

Esther 3
August 8, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: How do genocides start? What is your best understanding of that? [Let people engage]

A: Genocide happens through a combination of factors:

- 1) ethnic prejudice, racism, and other forms of hatred;
- 2) fear of the other;
- 3) extreme forms of nationalism;
- 4) radical and absurd ideas of social change;
- 5) myth-making—just simply the idea of creating mythologies around a group, constructing the group as the embodiment of all evil; and
- 6) the desire on the part of the state to engage in extreme propaganda against the group that motivates large numbers of people to go out and destroy that particular group.

Transition: You may or may not be familiar with a person named Samantha Power. She was the professor of Human Rights Practice at Harvard's John F Kennedy School of government. She won a Pulitzer prize for her book entitled *The Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. She documents the history of genocide in the 20th century, from the Armenian genocide in 1915, to Hitler, to Pol Pot who led a communist country of Cambodia 1975-1979 killed approx. 1.2 million people, and the genocide of Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda in 1984 where approx. one million lives were lost – *just to name a few*.

In today's story, we're going to meet a character named Haman who has embraced the idea of genocide and is bent on accomplishing his goal to exterminate the Jews. Let's see how Haman attempts to get his plan in place. Let's begin.

BOOK:

Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews

3 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 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 (375 tons) 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.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

While others bowed to Haman, Mordecai refused to worship him because of his Jewish faith—as Daniel had declined to worship Darius (Dan. 6)

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Es 3)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

III. Haman the Enemy (3)

Five years pass (v. 7) and Satan begins to work. Haman's promotion went to his head and turned him into a murderer. Being a faithful Jew, Mordecai would not bow down to Haman, and this made the proud ruler excessively angry. The palace knew Mordecai was a Jew (v. 6) but they did not know that Esther was one also. Haman decided to destroy *all* the Jews just because of his malice toward Mordecai. Satan is the destroyer Apollyon (Rev. 9:11). Haman and his fortune-tellers cast lots ("pur" in Hebrew) to find what day should be set aside for the execution, and it fell nearly a year later! Haman then offered to get for the king over \$25,000,000 in silver if the king would authorize the slaying of the Jews. Haman lied about the Jews, of course, for Satan is both a liar and a murderer. Foolishly, Xerxes gave Haman his ring and the authority to act, not realizing that he was risking the life of his own queen. Haman wasted no time, for that very month he had the decrees written and sent out (vv. 7, 12), ordering the Persians to destroy, kill, and plunder all the Jews in the vast reaches of the kingdom. It is difficult to see how the king could make a law to wipe out millions of people one minute, then sit down to eat and drink the next minute (v. 15). But dictators in our modern history have done the same thing. (For additional material about Haman, consult the Introductory Notes.)

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Be Committed (pp. 92–105)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

ESTHER 3

An Old Enemy with a New Name

(In which an evil man
challenges the throne of Almighty God)

For four years, things have been peaceful in Shushan. Esther has reigned as queen, and Mordecai has tended to the king's business at the gate. Then everything changed, and all the Jews in the empire found themselves in danger of being killed—just to satisfy the hatred of a man named Haman.

The Book of Esther is one of five Old Testament books that the Jews call "The Writings" or "The Five Megilloth." (The word *megilloth* means "scrolls" in Hebrew.) The other books are Ruth, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. Each year on the Feast of Purim, the Book of Esther is read publicly in the synagogue; and whenever the reader mentions Haman's name, the people stamp their feet and exclaim, "May his name be blotted out!" To Jews everywhere, Haman personifies everybody who has tried to exterminate the people of Israel. This chapter explains to us why Haman was such a dangerous man.

1. His ancestry (Es. 3:1a)

Haman was an "Agagite," which could mean he came from a district in the empire known as Agag. But it could also mean that he was descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam.

15:8). If the latter is the case, then we can easily understand why Haman hated the Jews: God had declared war on the Amalekites and wanted their name and memory blotted off the face of the earth.

The story goes back to the time of Israel's Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 17:8–15), when the Amalekites attacked God's weary people in the rear ranks of the marching nation (Deut. 25:18). After Moses commanded Joshua to fight against Amalek, he interceded on the mountain, and Joshua won a great victory. God told Moses to write in a book that He had declared war on the Amalekites and would one day utterly destroy them because of what they had done to His people. Moses reminded the Israelites of the Amalekites' treacherous attack before they entered the Promised Land (Deut. 25:17–19).

