

Esther 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 3. After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. 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.

Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you transgress the king's command? And when they spoke to him day after day, and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see where the Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone.

So as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast per, 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. 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. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents 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. So the king took his signet ring from his hand, and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of the Jews. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. In Esther chapter 1 we were introduced to King Ahasuerus.

[3 : 0 4] In chapter 2 we are introduced to the chief protagonists of the book, Esther and Mordecai. Now in chapter 3 we meet the chief antagonist, Haman the Agagite. A number of Jewish commentators have identified Haman with Mermucan in chapter 1, the man who advises King Ahasuerus concerning Vashti.

The description of Haman as an Agagite is significant. King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected from the throne because of his failure to kill Agag the Amalekite. There was an enduring antagonism between the Amalekites and the Israelites. The Amalekites had attacked Israel as they left Egypt. On other occasions they sought to attack Israel when Israel was at its weakest.

Amalek was a descendant of Esau, and in Amalek the rivalry between Esau and Jacob was continued and intensified. The Lord declared concerning Amalek in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17 to 19, Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget. King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected for his failure to keep this commandment by the Lord. He was a Benjaminite and a son of Kish, and here in this book we meet another son of Kish and Benjaminite, Mordecai. This Benjaminite, reminiscent of Saul, will face one of Agag's descendants, Haman. The old conflict will be revived again. Haman is advanced by King Ahasuerus, placed over all of the other officials. All of the officials are made to bow down before Haman at the gate. However, Mordecai does not do so, and the king's servants at the king's gate interrogate him as to why. When he continues not to bow and does not listen to them, they go and tell Haman. We immediately have a question here. Is Mordecai wrong not to bow to Haman? What are his reasons not to bow? Some have suggested that this is a resistance of idolatry, that to bow to a human being in such a manner is a denial of the fact that the Lord alone is due such worship. Others have seen Mordecai's refusal to bow as grounded in the fact that Haman was an Agagite. Mordecai as a Jew will not bow to this historic adversary of his people.

Neither of these reasons seem to work, and the text does not really give us a direct answer to our question. James Jordan suggests that Mordecai's refusal to bow is a rebellious action, that he really should have bowed, and that his failure to bow is a sin that precipitates much of the crisis that follows. The fact that the text does not neatly address the question that we might have about why Mordecai does not bow, and whether he is justified or not in this, raises the possibility for me that the text wants us to puzzle over this question. The text may not immediately answer this question, but it wants us to think through the question, to have it in the back of our minds as we go through the book. When we have such questions, it's usually best to consider what would help us to give an answer, and I can think of a few different lines of investigation. Biblical texts can give us a sense of how we are to view the actions of particular characters by framing those actors as good guys or bad guys. One of the ways that it can do this is by associating figures with other figures. Mordecai is a

Joseph-like character. He prospers and he is vindicated and elevated. On the surface of the story, he is a good guy and a hero throughout. Meanwhile, Haman, the man to whom Mordecai will not bow, ends up hanging on his own gallows. He is presented as a bad guy throughout. On the surface of things, this makes it more likely that Mordecai has a good reason for not bowing. People may struggle to identify this reason, but they are justified in looking. Another way that a text can tip us off as to the character of a person's action is by significant parallels with other narratives.

[7 : 04]

And I believe that we have one of these with the story of Joseph. Rabbi David Foreman notes the parallels between verse 4 of this chapter and Genesis chapter 39 verse 10. In verse 4 of this chapter, and when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them. And then in Genesis chapter 39 verse 10, and as she, Potiphar's wife, spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her. Rabbi Foreman observes that these are the only two places in scripture where we see these sorts of phrases. Elsewhere in the book of Esther, Mordecai is associated with the character of Joseph, so it is not surprising that we might see a connection between Joseph and Mordecai here. The question we must now ask is does this parallel give us any clue as to Mordecai's motives in his refusal to bow to Haman? I think it does. In the story of Joseph and Potiphar's house, he refuses to sleep with Potiphar's wife, the second in charge of the household, because he knows that such an act would be disloyal to his master Potiphar. What's more, it will be a sin against God. The result of his refusal to lie with

Potiphar's wife is that he is thrown out of the household and into the prison as one who is seen as disloyal. However, in truth, he is the loyal one. Mordecai has already been presented in a very positive light. He has foiled a plot against the king's life. This does not seem to be a man who would resist the king's command merely for the sake of it. There must be a reason. Perhaps as Joseph was loyal to his master and therefore refused day after day to lie with his master's wife, so Mordecai is faithful to his master the king and therefore refuses to bow to a man who he sees as a usurper, a man who he believes is trying to take over the rule of the king and undermine his authority. Just as Mordecai discovered the plot of Bigthan and Teresh, perhaps he knows something about Haman's motives too. I believe that the rest of the book of Esther strengthens this reading. In addition to the way that characters are framed as good guys or bad guys, significant parallels with other narratives, we should also think about the way that, as narratives progress, actions are followed by consequences and further actions. As for Mordecai, he never repents for his failure to bow to Haman. The impression is thereby given that his refusal to bow to Haman is not in fact a sin. Indeed, Haman gets his comeuppance and Mordecai is elevated and people bow to him. Finally, the way that the themes of an episode reappear and are developed elsewhere helps us to determine the character of actions. Bowing and playing the part of a king appears later, but decisively favours Mordecai and Haman's overstepping of his bounds also develops as a theme. It would seem then that Mordecai is justified in not bowing to

