

Notes on Esther 3

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II. The Rise of Haman to Power and His Decree Against the Jews – Chap. 3-5

A. Haman Decrees the Death of the Jews – Chap. 3

Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman

Verses 1,2

1. Who was Haman? What position was he given?
2. How was he honored? Who refused to do this?

The exalted position of Haman

The events recorded here occurred sometime later, after Esther had become queen and after Mordecai had saved the king's life (we are not told how long after). There arose to prominence a man named Haman. He was the son of Hammedatha, an Agagite. Exactly what this tells us about his background is unclear (cf. on vv 2-4). The king exalted Haman till he was above all the princes of all the provinces. In such a great Empire, this was surely a very exalted position.

Honor showed to Haman

As part of his exalted position, the king's servants were required to bow to him and pay homage. This was done at the command of the king.

However, we are told that Mordecai for some reason refused to bow. The reason is not given here but will be discussed more fully in the following verses. This refusal of Mordecai became the occasion for serious conflict that became the basis of the entire story of the book.

Verses 3,4

3. Describe how firm Mordecai was in his stand. What reason is given for this? (Think: Was bowing to a ruler always wrong? For what reason might Mordecai have refused?)
4. Application: List some lessons we can learn from Mordecai's conduct?

Mordecai challenged for his stand

Mordecai was then asked, by other of the king's servants who sat in the gate, why he acted in this way, especially since he was disobeying the king's command. He was disregarding, not just Haman, but the king himself. The account does not record his exact answer, but v4 shows that his explanation was based on the fact he was a Jew. This plus the fact that Haman determined to slay all Jews (v6) shows that Mordecai's reason for refusing to bow was based on his religion and nationality as a Jew. Clearly a reason of this nature would be required to explain the strength of Mordecai's convictions.

The servants spoke to Mordecai every day questioning him about his conduct, but he refused to listen. Finally the servants reported to Haman about Mordecai's conduct, to see whether or not Mordecai was going to be able succeed in his defiance of the law.

The record does not explain why, as a Jew, Mordecai believed he could not bow to Haman. Jews did at times bow to kings – 2 Sam. 14:4; 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16; etc. Two common explanations exist:

(1) Rulers of heathen empires were at times (though not always) honored as gods (cf. Acts 12). So bowing to the rulers was viewed as worship or reverence to a deity. If this was the intent in Haman's case, Jews could not participate since it would be idolatry. In this case, however, it is strange that such homage would be required toward Haman, but nothing mentions that such homage was required toward the king himself.

(2) It is possible that “Agagite” means Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites, whose kings were called “Agag” (cf. Pharaohs, Caesar, Herod, etc.; see 1 Sam. 15). If so, God had commanded what attitude Jews should have toward Amalekites – Ex. 17:14,15; Deut. 25:17-19.

Lessons from Mordecai’s example

The example of Mordecai is worthy of our consideration and imitation. From him we can learn the importance of standing for God’s will regardless of the opposition. He refused to sin or violate his conscience despite the great forces that were brought against him.

(1) First, he was disobeying a direct command of the king (cf. Acts 5:29).

(2) He had to withstand the continual urging of his companions, who sought to pressure him to participate (vv 3,4).

(3) He was clearly in the minority, perhaps completely alone, in the stand he took. Surely his conduct would be noticed in any crowd, since all the others would be bowing when he would not (the comments of his companions show that others did notice).

(4) He was threatened with death, not just to himself, but to all his people. But even after this decree was officially signed, he still refused to bow (5:9).

Other Bible characters have stood with equal courage in the face of opposition. Daniel refused to eat the king’s dainties or to cease praying though it meant being cast into a lion’s den. The three Hebrews refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s image, though the penalty was the fiery furnace. Joseph refused to commit adultery with Potiphar’s wife, though it meant prison. Peter and John continued preaching Jesus thought it meant beating and imprisonment. So Paul and all the apostles and Stephen were persecuted, as was Jesus Himself.

Many of us would have given in to the pressure and excused our participation as being just as “a little matter.” But examples such as that of Mordecai should give us courage. We should consider also our own influence on others for good or bad.

