

Introduction: Haman and Mordecai

Since the book of Esther was written, in part,
in order to explain the reason for the Feast of Purim
(the feast of casting lots),
it has been customary in the Jewish tradition to read the book of Esther
every year at the Feast of Purim!

Over time, there has been a tradition of how to read the book.
Since the book has heroes (Mordecai and Esther) and a villain (Haman),
everyone cheers when the names of Mordecai and Esther are read,
and everyone boos and hisses when Haman is named.

(The month of Adar is in February or March of our calendars).

The first two chapters set the stage for the book of Esther –
but the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3
sets the contrast between Mordecai and Haman.

Mordecai, as we saw last time, is a descendent of Kish – King Saul’s father.
That means that King Saul was his great-uncle many times removed!

We also should note that Haman is an Agagite.
What is an Agagite?
A descendent of Agag.
Agag was an Amalekite king – in the days of King Saul.

The book of Samuel tells us that Saul was commanded to destroy Agag –
and devote Agag and his people to destruction
(a term used in the OT when God commanded their utter destruction).
But instead, Saul spared Agag – along with much spoil –
claiming that he had intended to offer sacrifices to the LORD.

Samuel replied that the LORD desires obedience rather than sacrifice!

(And just a note on sacrifice –
with burnt offerings, the whole animal is burned in the fire;
but with sacrifices – otherwise known as peace offerings –
most of the animal is consumed by the worshipers.
So when Saul says that he was saving the animals for sacrifices,
he is licking his lips at the thought of a delicious feast!
Oh, and uh, worshipping God – of course, that’s what I meant!)

But the basic problem was that Saul did *not* do what God commanded.

Now, in our text tonight, we see that a son of Agag and a nephew of Saul
are pitted against each other.

Perhaps the family history may explain some of the animosity between these men.

Haman would remember that the house of Saul
was the occasion for his ancestor's demise.

No, Saul did not king Agag – but Samuel the aged prophet did.

It may have been nearly 600 years before –
but if the Jews remembered the story,
how much more would the Amalekites!

1. Mordecai Thwarts the Plot of the Eunuchs (2:19-23)

¹⁹ Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. ²⁰ Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. ²¹ In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. ²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows.^[c] And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

We read the end of chapter 2 to remember how Mordecai thwarted the plot against King Xerxes.

We have seen that the book of Esther does everything in pairs.

And as the plot thickens here – it does so by describing two plots.

The plot against Xerxes that Mordecai thwarts,
and the plot against Mordecai (and the Jews) that Haman hatches.

The contrast should be clear –

here is a man (Mordecai) who saved the king from a dastardly plot,
but now he himself becomes the potential victim of another plot.

If you are starting to think that the Persian court is filled with dastardly plotters,
you won't be far off track.

Remember that Xerxes had failed to conquer Greece –

he has returned to Persia in a weakened position.

Some of his own household were conspiring against him at the end of chapter 2 –

so he needs loyal friends –

he needs councilors who will support him,

and help fund his ambitious building plans throughout the empire!

And so...

2. Haman Plots the Demise of Mordecai and the Jews (3:1-14)

a. The Promotion of Haman and the Recalcitrance of Mordecai (v1-6)

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

You might call this position the “prime minister” – the chief advisor to the king.
And since Haman is now second to the king,
he is to be treated in the same manner as the king.

Persian custom was that people would prostrate themselves
flat on the ground before the king.

So “bowing down” doesn’t just mean a polite nod,
but complete prostration!

And so...

² And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. ³ Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king's command?”

Why does Mordecai transgress the king’s command?

What did God say about Saul, after his sin with Agag?

“I regret that I have made Saul king.”

As one commentator puts it:

“So for a Jew to encounter a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites
is to meet a living reminder of what is wrong and how it began to go wrong.
For an Amalekite to be in a position of power over a Jew
is to exert an ironic twist of the knife,
that the people who were supposed to have been utterly extirpated
have yet, half a millennium later, yielded a leader of the known world.
To bow down to such a man
is to consent in having one’s whole sense of destiny discredited.” (Wells, 44)

But all Mordecai said is “I am a Jew.”

Mordecai had told Hadassah not to use her real name –
but to use her Persian name.

Hadassah had lost everything – and had to keep her identity hidden.
She was now “Esther” – without name, without people –
the favorite concubine of Xerxes.

But Mordecai cannot keep his own identity hidden any longer.

When Haman struts by –
the nephew of Saul cannot bring himself to bow to the son of Agag.

At the very least, this is a very different stance
than the one that Mordecai counseled his cousin to take!

⁴ *And 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 stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew.*

Why would Mordecai risk *everything*?

Is this just a proud man refusing to humble himself?

He gave his cousin good counsel – which he himself didn't have the humility to keep?

That could be.

The text doesn't actually tell us!

So it's possible that Mordecai just stumbled into this one.

