

LESSON 21

Esther 3:2-4

2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. 3 Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In the first chapter, we saw an example of respect commanded and respect refused, and here we see a second such example.

Why did Mordecai refuse to honor Haman?

In the Greek version of Esther, Mordecai explains that he refused to bow down to Haman because he would not give the glory due to God to any man.

But, it is known from other sources that many Jews did bow to pagan officials of the Persian court because it was not seen as a religious act but rather one of court protocol. Herodotus confirms that Persians regularly bowed before high-ranking officials. Mordecai, along with everyone else, must have honored the king that way. No one in Persia who refused to bow down when Xerxes walked by would keep his head for very long!

“The Greek historians report that Persians greeted social equals with a kiss on the mouth, those of slightly higher status with a kiss on the cheek, and those of much higher status with complete prostration.”

Was Mordecai upset that Haman had been honored instead of himself after he was the one who saved the king's life?

History tells us that those honored by the king sometimes received promotions, tax exemptions, and an exemption from bowing to other nobles. Was Mordecai taking this honor upon himself as his due?

History tells us that the honor bestowed upon Haman back in verse 1 meant that he became the top

official in the court, the prime minister. Such a person was also called the “king’s eye.” If Haman functioned in the latter category then he was required to report potential threats to the king. Why didn’t Mordecai get this position after he, rather than Haman, had uncovered the plot against the king?

Did Mordecai believe he deserved the honor that Haman had received? Later, he will be seen as the natural successor to that honor after Haman dies.

Or perhaps Mordecai could see what sort of person Haman was, and he saw that Haman might be yet another threat to the king, just like the one that Mordecai had earlier uncovered. Maybe Mordecai was protecting Xerxes by not honoring Haman.

I think the correct answer is most likely the same one supported by Jewish tradition, which says that no self-respecting Benjaminite would ever show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. (Recall that Haman was an Agagite.) The most likely reason is the ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites. And this also explains why the text specifically points out Haman’s ancestry as well as Mordecai’s ancestry, and it also explains Haman’s reaction to the slight – he will seek to kill all **Jews**.

Whatever caused Mordecai to refuse, the text does not tell us and it was not obvious to his colleagues in the king’s gate, who repeatedly asked him to explain his actions. And, of course, as Persians they would not have been expected to know anything about the ancient controversy between the Amalekites and the Jews.

The final phrase in verse 4, “he had told them that he was a Jew,” supports the idea that Mordecai’s refusal was based either on the animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites or on his fidelity to the Jewish law. Whatever the reason for Mordecai’s refusal to obey the king’s command, we know that it had something to do with Mordecai being a Jew.

Finally, in verse 4 Mordecai’s colleagues go and tell Haman what was going on.

Would Haman have found out otherwise? Perhaps not. Perhaps Mordecai was standing in the background and not making an open show of his refusal to bow down. Perhaps Haman would never have noticed had it not been pointed out to him. He does see Mordecai later in verse 5, but would he have done so had it not been brought to his attention?

Are those three little words in verse 4 – “they told Haman” – perhaps the three most important words in these events? Aren’t they the words that incited the conflict that nearly led to the destruction of

God's people?

What does the Bible say? Blessed are the troublemakers? No – blessed are the peacemakers. God has something to say to those who stir up trouble – God hates it.

Proverbs 6:16-19 – “These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: 17 A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, 18 An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, 19 A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”

We should keep that list in mind as we read Esther. We will see each of those traits in the life of Haman.

Will we see some of those traits in any of the other people in this book?

For example, is Mordecai himself completely in the clear on this? I would suggest no if the only reason Mordecai refused to obey the king's command was because of something that had happened centuries earlier between Saul and Agag.

We see that same kind of hatred today in the Middle East, and we are still suffering from the problems it causes. If Mordecai refused to bow down because of his fidelity to the law, then that was the right decision – but as we have discussed, that is not the most likely reason why he refused to bow down. We are told his tribe and Haman's nationality for a reason.

