

Esther: A Frowning Providence

Esther 3

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We continue this morning with our series on the Book of Esther. And here the story takes a dark and ominous turn. The Empire, indulgent, opulent, comical, excessive to the point of parody, now becomes dangerous and threatening. We will make three points. The refusal in verses 1-4, the rage in verses 5-11, and the royal decree in verses 12-14.

I. The Refusal

First, then, the refusal. Chapter 3 of the Book of Esther, opens with the words “after these events.” Meaning after – as we saw last week – after Mordecai saved the king’s life, by foiling an assassination plot. He told the new queen, Esther, and she told the king, explicitly giving credit to Mordecai. *So, when we read: after these things, King Xerxes honored – we expect it to be Mordecai whose name we hear. But it is not. He honored one Haman, introduced now for the first time in the story.* Mordecai goes unrewarded. He suffers the slight, the injustice of being forgotten and ignored for his work.

Many of you, I’m sure, have experienced this. Being passed over and ignored, while someone else is promoted. Life in general, and life in the Empire particularly, is unfair, and often irrational. And frequently people get what they don’t deserve, or they don’t get, what they do deserve.

No fewer than 18 – 18 officials or counselors to the king – have been mentioned so far in the book (7 eunuchs, 7 legal advisors, and a few others), and out of nowhere, comes this guy-- Haman. And he’s made – essentially – the second in command. The Prime Minister. Vizier. The king’s right-hand man. He is elevated, the text says, and given a seat of honor, higher than that of all the other nobles.

Here is a great centralization and concentration of power. And we are given a critical piece of information. Haman, the son of Hammedatha is an Agagite. Now Agag was the king of the Amalekites, at the time of Saul. The Amalekites attacked and sought to destroy Israel in the wilderness (after the Exodus). And God had promised Moses (Ex. 17), that he would erase the memory of the Amalekites, and war against them from generation to generation. And Dt. 25

commands Israel, to war against them and blot them out. Now, later, when Saul came to power, Samuel (1 Sam 15) commanded him to destroy the Amalekites and Agag, their king. It was to be a complete, total holy war. Yet, Saul spared Agag (and the best sheep and cattle) in disobedience to the Lord. And because of this, Saul was abandoned and rejected as king by God. That long, bitter, hostile, tribal, holy warfare is evoked when Haman is called an Agagite (a descendent of king Agag, an Amalekite).

Now it's important to remember: Mordecai's genealogy, which we saw last week, showed him to be from the tribe and house of Saul. So, the conflict between Saul and Agag, is being revived here between Haman and Mordecai. All the royal officials knelt and paid honor to Haman – because the king had commanded it – apparently, they needed a law for that too.

But Mordecai – in an act of civil disobedience – refuses to kneel or pay honor. The narrator – as usual – gives us no comment as to why. It's not an idolatry or worship issue. Jews can, and do bow down, to rulers and others in Scripture, on numerous occasions. This is an act a lot like bowing one's head, or standing when someone enters a room. Kissing the hand of the Queen. It's an act of courtesy or court protocol. *It's public honor, but it isn't worship – and that is not the issue here. Mordecai would have bowed to the King, or he wouldn't be an official in the Persian court.* The issue is almost surely the fact that Haman is an Agagite, and Mordecai is from the house of Saul, and thus sees Haman as a mortal enemy. And an enemy of the people of God.

Now this was not one incident. The other officials asked M, day after day, about his actions, but he refused to comply. Haman, apparently, didn't even notice that, among the throng, Mordecai wasn't complying (not in upper echelons). Eventually Mordecai's colleagues – clearly not hostile originally – tell Haman, to see whether this behavior will be tolerated, for, the text says, Mordecai had told them he was a Jew.

Again, this does not mean – I'm a Jew I bow to God alone – it means – as a Jew, I will not honor this Amalekite, this descendent of Agag. The Empire was known to be generally tolerant, toward the many ethnic and religious groups under its umbrella. Here we have a new kind of test.

