei. Note that Mordecai's relation to Saul is only indirect—it is Shimei who is in focus. In 2 Sam 16:5, he cursed David. His motive (vv. 7-8) was that as a relative of Saul, he was jealous for the throne that God had given to David. In this, he is like the Amalekites in Exod 17, who were jealous for the water that God had given Israel.

In fact, Moses' prophecy concerning Amalek has its counterpart in Benjamin. Benjamin was Jacob's second-favorite son, the son of his beloved Rachel and the one whom he named “Son of my Right hand.” Yet when he blessed his sons at the end of his life, what did he say concerning Benjamin?

Genesis 49:27 Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.

## Resolution

So the struggle between Mordecai and Haman is the culmination of a struggle between two vicious, jealous tribes. In the flesh, there wasn't an inch of difference between the two lineages. Yet Mordecai is the most godly character in the book of Esther. He refuses to bow to a pagan potentate, and he encourages Esther that God will deliver the Jews (4:14). And in fact, he wins Israel's final victory over Amalek. How did a man of faith come from Benjamin's line, and not from Agag's? Why does Mordecai emerge the victor, and Haman the defeated?

It all goes back to two prophecies that were issued years before, one for each of the tribes.

**Amalek's prophecy** was delivered by Balaam, the prophet-for-hire whom Balak engaged to curse Israel. In Num 24 he delivered prophecies about a number of other nations as well, including Amalek:

Num 24:20 And when he looked on Amalek, he took up his parable, and said,  
Amalek *was* the first of the nations;  
but his latter end *shall be* that he perish for ever.

“First of nations” (no article in Heb) does not refer to their primacy among other nations either chronologically or in importance. Nimrod had a kingdom long before Amalek, in Gen 10:10, and Egypt was far mightier than this bedouin tribe. The targums seem to have the correct sense when they explain “first of nations” as “first of nations that made war with Israel.” The distinguishing feature of the nations is their antipathy against Israel, and Amalek was the first to launch this enmity against the new-born nation.

Balaam prophesies that Amalek will perish for ever. Though he is a pagan soothsayer, it is clear that God speaks through him, and this promise ultimately dooms the nation to destruction. Saul blundered in his task to exterminate them; and though David it was written of David that

**Benjamin's prophecy** is delivered by Moses when he blesses the tribes of Israel:

Deut 33:12 And of Benjamin he said,  
The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him;  
and the LORD shall cover him all the day long,  
and he shall dwell between his shoulders.

Of Benjamin, his brothers told Joseph, “His father loveth him.” But even more important, he was beloved of the Lord, protected by him, and borne upon his back (cf. Exod 19:4, “I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself”) like a young and tender child.

Ultimately, the difference between Benjamin and Amalek was that God condemned Amalek to destruction, but set his love on Benjamin. Neither one deserved God's favor. Even Jacob, who loved Benjamin deeply, was forced to acknowledge the frailty of his flesh. But God loved him, protected him, and delivered him.

God loved Benjamin, but cursed Amalek, and that's why Esther turns out the way it does. The contrast reminds us of Mal 1:2,3, which Paul quotes in Rom 8:13 as the foundation for his teaching of God's sovereign grace:

Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, 3 And I hated Esau.

In fact, the similarity goes much deeper. God loved Jacob, and Benjamin was his son. God hated Esau, and Amalek was his grandson, Gen 36:16. The book of Esther is the final demonstration of how God's sovereign purpose was worked out in the two families.

We are richly blessed as God's people. But let us never think for a moment that our own merit or virtue has anything to do with this blessing. We are what we are only because God loved us, and to him alone belongs the glory for what he has made us.