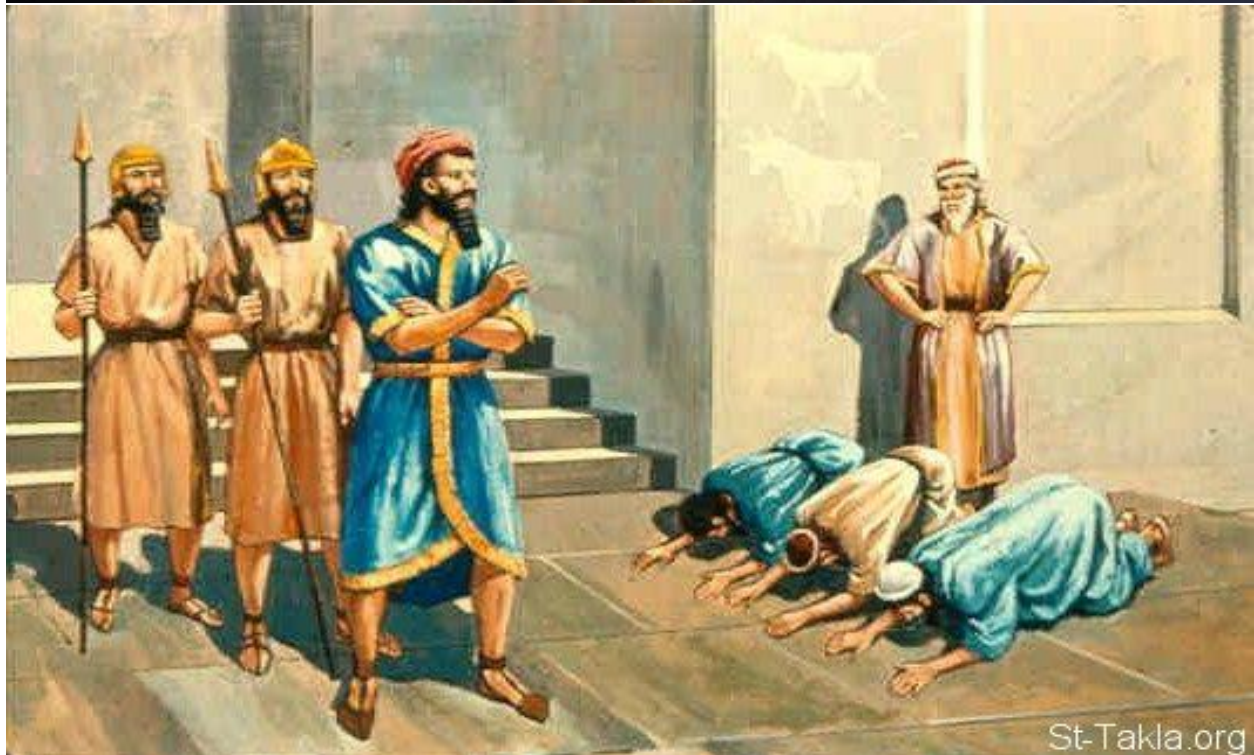


The Difference Between Daniel 3 & Esther 3

By David Lee Burris



It started with a dream.



Daniel 3:1

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

We don't know for certain how long a time span was there was between Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's secret dream and this event. But it is likely that Nebuchadnezzar got the idea for this statue from the head of gold mentioned in Daniel's dream interpretation. Obviously, Nebuchadnezzar fancied the idea of him being represented as gold in a vision from God. Given King Nebuchadnezzar's affinity for his pagan god Marduk, the god of magic and incantation, he probably assumed the vision actually came from him and not from the God of Daniel and his friends. Obviously, Daniel's God got the credit in Nebuchadnezzar's mind for revealing it, but at this point in his life he probably thought the dream actually came from the god Marduk. It's too much of a coincidence for Nebuchadnezzar to be given a dream wherein he was represented as the head of a golden statue and then later to actually build one and have it erected to discount the two events as being unrelated. He likely thought his pagan deity desired him to be seen in that way by his subjects and he was honoring the will of Morduk by building the statue of himself and setting it up in the plain of Dura. Scholars place the building and the erecting of the statue at no more than three years after his vision. This statue was about 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide at the base. The text says the statue was made of gold. It was most likely stone or wooden in construction and only overlaid with gold. – *Internet Commentary*