Will we stand up and do right when: (1) we are made fun of for teaching others about Jesus? (2) we are called “chicken,” “holy Joe,” etc. for refusing to practice sin? (3) we are persecuted and even threatened with physical violence? (4) our job is threatened because we refuse to lie, cheat, give to United Way, etc.?

Verses 5,6

5. How did Haman feel regarding Mordecai’s conduct? What did he decide to do?
(Think: What does this tell you about Haman’s character?)

Haman’s anger at Mordecai

When Haman realized what Mordecai was doing, he became fiercely angry. He wanted to lay hands on Mordecai, but he decided not to, because he had been told that Mordecai was a Jew. Presumably he understood that Mordecai’s religion/nationality was the reason for his refusal to bow. He decided that, rather than just attempting to lay hands on Mordecai, he would attempt to destroy all the Jews in the whole empire.

Note the pride and cruelty of this man:

(1) Note Haman’s pride: It was not enough that he was honored with such a high position and such favor with the king. In spite of this, his anger burned over so little a thing as a man who would not bow to him (cf. 5:11-13).

Many people cannot handle honor without becoming proud and conceited. They become tyrants who demand cowering submission by their subjects. Likewise, people today are often easily offended when people do not honor and praise them as they think they ought to be. Cf. Romans 12:3-5; Philippians 2:2-5; Proverbs 6:16-19; 16:5,18; 13:10; 1 John 2:15-17; Romans 1:30,32; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; 1 Corinthians 13:4,5; 2 Timothy 3:2; Luke 14:7-11; Galatians 6:1; Colossians 3:12,13.

(2) Note Haman’s cruelty: It would have been bad enough had he sought to imprison one man to satisfy his own ego. Worse yet would have been an attempt to slay one man. Yet so great

was Haman's cruelty, he would have massacred a whole nationality of people for his pride. And these were law-abiding people, hard workers, etc. Mordecai had proved his loyalty to the king (2:21-23). Yet he would have slain them all because Mordecai did not adequately satisfy his vanity.

Haman's requests the king to decree the death of the Jews

Verse 7

6. How did Haman decide the time for executing his plot? **Define** "Pur."

Haman chooses a time to accomplish his plans

These events occurred in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus, which would have been five years after Esther became queen (2:16ff). Haman then proceeded with his plan.

He began by having the lot ("Pur") cast before him to determine what month and day would be most favorable to attempt his plans. "The lot" throughout the Bible is a means of making decisions by some activity that would appear to be an act of chance (throw dice, toss a coin, etc.). However, it was believed that the gods would make the lot turn out such that it would reveal what was true or best. When inspired men did such by God's guidance, the result would be accurate. But here Haman appealed to his sources, which no doubt were false gods or perhaps even astrologers or magicians. Note that such consultation was probably fairly common by rulers in that day.

The result was that the month chosen was the twelfth month. However, as we will see, this was not a day favorable to Haman's purpose at all. This whole book shows that God watches over and cares for His people. We may suffer and be tried, but the final result will be for our good. But false gods cannot defeat God's purpose. Astrology is worthless. All appeals to other sources of supernatural information are inferior. If we want truth, we must go to God and His word.

Verse 8

7. What reason did Haman give the king for wanting to destroy "a certain people"?

Haman approaches the king for permission

To achieve his goals Haman then went to the king to obtain permission to slaughter the Jews. He stated some partial truths but by no means told the whole truth.

First he said there was a certain group of people who were scattered throughout the provinces of the empire who, in spite of being scattered, yet persisted in abiding by their own laws which were different than those of other people. This was true in a sense, since they followed God's law. But this was not necessarily bad in any sense.

Haman, however, charged that these people did not keep the king's commands, though he gave no specifics. This may have been true in the sense that they were not bowing to Haman. But in general the Jews were loyal citizens, as Mordecai had shown in sparing the king's life. The Jews' disobedience was hurting no one but Haman! Yet he argued that the people were not profitable to the king, as though this would justify his request. He did not mention his real reason for hating the Jews – the fact that one man would not bow to him, and he was therefore determined to destroy a whole nation! Note the manner in which evil men pursue their goals by half truths and false insinuations.

