



Esther - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Haman the Agagite was promoted to a position of prominence by the king, which meant that the people should bow before him as he passed but Mordecai would not. This infuriated Haman and when he found out that Mordecai was a Jew, rather than deal with him personally he sought permission from the king to have all the Jews killed, stating that they were the king's enemies. A date was set by lot and edicts written by Haman, sealed with the king's ring, were sent throughout the land giving instruction to annihilate the Jews throughout the Persian Empire.

II Esther 3:1-9:17 - Main Action

This is the heart of the story, where the main events take place. A plot to destroy the Jews (3:1-15) is foiled by a series of courageous actions by Esther and Mordecai (4:1-8:17), culminating in complete victory for the Jews (9:1-17).

II.a Esther 3:1-15 - Haman Undertakes to Destroy the Jews

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him.

Esther 3:1

King Ahasuerus promoted Haman. Haman was an ungodly man and one who was about to unleash potential genocide on God's people and yet God allowed this man to be placed in a position of power.

Accounts such as this often raise the age old question of, “Why does God allow suffering on earth, especially among his own chosen people?” In dealing with the problem of evil in the world, many problems like this one are encountered. Could God have prevented the Holocaust? Yes, he could have. He could also have prevented Stalin’s massacres in the USSR, the Spanish Inquisition’s torture of dissidents, and Nero’s reign of terror. In each case, God allowed evil men to exercise a certain amount of power for a short period of time. Ultimately, no one knows the reasons for what God allows. His ways and thoughts are infinitely higher than human understanding: *<<For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts>>* (Isaiah 55:8-9). His sovereign plan takes in the whole scope of history - past, present, and future, encompassing every possible course of action, every cause and effect, every potentiality, and every contingency. There is no way people could possibly fathom the intricacies of his design. By faith, believers trust that his plan is the best plan possible for restoring fallen humanity and a cursed world to righteousness and blessing. But what can be understood is that God’s permission is not the same as his approval. God allowed Adam to eat of the forbidden tree, but he did not approve of the action. In the same way, God’s allowing the Holocaust in no way suggests his approval of it. God is grieved by the sinfulness of humans and the hardness of their hearts: *<<And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart>>* (Genesis 6:6), and: *<<He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored>>* (Mark 3:5). Ultimately, it is the choices of humans that are the real causes of suffering, not God.

Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite shows that he was a descendant of Agag, who was the king of the Amalekites, the ancient enemies of Israel; refer to Exodus 17:8-16. Agag was defeated by King Saul and killed by the prophet Samuel; refer to 1 Samuel 15:1-33. The conflict between Haman and Mordecai mirrors the earlier conflict between their ancestors, Saul and Agag; refer also to the comment made on Esther 2:5.

² 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.

³ Then the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate said to Mordecai, ‘Why do you disobey the king’s command?’ ⁴ When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai’s words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew.

Esther 3:2-4

All the king's servants bowed down and paid homage. According to Herodotus, bowing to superiors was a normal part of Persian court etiquette rather than an act of worship. This cultural practice of showing respect is reflected in: <<*Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land*>> (Genesis 23:7), <<*Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent*>> (Exodus 18:7), <<*Then the king said to Ziba, 'All that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours.'* Ziba said, 'I do obeisance; let me find favour in your sight, my lord the king'>> (2 Samuel 16:4), and: <<*Bathsheba bowed and did obeisance to the king, and the king said, 'What do you wish?'*>> (1 Kings 1:16).

But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance because he was a Jew. The text does not give any more reason for Mordecai's refusal to bow, but given Haman's ancestry and animosity to the Jews, Mordecai apparently felt he could not bow to him without compromising his identity as a Jew. It is also possible that Haman was claiming some kind of divine status and Mordecai refused to give him that kind of honour.

There does not seem to be a Biblical command against bowing or paying homage to a political leader as a sign of respect as noted above. It was probably different for three young Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in Babylon for they may have seen bowing down the golden image as a form of idol worship; refer to Daniel Chapter 3.

Why do you disobey the king's command? There is no record of a specific command from King Ahasuerus that all had to bow before Haman. Perhaps the command was implied in the promotion he had received.

When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman. Apparently, Haman did not at first notice Haman's stubborn resistance. It had to be pointed out to him by his aides.

For he had told them that he was a Jew. Mordecai did the very thing he had told Esther not to do in her situation in Esther 2:10 and 2:20.

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated. ⁶ But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Esther 3:5-6

Haman was infuriated. Haman was an extremely proud and insecure man; he could only consider himself a success if everyone else thought he was a success. He clearly craved human praise, a fault Jesus found in the Jewish leaders of his day: <<You like to receive praise from one another, but you do not try to win praise from the one who alone is God; how, then, can you believe me?>> (John 5:44 GNT).

Haman thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Mordecai's refusal to bow gave Haman the opportunity to reveal his hatred of the Jews by setting out to destroy them all. The problem with Haman exposed his basic hatred for all Jewish people. He was clearly anti-Semitic and here was a legitimate reason in his own eyes to do something about them.

The whole kingdom of Ahasuerus included Jerusalem and the surrounding area with its mainly Jewish population. Almost the entire Jewish race still lived within what had been the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, and was then part of the Persian Empire. Had they all been killed then it seems likely none would have survived and God would never have allowed that: <<*If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah*>> (Isaiah 1:9), and: <<*So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace*>> (Romans 11:5).

⁷ In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur – which means ‘the lot’ – before Haman for the day and for the month, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

Esther 3:7

Nisan is the first month of the Jewish religious calendar, which began in spring with the Passover in accordance with Exodus 12:1-2. While the Jews prepared to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt, Haman plotted their destruction.

