

February 23, 2003
Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

However bitter the feelings between them, the conflict of Haman and Mordecai was more than a personal fight. It rather closely resembled, in fact, the resumption of a family feud.

It is important to see that the strife between Mordecai and Haman was older than either of them. If Haman hated the Jews, as surely he did (Esther 3:10; 8:5; 9:24), it was hardly surprising. He was, after all, an Amalekite, descended from King Agag (3:1), whose realm had been conquered by Israel's first monarch, Saul the son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin (1 Samuel 15:1-8). As for Mordecai, he also was of the tribe of Benjamin and the grandson of another man named Kish (Esther 2:5-6). The encounter of these two men involved an ancient grudge.

Thus, the earliest commentator on this story, Flavius Josephus, called attention to the immemorial resentment contained in Haman's hatred of Mordecai: "Now there was a certain Haman, the son of Amedatha, an Amalekite by birth, who was accustomed to approach the king. . . . And when he wished to punish Mordecai, he thought it too insignificant a thing to request of the king that he alone should be punished; he resolved, rather, to annihilate the whole nation, for he was naturally an enemy of the Jews, because the Amalekites, to which he belonged, had earlier been destroyed by them" (Antiquities of the Jews 11.6.5).

These circumstances form no little part of the irony of the Book of Esther, in which two ancient adversaries encounter each other anew, as it were, in the far off country of Persia. This time their battle is fought, not with military weapons, but with the might of wisdom. The combat of Haman and Mordecai moves its battle lines to the field of practical wit. The triumph that the Jew wins over the Amalekite in this instance is a victory of the mind.

Haman, the highest official of the Persian court (Esther 3:1), represents a perverse and malicious philosophy. He belongs to that class of men whom Jeremiah described as "skilled at doing evil" (4:22) and of whom Isaiah said they are "wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight" (5:21). Haman violates all the rules of true wisdom. First, he permits

himself to be filled with rage (Esther 3:5; 5:9; cf. Proverbs 21:24; 29:22). Second, moved by passion, he reacts precipitously and without caution (Esther 3:6; Proverbs 14:17,29). Third, he becomes imprudent in his speech (Esther 5:10-13; cf. Proverbs 12:23).

Mordecai too is an official of the realm, described as sitting "within the king's gate" (Esther 2:21), an expression meaning that he is a judge or magistrate, who adjudicates legal cases. (Indeed, we also know Mordecai from a contemporary Persian document that refers to him as "Marduka.") Though hardly the wisest man in Holy Scripture, he has more than enough wisdom to outwit Haman.

Josephus speaks of Mordecai's wisdom (sophia), born of his reverence for the Torah (nomos). Mordecai is not moved by passion, is not precipitous to act, nor rashly speaks his plans to others. In all these things he shows himself a true sage and man of self-control (cf. Proverbs 12:23; 13:3; 16:32), worthy to replace the arrogant Haman (Esther 6:1-14).

Consequently, what finally ensues in the encounter of these two men is exactly what the Bible's wisdom literature would lead us to expect (Proverbs 11:8; 26:27; Psalms 7:14-16; Ecclesiastes 10:8). Haman is put to death (Esther 7:10), whereas Mordecai is given the signet ring of the king (8:2,8) and honored in the sight of the nation (8:15).

When old King Saul, the earlier son of Kish, defeated Agag centuries before, his failure to kill that Amalekite had earned him the censure of Samuel (1 Kings 15:9,20-23). Indeed, that was the occasion, we recall, when the Lord regretted having made Saul the king (15:11). In the Book of Esther, however, the situation is set aright. The moral failure of the earlier Benjaminite is not duplicated in the case of Mordecai. Haman is not spared but dies the death he deserves.

With respect to that ancient feud, there is a further irony in the story of Mordecai and Haman. Whereas Saul, the first descendent of Kish, had despoiled Agag without killing him, this second descendent of Kish, Mordecai, kills the Agagites without despoiling them (Esther 9:10).

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php