Verse 9

8. What did he offer to pay if the king would agree?

Haman makes his request of the king

Having poisoned the king's mind against the people, Haman then boldly requested the destruction of these people. To clinch his request, he offered to give 10,000 talents of silver into the king's treasury if the king would approve the decree (the Waldrons point out that 10,000 talents of silver would equal 375 tons!). This bears all the earmarks of graft and bribery, as is so

common in many governments. To pay the king for permission to slaughter thousands of his subjects, however, is the grossest sort of evil! This had been smoothed over, however, by the accusation that the people were rebellious and unprofitable in the kingdom anyway. No information is given regarding where Haman would obtain such a fabulous amount of money. Perhaps he intended to take it from the spoils of the murdered Jews (3:13).

Note that, at this point, Haman had not even identified who these people were that he wanted destroyed. He had not named them as Jews. Nevertheless the king approved the request. Surely, though, the king learned who it was, at least when the decree was actually issued.

Verses 10-15

9. How was the decree written and circulated to the people?

10. What did the decree say?

11. Special Assignment: Explain why such a decree would be important in Bible history.

The decree is authorized.

The king then took his ring, the official seal by which he authorized decrees, and gave it to Haman. The seal was a sign of authority. He thereby authorized Haman to do as he pleased regarding these people, but the king refused the money. He did not want the bribe, but he granted Haman's wish anyway. Apparently he was so favorably inclined toward Haman that he trusted him and simply granted his request without question. He authorized that act at Haman's discretion.

Later the king realized his mistake when he learned the true character of Haman. This should teach us the importance of carefully choosing our close, trusted companions. Haman was an evil companion who corrupted Ahasuerus (1 Cor. 15:33). We must be very careful what influence people have on us and whose advice we take. Check matters out carefully. Surely in a matter that determined the lives of millions of people, the king should have been more careful and done more investigating. We need to take a lesson from his example.

The decree is issued.

The decree written and sealed

Having received authority from the king, Haman acted without delay. On the thirteenth day of the first month the decree began to be written. It was to be executed on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. This length of time no doubt was helpful to the Jews in giving Esther time to work on the problem.

Haman had a decree written to all the rulers in all the provinces in the language of those provinces. This decree was done by the authority of the king, sealed with his ring. Hence, the people knew they must obey.

The letters sent

The letters bearing the decree went by courier into all the provinces. The decreed said to destroy, slay, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, including women and little children. This was to happen on the appointed day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. People then were authorized to plunder the possessions of the Jews. The spoil would no doubt serve as a motivation to people to comply with the decree.

Note that the decree, had it been carried out, would have meant virtually the end of the Jewish nation, for it included all provinces, and almost all the world (especially where Jews were) was under this empire. Such would have been a terrible blow to God's people. Would He allow this or would He defend them? Further, consider the consequences to God's plan for man's redemption. If the Jews had been destroyed, how could Jesus be a descendant of Abraham, Jacob, and David as God has promised? No doubt, God could have found a way to accomplish His purpose in any case. But instead He chose to preserve the nation in the manner that we will see.

Note that Haman's evil would not only have affected himself, but he included the king in his evil, and now he was about to include all the people of the empire in his evil. All would have been involved in an act of mass murder. So our sins often affect those around us.

Mass murder, especially of Jews, has often occurred and is always an abomination. Pharaoh decreed destruction of Israelite babies, and so did Herod. Germany murdered millions in Germany. Communists did such a thing in many nations, not just to Jews, but to all who opposed communism. In our own society, abortion is a mass murder of a class of people.

The decree went out by rapid post to inform all the people to get ready for the actual day. The decrees perplexed the people, and rightly so: why murder a whole nationality of people? Why should the people have to be the ones to do it? Who would be the next victims? Meantime, the king and Haman were bosom buddies, drinking together, enjoying themselves, apparently unconcerned about the tremendous impact of their act.

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