

How an Assassination Changed the Greek Text of Esther

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The two Greek versions of the book of Esther, the LXX text and the alphatext (A-T, also called the »Lucianic« text), each give a different name for the Persian king of the Esther story. Where the Masoretic text (MT) reads Ahasuerus, the LXX, which is preserved in the majority of extant manuscripts, reads Artaxerxes. The A-T, preserved in only a few medieval manuscripts, agrees with the MT. Hoschander vigorously argued that the LXX version was historically accurate and identified Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes II. (404–358 B. C.).¹ However, the consensus of biblical scholarship now identifies the king of the Esther story as Xerxes (486–465 B. C.). Why do the Greek versions disagree and which reading was most likely original?

Another of the many differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of Esther provides a possible explanation. Where Haman is called an »Agagite« in the MT (Est 3,1), he is referred to in both Greek versions as a »Bougaion«. Who or what was a »Bougaion«? This Greek epithet provides the clue that may explain why the name of the king in each of the Greek versions is different and may also indicate which reading was most likely original.

The reference to Haman as an Agagite in the MT identifies him as a perennial enemy of the Jews. Agag was the king of the Amalekites during the reign of Saul (I Sam 15). There was a long history of animosity between the Israelites and the Amalekites. The Amalekites had the notorious distinction of being the first people who tried to annihilate Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan (Ex 17,8–15). Because they tried to destroy His people, God promised Moses that He would be at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation and would wipe out their memory. Over the centuries, other perennial enemies of Israel have been called Agagites, even though they had no ethnic relationship to the Amalekites.

The Greek versions of Esther substitute »Bougaion« for »Agagite« to label Haman as an enemy of the Jews. Moreover, the A-T version, which amplifies the theme of political assassination, portrays Haman not only as the enemy of the Jews, but as an enemy and potential assassin of the Persian king as well. What is the meaning of this appellation »Bougaion«?

Few explanations of the term »Bougaion« have been advanced. J. Lewy argued that »Bougaion« reflects an original Semitic reading that preceded the term »Agagite«. He suggested the epithet is derived from the West-Iranian term *baga*, which in the Babylonian Marduk-Ishtar mythology was used to denote a »worshipper of Mithra«. ² He argues that

¹ J. Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History*, 1923.

² J. Lewy, *The Feast of the 14th Day of Adar*, HUCA 14 (1939), 134–135.

a Jewish redactor used the Babylonian myth as a source for the biblical Esther story, changing the identity of the villain, Haman, from a »worshipper of Mithra« to an »Agagite«, the perennial enemy of the Jews. His theory does not satisfactorily explain the manuscript evidence, because the name »Bougaïos« occurs in what is clearly a Greek version of the Jewish *biblical form* of the Esther story, and not of some earlier literary stage where Babylonian mythology was prominent (if such a stage ever existed in the development of the book of Esther).

D. J. A. Clines suggests that a variant reading of the name, Gogaion, found only in ms. 93, is the original Greek reading. He connects that name with Gog of Ez 38–39 and explains it as an interpretative rendering of the Hebrew term »Agagite«.³

I propose that the substitution of »Bougaïos« for »Agagite« was a redaction motivated by an identifiable historical person and event. A subsequent misunderstanding of its use explains the difference in the king's name between the Greek versions. I suggest that βουγαῖος (Bougaïos) is a variant transliteration of a Persian name found in Josephus as βαγώσης (Bagoses) and in Diodorus Siculus as Βαγώας (Bagoas).⁴

Bagoses, according to Josephus, was the name of the commander in chief of the Persian forces under Artaxerxes (Loeb, Ant. XI.297–301). It is unclear if Josephus meant Artaxerxes II. (Mnemon, 404–359 B. C.) or Artaxerxes III. (Ochus, 358–337 B. C.). The Persian name of this general appears in most manuscripts of Josephus in the form βαγώσης, but in at least one reading in the variant form βαγώας. The form, βαγώας, agrees with that found in Diodorus Siculus, who also describes a Persian general and commander of the king's bodyguard of that same name who led a campaign into Egypt during the reign of Artaxerxes III. (Loeb, Dio XVI.47–51).

Moreover, βαγώας is, according to Cowley, the Graecized form of the Persian name »bigvai« found in papyrus no. 30 from Elephantine.⁵ »Bigvai« was the Aramaic transliteration of the name of the Persian governor of Judea who served under Artaxerxes II. in 408 B. C.

R. Marcus, editor of the Loeb edition of Josephus, identifies the βαγώσης of Josephus as the »bigvai« of the Elephantine papyrus, the Persian governor of Judea serving under Artaxerxes II.⁶ Cowley disagrees, saying the name was a common one, and identifies the βαγώσης of Josephus as the general serving under Artaxerxes III. The exploits of βαγώσης as described by Diodorus places him in the Egyptian campaign during the reign of Artaxerxes III. The evidence offered by this study suggests that the Bagoses described by Josephus and Diodorus was one and the same man serving Artaxerxes III., but was probably not the same person as the Persian governor of Judea in 408 B. C. under Artaxerxes II.

Immediately after recounting the Esther story, Josephus describes Bagoses as an enemy of the post-exilic Jews. Bagoses was involved in the intrigue surrounding the office of high priest. He intended to procure the office of high priest for his friend, Jesus, in the place of Jesus' brother, John. When John murdered Jesus, Bagoses took revenge by defiling the temple in Jerusalem, imposing a prohibitively high tax on the daily animal sacrifices

and oppressing the Jews for seven years. Bagoses became so politically powerful in the Persian court that in 338 B. C. he led a coup and assassinated Artaxerxes III. and all of his sons except one.