Notice something else here. Mordecai has, tactically, chosen submission and conformity to this point. He felt no need to draw the line when his adopted daughter (Esther) was coopted into a marriage with a pagan king. He insisted that she hide her Jewishness to get along. He even actively saved the regime by exposing the assassination plot. Now – he chooses a wholly different tactic of resistance. He reveals his Jewishness. Actively opposes the regime, in a dangerous, public, and provocative act.

One can question the wisdom of this action. After all, it provokes an attempted Holocaust. And all Mordecai's later actions simply undo the fruits of this one. So, Haman is an Agagite, and maybe Mordecai knows him, and his (soon to be revealed) monstrous moral character. Still, its far from clear that Jews – especially in exile – could not even show civil honor to an Amalekite in power.

Nevertheless, this is the call Mordecai makes – and it is a grand reversal of his previous strategy to fly under the radar, to survive, and accumulate some power and influence. (Both extremes of resistance)
That's the refusal.

II. The Rage

Our second point is the rage. When Haman saw the Mordecai would not kneel, or pay honor, he was enraged. Vashti refused to come, and the King was enraged. His underlings have learned that rage is the mode of responding to personal slights. In both cases, a minor public issue is turned into an Empire wide matter of law. Disproportion, over-reaction, excess, grand legal gestures in the face of petty offenses – that is the way of the total State.

In the first case (Vashti's rebellion) the law – that husbands rule their household – was comic, here the decree will be tragic. Haman learns that Mordecai is a Jew, and the ancient hatred of the people of God – what we now call anti-Semitism – completely obliterates the Persian practice of tolerance. He scorns the idea, as beneath his dignity, of killing ONLY Mordecai, and he looks for a way to destroy ALL, Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. That would include all the Jews in Palestine, and thus the Davidic line, the ancestors of Christ would also be in the crosshairs.

So, in the twelfth year (v. 7 says), that is five years after Esther became king. In the first month, the month of Nisan, Haman has some professional diviners cast lots in his presence, to select the day, and the month, for the massacre of the Jews. Good day for mass slaughter. The lot is called the pur. In Hebrew the plural is purim. And this is where the name of the Feast of Purim (March 20/21 this year), derived from the events in this book, comes from. We're not told exactly how this works, but the lot fell to the twelfth month (later told the 13th day, v.13). A full eleven months away. Which will, of course, allow time for the deliverance of the Jews to be conceived and executed.

Haman now must persuade Xerxes. He must be confident he can succeed, otherwise he would have gotten the king's approval first, and then drawn lots. His speech to Xerxes is a classic piece of dehumanizing, anti-Semitic, propaganda. He begins: There is a certain people – notice the name of the people is suppressed. This way, the king can put no faces to the people. Faces like those of Mordecai the Jew (and eventually, though he doesn't yet know it, like his wife,

the Queen). Keep the people anonymous, it depersonalizes them, and turns them into abstractions.

There is a certain people – dispersed among the peoples in ALL the provinces. They are ubiquitous, everywhere, their rootless. This stirs up a certain paranoia, that flies in the face of Jewish weakness, and gives them a kind of mysterious power.

They keep themselves separate – This is a half- truth. Mordecai lives and works in the capitol. Anti-Semitic writers have always seen Jewish separation, as meaning they are unassimilated, anti-social, haters of humanity. Their customs are different from those of all other people – yes, but not the whole story – they participate in Persian life.

And they do not obey the kings laws – As a general rule, this is an outright lie. There is one Jew, who has disobeyed one court protocol law.

It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate or leave them alone. This is an absurd claim. Without any evidence. Of course, this is about Haman's best interests, not the king's at all.

So, he proposes – *if it pleases the king* – a decree to destroy the Jews, and – w/o waiting for the king to deliberate -the idea is sweetened with a bribe of 10,000 talents of silver. An absurd and probably satirical amount, equal to nearly 65% of the Empire's yearly revenue. There is no indication, as to how Haman could possibly get that much money – its in the text, to show how earnest he is about his genocidal plan.