In the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus. This was around 474 BC or five years after Esther had become queen.

Pur is the Hebrew word for lot, from which the term *purim* or lots is derived: <<*Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur*>> (Esther 9:26a). Casting lots was a traditional way of seeking divine guidance: <<*You shall describe the land in seven divisions and bring the description here to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the Lord our God*>> (Joshua 18:6), and: <<*Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they*>>

cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles>> (Acts 1:24-26) or, as here, finding the most opportune time to do something.

The lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. Since this took place in the first month, the casting of the lot determined that the Jews would not be attacked and massacred for at least 11 months. This proves the truth of: <<*The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone*>> (Proverbs 16:33). The lot is cast to chance, but its every decision is from the Lord. The long delay between the first month and the month of massacre against the Jewish people was ordained by God, allowing time for the following story to come to fruition.

⁸ Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.'

Esther 3:8

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus. Haman's charge was the most dangerous possible; it was a half-truth. Yes, the Jews were a certain people scattered and separated; and yes they had their own laws. However, their own laws, to this point, did not prevent them from keeping the king's laws as loyal subjects. In fact, Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman was not based on the law of God but on the principle of personal integrity. It seems that Haman was almost completely unfamiliar with this principle.

They do not keep the king's laws is an allusion to Mordecai's refusal to bow (v.2), with the false implication that all Jews behave similarly.

It is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them is an oblique reference to their disobedience leading to them not paying their taxes; a lie but a clever tactic by Haman. The remission of taxes in Esther 2:18 and the unsuccessful war with Greece (refer to the comment made on Esther 1:2-3) may have left the royal treasury low on funds.

⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries.'

Esther 3:9

If it pleases the king. Haman makes it seem that this should be something that was beneficial to the king whereas it was something that would have been pleasing to Haman due to his personal hatred of the Jews. Haman suggested organising the mass murder of the Jewish people. Haman also neglected to tell King Ahasuerus how many of these 'certain people' (v.8) there were in his kingdom; Ahasuerus probably considered this a relatively small threat.

Let a decree be issued for their destruction. Haman made no bones about it - he wanted the Jewish race annihilated. Even though Hitler and Himmler wanted a similar outcome for the Jews of Europe, even they were not this bold in the beginning.

The persecution of the Jews began systematically almost as soon as Hitler came to power. The Nazis established many new anti-Jewish laws. These were introduced slowly at first, so that the civilian population would not realise the extent of the Nazi party's anti-Semitism. It is uncertain whether Hitler planned to murder all Jews when he first came to power. Originally it seems he intended to force them out of Germany but this eventually led to a plan to exterminate the Jews.

Haman offers to pay ten thousand talents of silver, a huge amount in the order of 12 million ounces at 34 kg per talent. At 2016 prices this would be in excess of £170 million or \$212 million US, although silver may not have fetched such a high price in those days as it was a more common commodity as it had been in Solomon's day in Israel: <<*The king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah*>> (2 Chronicles 1:15). This was essentially the promise of a bribe. This money would not come from Haman's own pocket; it would be obtained from the property of slaughtered Jews.

¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

Esther 3:10

The king's signet ring was used to seal official documents. Haman is empowered to act with royal authority: <<*Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck*>> (Genesis 41:42), and: <<*On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts*>> (Haggai 2:23).

¹¹ The king said to Haman, ‘The money is given to you, and the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you.’

Esther 3:11

The money is given to you. Ahasuerus authorises Haman to use as much of the ten thousand talents of silver as he needs to implement his plan.

And the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you. Again, King Ahasuerus probably had no idea what he agreed to; he probably believed that he merely agreed to the execution of a handful of dangerous revolutionaries in his kingdom, not an entire race of mainly loyal people.

¹² Then the king’s secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king’s satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king’s ring.

Esther 3:12

The first month presumably of the following, i.e. 13th year of Ahasuerus’ reign (v.7).

To every province in its own script and every people in its own language. The Persian Empire was vast with its population speaking multiple dialects and languages. In order to ensure there was no misunderstanding of the king’s decrees they were always translated into the local language before being sent out. Official documents were often just written in Aramaic: <<***And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia; the letter was written in Aramaic and translated***>> (Ezra 4:7), the diplomatic language of the times, much like English is in the 21st Century.

¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Esther 3:13

To annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day. With this, an empire-wide death sentence on the Jews was announced by the king. This

was like other attacks against the Jewish people in history except that it was announced well in advance.

The twelfth month. Because of the extent of the empire, it took almost 12 months to notify and prepare all of those responsible for putting the edict into effect.

¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day.

Esther 3:14

A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. This was not just a case of sending in the army or special murder squads such as those organised by the SS in Europe during World War II. This massacre was going to be undertaken by the local population not unlike the Palestine riots of 1929 but on a much wider and more destructive scale. Whole communities were due to be massacred by their own neighbours.

¹⁵ The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Esther 3:15

The king and Haman sat down to drink. When the king sat down to drink, he thought he had done well, but he did not really understand what he had done. Haman also sat down to drink, and thought he had done well; and he knew exactly what he intended to do.

But the city of Susa was thrown into confusion is reassuring evidence that many of Susa's citizens did not share Haman's intense hatred of the Jews. The citizens of the empire knew Jewish people who lived among them and they knew that they were good citizens who caused no trouble. Therefore, they were confused that such a decree came forth, declaring that these Jews were dangerous enemies. Again, all this came to pass because of the insecurity and wounded pride of one wicked man - Haman.