

## V. Haman's Promotion and Petition (3:1-15)

As the writer used the episode of Ahasuerus' extended celebration as the foundation for introducing Mordecai and Esther and her ascension to the throne, so the events of chapter two serve as the springboard for Haman's introduction into the narrative – "*After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman...*" The author's timing in this regard was purposeful: Mordecai's and Esther's place in relation to Ahasuerus needed to be established before Haman is introduced because of how these individuals play against one another in the telling of the story.

### A. The Introduction of Haman (3:1)

In notable contrast with the other two main characters, Haman enters the narrative abruptly. The writer says nothing about his life or his background in Ahasuerus' service, and only identifies him as an *Agagite*. To a Jewish reader, this description would have linked Haman with Agag – a name, or possibly a title, ascribed in the Old Testament to two kings of the Amalekites (cf. Numbers 24:7; 1 Samuel 15:8). The author certainly understood that this would be the case, and his intention in establishing this connection becomes evident in the light of biblical history.

1. First of all, Haman's association with Agag links him to the Amalekites. Amalek was a grandson of Esau, and he went on to become one of the princes of Edom (ref. Genesis 36:10-16). As Esau represents the principle of opposition to God's covenant and His covenant seed, so the Amalekite nation descended from him epitomizes the enemies of Israel, and therefore the enemies of Israel's God. The Amalekites fought against Israel during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) and resisted their possession of the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:25-31; Judges 3:1-14, 6:1-6).
2. Further insight is provided by the events recounted in 1 Samuel 15:1ff. In that context Agag, the king of the Amalekites, represents the point of decision with respect to obedience to God. After defeating the Amalekites in battle (14:47-48), Yahweh commanded Saul to go out against them again and this time utterly destroy them and everything belonging to them (cf. 15:2-3 with Exodus 17:8-16). But Saul decided to hold back the choicest booty and spare the Amalekite king so that he could parade him as his trophy of conquest before the sons of Israel. This act of disobedience, together with Saul's previous violation of the priesthood (13:5-14), cost him the kingdom of Israel. Yahweh's anointed king had volitionally disobeyed His command, and it was Samuel, the Lord's prophet and judge, who had to step up and carry out His will against Amalek.

The Old Testament scriptures present the house of Amalek as the counterpart of the house of Israel. As the latter is the national extension of *Jacob* (Israel), so the former is the extension of *Esau*. And so, by linking Haman with Agag and the Amalekite nation, the writer conveys to his readers that there will be covenantal implications to Haman's role in the story. *Before anything else is known about Haman or he has made any contribution to the narrative, the reader – whom the author assumes understands the larger story of salvation history – already knows what is coming.* He anticipates from the outset what will shortly be revealed: Haman will prove to be an avowed enemy of the covenant seed, and therefore, like Agag, Amalek, and Esau before him, a manifestation in his own generation of the seed of the serpent (ref. Genesis 3:15).

## **B. Mordecai's Conflict with Haman (3:2-5)**

1. The writer's description of Haman suggests that a threat to the covenant people lies on the horizon, and he provides the foundation for that threat in the circumstance of Haman's promotion. Again, the text gives no indication of Haman's previous status or role in Ahasuerus' administration; the author was only concerned to recount his exaltation to the place of preeminence among the king's nobles. Other than Ahasuerus himself, no one in the vast Medo-Persian kingdom was now greater than Haman. His prestige and authority were subordinate only to the king, and his newly granted status was to provide the occasion for the ensuing conflict (3:1).
2. Haman's promotion brought with it great distinction, and Ahasuerus demanded that all his subjects acknowledge it by bowing down and paying homage to Haman whenever he was in their presence. But each time Haman would pass by Mordecai he refused to fall down before him. This continued for some period of time, and though Ahasuerus' servants confronted Mordecai and demanded that he comply with the king's command, Mordecai staunchly refused (3:2-3).
3. The reason Mordecai gave for his refusal was that he was a Jew (3:4a). The writer provides no further explanation, but the implication is that Mordecai viewed this obligation of homage as constituting a form of idolatry. This is evident from the fact that no Israelite had a problem with prostrating himself before a king or ruler as a show of honor and submission (cf. 1 Samuel 24:8; 2 Samuel 1:1-2, 9:6-8, 14:4-5, 21-22; 1 Kings 1:15-16; etc.). Mordecai clearly believed that what was being demanded of him was not appropriate respect and honor, but *reverence*, and he could not give to a man what rightly belongs only to God. It isn't stated whether Haman demanded this reverence or it was embodied in Ahasuerus' command, but two considerations are helpful:
  - a. The first is that it was a common practice in ancient cultures – including Persia – for rulers to regard themselves as divine and therefore proper objects of worship. Assuming that Ahasuerus viewed himself in this way, it is unlikely that he would command reverence for his subordinate and thereby compromise his own unique status in the eyes of his subjects.
  - b. The contention that Haman chose to exalt himself to divine status and demand reverence is further supported by his personality. The author characterizes him as fiercely arrogant, a man who was calculating and ruthless in his aspirations, willing even to exploit the king himself in order to achieve his ends.
4. Having come to the conclusion that they wouldn't be able to prevail with Mordecai, and likely fearing Haman's retribution against them for failing to secure his compliance, the king's servants went to Haman to explain Mordecai's reason for refusing to bow down to him. The text suggests they were hopeful that Haman would accept Mordecai's behavior once he learned of his Jewish identity (3:4b). He would then understand that Mordecai's actions were not a matter of dishonor or disrespect, but simply deference to a religious custom peculiar to the Israelite people.