Daniel 3 relates the famous account of ***Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*** (or, to use their Hebrew names, *Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah*). The three brave Hebrews take a stand against the king of Babylon, refuse to bow to an idol, and are thrown into a burning fiery furnace. Interestingly, Daniel is not mentioned in the story at all. ***Why did Daniel's three friends face the wrath of the king alone? Where was Daniel during their time of crisis?***

Scripture does not say where Daniel was when King Nebuchadnezzar tried to kill Daniel's friends. There are a few possibilities, all of them speculative:

1) Daniel, who was "ruler over the entire province of Babylon and . . . in charge of all its wise men" (Daniel 2:48), had been sent away on an assignment by Nebuchadnezzar and was therefore not present at the event described in Daniel 3.

2) Because of Daniel's promotion and his place in the royal court (Daniel 2:49), Nebuchadnezzar had exempted Daniel from the command to bow down to the golden statue.

3) Daniel, in fear of being executed or to appease the king, bowed down to the golden statue.

Option (3) can definitely be dismissed. One thing we say for sure is that Daniel was *not* bowing down to the idol that Nebuchadnezzar had made. He who had "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself" (***Daniel 1:8, KJV***) was not going to commit a blatant act of wickedness such as worshiping a false god. In ***Daniel 6***, Daniel risks his life by simply praying. If Daniel was willing to die for his commitment to prayer, there is no way he would have directly violated one of the Ten Commandments (see ***Exodus 20:4***). Daniel's character and commitment were such that he would not dare dishonor the Lord.

Options (1) and (2) are both plausible, with (1) perhaps being the more likely possibility. Nebuchadnezzar's command to bow down and worship the image was addressed to "nations and peoples of every language" (***Daniel 3:4***), and present at the dedication were "the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials" (verse 3). In other words, the king's command seems universal, with no exceptions; everyone within hearing range of the music was to bow down and worship the king's image (verse 5). The most likely scenario, then, is that Daniel was away on the king's business and was not present for the dedication of the idol.



The Crisis (3:1-15)

The third chapter of Daniel opens with Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, making a statue of gold that is around 90 feet high. So, the king gathers all of his officials for the dedication of this image. Then the proclamation is made that the people are commanded to fall down and worship the image when the music plays. Whoever does not bow down and worship will be immediately cast into a furnace of blazing fire.

We know this is going to be a problem because at the end of Daniel 2 we saw that Daniel requested that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon. Now the crisis is stated in verse 8. Some Chaldeans (these are the ones who are the magicians of the kingdom) came forward to maliciously accuse the Jews. . . . Some of these Jews that Nebuchadnezzar has appointed pay no attention to you and have not worshiped the image.

Nebuchadnezzar goes into a furious rage and commands these three to be brought before him. Nebuchadnezzar offers a second chance for them to bow down and worship the image at the sound of the music. They must worship this object or else be killed. What will they do? What would you do? Remember the command is that anyone who did not worship the image would be cast into the furnace of blazing fire.

Now we cannot miss verse 15 because it's key to the chapter. **“But if you don't worship, you shall immediately be cast into a fiery burning furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”** Consider that this is a rhetorical question. The answer he wants them to have in their minds is that there is no god who can save them from what he is about to do to them.

Nebuchadnezzar is setting himself up as most supreme. How intimidating this moment would be!

Faith Proclaimed (3:16-18)

Listen to the answer of these three men. First, we have no need to answer you in this matter. What matter are they talking about? As we can see by the rest of their response to King Nebuchadnezzar they are answering the matter of whether there is any god who can save them out of his hand. They make the declaration that their God whom they serve is able to deliver them from the furnace of burning fire.

Nebuchadnezzar said that there is no god who can deliver them but they reject that declaration. The God we serve is able to deliver us!

