

ESTHER

Chapter 3

Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews

After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.² All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.³ Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?"⁴ Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.⁶ Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.⁷ In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on^a the twelfth month, the month of Adar.⁸ Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.¹¹ "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."¹² Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring.¹³ Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews— young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.¹⁴ A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.¹⁵ Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

3:1 *After these events.* Four years have elapsed since Esther's selection as queen (v. 7; 2:16–17). The fact that no reason is given for the promotion of Haman provides an ironic contrast between the unrewarded merit of Mordecai (2:21–23; see 6:3) and the unmerited reward of Haman. (CSB)

Nearly five years had elapsed since Mordecai's discovery of the plot against the king's life (cf v 7). (TLSB)

son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. There is some debate about the ancestry of Haman. The name Hammedatha appears to be Persian and probably refers to an immediate ancestor. The title "Agagite" could refer to some other immediate ancestor or to an unknown place; however, it is far more likely that it refers to Agag, king of Amalek (1Sa 15:20). The Amalekites had attacked Israel after she fled from Egypt (Ex 17:8–16; 1Sa 14:47–48); for this reason the Lord would "be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Ex 17:16). Israel was not to forget, but must "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Dt 25:17–19). Saul's attack on Amalek (1Sa 15) resulted in the death of King Agag and most, though not all (1Ch 4:42–43), of the city's population. In Esther, about 500 years after the battle led by the Benjamite Saul, the Benjamite Mordecai (see note on 2:5) continues the war with the Amalekites. (CSB)

Haman is introduced abruptly, and no reason is given for his promotion to high office. Perhaps Haman is meant to be identified as a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, an enemy of King Saul of Israel (1Sm 15:7–8 1Sm 15:7–8), with whose family and tribe Mordecai was linked (2:5). God decreed continual enmity between Amalek and Israel (Ex 17:8–16). The trouble extended all the way back to Jacob and Esau! (Amalek was Esau's descendant; Gn 36:12). (TLSB)

above all the officials. Haman was like a prime minister, secretary of state, or grand vizier of Ahasuerus. (TLSB)

3:2–6 Obedience to the second commandment (Ex 20:4) is not the issue in Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman, for the Jews were willing to bow down to kings (see 1Sa 24:8; 2Sa 14:4; 1Ki 1:16) and to other persons (see Ge 23:7; 33:3; 44:14). Only the long-standing enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites accounts both for Mordecai's refusal and for Haman's intent to destroy all the Jews (vv. 5–6). The threat against the Jews "throughout the whole kingdom" (v. 6) is a threat against the ultimate issue of redemptive history (see Introduction: Purpose, Themes and Literary Features). (CSB)

3:2 *homage.* In ancient times, respect was shown to a superior by bowing one's head or falling prostrate to the ground. (TLSB)

Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. No specific reason is given for Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, but his refusal to bow had serious consequences. (TLSB)

3:3 Ahasuerus's servants were puzzled by Mordecai's stubborn refusal to bow to Haman, which was against the king's command (v 2). (TLSB)

3:4 Compare the phraseology with that in the Joseph story (Ge 39:10). **3:7** (CSB)

spoke to him day after day. Trying to convince him to obey the king by honoring Haman. (TLSB)

words would stand. Mordecai may have suggested that Haman would not be able to overcome him because of his nationality (cf 4:14; 6:13). (TLSB)

Jew. Judean. For the first time, Mordecai revealed his nationality. (TLSB)

3:5 *fury.* Hbr *chemah*, which sounds similar to Haman's name. His extreme anger seems out of proportion to the slight he received from Mordecai. Haman's animosity for Mordecai and the Judeans may have been building for a long time. Aph: "Mordecai also was persecuted as Jesus was persecuted. Mordecai was persecuted by the wicked Haman; and Jesus was persecuted by the rebellious People. Mordecai by his prayer delivered his people from the hands of Haman; and Jesus by His prayer delivered His people from the hands of Satan. Mordecai was delivered from the hands of his persecutor; and Jesus was rescued from the hands of His persecutors" (NPNF 2 13:400). (TLSB)

3:6 *to lay hands on.* To arrest and punish. (TLSB)

destroy all the Jews. Haman's hatred for Judeans caused him to seek their extermination, a genocidal hatred. (TLSB)

3:7 *twelfth year ... first month.* April or May, 474 B.C., the fifth year of Esther's reign. (CSB)

first month ... Nisan. Mar/Apr, month of Passover. According to Babylonian records, human fates were fixed by the gods during the first month of the year. *twelfth year.* 474 BC. (TLSB)

they. Either indefinite or the astrologers who assisted Haman (5:10, 14; 6:12–13). (CSB)

pur. See 9:24, 26. This word is found in Akkadian texts with the meaning "lot" (as here). The celebration known as Purim takes its name from the plural of this noun (see 9:23–32). There is irony in the fact that the month of the Jews' celebration of the Passover deliverance from Egypt is also the month that Haman begins plotting their destruction (Ex 12:1–11). (CSB)

Borrowed from Old Babylonian *puru*, meaning "stone" or "lot," which appears to refer to the stones thrown to determine an auspicious day. Colored or numbered pebbles or clay cubes were possibly used as dice. Hbr plural form *purim* became the name of the festival that commemorated divine providence overruling the fatal lots (9:26). (TLSB)

they cast lots. Perhaps appointed priests. or wise men cast the lots for Haman. Seeking supernatural guidance for auspicious occasions was common practice in ancient times. (TLSB)

twelfth month. An 11-month delay is contemplated between the securing of the decree and the execution of it in the month Adar (February-March). (CSB)

