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## Mordecai Ham : A Thorn in the Devil's Side

James A. Borland

*Liberty University*, [jborland@liberty.edu](mailto:jborland@liberty.edu)

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# Mordecai Ham

## A Thorn in the Devil's Side

*by James A. Borland*

**F**rom a small beginning in rural Kentucky there came a spiritual giant who recaptured Satan's territory for more than six decades. Mordecai Fowler Ham, Jr., was born in Allen County, Kentucky, on April 2, 1877. During his 84 years, nearly one million souls received Christ under his hard-hitting preaching. He fought hard for Christ against the Devil. He opposed modernistic theology, biological evolution, religious formalism, and liquor, while standing firmly for God, morality, and America.

As an evangelist he worked with local churches and became an intimate of such Fundamentalist leaders as Lee Scarborough, J. Frank Norris, W.B. Riley, A.C. Gaebelein, C.I. Scofield, and Gypsy Smith. In 1935 Bob Jones College, then in Cleveland, Tennessee, conferred upon Ham the honorary doctor of divinity degree, and the following year he was elected president of the Interdenominational Association of Christian Evangelists as they met in Winona Lake, Indiana.

Mordecai Ham had a rich spiritual heritage. He was born into a godly family that included four sisters and a brother. His grandfather, Mordecai, after whom the lad was named, was saved and baptized at age 22 and ordained to the gospel ministry five years later. The elder Mordecai sometimes pastored as many as six Kentucky congregations at one time. He concurrently served

three churches for more than 40 years, and another for over 50 years.

Thus, the spiritual heritage was passed on to young Mordecai's father, Tobias. Tobias was saved as a teenager and was ordained to the ministry the year before his son's birth. Tobias started five churches out of the 14 he pastored, baptized 1,500 souls, and performed 800 weddings. During his childhood years,

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**"My call to the ministry was a continuous and irresistible urge."**

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Mordecai learned two things—hard work and spiritual sensitivity. He later noted that his father "believed in the dignity of work, and he didn't believe in labor-saving devices." Every evening in the Ham home was a spiritual revival.

Mordecai felt called to preach at age 9 and was a Sunday school superintendent by age 16. After attending Ogden College in Bowling Green, where he also studied law, Mordecai took a salesman's job with a grocery firm because he was too young to take the bar exam. Ham recalled, "My call to the ministry was a continuous and irresistible urge. I fought it when I started out as a salesman, because my God had not completely whipped me, and I did not want to be a preacher until I had first made a fortune."

Ham did not want to be a lay preacher-farmer as his father was forced to be for financial reasons. God used the

prayers of his mother and the passing of his preacher grandfather in 1899 to stir his earlier call to serve the Lord. In July of 1900 Mordecai married Bessie Simmons and six months later quit the business world to enter the ministry.

For eight months he did nothing but seclude himself for the study of God's Word and two dozen other books, including several by J.R. Graves. Ham's first chance to preach was thrust upon him rather suddenly and unexpectedly. He was attending a district association meeting held in one of the churches his grandfather formerly pastored, when it was announced that young Ham would preach the next message. He later testified, "Evidently the Holy Spirit took charge and overcame my lack of preparation, because when I finished, the congregation was praising God."

From that point, without any formal organization or sponsorship, Mordecai was invited to meetings all around Kentucky. His hallmarks were straight biblical preaching and undaunted efforts to win lost souls to Christ.

In one of Ham's first meetings he went after the worst infidel of the area. He found him hiding and trembling in a cornfield. When he was discovered, the infidel asked what the evangelist was going to do. "Ask God to kill you," was Ham's reply. The man protested, but Ham continued, "Why not? You say that you don't believe there is a God; so my prayer shouldn't trouble you." At that point the infidel begged Ham not to pray that prayer. "All right," Ham said, "I shall pray for God to save you." The man of God led the infidel to Christ right there in the field. Before the meetings had concluded, Ham had baptized his new convert and everyone in the man's family as well.

Ham's first meetings lasted four weeks in September and October 1900. By Christmas over 300 had been saved through his efforts and he had received offerings totalling almost \$200. His usefulness for God increased, and his ministry was extended during the next five years throughout a large section of Kentucky. The evangelist also held meetings in Tennessee, Ohio, and Texas. Several hundred received Christ during his campaigns and most were baptized and joined the local churches in the area.

Customarily, Ham worked with the local churches wherever he visited. He

would first preach for many days and nights to believers to get their hearts right with God. The Christians would then begin to affect the entire town for God, resulting in hundreds of public decisions.

During his first half-decade in the ministry, things went quite well for the young evangelist. In 1904 the *Western Kentucky Herald* commented of him: "Beside being a preacher with rare gifts, he is a singer of marvelous power. . . . But the greatest thing about him is he is a soulwinner. We have been with quite a number of pastors and evangelists, but, save D.L. Moody, Bro. Ham is the most successful soulwinner we have ever met. . . . He is a man of prayer." Bessie Ham often accompanied Mordecai in his meetings since no children required her attention at home.

In October of 1905 the twosome went to Beaumont, Texas, for a meeting where more than 300 were saved and added to the local churches of that city. During the meeting, Mrs. Ham suddenly contracted cerebral meningitis and died just three weeks before Christmas. Mordecai was stricken with a tremendous grief and lost nearly 50 pounds during his ordeal. Deprived of his life's companion he sought consolation in the Lord. In January 1906 he went by ship on a

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**James A. Borland** is Professor of Biblical Studies at Liberty Baptist College and Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, and serves as

interim pastor of Grace Bible Church in Madison Heights. He holds a Th.D. from Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana.

pilgrimage to the lands of the Bible. In his struggle, Mordecai had decided to remain unmarried and to serve the Lord as the apostle Paul had.