But they do not leave it at this. They continue in verse 18 that even if our God, who is able to deliver us, doesn't deliver us, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up. These men declare the words of the apostles in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men."

These men have confidence in God's power and they will submit to God alone. God's glory will be put on display by delivering them or by them dying in full faith for him. This is great biblical faith. **Bible faith is not confidence in a particular outcome, but confidence in a sovereign God. God will not do whatever you want him to do just because you have great faith.** The apostle Paul had great faith and prayed for the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh. But God didn't remove it. Great faith does not mean that God must do whatever we want him to do. Prayer certainly has no chance of being answered without faith (as we see in the scriptures). But this does not obligate God. Our faith is in God, not in what we want God to do. **Faith is not that we know the outcome, but that we know the outcome belongs to God. Faith obeys. Faith does not write God's script.**

Biblical faith is not in the outcome but in God who is able to do all things. Notice that this is the faith these three men are declaring before Nebuchadnezzar. Whatever the outcome, our faith is in God! **They know God is able but also know that their faith in God does not mean that they will be delivered.** Consider how true this is for these three men! After they give this answer, the king stokes the fire seven times hotter and they are thrown into the furnace. It does not look like their God will deliver after all.

Delivered Through The Fire (3:19-30)

Amazingly, the fire is so hot that when the three men are thrown into the furnace, those guards who threw them in are also then burned up in the process. But when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (assigned Babylonian names) are thrown in, they aren't immediately consumed. Rather, they are walking around in the furnace of blazing fire. Even more, there is a fourth person seen walking in the fire and none of them are hurt. The fourth person has the appearance of a son of the gods. The point is that God has come to deliver his people.

God brings his people through the fire and see his people through their fiery ordeals. Notice that the apostle Peter reaches for the same imagery when he writes to Christians who were going through trials.

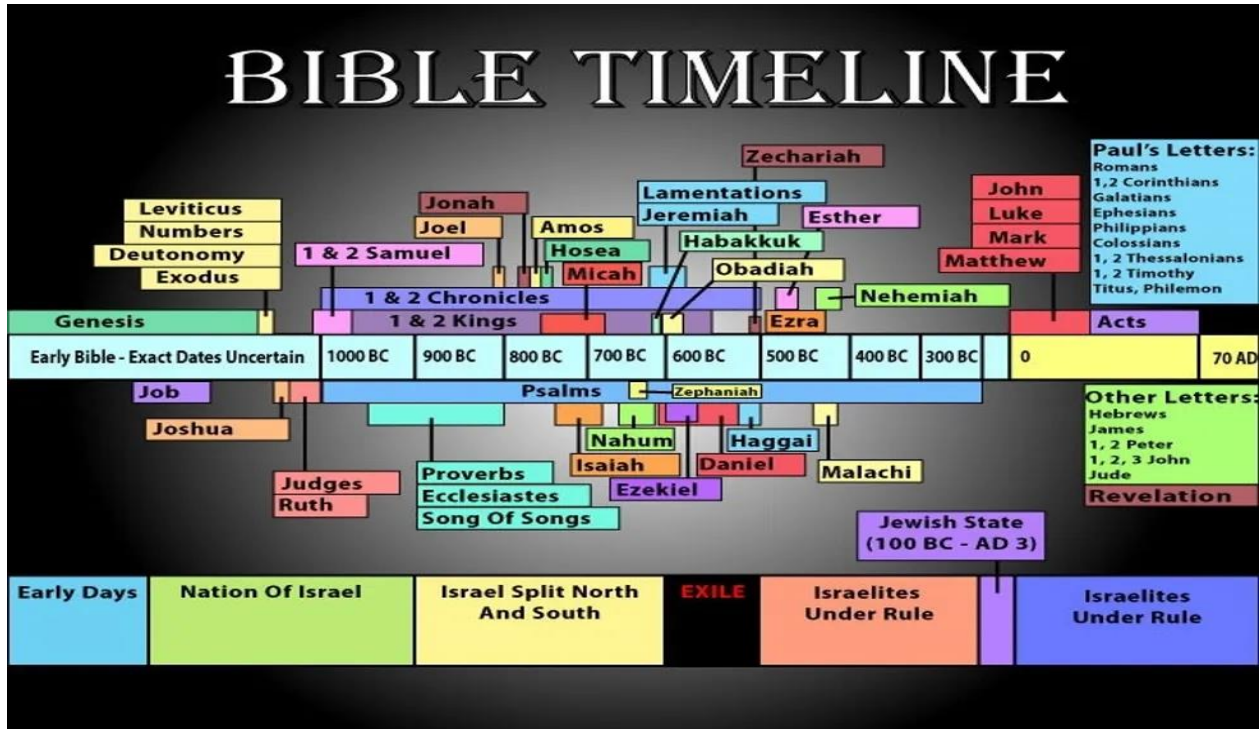
Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1st Peter 4:12 ESV)