If, as it seems is much more likely, Mordecai refused to honor Haman simply because Haman was an Agagite, then that was most likely wrong.

Yes, Haman was evil, but so was Nero, and 1 Peter 2:17 commanded that he be honored. Why do we obey civil authorities when their commands do not conflict with God's law? Because in such cases they are acting as a minister of God. (Romans 13:1-7) Had Mordecai given Haman the honor he was due (and the honor King Xerxes was due, because it was the king's command that Mordecai was disobeying), then much of the trouble that followed might have been avoided. (I say “might” because Haman may have been looking for any excuse to attack God's people. Mordecai was not the only person here with racial hatred.)

But, with all of that said, perhaps Mordecai believed he was following the Law in refusing to honor Haman.

Deuteronomy 25:19 – “Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.”

So, as usual, we don’t really know whether Mordecai was acting from a good motive or a bad motive. All we know is what he did, or in this case failed to do.

At the end of verse 4, we see that Mordecai had told the other servants of the king that he was a Jew. Identification with God’s people almost always creates hardship. Mordecai so identified himself here. Esther had not yet done so, but her opportunity was coming.

Esther 3:5-6

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.

Haman’s pride and hunger for power cause him to become filled with fury at Mordecai’s refusal to honor him.

Notice the difference here in how Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are presented by the text. We are left to wonder at Mordecai’s reasons for refusing to bow down, and we are left to wonder about Esther’s feelings in Chapter 2. But we have no doubt about how Haman feels – he is filled with fury, and we are told what Haman was thinking in verse 6. Haman is allowed no mysteries in this book!

Here is how one commentary describes Haman:

“Haman is devoured by his obsession with control. Such an obsession is a single, ineradicable notion that dominates the thoughts and feelings in spite of one’s own will. Mordecai’s refusal to show fear, indeed his very presence in the King’s Gate, proves to Haman that, whatever his might, he lacks control: he cannot govern the Jew’s emotions; he cannot even prevent his current presence in the place of power. But ironically and appropriately, Haman’s obsession with control in effect imposes Mordecai’s presence upon all of his thoughts and gives Mordecai power over

his mind, robbing him of all pleasure he might derive from the honor, wealth, and power in which he glories. Haman makes himself miserable.”

Rather than attack Mordecai alone (which may further support the notion that Mordecai was an official of some sort), Haman decides to wipe out Mordecai’s entire race.

Whatever we say about Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai’s Jewishness was known, while Esther’s was not. That also explains why Esther and Mordecai spoke using intermediaries. Mordecai’s relation to Esther must have still been a secret because otherwise Haman would have known that Queen Esther herself was a Jew.

That Esther’s Jewish ancestry was not known may tell us something about how she had been living. As one commentator noted:

“For the masquerade to last that long, Esther must have done more than eat, dress, and live like a Persian. She must have worshiped like one!”

And before we become too judgmental, perhaps we should examine our own lives. Are we hiding our true identity from the world while we eat, dress, live, and worship like the Persians who surround us? Are we hiding our own identity from the world? Do our friends think we are Persians just like they are?

Incredibly, some commentators argue that Haman’s attempted genocide is so improbable that the story must be fictitious.

It is because of arguments like that one that professors get the reputation for living in isolated ivory towers unaware of what is going on around them! How can anyone living in today’s world argue that an attempted genocide of the Jews (or of anyone for that matter) is too improbable to be true?

Even in Haman’s day it was not incredible. When Smerdis the imposter (who had been placed on the throne by the Magi priests) was killed, every Persian in the capital took up weapons and killed every Magus they could find. For years afterward, this slaughter was an annual holiday at which the Persians would hold massive feasts to celebrate the day an immigrant community was nearly wiped out.

We should pause for a moment to say a few words about anti-Semitism, of which this attempted genocide is but one of many examples extending up until the present time.

The sad fact is that anti-Semitism has often been linked with Christianity, and that is something we must never condone. Here is a quote about the Jews by a famous German – can you guess who said it?

“First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ... Third, I advise that all their prayer books ... be taken from them. ... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. ... Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.”