It was Saul, the first king of Israel, whom God commanded to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15); and he failed in his commission and lost his own crown. (It was an Amalekite who claimed he put Saul to death on the battlefield. See 2 Sam. 1:1–10.) Because Saul didn't fully obey the Lord, some Amalekites lived; and one of their descendants, Haman, determined to annihilate his people's ancient enemy, the Jews. It's worth noting that King Saul, a Benjamite, failed to destroy the Amalekites; but Mordecai, also a Benjamite (Es. 2:5), took up the battle and defeated Haman. It's also worth noting that the founder of the Amalekites was a descendant of Esau (Gen. 36:12), and Esau was the enemy of his brother Jacob. This was another stage in the age-old conflict between the flesh and the Spirit, Satan and the Lord, the way of faith and the way of the world.

Everything about Haman is hateful; you can't find one thing about this man worth praising. In fact, everything about Haman, *God hated!* "These six things the Lord hates, yes seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren" (Prov. 6:16–19, NKJV). Keep these seven evil characteristics in mind as you read the Book of Esther, for you will see them depicted in this depraved man.

2. His authority (Es. 3:1b)

At some time between the seventh and twelfth years of the reign of Ahasuerus (v. 7; 2:16), the king decided to make Haman chief officer in the empire. Think of it: Mordecai had saved the king's life and didn't receive a word of thanks, let alone a reward; but wicked Haman did nothing and was promoted! There are many seeming injustices in this life; yet God knows what He's doing and will never forsake the righteous or leave their deeds unrewarded. (See Ps. 37.)

Haman probably fawned and flattered his way into this powerful new position because that's the kind of man he was. He was a proud man, and his purpose was to achieve authority and recognition. As we have seen, Ahasuerus was a weak and gullible man, susceptible to flattery and anxious to please people; so Haman's task wasn't a difficult one.

Some Bible students have seen in Haman an illustration of the "man of sin" who will one day appear and ruthlessly rule over humanity (2 Thes. 2; Rev. 13). Haman was given great authority from the king, and Satan will give great power to this wicked world ruler we call the Antichrist (Rev. 13:2, 4). As Haman hated the Jews and tried to destroy them, so the Antichrist will usher in a wave of worldwide anti-Semitism (12:13–17). At first, he will pretend to be friendly to Israel and will even make a covenant to protect them, but then he will break the covenant and oppose the very people he agreed to help (Dan. 9:24–27). As Haman was ultimately defeated and

judged, so the Antichrist will be conquered by Jesus Christ and confined to the lake of fire (Rev. 19:11–20).

God permitted Haman to be appointed to this high office because He had purposes to fulfill through him. (See Rom. 9:17.) God takes His promises seriously and will not break His covenant with His people. My friend J. Vernon McGee used to say, “The Jew has attended the funeral of every one of the nations that tried to exterminate him”; and Haman was not to be an exception.

What people do with authority is a test of character. Do they use their authority to promote themselves or to help others? Do they glorify themselves or glorify God? Daniel was given a high position similar to Haman’s, but he used his authority to honor God and help others (Dan. 6). Of course, the difference between Daniel and Haman is that Daniel was a humble man of God while Haman was a proud man of the world.

3. His vanity (Es. 3:2–6)

Not content with merely having a high office and using it, Haman wanted all the public recognition and honor that he could secure. Although the ancient people of the Near East were accustomed to giving public displays of homage, the king had to issue a special edict concerning Haman, or the people would not have bowed down to him. Haman was a small man in a big office; and the other nobles, more worthy than he, would not willingly recognize him. This fact is another hint that Haman got the office not by earning it but by stealing it. If he were a worthy officer, the other leaders would have gladly recognized him.

Pride blinds people to what they really are and makes them insist on having what they really don’t deserve. The British essayist Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864) wrote, “When little men cast long shadows, it is a sign that the sun is setting.” Haman was a little man, indeed, but his vanity compelled him to make himself look and sound bigger than he really was.