But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. (Deuteronomy 4:20 ESV)

The goal of fiery trials is achieved. Nebuchadnezzar confesses the name of God and declares that no one can speak anything against God's name. This confession continues into chapter 4 when King Nebuchadnezzar writes his own praises for the Most High God.



Jump Ahead Next Door Next Century



And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.

Esther 3:2

CHAP. 3. 1–15. — HAMAN, ADVANCED BY THE KING AND DESPISED BY MORDECAI, SEEKS REVENGE ON ALL THE JEWS

1. After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman and set his seat above all the princes—*i. e.*, raised him to the rank of vizier, or prime confidential minister, whose pre-eminence in office and power appeared in the elevated state-chair appropriated to that supreme functionary. Such a distinction in seats was counted of vast importance in the formal court of Persia. 2. all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman. Large mansions in the East are entered by a spacious vestibule or gateway, along the sides of which visitors sit, and are received by the master of the house; for none, except the nearest relatives or special friends, are admitted farther. There the officers of the ancient king of Persia waited till they were called, and did obeisance to the all-powerful minister of the day. but Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. [The Septuagint has οὐπροσεκύνει αὐτῷ, did not prostrate before him (cf. *Josephus*, 'Antiquities,' b. xi., ch. vi., sec. 5)]. The obsequious homage of prostration, not entirely foreign to the manners of the East, had not been claimed by former viziers; but this minion required that all subordinate officers of the court should bow before him with their faces to the earth. But to Mordecai it seemed that such an attitude of profound reverence was due only to God. Haman's being an Amalekite, one of a doomed and accursed race, was, doubtless, another element in the refusal; and on learning that the recusant was a Jew, whose non-conformity was grounded on religious scruples, the magnitude of the affront appeared so much the greater, as the example of Mordecai would be imitated by all his compatriots. Had the homage been a simple token of civil respect, Mordecai wouldn't have refused it; but the Persian kings demanded a sort of adoration, which, it is well known, even the Greeks reckoned it degradation to express; and as Xerxes, in the height of his favoritism, had commanded the same honors be given to the minister as to himself, this was the ground of Mordecai's refusal.¹

¹ Jamieson, R. (n.d.). [*A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Joshua–Esther*](#) (Vol. II, pp. 638–639). London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited.

Why Didn't Mordecai Display Homage To Secular Power?

3:2–4 The order for all the people to bow before Haman would not have been unusual. According to Herodotus, the Persians were very conscious of social class and observed strict protocols regarding rank. They would greet equals with a kiss, but would always bow and make obeisance before those of higher standing. The practice was also common among the Jews, who had no problems kneeling before those whom they respected or whose favor they wished to garner (see, e.g., Gen 33:3; 42:6; 1 Sam 20:41; 24:8).