However, other plans developed. While holding a meeting in Eminence, Kentucky, in the late summer of 1907, Ham stayed with a leading dentist of the community who was also a deacon at the

local church. He fell in love with the dentist's 14-year-old daughter and they were married the following June. Mordecai was 31. Annie Laurie Ham was a perfect helpmeet for Mordecai, and they lived to celebrate beyond their 50th wedding anniversary. Ham declared that Annie Laurie was "the greatest blessing" God ever gave him. Between 1912 and 1924 God blessed their home with three lovely daughters.

As Ham's meetings grew in size, he could no longer meet in most church auditoriums. Instead, his practice was to erect a large wooden tabernacle to seat

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about 5,000 people. Sometimes a tent was used. He often spoke five or six times each day, including a large noon meeting and gatherings in area factories. Extension services were held in local churches to aid their soulwinning efforts. Church rallies were held to receive the new members into local fellowships.

In 1911 Ham led revivals in Texas, including meetings at First Baptist of Fort Worth. Pastor J. Frank Norris offered him the opportunity to share his pastorate there, with each spending 50 percent of his time in evangelism. Ham refused the offer. In 1912 in Waco, Texas, Mordecai met and secured the services of an associate, W.J. Ramsey, a good songleader. They were considered a great team as they served together for the next third of a century.

The burning issue in America in the early 1900s was the prohibition of alcoholic beverages. In city after city where Ham visited, citizens voted to outlaw liquor. In fact, from 1907 to 1915 no less than nine Southern states voted

to go dry—largely as a result of the Ham revivals. The Prohibition Amendment was finally adopted in January 1920. After that, many sought its repeal. The Presidential elections of 1924, 1928, and 1932 were dominated by this issue. The Democrats were against prohibition. As a result, Ham campaigned vigorously for Hoover and against Al Smith in 1928. Smith was a Catholic, and some of his followers disliked Ham so much that they dubbed Mordecai Ham, J. Frank Norris, and two others the "Four Horsemen of the Devil."

Earlier in Texas, the governor was being impeached. Ham advertised that he would speak on "Governor in the Middle of a Fix," since he was in San Antonio. The governor sent four well-paid stenographers to copy down the message. True to his word—but to the governor's dismay—Mordecai preached on the troubles of Pontius Pilate.

Mordecai Ham's only interlude from regular revival and evangelistic meetings came between 1927 and 1929, when he pastored the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City. During the previous year a campaign in that city had netted nearly 1,000 church additions. The church boasted a 5,000-seat tabernacle, and it was not unusual to have 2,000 in prayer meeting. However, Mordecai's love for evangelism soon drew him back into the field.

As Ham reentered evangelism, liquor was still a hot topic until the Prohibition Amendment was repealed in 1933. Ham used to say that "Liquor is a lecher that feeds on communities which tolerate it." He was violently opposed by the liquor forces. Several times he was physically accosted and his family was under constant threat. Frequently police had to protect him from angry drunken mobs, but he resolutely stood for righteousness.

The 1920s and 1930s were also times when atheists, evolutionists, and modernistic theologians made broadside attacks upon Fundamentalism's men and their message. Ham was not immune from such, but met each challenge head on. He loved a fight, but sought God's help in every battle. Mordecai was slandered, ridiculed, made the brunt of jokes and cartoons, but continued to win the lost everywhere he went. One pastor in Burlington, North Carolina, wrote, "Ham is as scriptural as Moody, as logical as Torrey, as winsomely persuasive as

Gypsy Smith, Sr., and as graciously tender as [J. Wilbur] Chapman."

In November of 1934 during Ham's crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina, a 16-year-old youth was saved. His name—Billy Graham. Mordecai F. Ham was also

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**"The greatest thing about him is he is a soulwinner."**

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instrumental in seeing that literally hundreds of young men received Bible training after being called to the ministry. He often took offerings to train young ministers. Mordecai Ham had a profound effect on his generation.

Between his pastorate and 1941 he held 61 extended meetings in 15 states and saw 168,550 souls won and backslidden reclaimed for Christ. After ending the tent and tabernacle campaigns in 1941, Mordecai and Annie Laurie devoted their efforts to an extensive radio outreach and short speaking engagements.

Mordecai Ham continued his ministry until the Lord called him home in December 1961. As a giant Fundamentalist leader and a true champion for Christ, Mordecai Ham certainly was a thorn in the Devil's side.

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**Why**

*Let us alone; what hast thou with thee, thou Jew of Nazareth?" (Mark 1:23)*

One of the tounding t human mi contemplate is why women will not eagerly accept salvation so fully pro them and so freely c them. Our Saviour gives the answer perplexity. In John 3 read: "For God sent Son into the world to condemn the world; but the world through him saved. He that believeth in him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he believed in the name of the only begotten Son. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For he that doeth truth, the light shall manifest, but he that doeth falsehood, the darkness shall manifest. The light is objected to his sleeping conscience, he has been lulled asleep. Many people remain in darkness, and they cannot want to escape the prison, and they cannot be turned on them. In Texas, a millwright visited the 250 men he had put out in the pine woods, and he began lighting into them, and things were going on, and grace. The men pronounced that they