“Fools take to themselves the respect that is given to their office,” wrote Aesop in his fable “The Jackass in Office”; and it applies perfectly to Haman. He was recognized, not because of his character or his ability, but because of the office he filled and because of the edict of the king. “Try not to become a man of success,” said Albert Einstein, “but try to become a man of value.” Men and women of value earn the recognition they deserve.

Haman’s promotion may have brought out the worst in Haman, but it brought out the best in Mordecai; for Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman. It must be remembered, however, that the Jews didn’t violate the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4–6) when they bowed down before people in authority any more than Christians do today when they show respect to leaders. For instance, Abraham bowed down to the sons of Heth when he negotiated with them for Sarah’s grave (Gen. 23:7). Also Joseph’s brothers bowed down before Joseph, thinking he was an Egyptian official (42:6). David even bowed down to Saul (1 Sam. 24:8), and Jacob and his family bowed before Esau (Gen. 33:3, 6–7). The Jews even bowed to one another. (See 2 Sam. 14:4 and 18:28.)

There were crowds of people at the gate, and some of them would be pleading for Haman to intercede for them. Consequently, Haman didn’t notice that Mordecai was standing up while everybody else was bowing down. The other officials at the gate questioned Mordecai about his behavior, and it was then that Mordecai openly announced that he was a Jew (Es. 3:3–4). For several days, the royal officials discussed the matter with Mordecai, probably trying to change his mind; and then they reported his behavior to Haman. From that time on, Haman watched Mordecai and nursed his anger, not only toward the man at the gate, but also toward all the Jews in the empire.

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow down to Haman? What was there about being a Jew that prohibited him from doing what everybody else was doing? Even if Mordecai couldn't respect the man, he could at least respect the office and therefore the king who gave Haman the office.

I think the answer is that Haman was an Amalekite, and the Amalekites were the avowed enemies of the Jews. The Lord swore and put in writing that He had declared war on the Amalekites and would fight them from generation to generation (Ex. 17:16). How could Mordecai show homage to the enemy of the Jews and the enemy of the Lord? He didn't want to be guilty of what Joab said about King David, "You love your enemies and hate your friends" (2 Sam. 19:6, NKJV).

Mordecai's controversy with Haman was not a personal quarrel with a proud and difficult man. It was Mordecai's declaration that he was on God's side in the *national* struggle between the Jews and the Amalekites. Mordecai didn't want to make the same mistake his ancestor King Saul had made in being too lenient with God's enemies (1 Sam. 15). Because Saul compromised with the Amalekites, he lost his crown; but because Mordecai opposed them, he eventually gained a crown (Es. 8:15).

Keep in mind that the extermination of the Jews would mean the end of the messianic promise for the world. The reason God promised to protect His people was that they might become the channel through whom He might give the Word of God and the Son of God to the world. Israel was to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:7-18). Mordecai wasn't nurturing a personal grudge against Haman so much as enlisting in the perpetual battle God has with those who work for the devil and try to hinder His will in this world (Gen. 3:15).

Mordecai is not the only person in the Bible who for conscience' sake practiced "civil disobedience." The Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's orders and refused to kill the Jewish babies (Ex. 1:15-22). Daniel and his three friends refused to eat the king's food (Dan. 1), and the three friends also refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 3). The apostles refused to stop witnessing in Jerusalem and affirmed, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). That statement can be a wonderful declaration of faith or a cowardly evasion of responsibility, depending on the heart of the person saying it.

But please note that, in each of these instances, *the people had a direct word from God that gave them assurance they were doing His will*. And further note that, in every instance, the believers were kind and respectful. They didn't start riots or burn down buildings "for conscience' sake." Because civil authority is ordained of God (Rom. 13), it's a serious thing for Christians to disobey the law; and if we're going to do it, we must know the difference between personal prejudices and biblical convictions.

Something else is involved: By confessing that he was a Jew, Mordecai was asking for trouble for both himself and the other Jews in the empire. *Obedience to conscience and the will of God in defiance of civil law is not a casual thing to be taken lightly*. Some of the "conscience protesters" we've seen on television, however, have seemed more like clowns going to a party than soldiers going to a battle. They could never stand with people like Martin Luther who challenged prelates and potentates with: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise!"

