

ESTHER

For Such A Time As This

by

Carl Armerding

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CHAPTER THREE

A CRISIS IN THE MAKING

IN OUR STUDY of chapter 1 we suggested that there was reason to believe that a great social upheaval might have occurred if Vashti had not been deposed because she refused to obey the summons of King Ahasuerus. But in this chapter we see the beginnings of a crisis far more serious than that. In Haman we can easily see a prototype of more modern anti-Semites such as Adolf Hitler, Julius Streicher and others. But Haman is by no means the first of these Jew-baiters. It must not be overlooked that the main reason why Satan has plotted from time to time to exterminate the Jew is because the Seed, which was to bruise his head, was to come through that people. His bloody attempt to frustrate the divine prediction began with the slaughter of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain.

It has been pointed out by others that Pharaoh's attempt to destroy the firstborn of the Israelites was another link in the chain that was to extend all the way to Calvary and beyond. Pharaoh's reason for ordering the destruction of all boy babies born to Hebrew mothers was that he feared that they might soon outnumber the Egyptians. Therefore, he said to his people, **"Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we: come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land"** (Exodus 1:9, 10). From this we learn that he really did not wish to exterminate the Israelites, but he wanted to keep down the number of them so that they could be kept under control. Such was not the case with Haman as we shall see.

Haman is described here as **"the son of Hammedatha the Agagite."** There has been much discussion as to the exact meaning of the name **"Agagite."** Most conservative scholars are agreed that it is a title such as Pharaoh in the case of the kings of Egypt, and Abimelech in that of the kings of the Philistines. The earliest Biblical reference to Agag is found in the prophecy of Balaam who said of Israel's King that He **"shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted"** (Numbers 24:7).

The very fact that the Messiah is here compared with Agag gives to the latter an importance which is significant. The force of this is seen as one considers the further prophecies of Balaam, who had been hired, as we know, by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse Israel. Even though Balak had ordered Balaam to flee when he found that instead of cursing Israel he had blessed them three times, Balaam again took up his parable in which he becomes more specific than before.

Previously he had merely spoken of Israel's enemies in a general way (See Numbers 23:24 and 24:8). But in his final parable he says, **"There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth."**

But my main reason for calling special attention to this parable is the fact that when Balaam looked on Amalek he said, **"Amalek was the first of the nations; but his latter end shall be that he perish forever"** (Numbers 24:20).

The reason for this is given us in the words of Samuel when he said to King Saul, **"Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not. . . . And Saul smote the Amalekites . . . and he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag,"** for which he was sharply rebuked by the prophet who himself **"hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal"** (I Samuel 15:2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 33).

But since the prophecies of Balaam have to do with **"the latter days"** (Numbers 24:14) we need not be surprised to find successors to Agag rising up from time to time to frustrate if possible the purpose of God concerning His people Israel. Such we believe to be the case in the chapter now before us.

The Persian Empire in Esther's day included the former kingdom of the Amalekites, **"the first of the nations."** It is entirely possible that Haman may have been the heir to the throne of Amalek and for that reason was known as **"the Agagite."** Even if this title refers primarily to his father, Hammedatha, he would naturally inherit it from him. And even though he was not actually reigning as king at the time, there is nothing strange about his retaining the title. In much the same way we might refer to the descendants of the Bourbons, the Hapsburgs, and the Hohenzollerns today.

Our purpose in presenting all of the foregoing is to see in it a possible explanation for the promotion of Haman when Ahasuerus **"advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him."** The word for **"seat"** in this verse is the word commonly rendered *throne* all through the Old Testament. It is so rendered in Esther 1:2 and 5:1. That makes all the more remarkable the promotion of which we read here. But if Haman was **"in the royal line"** of the Amalekites, **"the first of the nations,"** then we can see a good reason why Ahasuerus would advance him to a place even above the princes that were with him.

From Esther 1:14 we have learned that there were **"seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat first in the kingdom."** But they were made subordinate to Haman who must have been second only to the king himself.

"And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him."

Since, as we have already seen, the gates of the city were something more than a place of entry, these men were also men of distinction. They may have been former officers in the kingdoms which the Persians had subdued. Or, they may have been representatives of those kingdoms.

In that case they would consider themselves equal to Haman. Hence, the necessity for a royal command to reverence Haman as one who was now superior to them.