Haman and events that follow will reveal why this is the case. Haman's response to the news of Mordecai's insubordination is profound anger and a desire for vengeance. He doesn't want to lay hands on Mordecai alone, however. That would appear petty. Far better to kill all of Mordecai's people, the entire Jewish community. As in chapter 1, this is a way of responding to a personal slight that elevates it to the level of a great law. As we saw, some commentators identify Mimucan with Haman. Mimucan's advice in response to Vashti's non-appearance is similar to Haman's approach here. Mimucan blew up Vashti's non-appearance into a great issue of state to be responded to by a great edict. Once again, in this chapter, law is a way of settling personal scores, presenting matters that in many respects are largely petty and personal, as if they were great matters of civil order. To determine the day for this empire-wide pogrom against the Jews, Haman casts lots over a period of time, seeking to determine the one portentous day upon which all of these events would occur. This casting of purr, also described as lots, is a surprisingly important theme of the book. Indeed, it plays some part in the naming of the feast of the Jews' victory over their opponents at this time. In chapter 9, verse 24, we read,

For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast purr, that is, cast lots, to crush and to destroy them. The book of Esther, as Rabbi Foreman has observed, is a book that deals extensively with themes of chance, fate, providence, and law. Haman, Rabbi Foreman observes, is a sort of man who will blow up a personal vendetta into a great law of the kingdom, on the one hand, and on the other, he will leave the decision of the day on which to slaughter tens or even hundreds of thousands of people to the casting of lots.

He argues that the purpose of the casting of lots is in part to find a propitious day for the act, and also to cast terror into the Jews. His actions suggest that chance and fate are at the helm of the universe, rather than a creator god who providentially rules over all. Haman, however, has to find a reason that would justify such extreme measures. Why single out this particular people? Haman makes the case for genocide without mentioning the name of the Jews. Rather, he describes the Jews, mixing together elements of truth and falsehood. The Jews are an exiled people, a people scattered abroad, dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of his kingdom.

[12 : 24] They no longer have a distinct land of their own, and yet they remain a distinct people. They observe their own customs and laws, and Haman claims, the falsehood that accompanies the truth, that they don't keep the king's laws. The existence of such a people in his realm is more of an inconvenience for Ahasuerus than a blessing. Here is an exiled people that has not yet realised that it has ceased to exist. They are like the cartoon character that has run off the edge of the cliff, and is still running and not falling in mid-air. They really should disappear and be assimilated into the nations and peoples around them. One of the things to note here is the way that the people are maintained in their distinctiveness and exile by their keeping of the laws of God. Without faithfulness and commitment to the laws of God, the Jews would have swiftly disappeared into the nations that surrounded them. They would have worshipped the same pagan gods, and they would have engaged in the same sort of idolatrous practices they would have intermarried with and taken on the practices of their neighbours. Haman, tipping his hand at this point and revealing how much he is personally invested, offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of the king, if only he will be allowed to wipe out this people. Many commentators argue that there is some sort of hyperbole being used here on the part of the author of Esther. 10,000 talents of silver was not that far removed from the annual sum of tribute received by Persia. Other commentators have argued that Haman was claiming that he would pay this sum of money in the plunder taken from the Jews. Such a vast quantity of plunder and the removal of this inconvenient people would easily compensate for the loss of tax revenue. The king very readily acquiesces though. He takes his signet ring and gives it to Haman.

The language here is very similar to that of Genesis chapter 41 verse 42, where Pharaoh gives his signet ring to Joseph. If Mordecai is like Joseph, Haman is like the anti-Joseph. King Ahasuerus unreservedly authorizes Haman. The language of verse 11 is not clear, but one possible meaning of it is that Ahasuerus refuses to take any money from Haman. In verse 10, Haman is described as Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of the Jews. Frederick Bush observes that there is a chiasmic pattern in the way that Haman is identified within the book. He is identified on six different occasions.

On the first and the last, he is identified as the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. On the second and the fifth, the enemy of the Jews. And on the third and the fourth, the Agagite. The king's scribes are summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, most significantly the day before the Passover.

The decree was to be carried out eleven months later. Letters were sent to every single part of the kingdom promulgating this edict. As Adele Berlin notes, Herodotus claims that it would have taken three months for a message to travel to all parts of the kingdom. The decree is a terrible one indeed.

They are to annihilate all of the Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, and plunder all of their goods. The chapter ends with contrasting responses to this. The king and Haman give no thought to what they have just instigated. They merely return to their partying, much as the brothers of Joseph had left their brother in the pit in Genesis chapter 37 and turned to their eating, unmindful of his fate. The lower city of Susa, however, responds with dismay. This response is presumably not merely from the Jews. The rest of the population would be understandably unsettled by the seemingly erratic decrees of this new prime minister, and even if they had no thought for the Jews, they would be understandably uneasy about the prospect of a great genocide happening in their midst. There is a ceasing to be a society of predictable and knowable law and order, and is descending into a sort of chaos. A question to consider, what can we learn from the similarities between the advice given by Mimucan concerning Vashti and the plan of Haman in this chapter?

[16:18]