Mordecai may have had shortcomings with reference to his religious practices, but we must admire him for his courageous stand. Certainly God had put him and Esther into their official positions so that they might save their people from annihilation. Their neglect of the Jewish law is incidental when you consider their courage in risking their lives.

Like a cancerous tumor, Haman's hatred for Mordecai soon developed into hatred for the whole Jewish race. Haman could have reported Mordecai's crime to the king, and the king would have imprisoned Mordecai or perhaps had him executed; but that would not have satisfied Haman's lust for revenge. No, his hatred had to be nourished by something bigger, like the destruction of a whole nation. As with Judas in the Upper Room, so with Haman in the palace: he became a murderer. Mark Twain called anti-Semitism "the swollen envy of pygmy minds." And he was right.

4. His subtlety (Es. 3:7–15a)

Follow the steps that wicked Haman took as he executed his plan to destroy the Jewish people.

He selected the day (Es. 3:7). Haman and some of the court astrologers cast lots to determine the day for the Jews' destruction. This was done privately before Haman approached the king with his plan. Haman wanted to be sure that his gods were with him and that his plan would succeed.

The Eastern peoples in that day took few important steps without consulting the stars and the omens. A century before, when King Nebuchadnezzar and his generals couldn't agree on a campaign strategy, they paused to consult their gods. "For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads, to use divination: he shakes the arrows, he consults the images, he looks at the liver" (Ezek. 21:21, NKJV). ["Shaking the arrows" was something like our modern "drawing straws," with the arrows marked with the possible choices of action. "Consulting images" had to do with seeking help from the images of the gods they carried with them. "Looking at the liver" involved offering an animal sacrifice and getting directions from the shape and marks on the liver.] The Babylonian word *puru* means "lot," and from it the Jews get the name of their feast, Purim (Es. 9:26).

It's interesting that Haman began this procedure in the month of Nisan, the very month in which the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egypt. As the astrologers cast lots over the calendar, month by month and day by day, they arrived at the most propitious date: the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (v. 13). This decision was certainly of the Lord, because it gave the Jews a whole year to get ready, and because it would also give Mordecai and Esther time to act. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov. 16:33, KJV).

Was Haman disappointed with this choice? He may have wanted to act immediately, catch the Jews off guard, and satisfy his hatred much sooner. On the other hand, he would have nearly a year in which to nurse his grudge and anticipate revenge, and that would be enjoyable. He could watch the Jews panic, knowing that he was in control. Even if the Jews took advantage of this delay and moved out of the empire, he would still get rid of them and be able to claim whatever goods and property they would have left behind. The plan seemed a good one.

He requested the king's permission (Es. 3:8–11). Like Satan, the great enemy of the Jews, Haman was both a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). To begin with, he didn't even give the king the name of the people who were supposed to be subverting the kingdom. His vague description of the situation made the danger seem even worse. The fact that these dangerous people were scattered throughout the whole empire made it even more necessary that the king do something about them.

Haman was correct when he described the Jews as a people whose “laws are different from those of all other people” (Es. 3:8). Their laws were different because they were God’s chosen people who alone received God’s holy law from His own hand. Moses asked, “And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?” (Deut. 4:8, NKJV) and the answer is: “None!”

The fact that one man, Mordecai, disobeyed one law was exaggerated by Haman into the false accusation that *all* the Jews disobeyed *all* the laws of the land. The Prophet Jeremiah had instructed the Jews of the Exile to behave as good citizens and cooperate with their captors (Jer. 29:4–7), and the evidence seems to be that they obeyed. If the Jews in the Persian Empire had been repeatedly guilty of sedition or treason, Ahasuerus would have known about it by now. And even if some Jews in a few towns did disobey the king’s laws, why should the whole nation of Israel be destroyed for the crimes of a few?

Haman’s *coup de grace* came at the end of his speech when he offered to pay the king 10,000 talents of silver for the privilege of ridding the empire of these dangerous people. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (Book III, Section 95), the annual income of the entire Persian Empire was 15,000 talents of silver. In effect, Haman was offering the king an amount equivalent to two thirds of that huge amount. Haman must have been a fabulously wealthy man. Of course, he hoped to recoup some of this amount from the spoils taken from the Jews.