But one theme that we have seen – and will see again and again –
is that what is good for the Jews is good for Persia, and all nations.
And it is *not good* for an Amalekite to be prime minister.

It is especially not good for *this Amalekite* to be prime minister!

After all, watch how Haman reacts:

⁵ *And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.* ⁶ *But he disdained^[a] to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy^[b] all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.*

Haman also remembers the Jews!

He remembers how his ancestor Agag was overthrown –
and his people obliterated.

(Sure, Saul didn't really do the job –

but the book of Samuel tells us that David finished what Saul failed to accomplish).

Haman undoubtedly sees this as a chance to get his family's revenge on the Jews.

After all these years and centuries,

the son of Agag has a chance to take down the family and the people of Saul!

And now we find out what time it is:

b. The Casting of Lots (Pur) and the Plot of Haman (v7-11)

⁷ *In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast*

Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

This is the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus – 474 B.C. – in the month of Nisan (around April).
And so in the first month, Haman is wondering what will be the propitious time
to launch his attack on the Jews.

This was a common practice in the ancient world.
Whether consulting oracles, reading entrails or omens, or casting lots –
there were many who believed
that one should only embark on a new venture
if one had a favorable message from the gods.

And so Haman casts lots to find out when is the propitious time for slaughtering the Jews.
And the answer is – the 12th month.

To get there, it says that they cast lots “day after day” and month after month.”
That suggests that they asked, “shall we do it in the first month?” NO.
“second?” No.
“third?” No.
“fourth?” No...

And so on until they reached the twelfth month.
And from there, they proceeded from day to day
until they had their date for the proposed extermination of the Jews!

You are supposed to see the providence of God here.
It is remarkable that there are so many “no” answers.

⁸ *Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed 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 to the king's profit to tolerate them.*

“There is a certain people” –
if he had *named* that people, Xerxes might have remembered
that Cyrus the Great had ordered the rebuilding of their temple!
And his father, Darius, had encouraged and blessed the Jews,
so that the temple was completed in Darius’s day.

So Haman thinks it prudent to omit their name!
Rather, he focuses on their distinctive idiosyncrasy!

They have their own law.

And – worse and worse – they do not keep the king’s law!!

(If he had been forced to provide proof,
he could have pointed to Mordecai, who refused to obey the king –
whose command was to bow before Haman!

But he also could have pointed to the examples of Daniel
or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Sure – God blessed them, and the Babylonian and Persian kings in their day
had honored them for their faithfulness to the LORD –

but that never stopped the jealous and arrogant from holding it against them!

In the same way, the Jews would accuse Jesus of making himself to be a king!

And they said that the reason why Jesus had to die,
was because “we have a law...”

It is true:

Mordecai would not bow to Haman because “we have a law”

But the Jews who sent Jesus to the cross also said,
“we have no King but Caesar...”

Mordecai will hold fast to Israel’s law –
but when Mordecai thinks of “law” (*Torah*)
he’s not just thinking of a list of rules.

He’s thinking of the whole story – the whole meaning of the Torah.
After all, the five books of Moses are Torah.

Not just the rules in those five books – but also the stories in those five books.
The rules and the stories together *that* is what makes *Torah*.

You have to understand the picture – the pattern – the point of where we are going!

And that’s what makes Haman such a bad prime minister:

“If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents^[c] of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries.”

Haman shows us what power looks like without God.

Power is my servant – what I use to inflate my own honor, influence, and status.

I am the center of the universe!

He’s been learning well from Xerxes!

As one commentator puts it (Wells):

“if he has studied the behavior of Ahasuerus to this point,
he will know that exercising power means passing laws,
making flamboyant gestures, drinking lots of wine,
winning battles of honor, exhibiting rage,
and using one’s office to promote one’s personal image and agenda.” (46)

But...

If you destroy the Jews, then you will destroy the hope for God’s blessing on the nations!
If the Jews are obliterated, then there is no future for humanity!

A prime minister who counsels a king to destroy hope and salvation
is a fool.

But all Xerxes hears is “and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver...”

After all, Xerxes is broke.

He spent an untold fortune on a failed invasion of Greece,
and now he really needs to succeed in his building campaign –
otherwise the *next* plot against him might succeed!

¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

This is a very good translation of the Hebrew –

the problem is that it appears to be translating a Persian idiom.

“The money is given to you” in that Persian idiom would mean “the money is given *by* you.”

Xerxes is not saying “I don’t need the money.”

He is saying, “the money is in your hand – well, then, so are the people
(now give me the money)”!

c. The Decree of the King and the Feast of Haman (v12-15)

¹² Then the king's scribes 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 signet ring. ¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction 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.

The scribes are summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month –

and the edict is given for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

The decree is issued on the thirteenth day of the first month –
the night before the Passover.

Every Jew would see the connection!

The son of Agag is bringing a curse of utter destruction upon the Jews.
Not just the death of the Firstborn – as in Egypt –
but the whole people will be plundered and killed.
“To destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old,
women and children, in one day.... and plunder their goods.”