Which German said that? Was it Hitler? Are those statements from the Nuremberg Laws? No. That quote is from Martin Luther.

Samuel Sandmel has written that “the pogroms [organized massacres] in Eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.” Very sad!

Certainly, we know what our attitude should be toward the Jewish race or any other race. As far as the church is concerned, there are only two groups of people in the world – those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ, and that division crosses all racial boundaries.

Colossians 3:11 - “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

I have mentioned that Esther is a very modern book, and one reason that is true is that Esther is a textbook on racial hatred and all of the problems that such hatred can create. At the heart of these events is the racial hatred between Haman and Mordecai – and that hatred, it seems, ran in both directions.

Haman’s reaction of killing all the Jews after being insulted by one Jew was certainly excessive, but can we say it is surprising? Some say (incorrectly) that it is so surprising that it is unlikely to have been true. And yet we may have witnessed a similar reaction in our own recent history. Some have argued that Adolf Hitler’s hatred of the Jews was caused partly by his rejection by a Jewish director when he had applied to art school in Vienna.

Also, we should recognize that there is a kind of twisted symmetry in Haman’s plan: Israel had been commanded to utterly exterminate the Amalekites, and now an Amalekite would attempt to

exterminate Israel.

And there is also an interesting symmetry with what we saw in Chapter 1. The king was insulted by one woman, and so he issued a decree that applied to all women. Here, Haman was insulted by one Jew, and so he seeks to kill all Jews by a decree. Again, we see our theme of excess.

Esther 3:7-11

7 In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

We are now in the 12th year of the king's reign, which means that Esther has been queen for five years.

This was more than a century after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, more than 60 years after the first return to Jerusalem, and less than 20 years until Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

Verse 7 is an important verse. First, it explains the basis for the Feast of Purim that will be established in this book. And second, it drives home our theme of who is really in charge here, and also our theme of conflicting world views. Are the events in this book determined by the roll of dice or by something or someone else - perhaps even by someone not mentioned anywhere in the book?

In verse 7, we see the casting of something called "Pur" or plural "Purim." What is that? The author explains what it is by using the Hebrew word "goral" (translated "lot" in the KJV) in verse 7 to explain the foreign word "Pur."

In Psalm 16:5, David praised God because "you have assigned me my portion and my cup, you have

made my lot [goral] secure.” David praised God because it was God (rather than chance or luck) who had secured David’s destiny.

As for who cast the Pur, the phrase “before Haman” or “in Haman’s presence” suggests it was not Haman himself. It was likely cast by an astrologer or a magician.

Archaeologists have unearthed purim and found them to be clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots just like our modern dice. The difference is that they were not used for gambling but rather were used for divination. Both Herodotus and Xenophon wrote about the Persian custom of casting lots.

This is not the only place we see the use of lots in the Bible.

- Lots were cast to determine which goat would be slaughtered and which would be driven away on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8).
- Lots were used to divide up the promised land among the tribes (Joshua 18:6-10).
- Lots were used to publicly verify the choice of Saul as king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:20-21).
- Lots were used to determine guilty parties (Joshua 7:14-18; 1 Samuel 14:42).
- Lots were used to assign responsibilities for the singers in the temple (1 Chronicles 25:8).
- In the New Testament, lots were used to determine which of the disciples would replace Judas Iscariot among the apostles (Acts 1:24-26).

Perhaps in some of those cases lots were being used simply like flipping a coin - to quickly and fairly make a decision. But I think that in some of these cases the lots were likely being used like the Urim and Thummim we discussed earlier - as a miraculous way to let God tell the people which path to take.

Acts 1:24,26 - And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen ... And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Of course, here it is Haman casting the lots rather than the people of God, but does that mean God is

not involved?

What question was Haman trying to answer by casting this lot? The text does not tell us but most commentators agree that Haman was trying to determine the best time to carry out his plan to destroy the Jews. Another related possibility is that Haman was trying to figure out the best time to approach the king with his petition.