Our Feb/Mar. Haman found favorable omens for his “lucky” day, even if it meant waiting almost a year. (TLSB)

Adar. The month when the extermination of the Judeans would begin; means “be darkened.” (TLSB)

3:8–9 The name of the people Haman wishes to destroy is slyly omitted in this blend of the true and the false: The Jews did have their own customs and laws, but they were not disobedient to the king (Jer 29:7). (CSB)

When the insane rage of Satan against God’s people joins up with this blind human prejudice, reason and decency are cast aside and hatred runs wild. But under the wise rule of God’s justice, in their blindness the persecutors and tyrants of this world often plant the seeds of their own destruction. (PBC) (Hitler etc.)

3:8 *certain people.* Haman never told Ahasuerus who these people were. (TLSB)

dispersed and scattered. See 8:11, 17; 9:2, 12, 16, 19–20, 28. (CSB)

Their laws are different. Haman probably thought esp of dietary laws, circumcision, and keeping the Sabbath. (TLSB)

3:9 *destroyed.* Hbr *'abad* is different from *shamad* in vv 6, 13. *'Abad* sounds like the Hbr word for “enslave,” which suggests that Haman might have been trying to deceive Ahasuerus about his true plans. (TLSB)

ten thousand talents. Herodotus (3.95) records that the annual income of the Persian empire was 15,000 talents. If this figure is correct, Haman offers two-thirds of that amount—a huge sum. Presumably the money would have come from the plundered wealth of the victims of the decree. Verse 13 implies that those who would take part in the massacre were to be allowed to keep the plunder, perhaps adding financial incentive to the execution of the decree since Xerxes disavows taking the money (v. 11). On the other hand, 4:7 and 7:4 may imply that the king had planned on collecting some of the money. (CSB)

Haman offered an exorbitant bribe to facilitate his request note). He was possibly bluffing or may have hoped to realize that amount from plundering the Judeans (v 13). (TLSB)

men who carry out this business. This clause may represent the title of revenue officers who would bring the money to the treasury, or it could refer to those who carry out the decree. The Amalekites had once before plundered Israel (see note on v. 1); Haman plans a recurrence. (CSB)

3:10 *signet ring.* Used to impress a distinctive design into the seal of a document; served as the king's signature (cf 1Ki 21:8). By giving Haman his signet ring, Ahasuerus is authorizing him to do whatever he wants. (TLSB)

enemy of the Jews. Agagites continued to hate the Judeans across generations. (TLSB)

3:11 *The money is given to you.* Based on Mordecai's statement in 4:7, it seems that Ahasuerus accepted the bribe, and with these words meant to say that Haman had the right to use his money however he wished. (TLSB)

3:12 *thirteenth day ... first month.* In the 12th year of Xerxes's reign (v. 7), i.e., Apr. 17, 474 B.C. (CSB)

Haman issued the decree to annihilate the Judeans on the day before their annual Passover celebration (14th of Nisan). (TLSB)

satraps. Herodotus reports that Darius I had organized the empire into more than 20 satrapies. (TLSB)

governors. In charge of the 127 provinces. (TLSB)

officials. Local appointees. (TLSB)

3:13 Haman's decree against Israel is the same destruction that had earlier been decreed against Amalek (1Sa 15:3). – Critics have claimed the plans to carry out such a large-scale massacre in a single day are unbelievable, but history has recorded other massacres on this scale. In 88 BC Mithradates, king of Pontus, massacred 80,000 Romans in one day. (PBC)

couriers. Cyrus the Great established an empire-wide postal system, similar to the Pony Express. (TLSB)

to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate. The piling up of the three verbs conveys the idea of total elimination of the Judeans. The people's situation goes from bad to worse: captivity, enslavement, and now legalized genocide. (TLSB)

thirteenth day ... twelfth month. Mar. 7, 473 B.C. (see 8:12). (CSB)

Day determined by lots (v 7). The 11-month delay in carrying out the edict gave Mordecai and Esther an opportunity to come to the aid of their people. (TLSB)

3:15 Haman and the king will drink together again in the story when the fate of the Jews is once again being decided (7:1–2), but then it will be at the dissolution of their relationship and the reversal of the decree here celebrated. The celebration here is in sharp contrast to the fasting and mourning of the Jews (4:1–3, 15–16). (CSB)

drink. Another reference to feasting; this one a private affair. (TLSB)

CITY OF SUSAN WAS BEWILDERED – Apparently the decree struck them as strange and arbitrary. (PBC)

In contrast to Haman’s merriment, common citizens were horrified and perplexed by the change of attitude and lethal machinations of the decree. (TLSB)

Ch 3 Haman’s extreme prejudice against the Judeans threatens them with annihilation. Bigotry and intolerance continue in our modern world. The danger is that we criticize these attitudes in others but fail to see the log in our own eye (Lk 6:41). Our prejudices can put barriers in the way of people hearing the Good News of salvation. To become better witnesses, the Holy Spirit must root out the sin of Haman from our hearts. For God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Tm 2:4). • When prejudice limits my vision, open my eyes, dear Savior, to see Your vast forgiving love for me and all people, which resulted in Your sacrifice on the cross. Amen. (TLSB)