But the enactment of the decree will wait until the thirteenth day of the 12th month –
a month before the *next* Passover.

The decree of utter destruction that Saul failed to execute on Agag
is now decreed against Israel!

What will God do to save Israel from this new Pharaoh?
Because this is not like Ramesses of old!
Ramesses was shrewd and a master of tactics!

Ahasuerus is a slave to his anger – a slave to his passion for women –
and a slave to his advisors.

Moses will arrive in Egypt for a showdown between the powers of Egypt and the power of God!
Pharaoh will say that if Moses ever sees him again, he will surely die.

Esther will say that if she goes to see the king, she may well die!
But in the end, she will go – because she trusts in the God of Moses,
and so she will go the way of the cross –
scorning its shame –
trusting that “if I perish, I perish” –
and the God of her fathers was the God who raises the dead.

But as the decree goes forth...
the King and Haman sat down to drink...

¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

We're back at another feast!

Herodotus tells us that if the Persian king made a decree sober,
then he had to get drunk in order to confirm it!

While that may not be exactly the case,
both the Greek and the Hebrew historian agree
that this is the basic pattern of Xerxes' court!

Remember that Esther is the only book outside of the Torah (the five books of Moses)
where a feast is promulgated.

But the Feast of Purim is a feast about how Israel lives in the midst of the nations.

All the feasts of Moses were oriented around the Exodus.
And all through the prophets – even through Ezra and Nehemiah –
the focus is on how the Mosaic feasts will be fulfilled, renewed, and practiced.

Isaiah had spoken of a new feast.

Isaiah had spoken of how God would make for all the peoples a feast of rich food –
but Isaiah had spoken of this happening “on this mountain.”

Zion remained the center – Jerusalem was the city of God, the mountain of God.

The startling thing in the book of Esther is that the new feast is promulgated
not in Jerusalem – but in Susa!

But it is a feast of lots – *pur* – hence the name, *Purim*.

Here in Esther 3, it sure looks like the fate of the people of God
is in the hand of chance – of fate –
of the lucky (or should we say unlucky) number 13.

Here on the eve of the Passover, we are told that the Jews will never celebrate another Passover!

And so all of Susa is thrown into confusion.

While the King and Haman drink merrily –
the whole city is in an uproar.

There aren't very many Jews in Susa.

But the point is clear: the *people* of Susa realize that this is *not a good thing!*

It is *not good* for their king to seek to destroy the Jews.

When the nations *bless* the seed of Abraham –
then good things – blessings – come to the nations!

And we are starting to see that at least many among the nations recognize this!

If Xerxes is willing to slaughter a whole people at the whim of his prime minister,
what does that mean for the empire?

In the book of Esther, *home* is Persia –
insofar as Esther and Mordecai have a home.
There is nothing about Jerusalem – no longing for Zion.
There is no sense of living in “exile.”
Rather, it is living in the “diaspora.”

We are dispersed among the nations.
Every foreign land becomes a home land –
and yet, every homeland becomes a foreign land.

We don't know – in advance – how this particular story will end!
I will go to the king.
If I perish, I perish.

But that doesn't mean that we don't know what story we're in!
We know that we are in the story of salvation.
This story ends at the New Jerusalem – the New Creation.

But living here in Persia is not about living in the Jewish Ghetto.
It's about seeking the welfare of the city where God has put us.
And the welfare of that city depends on what happens to *us*.

It may seem at times as though it's all just the luck of the draw – a game of chance.
That's why God gave us the Feast of Purim.
The Feast of the Lucky Draw.

How should we live – when we know that we will spend the duration of our earthly lives
in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation?

We are not just biding our time here in exile – waiting until we can go home.
This is where we will live until Christ returns!
This is where Christ *calls us* to live until he returns.
We can't just adopt short-term tactics.
We need long-term strategies for how to live here for generations!

How do you survive in this age without losing your identity as a citizen of the age to come?
*You gotta know when to hold 'em – know when to fold 'em –
know when to walk away – know when to run...*

Sometimes (with Esther) it may feel like you are selling your soul!
Other times (like with Mordecai) you may take a stand that seems utterly absurd.

How do you know when to do which?

You gotta know the story you're in!
What does this moment mean?

And so yes, *know your Bible well!*
Know the stories!
Understand how they fit together –
and how your life fits into that story!

And that takes time!
So also – don't worry too much about the fact that you don't know.
But walk faithfully.
Spend time in prayer –
and by that I don't mean "praying for things – or even for other people."
No, I mean spend time in prayer – in meditation – in fellowship with the Triune God.

With your closest friends, you can sit in silence and just *be* with each other.
Be with God.
I know – sitting in silence is *really hard!*
And so in the same way that the Psalm 119 meditates on God's word,
his law, his righteousness, his nearness...
so also you take time to meditate,
to reflect on who God is and what he has done.