In Esther 3:11, the king’s response (“The silver is given to thee,” KJV) gives the impression that Ahasuerus rejected the money and offered to pay the expenses himself. In typical Oriental fashion, the king politely rejected the offer (“Keep the money,” NIV), fully expecting Haman to insist that he accept it. (See Abraham’s bargaining with the sons of Heth, Gen. 23.) Haman knew that the Greek wars had impoverished the king’s treasuries, and he would never have offered so much money to so mighty a ruler if he didn’t really intend to pay it. (See Es. 4:7.)

Without asking any questions, the king gave Haman his royal signet ring (see 8:2, 8), which granted him the authority to act in the king’s name. He could write any document he pleased and put the king’s seal on it, and the document had to be accepted as law and obeyed. It was a foolish thing for Ahasuerus to do; but true to character, he acted first and regretted it afterward. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Prov. 18:13, NKJV).

He immediately spread the word (Es. 3:12–14). Unknown to the Jews who were getting ready to celebrate Passover, Haman was busy with the king’s secretaries, writing out the new law and translating it into the various languages of the peoples within the empire. In verse 13, the words of the law are similar to the instructions Samuel gave to King Saul when he sent him to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–3). The one important difference was that Saul was not permitted to take any of the spoil, while Haman and his helpers hoped to plunder the Jews and accumulate great wealth. The official document was given to the royal couriers, who quickly carried it to every part of the empire.

If, in an ancient kingdom, a message of bad news could be so quickly prepared, translated, and distributed, why does it take the church so long to disseminate the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? To be sure, we have more people in our modern world than Ahasuerus had in his empire, but we also have better means of communication and transportation. *The problem must be with the couriers.* The message is ready to go, but we don’t have enough people to carry it and enough money to send them.

The work was done quickly because Haman didn’t want Ahasuerus to change his mind. Once the law was written and sealed, the doom of the Jews was also sealed; for the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be altered (Es. 1:19; 8:8; Dan. 6:8). Haman’s subtle plan had worked.

5. His apathy (Es. 3:15b)

Haman could send out the death warrants for thousands of innocent people and then sit down to a banquet with the king! What a calloused heart he had! He was like the people the Prophet Amos described: “that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph” (Amos 6:6). However, in the end, it was his own death warrant that Haman had sealed; for within less than three months, Haman would be a dead man (Es. 8:9).

Helen Keller said, “Science may have found a cure for most evils, but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings” (*My Religion*, p. 162). Jesus vividly illustrated that apathy in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He pointed out that two religious men, a priest and a Levite, ignored the needs of the dying man, while the Samaritan, a hated outsider, sacrificed to take care of him. Jesus also made it clear that loving the Lord ought to make us love our neighbor, and our neighbor is anyone who needs us.

Therefore, before we condemn wicked Haman, let’s examine our own hearts. Billions of lost sinners in today’s world are under a sentence of *eternal* death, and most Christians do very little about it. We can sit at our church banquets and Sunday dinners without even thinking about helping to get the message out that “the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

In June 1865, missionary to China, J. Hudson Taylor, had gone to stay with friends at Brighton, a popular British resort city by the sea. He was weary and ill and seeking the will of God for the future of his ministry. On Sunday, June 25, “unable to bear the sight of rejoicing multitudes in the house of God,” he went for a walk on the sands and wrestled with God in agony of soul. God met him in a fresh way, and he trusted God to provide twenty-four workers to labor with him in China. Two days later, he went to the London & County Bank and opened an account in the name of the China Inland Mission! It was the beginning of a miracle ministry that continues today. (See Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God, pp. 31–32.)

The phrase in the account that tugs at my heart is “unable to bear the sight of rejoicing multitudes in the house of God.” Certainly, it’s good to rejoice in the Lord and to do it in His house, but rejoicing must never be a substitute for responsibility. As a popular Gospel song expresses it: “God’s tables are full, but His fields are empty.” We all want to enjoy the feast, but we don’t want to share the message. We don’t have to be hardened unbelievers like Haman to be apathetic and unconcerned about the plight of the world’s billions of lost souls.

In contrast to the happiness of the king and his prime minister were the heaviness and bewilderment of the people in Shusan, Gentiles and Jews alike. What had caused this sudden change in policy? Why were the Jews suddenly targeted as enemies of the empire? Was there any way of escape?