Why, then, does Mordecai refuse to bow? The common assumption among Christians seems to be that Mordecai considered such prostration to be akin to idolatry. This idea was also found in ancient times: in the LXX, Mordecai contends that the reason he would not bow is that he refused to put any man's glory over that of God and would worship no one but Him (Add Esth C.5–7). *The notion clearly rests on an understanding that bowing before someone implies worship, an idea that was not known in the ANE.*

The LXX also implies that Haman had been in on the plot to kill the king and that Mordecai was aware of the fact (Add Esth A.17). *The translators apparently inserted this detail into the narrative to clarify the ambiguity regarding Mordecai's motives, and it is not helpful for understanding the MT version.* **Some of the traditional Jewish texts (e.g., Tg. Esth. I; Esth. Rab.) explained Mordecai's actions by claiming that Haman carried an idol with him, and it was before this image that Mordecai refused to bow.**

Paton (197) finds Mordecai's conduct inexplicable and attributes it to arrogance. Likewise, Baldwin (76) sees Mordecai's act as one of "pigheaded pride." They offer no reason, however, for why Mordecai felt he should be above Haman. Bickerman, however, suggests that Mordecai might have been suffering from "sour grapes":

Mordecai was jealous because Haman received a promotion that he thought was his due. There is much to commend this theory. First, there is the placement of the episode immediately after the story of Mordecai's intervention on behalf of the king. It is fresh in the reader's mind that Mordecai had received no reward for his heroic act. It might be considered a biblical trope that when Jews do favors for foreign kings, they are rewarded with a promotion, as in the case of Joseph (Gen 41) and Daniel (Dan 2 and 5). The parallel to Joseph is especially striking, since Esther's narrator has used language that clearly alludes to the Joseph story (Levenson, 68; Laniak, 221).

The narrator and audience might have known not only these stories, but others of similar vein, conditioning them to expect that Mordecai's actions would have been rewarded with a similar promotion—but instead the promotion goes to Haman. Of course, Mordecai would have been offended. Also, **that Mordecai refuses to explain his behavior gives the impression that he is pouting over a perceived injury.** Finally, there is—typically overlooked—that even before the Jews are empowered to defend themselves, Mordecai receives the office vacated by Haman (Esth 8:2). His promotion appears to be part of the reversal motif, representing the righting of a wrong. If this narrative is truly “balanced,” this act could be the correction of an earlier injustice and implies that Mordecai should have received the office that had been given to Haman. It should also be noted that Mordecai receives Haman's office right after a eunuch reminds the king of Mordecai's aid to the king (Esth 7:9).

Most scholars, however, have not been persuaded by Bickerman's proposal. Rather, **the most widely accepted interpretation (by Ehrlich, Meinhold, Moore, Fox, Bush, Laniak, and others) is that Mordecai refused to bow to Haman because of the ethnic antagonism between Jews and the Amalekites. Many have argued that Mordecai's revelation that he was a Jew (3:4) was his explanation for refusing to bow.**

The text, however, implies that Mordecai did not answer when the other officials asked why he would not bow, so there is little reason to conclude that “he had told them he was a Jew” was his explanation for his obduracy—*it was background information that he had already given them*. Nor would his being Jewish have served as an explanation for his behavior, since *his coworkers would have had no reason to know of the enmity between Jews and Amalekites*. Rather, what the text states is that they were curious whether Mordecai’s behavior would be tolerated “because he was a Jew.” *The implication is that Jews were somehow treated differently from other people*. We have already seen that Mordecai believed it would be detrimental to Esther’s bid to become queen if it were known that she was a Jew.

Perhaps Mordecai felt he had been passed over for the promotion and his service overlooked because he was a Jew. Perhaps the narrator assumed that his audience, who may have experienced some prejudice living in the Gentile world, would draw that conclusion. On the other hand, the text also implies that the Jews *were* different from other people, as Haman’s wife, Zeresh, will later acknowledge (6:13). Mordecai’s colleagues were interested in seeing whether Mordecai could get away with insubordination because he was a member of an ethnic group that was subject to prejudice and yet apparently lived a “charmed life.”

It is also worth noting that Mordecai's refusal to bow was not only an insult to Haman, but to the king as well. After having just saved the king's life, he is now deliberately insubordinate. This fact further supports the theory that Mordecai is responding to an apparent snub. Mordecai is not just stubborn; he is angry at the king.