So, the king takes his signet ring. Gives it to Haman, who, we reminded, is an Agagite, and thus – the enemy of the Jews. The King – without so much as a follow-up question, or a twinge of conscience – tells Haman to keep his money (ambiguous as to whether he is actually accepting offer) and do with the people as YOU, Haman, please. This is delegation to the point of lunacy. Later, we will see that he king actually forgets, that this whole thing, was something he authorized. That is the rage.

III. The Royal Edict

Finally, the royal edict. The secretaries are summoned, and they write out, in the script and language of each people – notice – Haman's orders- he's in charge now. The decree goes out through the administrative and communications apparatus of the Empire. The hand of fate seems to be moving now, with meticulous precision to an inevitable end. Haman is on the right side of history. And the decree is more viscous than even what was said to the king (soft-pedaled). It is to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews – we see the magnitude

of the hatred – all the Jews, young and old, even women and children. Haman, the rabbi's said, was worse than the Pharaoh. One of them, puts these words in Haman's mouth:

Pharaoh was a fool for saying: *“Every son that is born to you, will be cast in the river.” Did he not know that the daughters would marry and have children? I will not make such a mistake, but will decree “to annihilate, to kill and to destroy.”*

And, we learn at the end of v.13 – to plunder their goods. So, if you're not a hateful anti-Semite, please join us for the plunder. The deed itself is eleven months away. The decree is issued as law, so that all the people – the whole murdering multitude – will be ready when the day comes.

The king and Haman sit down – callously – to eat and drink. The city is stirred up, bewildered (surely other provinces were) – indicating, of course, that not everyone – probably not even the vast majority of people, were Jew haters.

Let me close with some things to remember about each of these points:

First, the refusal. It's important to see, there is no “one size fits all” set of tactics for the rough and tumble world of politics – the world Mordecai is in. He changes, already in the first chapters, from quiet submission, to active support, and then to open resistance. And by the way he is – arguably – open to criticism at every point. Wisdom, and its practical application – prudence – require great attention to the time, the context, the people we are dealing with.

Ethics ARE, contrary to what you may have heard – situational. That does not mean we are relativists. God and his law are part of the situation. But the situation matters profoundly – and neither Daniel, nor Joseph, read their political situation the way Mordecai and Esther read their times. To insist there is always a clear right and wrong answer, in the broken world dominated by Empire, is a failure of maturity. And doing this well is exquisitely difficult. It is the work of discernment across a lifetime, and it is relevant to us for we are resisters in an age of Empire.

And note this: history, like our narrator, does not tell (rarely) us if the choices we have made are indeed good and right choices. To live, is to live with ambiguity. (justification by faith alone)

Second, the rage. The text reminds – and we saw it in our NT lesson from Jesus' own lips – there is an ancient, enduring, irrational, murderous hatred of God's covenant people loose in the world. Do not be surprised. Expect it to endure. But know this. This lot-casting rage forgets that – as Prov. 16 says: The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. The rage of the nations is overruled, by the Lord of the lot. As our New Testament lesson said: *Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city*

to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.* And the Lord of the lots, his overruling and delivering hand is seen – hinted at – in the fact that the decree itself is issued on the day before Passover. 13th Day of Nisan.

The decree is issued – as the Jews get ready to celebrate the deliverance from the Pharaoh that Haman is trying to outdo. Under the hand of this God, the nations rage in vain, for he has established his king, in Zion. Christ, ironically, the crucified Jew, as Lord.

Finally, the decree. The Empire is a parody, of God the universal Judge. And there is a decree against us more dreadful than this terrible decree. It is the decree of God's just wrath against the fallen race. And that decree has been borne in the killing of Christ the Jew. The Passover Lamb. The Jew, whose line was saved from Haman. And, thus, Christ the King, through his empire, the holy catholic church, publishes abroad, in every script and tongue and language, the gospel of peace.

We fear no decrees, for we have, in Jesus, faced the worst decree. And now we announce the grandest decree, good news, from the Jews, and to them first, and then to the whole world. As the fragile, Empire threatened early-Christians, prayed in our NT reading, so we are to take their words on our lips:

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness – and I might add with great, wisdom and tact and courage. Amen.

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