But there was one among them who refused to obey the royal command. **“Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.”**

Just why he should be an exception now becomes a matter of inquiry on the part of his fellows who sit in the gate with him. They wanted to know why he was transgressing the king’s commandment. It looks as though he paid no attention to them at first. But they kept after him. And **“it came to pass, when they spoke daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai’s matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.”** Perhaps they, too, would like to be excused from having to bow down to Haman. But they could not use the same reason.

Mordecai did not refuse to obey the king’s command because he differed with his political views or for any reason like that. His reason for disobedience was not a matter of choice with him. It was God who had made him a Jew. The fact that he had to tell the others that he was a Jew is interesting. He had lived so long in Persia that he must have become like them. But when the test came, he did not hide the fact that he was not a Persian but a Jew. And we must admire him for that. And so, once again we see the hand of God using the commandment of Ahasuerus to compel His servant to reveal his identity even though it might cost him his life.

“And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.” So enraged was he that **“he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.”**

Just why the Jews should be referred to here as **“the people of Mordecai”** is not revealed unless it be that Mordecai was now identified as their representative on that council which sat **“in the king’s gate.”** But no matter what our position may be **“none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself”** (Romans 14:7).

The Devil hates the Lord’s people, not so much because of who they are, but because of what they are. Our Lord Jesus said, **“If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you”** (John 15:18, 19). And even though **“the people of Mordecai”** had sinned against the Lord, He did not cast them away. We like to think that Mordecai appreciated that and therefore refused to pay homage to another who would, if possible, usurp the place of God.

All of this happened **“in the first month, that is, the month Nisan.”** Nisan is the seventh month of the civil year and the first of the ecclesiastical, or sacred, year. It is the same as the month Abib (Exodus 13:4) which the Lord said was to be to them **“the beginning of months.”** It corresponds to our month of April. And it was **“in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus.”** That means that it was about five years after the coronation of Queen Esther. That event took place **“in the seventh year of his reign”** (Esther 2:16). For one full year, **“from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar,”** **“they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman.”**

It is very interesting to find that the word “**Pur**” comes from a primitive root meaning “*to crush, to break, and to bring to nought.*” In order to determine the right day on which to destroy all the Jews, they cast lots. Evidently “**the lot**” was called “**Pur**” in those days because they used rough stones or pebbles for this purpose. Perhaps there is some connection between the crushing, or breaking, and the broken pieces used in casting lots. At the same time there may be also a suggestion of the purpose of all this, that is, the crushing of the Jewish people.

Of course, the Jews themselves used the lot as we know from the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Moreover, we read in Proverbs 16:33 that “**the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.**” And it is very evident that the whole disposing of this lot was of the Lord. And thus we get another of those incidental touches in this Book of Esther to show us that God is watching over His own.

Having decided on the day of their destruction beforehand, Haman now goes to obtain the royal approval of his bloody scheme. He says not a word about his personal reasons for desiring the destruction of the Jews. He does not even mention Mordecai by name, nor bring any direct charge against him. He begins by saying, “**There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom.**”

In this respect they were different from the other nations which the Persians had subdued. It is reasonable to suppose that the other nations were kept within the former boundaries. But the Jew is different. And it is striking to see that Haman uses the very words that James uses when writing to this same people, addressing them as “**scattered abroad.**” Similarly, the Apostle Peter writes to “**the strangers scattered throughout Pontus,**” etc. They were scattered indeed, but it was God who had scattered them. But when He did, it was like seed that would take root and spring up in most unpromising soil. No weapon that was formed against them could prosper.

But Haman went on to say that “**their laws are diverse from all people.**” And in that he gave unwitting testimony to the distinctiveness of those laws which had been committed to them at Sinai by the hand of Moses. And no matter how far and wide the recipients may be scattered, this distinction abides. It was because that law was divine that it remained intact, even though those who received those “**lively oracles**” had repeatedly broken and even despised them. But we like to think that there was still a measure of obedience to that law. We believe that we can see some evidence of that in the fact that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Haman may have had some knowledge of the real reason why Mordecai would not bow down to him. And if Haman was really an Amalekite, then we can see, too, that there would be a natural hatred in the heart of Mordecai for one who represented one of the bitterest enemies of his people.

