

Many of you will remember the story of Esther, but may not know the back-story. (The hard to find book of Esther is located right before the book of Job.) In the main part of the story Esther saves the Jewish nation.

It is 500 BCE and they are slaves in Persia. Esther and her uncle Mordecai (both Jews taken from Bethlehem) saved the Jewish people from complete annihilation. It is the story of how an advisor (Haman) to King Xerxes, convinced the king to issue an edict calling for the destruction of the entire Jewish people. *King Xerxes honored Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.* But Haman was angered when Mordecai would not bow down to him. Esther saves the Jews by risking her life to plead to the king to annul the edict, and expose Haman's plot against the Jewish peoples.

God's name is never mentioned in the story, although His hand is clearly present in every event. A Jewish tradition for Purim is to dress up in costumes and masks, to celebrate that sometimes God wears a mask, in other words; that **He caring for us even when he doesn't seem to be.**

The story of Esther is actually the culmination of a much longer story that stretches over 1300 years in the life of Israel. The clue is the identity of Haman, who is described as an "Agagite". Agag was the king of the Amalekites in Saul's time, so Haman is an Amalekite.

The Jews consider the Amalekites as Israel's worst enemy of all time. The Amalekites were the first nation that ever attacked Israel, and they did this almost immediately after Israel left Egypt, as they entered the wilderness (Exodus 17). They chose a particularly cowardly and brutal way to attack, by coming from the rear and killing the elderly and weaker Israelites that were straggling behind. Since they were the first to attack, they became the symbol of all of the nations that want to destroy Israel.

God was furious with the Amalekites, and singled them out for divine judgment: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." Moses built an altar and named it The LORD is My Banner; and he said, "The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation." (Ex. 17:14-16)* The Amalekites continually plagued the Israelites throughout their history.

When Israel first tried to enter the Promised Land but lost faith in God, the Amalekites were there to attack them.

Later, Saul was given the command to destroy them and leave nothing alive, not even children or animals (1 Sam. 15:7-9). God told Saul; *Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey. (1 Sam. 15:3)*

But Saul disobeyed God and kept some of the best animals for himself, and let King Agag live. Saul's disobedience allowed this destruction to come back to terrorize Israel again and again. God said that he regretted making Saul king, and later removed him from the throne. King David and King Hezekiah also fought against the Amalekites during their reigns, and now they are back again during this time of Esther.

Remember Haman is an "Agagite", a descent of the Amalekite king: *Then the king (Xerxes) took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. Esther 3:10*

For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. (Esther 9:24)

The narrator of Esther is explicit in showing that Mordecai and Esther are from the family of Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin and descendants of Saul's line (Esther 2:5-6). While Saul kept some of the booty for himself, the story of Esther points out repeatedly that the Jews took none of the plunder after they were allowed to kill Haman and his descendants. By not committing Saul's sin, they finally had victory.

It often shocks us when God gives such a horrible command and for Him to be so angry when it is not carried out. God's harsh command to Saul to destroy every living thing of the Amalekites was because He foreknew that this was a nation bent on the destruction of Israel, without whom the world would have no Savior. Israel was nearly annihilated in Esther's time because of Saul's disobedience.

Sometimes God's commands are incomprehensible, but if we had his perspective, we would see his logic.