Because of the notoriety of this assassin of a Persian king, if βουγαῖος is a variant transliteration of the name of the Persian general, Haman could anachronistically be labeled a »Bougaion« to characterize in one word both his political ambitions against the king and his hostility toward the Jews. A modern analogy of the use of the appellation would be to imply that someone is an assassin by calling him an »Oswald«, whom Americans, at least, would recognize as the name of the alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy.

This appellation is fitting for the *Tendenz* of the A-T of Esther, which amplifies the theme of assassination. Assassination is only mentioned in the MT when Mordecai uncovers the eunuchs' assassination plot (Est 2,19–23). There it functions in the story only as the motivation for Mordecai's timely reward which leads to Haman's downfall and the deliverance of the Jews. In the Hebrew version, Haman is neither involved in the assassination plot nor is portrayed as disloyal to the king. In the A-T, however, Haman is implicated in the assassination plot at least to the extent of favoring it. According to the A-T, it was because Mordecai foiled this assassination attempt that Haman became an enemy of the Jews. Furthermore, the A-T accuses Haman of conspiring to give the Persian empire over to the Macedonians (7,27), an element which is entirely missing from the MT.

Most likely the term »Bougaion« would enter the Esther story as a pejorative label for Haman soon after the historical Bagoses became infamous as an assassin in 338 B. C. By referring anachronistically to Haman as a »Bougaion«, the A-T characterizes him not only as an enemy of the Jews but as plotting to overthrow and assassinate the Persian king as well.

The characterization of Haman as a »Bougaion« in the Greek versions goes far in explaining why the LXX text gives the name of the king as Artaxerxes. A subsequent scribe or redactor of the Greek who read »Bougaion« as an appellation for Haman knew that it was Artaxerxes, not Xerxes, who was assassinated by a close advisor named Bagoses. He apparently misconstrued this reference to mean that Haman was contemporaneous with the Persian general Bagoses and was somehow involved in his plot to assassinate the king. Though the plot was once foiled by Mordecai, a subsequent attempt succeeded. The scribe or redactor accordingly »corrected« the name of the king in the Greek text. This suggests that the A-T reading of the king's name, which agrees with the MT, preserves the original reading.

The use of the term »Bougaion« as an appellation was probably limited specifically to the late Persian period, or perhaps to the early Hellenistic, because of its association with this one historical person and event in 338 B. C. It is less likely that the term would have been original to the LXX version of Esther which dates, according to its colophon, not earlier than 114 B. C.⁷ This supports the theory I have argued elsewhere that the redaction of the Esther story which identifies Haman as a »Bougaion« was produced earlier than the LXX version of Esther.⁸

³ D. J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, 1984, 197n7.

⁴ According to Liddell-Scott, βαγώας is also the Greek form of a Persian word equivalent to εὐνοῦχος.

⁵ A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C.*, 1923, 108.

⁶ See Appendix B in Loeb, Ant., vol. vi for Marcus' argument.

⁷ E. J. Bickerman, *The Colophon of the Greek Book of Esther*, JBL 63 (1944), 339–362.

⁸ K. H. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text*, SBL.DS, 1996.

If my theory is correct, the appellation »Bougaion« found in the Greek Esther originated as a Persian name. It could have entered the Esther story originally either in Aramaic or in Greek, for the Persian name had forms in both languages and is attested in Jewish texts dating from the Persian period at Elephantine. It could therefore have entered the Esther story in its Semitic form late in the Persian period, soon after Artaxerxes III. was assassinated. This would imply that the first Greek version of Esther was simply translating the name found in its *Vorlage*. Alternatively, the reading may have first entered the Esther story in Greek early in the Hellenistic period as the creative work of the translator or a subsequent redactor.

The appellation is not found in the Aramaic targums of Esther or in any surviving Hebrew manuscripts. Therefore, it seems unlikely to have originated in the Semantic version. Furthermore, the theme of political assassination is amplified only in the Greek versions, and is a major theme of addition E, one of the six additional chapters found only in the Greek versions. The syntax of addition E indicates it was originally composed in Greek. Therefore, this study concludes that the appellation »Bougaion« originally entered the Esther story in Greek, either at the time it was translated from Hebrew or, more likely I believe, when one or more of the additions was introduced into the story.

If, as Josephus describes, the Jews in Jerusalem had suffered at the hand of the Persian general Bagoses shortly after the time of Esther and Mordecai, the redaction of the Esther story which introduced that epithet for Haman may have been intended to encourage the Jews by condemning their most recent enemy to the same fate as Haman, the Persian enemy of a previous generation of Jews. By doing this, the Greek-speaking Jews who chose not to return to Jerusalem were thereby assured that Yahweh's covenantal promise of protection first given to Moses extended even beyond the geographical borders of the promised land.

In the Septuagint version of Esther, the king's name is given as Artaxerxes and Haman is called a »Bougaion«. This article proposes that »Bougaion« is a variant Greek spelling of the Persian name found elsewhere as »Bagoses«. Bagoses was a Persian general who assassinated Artaxerxes III. in 338 B.C. The Greek Esther amplifies the theme of royal assassination. It anachronistically labels Haman as a »Bougaion« to characterize him as a potential assassin of the king. Subsequently, Haman's epithet was mistakenly construed as a historical reference and the name of the king was »corrected« to Artaxerxes.