The phrase לְרֹאוֹת הַיַּעֲמָדוֹ דְּבָרַי מְרֻדָּי (*lirē'ôt hă ya'amdû dibrê mordōkay*; translated here “to see whether Mordecai's deeds would be tolerated”) is a crux in this passage. Fox, followed by Bush (379–80), Berlin (37), and others, argues that this phrase means something like, “to see if his explanation would hold up.” They then argue that the following phrase, “for he had told them he was a Jew,” was Mordecai's explanation for his behavior. This understanding seems to have been adopted by several translations (e.g., NASB, NRSV). Other translations have understood the phrase in a way similar to that offered here, such as the NIV's “to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated” (so, too, the NLT).

The phrase יַעֲמָדוֹ הַדְּבָרִים (*ya'amdû haddēbārîm*; lit., “the words/deeds would stand”) occurs nowhere else in the Heb. Bible. The words, however, are very common. The first, דָּבָר (*dbar*), basically means “word,” but it very frequently means “thing,” “issue,” or “deed” (cf. Esth 2:23 and 6:1, “the book of the deeds of the days”; 1 Kgs 11:41, “the deeds of Solomon”). The word עָמַד (*'md*) typically means “stand,” though it can also have the sense of “endure.”

In Esth 3:4, it is unlikely that the other courtiers would consider Mordecai's declaration that he was a Jew to be a sufficient excuse for refusing the order of the king. Surely, they would not have thought that Haman would have considered it a sufficient excuse!

My understanding is that the word עמד in Esth 3:4 is based on one of its common meanings, "continue, endure." The phrase could literally be translated, "to see whether Mordecai's words/deeds would be allowed to continue" (understanding the verb form to have a juss. force). **The phrase "for he had told them he was a Jew," in this interpretation, is not the content of Mordecai's "words," but the reason why the courtiers suspected his actions would not be tolerated.** Fox's argument that the text would then have simply said, "Because he was a Jew," does not take full account of the context: Mordecai had earlier told Esther not to *tell* anyone that she is Jewish.

The other courtiers would not have known Mordecai was Jewish unless he had told them. The narrator is drawing a contrast between Esther, who was concealing her Jewish identity, and Mordecai, who had revealed his Jewishness.²

² Tomasino, A. (2016). [Esther](#) (pp. 216–219). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The exegetical tradition suggests two distinct lines of thought. The first is that Mordecai refuses to bow down on religious principles – obeisance to Haman is an expression of idolatry. The second points to an ethnic vendetta – the refusal serves as a pretext for the eternal battle between Amalek and Israel.

Interpretation 1: A Form of Idolatry

At the opening of chapter 3, Haman is promoted to viceroy:

וְכָל עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ פָּרְעִים וּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת לְהֵמָּן כִּי כֵן צִוָּה לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ
וּמִרְדֵּכָי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה.

And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance (Est. 3:2 NRSV).

The demand that a courtier bow down to the king's second-in-command seems innocuous enough; the Hebrew Bible is replete with examples of bowing to human beings.^[4] No law in the Torah explicitly forbids it. But this particular collocation יִכְרַע וְיִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, “to bow and do obeisance,”^[5] only appears in the Hebrew Bible as a homage to the One God.^[6]

This could be understood—at least by ancient interpreters—to imply that Haman was presenting himself as a deity.

Haman's Wearing an Idol – Rabbinic Interpretion

The Rabbinic tradition suggests Haman wore an idolatrous figure—either as a medallion around his neck or embroidered to his turban.^[7] Ostensibly, they suggest this because, as stated above, nothing in the Bible—or in rabbinic halacha— forbids a Jew to bow to a person. Nevertheless, the Septuagint and the Targum Sheni make another claim.

Only Bow Down to God – Septuagint and Targum Sheni

The Greek version of Esther (Septuagint), presents Mordecai's defense along these lines. By obeying the rule of the Persian King and bowing to Haman, he would betray his allegiance to the King of kings, the God of the Jewish people. In what scholars call Addition C (which follows chapter four of the MT), Mordecai turns to God in prayer, with an explicitly theological message not found in the Masoretic text:

... you know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman; for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel! But I did this so that I might not set human glory above God's glory, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride. (Greek Esther, Addition C; 13:12-14, NRSV).