The phrase “from day to day, and from month to month” in verse 7 does not mean that the lots were cast every day throughout the year. Instead, it means that the lot was cast twice on one day - first to determine the proper day of the month, and then to determine the proper month of the year.

In verse 8, Haman uses a mixture of truth, error, and exaggeration to convince the king to follow his plan.

Haman tells the king that all the Jews disobey all the laws, even though only one Jew had disobeyed only one law. (We see our theme of excess there.)

Haman also says that the Jews are scattered throughout all the provinces, which was likely also an exaggeration, although the Jews do seem have to been fairly widespread. We know that some were in Judah at this time.

The most important thing about verse 8 is what we do not find in verse 8. As one commentator explains:

“Haman never explains that a personal feud with Mordecai is at the root of his plan. It is in Haman’s best interest to convince Xerxes that it is in the king’s best interest to destroy the Jews. How ironic that he enlists the king’s support to annihilate an ethnic group that includes a man who saved the king’s life and a woman who shares the king’s bed!”

Haman’s charges against the Jews were based on the fact that they were different – they had different laws and different customs.

Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will be different – in Esther’s day or in our own. But we must notice that Esther, it would seem, had not been very different herself because her ancestry appears to have remained completely hidden for now going on 5 years.

(And, again, before I get too judgmental, I should ask myself whether I have known anyone for that

long or longer who still does not know that I am a Christian? Have I been keeping my own secrets?)

Haman knew about something in verse 9 that would quickly sway the king to his side – money! Xerxes desperately needed to replenish his treasury after the disastrous war with Greece. Haman presumably planned to obtain this massive amount of money by plundering the property of the Jews he would kill. (And I’m sure we don’t need a reminder here of how history often repeats itself!) Haman’s plan also tells us that, while the Jews may have been politically insignificant at this time, they apparently had some economic and financial prominence, and that fact may have led to some of Haman’s resentment.

10,000 talents would have been about two thirds of the entire empire’s income according to Herodotus, leading some to believe that Haman was exaggerating, perhaps intentionally to better sway the king. The booty that Alexander the Great brought to the treasury at Susa was 49,000 talents of gold and silver, which would be at least five times the value of Haman’s offer.

By giving Haman the signet ring in verse 10, the king was giving Haman unlimited authority to do whatever he wanted regarding this issue. Neither the King nor Haman appears to have had any idea that Queen Esther herself was a member of this troublesome group.

Notice that Haman here never once mentions the Jewish race by name in his argument before the king but instead refers to them only as a “certain people.”

Perhaps that was because Xerxes’ two predecessors, Cyrus and Darius, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews.

In any event, you would think the king would ask – but he does not.

Some surmise that Xerxes may have been looking for a scapegoat to blame for his loss in Greece, and if so it would not be the last time God’s people found themselves in that position. Nero later used the church as a scapegoat for the devastating fire that many believed he himself started. And as times turn bad today, we might wonder if history might not repeat itself. Are Christians to blame for all the troubles we face today - some are already saying so!

And in verse 11, Haman hears what must have been music to his ears – “the silver is given to thee.”

Haman gets the financing he needs for his plan, although the king certainly expected his promised 10,000 talents in return.

Later in 7:4, Esther will confirm that her people had been sold. It would not be the last time that God's people would be sold. Those 30 pieces of silver have changed hands many times.

The king's permission in verse 11 to Haman that he "do with them as it seems good to you," is paralleled by a similar phrase later in 9:5 that the Jews "did what they would unto those that hated them," but by that time the tables will have been turned!

One commentary has this to say about verse 11:

"More than one commentator has rightly expressed great doubt that a Persian king would so blithely hand over an entire nation within his empire for destruction."

Really? Has there been any modern day example of a ruler blithely handing over an entire nation within his empire for destruction? Can we think of anyone who did such a thing to the Jews in our own recent history? Anyone come to mind? Can we perhaps think of an example where the Jews had little political power but great economic power? Can we think of an example where their goods were plundered by the one who was devoted to their destruction? Or is all of that just too bizarre to be true as that commentator believes?

#ezra-esther