The situation was not hopeless, however, for God had two people prepared and in place—Mordecai and Queen Esther—and He was ready to act.

Martin, J. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 705-706) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

2. HAMAN PROMOTED (3:1–6)

3:1. **Haman** was promoted to the highest position by **Xerxes**. This occurred **after these events** (i.e., after Mordecai saved the king from the assassination and the two men were executed). It is reasonable to suppose that Mordecai expected a reward for his work on behalf of the king. But no reward was given then, possibly because of some bureaucratic bungle. Later this neglect appalled and surprised the king (cf. 6:1–3).

Because Haman was an **Agagite**, some have supposed that he was descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:8). However, it seems unlikely that a high-ranking Persian official would be related to a west Semite who lived 600 years earlier. Archeologists have uncovered an inscription which indicates that Agag was also the name of a province in the Persian Empire. This probably explains why Haman was called an Agagite.

3:2–4. Haman's promotion meant that the other nobles had to kneel **down** to him, that is, they had to pay him special respect. This was not an act of worship, such as that commanded of the three Hebrew young men in Daniel 3:8–15. Since the **officials at the king's gate** had to kneel before **Haman**, the people probably also had to bow before the king himself. **Mordecai** said he would not bow to **Haman** (cf. Es. 5:9) because **he** (Mordecai) **was a Jew**. Probably this persistent (**day after day**) refusal stemmed more from pride than from religious scruples. For several years **Mordecai** had not let Esther tell the king she was a Jewess (2:10, 20), but now Mordecai was using their national heritage as an excuse for not giving honor to a high Persian official.

3:5–6. **Haman ... enraged** by Mordecai's refusal (cf. 5:9), set out to find **a way to kill all ... the Jews**, not just **Mordecai**. This was an early case of anti-Semitism. In this literary plot, a climax is now reached in the tension. (Later a second climax was reached when Haman was revealed to be the plotter against the Jews; 7:6.) If the Jews were killed **throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes**, this would include those in the land of Palestine. These latter Jews were faithful to the Lord, worshiping in the rebuilt temple and living according to the stipulations of the Law (cf. comments on Ezra 1–6). A massive execution of thousands of Jews would thwart God's program. However, God cannot be thwarted (Job 42:2). He can overturn man's diabolical efforts, sometimes by miraculous acts, and sometimes through seeming acts of happenstance as in the following sequence. God is always working on behalf of His people.

B. King persuaded by Haman to destroy the Jews (3:7–15)

1. LOT CAST BY HAMAN (3:7–9)

3:7. The author included a seemingly obscure part of the account by recording that Haman used a **pur**, a Babylonian word for **the lot**, to decide when the Jews should be killed. The original readers of this book would have understood that God was working to protect His people even in the timing of events. As things worked out, the Jews had almost a year in which to prepare themselves for the conflict with their enemies.

A little more than four years had gone by since Esther had become queen, in 478 B.C. (2:16). On the first day of the year, in **Nisan** (April–May) 474 B.C., at the beginning of Xerxes' **12th year**, the **pur** was cast **to select a day and month**. **Pur** is the basis of the name of the Feast of Purim (9:26). Presumably the day selected was when the execution of the Jews was to begin. **Haman**, along with many people in the Persian Empire, was extremely superstitious (cf. 6:13). The Persian religious system stressed fate and chance. Haman was allowing fate, by the casting of the lot, to dictate his move against the Jewish nation. Little did he then realize that the God who created all things and controls all events was in control of that situation, the lot-casting

(Prov. 16:33; cf. comments on Acts 1:26). God had already prepared a means of delivering His people from Haman's plot. The month chosen by the lot was **the 12th month** (February–March)—almost a year later. The day, stated later (Es. 3:13), was the 13th of the month (cf. 8:12; 9:1).

3:8–9. **Haman** went in to the **king** to present his plan. Falsely accusing all Jews of refusing to **obey the king's laws**, he suggested that **the king** would be better off if the Jews, **scattered** throughout the empire, were exterminated. Haman said he himself was willing to bear the costs involved in carrying out this **decree**. Haman must have been a man of immense wealth. As the highest official he undoubtedly had many opportunities to add to his personal fortune. **Ten thousand talents of silver** weighed about 750,000 pounds, an enormous amount worth millions of dollars in present-day currency. That was the staggering sum which Haman was willing to pay. Possibly this huge sum made the king suspicious of Haman. Surely he could not have acquired so much money without being crooked. (Interestingly, however, the king did not make him pay the money; v. 11.) At that time Persia used silver as its monetary standard.