But Haman goes on to say, “**neither keep they the king’s laws: therefore it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.**” For this statement he offers no proof whatever. Had he carefully considered their past history as a nation, he would never have said that it was “**not for the king’s profit to suffer them.**” It is those nations which have not suffered, or tolerated them, who have been the losers. But the nations which have favored them have been blessed because of them.

Haman does not allow the king to decide their fate even though he is polite enough to say, “**If it please the king.**” He it is who wants it to “**be written that they may be destroyed.**”

And he stands ready to **“pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have charge of the business, to bring it into the king’s treasuries.”**

Inasmuch as the royal treasuries were quite exhausted at this time because of the expensive campaign against the Greeks, this would be welcome news. No doubt it was a deciding factor. A talent of silver, so we are told, was worth about \$2,000. Therefore ten thousand talents would be worth about twenty million dollars. That is a lot of money even at present values. But in that day it must have been worth a great deal more than it would be today. Where Haman was to get all of this money, we are not told. But we may get a hint later.

In giving his ring to Haman the king was really handing over that which would enable Haman to give his bloody plan the royal sanction. But the Scripture is careful to notice that the king **“gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews’ enemy.”**

And we believe that there is real significance in this repeated description of Haman. In addition to the royal ring we read that the silver was given to him, and the people also, to do with them as he liked. **“The silver”** here can hardly refer to the silver which Haman had offered to pay to the king, for it had not yet been paid. It probably refers to the silver of the people whom he now had the authority to exterminate. The confiscation of their goods would naturally follow their liquidation. In giving Haman their silver the king was merely being generous with that which was not his; Bankrupt though he was, he had to keep up the appearance of affluence. And his tribe has by no means died out as yet.

No plan for the evangelization of the world was ever carried out with more precision and attention to detail than we have here. **“Then were the king’s scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king’s lieutenants, and to the governors that; were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language.”**

The thirteenth day of the first month would be the day before the Passover had to be killed. By using the royal scribes to write out the proclamation, Haman would be spared the personal expense which would be involved in such a gigantic undertaking.

But it may also be that there were a good many scribes around just waiting for something to do. The lieutenants, governors, and rulers mentioned in this verse probably refer to the three grades of officers.

The highest of these would be the lieutenants, or satraps, “the official title of the viceroy, who, in behalf of the Persian monarch, exercised the civil and military authority in several small provinces combined in one government” (*Dictionary of the Bible*, by Davis).

The governors would be subordinate to these, whereas the rulers were “native authorities—the head men of the conquered peoples, to whom the Persian system allowed a considerable share of power” (*Pulpit Commentary*). Not one province was overlooked. And the decree was translated into the language of each province so that every last man, woman, and child would know what was to be expected. Would to God we could say as much for the good news of the Gospel!

All of this was done in the name of the King Ahasuerus, and sealed with his ring, the seal in this case being the equivalent of his personal signature.

From verse 13 we learn something of the contents of this fateful document. **“The letters were sent by posts into all the king’s provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.”**

As we read these words, we are reminded of the wording of a modern legal document. The objectives are stated in every possible way so that there may be no way of escape on the part of any who might dare to contest its meaning. And the **“posts”** who carried these letters to the different provinces were couriers who traveled on horseback from one station to another, fresh riders and fresh horses being provided as required to cover the longer distances. We may be sure that if they had had all the means of communication which we now have, they would have availed themselves of them. Should we do less to get out the Gospel to every creature?

In verse 14 we come to the publishing of the commandment to all the people. This is the third step in connection with this document. First it was written. Then it was delivered. And finally it was published. It looks as though the enemy had followed the divine pattern of the Gospel itself. And the couriers, **“hastened by the king’s commandment,”** lost no time in delivering it. The fact that **“the decree was given in Shushan the palace”** shows that it came right from headquarters, as we would say. And so confident are **“the king and Haman”** that their orders will be faithfully carried out that they can sit down with all leisure **“to drink.”**

“But the city Shushan was perplexed.” It is generally thought that **“the city”** was distinct from **“the palace.”** The common people were evidently filled with apprehension. They probably took slight comfort from the fact that only Jews were involved at the time. It might be their turn next.

And history has shown that again and again the fate of Gentiles has been bound up with the fate of the Jews. Even if every Jew in the country were destroyed, he who is a murderer from the beginning would soon be looking for fresh victims. He is well named Apollyon, the Destroyer.

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