His tone is poignant, apologetic almost, for the dire straits he has brought upon his people. But he justifies his integrity as motivated by the "glory of God."

The Aramaic Targum Sheni, like the Greek version, does not mention an idol, but argues that it is inappropriate that "the Jew" should bow to a mere mortal man.^[9] In chapter 3, for example, in response to the king's servants' question: "Why do you disobey the king's command" (3:3, where no answer is given in the MT), Mordecai rails at the hubris of the man, "Proud and haughty... born of woman, whose days are few... and whose ultimate end is a return to dust...shall I kneel before him? No! I only bow down to the eternal God...."^[10]

In both the Targum Sheni and the Septuagint, bowing to a man is, in and of itself, a form of idolatry, and therefore presents a challenge to monotheism, which adjures the Jew to pay obeisance to God alone.

Interpretation 2: No Bowing Before an Amalekite

The second possibility is that Mordecai "the Jew" as the embodiment of Israel, refuses to bow down to Haman, the Agagite, as the embodiment of Amalek.

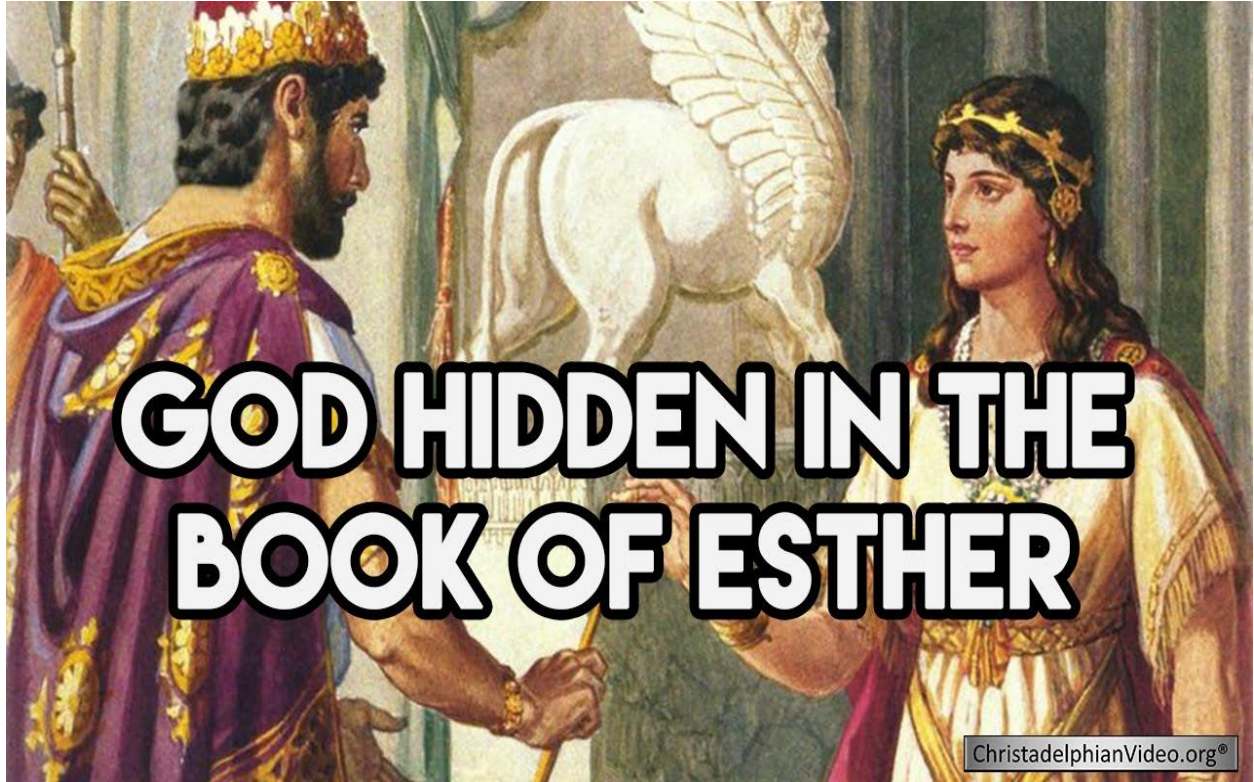
This tradition is inscribed in liturgical practice on Shabbat Zakhor before Purim, when we read (Maftir) the injunction "Remember what Amalek did to you," attacking the old and the weary that straggled behind the desert sojourn out of Egypt. And so, we are urged, paradoxically, to "wipe out the memory of Amalek" (Deut. 25:17-19; cf. Exod. 17:8-16).