5. But their hopes were not to be realized; when Haman heard their explanation he was filled with rage (3:5). Not only did he not regard Mordecai's Jewishness as an acceptable reason for his insubordination, it added insult to injury and only inflamed his indignation. Who did this lowly Jew think he was to refuse to bow to his rightful lord – the man who was second only to Ahasuerus himself, the great king whose dominion embraced half the civilized world including the desolate and impotent nations of Israel and Judah?

**C. Haman's Response to Mordecai (3:6-15)**

1. In his fury Haman longed to kill Mordecai, but he realized he had a bigger problem: If Mordecai's behavior really was grounded in his Jewish identity, couldn't the same response be expected from all his countrymen? Furthermore, Mordecai's example would surely embolden others. The thought of Jews across the kingdom mocking and insulting him in this way was more than Haman could bear, and he determined at that moment that he wouldn't rest until he had seen the destruction of the entire Hebrew nation (3:6).
2. Haman was resolute in his commitment to annihilate the Jews, but he wasn't stupid. He realized his goal was no small feat and that it would never be achieved without the approval of the king. And so Haman sought out the diviners of the kingdom to "*cast the lot*" on his behalf in order to determine what, if any, day in the future would yield success in the execution of his plan (some English versions are misleading; the NIV and NKJV capture the meaning of the text). The lot was cast and it gave its answer: The Jews were to be destroyed on the thirteenth day of the month, eleven months hence (3:7).

The lot, or *pur*, is introduced here, and will not reappear in the narrative until the conclusion of the book where it is referred to numerous times (ref. 9:24-32). In the present context it reveals the certain doom of the Jews; in the closing summary it is used in its plural form, *purim*, in reference to the annual celebration commemorating their providential deliverance and preservation. Thus the concept of the lot is an important thematic element, forming an *inclusio* (literary bookends) that frames the entire story.

- a. From a literary standpoint, "pur" serves as a *metaphor* for divine promise as it is upheld and advanced by providence. The lot represents an entity or divining process by which a course of action is determined. The implication is that the lot has insight into future outcomes; it "knows" what lies ahead and so is able to reveal to the inquirer how he should proceed going into the future. God's promise is like the lot in that it also knows the future and its outcomes, and so provides the one who possesses it with direction and confidence as he plans his course.
- b. This metaphorical relationship provides insight into the shift from the singular *pur* at the beginning of the story to the plural *purim* at the end. The Jews' fate was sealed when Haman received the "word" of the lot. The lot enabled him to peer into the future, and he set himself to act accordingly. But as the story unfolds it will become evident that **another** lot exists. Unlike its counterpart, this "pur" tells the truth and will be vindicated by what actually occurs. Moreover, *the first lot will serve its truthful superior by providing the delay that enables the outcome.*

3. Emboldened by what the lot revealed to him, Haman went to Ahasuerus to seek his approval and authorization. His argument to the king was clever and persuasive: There existed within the kingdom a group of foreign miscreants who continued to hold fast to their own obscure laws and refused to submit to the laws of Medo-Persia. They would not comply with the king's directives and for this reason it was unwise and counterproductive to allow them to remain alive (3:8).
4. Haman was confident the king would regard criminal insubordination as sufficient ground for slaying the Jews, but he also anticipated that Ahasuerus would be concerned about the logistics and cost of carrying out such an ambitious plan. The Jews were scattered throughout the far reaches of the empire, so that identifying and killing all of them would require a great deal of coordination, manpower, and money. Haman intercepted this probable objection by offering to donate ten thousand talents of silver – much of which he hoped to gain through plunder – toward the cause. This would fully fund the enterprise with plenty left to build up the reserves of the king's treasury (3:9).
5. Hoping that his proposition would prove agreeable to Ahasuerus, Haman petitioned him not simply for authorization, but for a *decree*. His design was to secure from the king an irrevocable edict in accordance with Medo-Persian law so that any future remorse or reconsideration would be to no avail. Haman had Ahasuerus right where he wanted him, and he wasn't about to let go until he had sealed the outcome he sought.
6. Ahasuerus was persuaded by Haman's arguments and, in a gesture by which his royal authority was delegated to compose and distribute the decree, the king removed his signet ring and gave it to Haman, "*the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews*" (3:10). By that simple designation the writer communicates several critical insights that must not be missed:
  - a. First of all, it spotlights Haman's transformation. He was introduced as an Agagite, but the author now appends to that title a second appellation: "enemy of the Jews." Not long before, Haman had given little or no thought to the Israelites scattered throughout the kingdom; now he was sworn to their annihilation.
  - b. Haman's transformation into the "enemy of the Jews," when viewed in light of the insight of the lot and the irrevocable edict about to be issued, signals to the reader that all is lost; nothing can prevent the destruction of the Hebrew people.
  - c. But Haman is also the *Agagite*, and this title points to the larger salvation-historical significance of Haman and his evil scheme. He represents the perpetuation of Amalekite opposition to Israel, which itself reflects the earlier struggle between Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:19-23) and ultimately the ancient, decreed conflict between the serpent and his seed and the seed of the woman.
7. The context ends on a note of sharp contrast: Having dispatched the king's decree that the Jews were to be exterminated in one day eleven months hence, Haman and his lord sat down to celebrate their good fortune. Meanwhile, at the epicenter of the shock wave that was to spread across the empire, the people of Susa were reeling in shock and confusion.