2. KING'S PERMISSION GIVEN (3:10–11)

3:10–11. Xerxes, as before, was easily influenced by his officials (cf. 1:16–22; 2:2–4). He accepted Haman's advice and acquiesced. By giving his **signet ring** to **Haman**, Xerxes was allowing **the enemy of the Jews**, as Haman was now called, to send out a proclamation to the empire in the king's name. Five times in the Book of Esther, **Haman** is called the Jews' enemy (cf. 7:6; 8:1; 9:10, 24). The signet ring, when impressed on clay, made a special imprint, which, like a signature, represented the king's authority (cf. 3:12; 8:2, 8; Gen. 41:42; Dan 6:17; Hag. 2:23). The king noted that Haman could **do with the people as he pleased**. Little did **the king** realize that his queen, Esther, was a Jewess and would be included in this hideous plan.

3. PROCLAMATIONS SENT OUT (3:12–15)

3:12–15. **Haman's** proclamation, sent out under **the king's** name to all the **provinces** and in various languages (cf. 1:22), called for the death of **all** Jewish people including **women and little children**. Haman intended to rid the world of God's covenant people. Also, the executioners were ordered to confiscate property owned by **Jews**. The day the decree was dispatched was in March 474 B.C. (On the quick dispatching of this edict see comments on 1:22.)

The edict ... bewildered the people in **the city of Susa** (cf. 8:15). Apparently, such a decree had never before come from the royal court. Haman's bloodthirstiness, along with Xerxes' seeming indifference to such atrocities, was incredible even to a sophisticated society which was used to cruel behavior. Perhaps other minority populations wondered if they would be the next to be annihilated.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (pp. 723-725). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

3:2 Mordecai's obedience to the civil authorities had a limit. It stopped at the point where his loyalty to the civil authorities violated the biblical mandate. As a Jewish man, if Mordecai bowed

down to Haman, he would have violated the covenant obligation of obedience to God above all other allegiances (Ex 20:3).

3:6 Haman’s intention to eradicate all the Jews in Ahasuerus’ kingdom revealed a horrible prejudice that is inexcusable. It is never permissible to persecute a person because of religion, race, or ethnicity. Every person is created in the image of God, regardless of these differences (Gn 1:26–27). All deserve equal treatment and respect.

3:11 Some critics doubt that the king would approve the eradication of an entire race of people within his kingdom. However, there is historical evidence from this period of just such acts. Herodotus records an event some time before Darius became king, in which a group known as magi became so reviled by Persians that the Persians killed all of those they could find. Then the Persians instituted an annual festival known as *Magophonia* or “Killing of the Magi,” during which no Magus was to show himself in public for the entire day (*Her* 3:79).

Mathews, K. A. (1998). The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (pp. 195). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Haman’s Plan (3:1–15). The theme of power is continued by the introduction of Haman as second in position to the king. This incident took place about five years after the installation of Queen Esther (2:16; 3:7). Haman is identified as an “Agagite,” perhaps a descendant of the Amalekite king, Agag, who was defeated but spared by King Saul (1 Sam. 15). Israel and Amalek were enemies from Moses’ time (Exod. 17:8–16). For the author, the contention between Haman and Mordecai, a descendant of Kish (as was Saul), typified the enmity between Israel and the Gentiles. This Agagite, however, would not be spared.

While others bowed to Haman, Mordecai refused to worship him because of his Jewish faith—as Daniel had declined to worship Darius (Dan. 6). Haman masterminded a plot to exterminate all the Jews. The divinely appointed day and month was determined by the casting of the *pur*, meaning *lot* (Akkadian). The king was persuaded to permit the mass murder by official decree and sealed by the king’s own signet ring (see 8:2, 8). Couriers raced throughout the empire to deliver the decree that on the thirteenth day of Adar, some eleven months later, the Jews were to be destroyed. The common people of Susa were shocked by the cold-blooded decree in contrast to the conspirators, who meanwhile confidently celebrated.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Es 3:1-15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.