We also read of King Saul's failure to fulfill God's decree when he preserves the life of Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Sam. 15 as the Haftorah). Mordecai, a descendant of Saul's line, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin (Est. 2:5, cf. 1 Sam. 9:1-2), must then finish off the job, so to speak.

In the MT of the Esther scroll, genealogical associations point to an ethnic vendetta that will be played out between these two characters. The Greek version, however, never calls Haman an Agagite, so the allusion to this ethnic divide would have been lost on the Greek readership. Haman is referred to, instead, as "the Bougean," (in the Septuagint Alpha-text), a pejorative for Greek speaking Jews.^[11]

By contrast, the Rabbinic tradition, based solely on the MT, cannot help but hear the trumpets of warning at the opening of chapter 3: "And after these things, Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite", with the added epithet "enemy of the Jews" (3:10, 7:6, 9:10). - Rabbinic Blog

God Is Hidden – All Is Speculation!





“But Mordecai Would Not Bow...”

Mordecai, the cousin, guardian, and surrogate father of Esther, has always been one of this writer’s favorite Bible characters. Not only is Mordecai an example of courage and conviction, but an individual who knew how to read a difficult situation and respond to it with great wisdom. As we recall the story of Esther, it was Mordecai who engineered her entrance into the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus (known in secular history as Xerxes) and her ultimate elevation as Ahasuerus’ queen (Esther 2:15-17). Mordecai made a mortal enemy in the person of Haman, one of the Persian princes who saw his position as a favorite son threatened by the presence of the Jews among his people, and by Mordecai in particular.

Let us note the following text: “After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king’s servants who were within the king’s gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage” (Esther 3:1-2 – NKJV).

Why Mordecai Would Not Bow or Pay Homage

Let’s focus on the last sentence of the above reading. We might wonder why Mordecai did not bow or pay homage.

After all, wasn't Haman was in a high position of authority? Was he not a prince, promoted by the king? Didn't the king decree that Haman should be shown honor? What would've been wrong in Mordecai bowing to this prince? Are we not told in Scripture to give honor where honor's due? (Romans 13:7). To answer these questions, we will have to consider the original context. What Haman was demanding of the people here was not merely the justified honor to be paid to a civil authority figure. What he sought, from cultural perspective of Persian custom, was to be worshiped as deity. In a word, to be honored as a god. This Mordecai refused to do.

An Example of Daniel's Friends

Mordecai's action was not unlike that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, the three friends of Daniel who refused to bow to the image of himself that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had erected.

Courage and Conviction in an Age of Compromise

We live in an age of compromise, of tolerance, of "going along with the crowd to get along." Confronted with the dilemma Mordecai faced, many people in our world today would simply say, "What would it matter just this once? I know Haman isn't really a god, but if he wants to think so, and obeying his order will keep me in good graces, what difference would it make?" Mordecai refused. He would not compromise his faith even for a man with the authority to build a gallows to have him hung from it (Esther 5:14). As Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego told Nebuchadnezzar, "If you are going to throw us into the furnace for not bowing to your idol, go ahead, because we are not bowing," In essence, Mordecai's action told Haman, "Hang me if you will, but I'll not give you what belongs to my God!"

God Directly Delivers From Penalty @Daniel Three



God Delivers Indirect Poetic Justice @Esther Three



