

III. Perverseness of Haman, Chapter 3

A. Scorn of Mordecai

TEXT: 3:1-6

- 1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.
- 2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed down, and did reverence to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence.
- 3 Then the king's servants, that were in the king's gate said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?
- 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake 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.
- 5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.
- 6 But he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasureus, even the people of Mordecai.

Today's English Version, 3:1-6

Some time later King Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the position of prime minister. Haman was the son of Hammedatha, a descendant of Agag. The king ordered all the officials in his service to show their respect for Haman by kneeling and bowing to him. They all did so, except for Mordecai, who refused to do it. The other officials in the royal service asked him why he was disobeying the king's command; day after day they urged him

to give in, but he would not listen to them. "I am a Jew," he explained, "and I cannot bow to Haman." So they told Haman about this, wondering if he would tolerate Mordecai's conduct. Haman was furious when he realized that Mordecai was not going to kneel and bow to him, and when he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to do more than punish Mordecai alone. He made plans to kill every Jew in the whole Persian Empire.

COMMENTS

v. 1-4 *Insubordination of Mordecai*: Xerxes decided to promote a man named Haman. The name *Haman* in Hebrew means *violent one*, or, *riotous one*. Some think the name is strictly Persian and is an exact equivalent of the Greek "Eumenes," which means "well disposed." The Hebrew text has Haman's father, Hammedatha, as an Agagite. Some Jewish tradition would have Haman descended from the Amalekites (of king Saul's day) whose king was Agag. But the scriptures indicate that when Agag fell, he was the last of his house (I Sam. 15:33). The Assyrian King Sargon, father of Sennacherib, left an inscription (at Khorsabad) indicating that Agag was a territory adjacent to that of Media. The Septuagint (Old Testament in Greek language, written about 300 B.C.) calls Hammedatha, "the Bugaeon." The Bug River flows into the northern edge of the Black Sea. This could be the territory from which Haman's ancestors came. It is conjectured by some scholars that Hammedatha may be the same as the old Persian *Mahadata* which means "given by the moon." Others have thought the term *Agagite* was a title such as *Pharaoh*. In light of all the foregoing information it would seem more accurate to assume that Haman was truly Persian and definitely not related to any Canaanites such as the Amalekites. Haman certainly gave his sons Persian names (cf. Esth. 9:7-9).

Haman was promoted above all *hassarim* (Hebrew for *princes*). In the language of ancient Turkey he would be called a *grand vizier* (prime minister), a prince of princes. Haman actually became second *ruler* in the kingdom of Persia.

It has been suggested that Haman was of lowly origin and not from one of the "first" families of Persia. This may account for the emphasis placed on an apparent need of Haman to have everyone do obeisance toward him. In ancient times emperors and noblemen ruled as absolute despots and common men were so servile that a man appointed second ruler in an empire would receive the profoundest homage and reverence from all. The very fact that the "king" (emperor) had *commanded* all who were in the palace gates to do obeisance to Haman indicates that some might deliberately refuse to do so. Indeed, there was one who did not bow down and pay reverence to Haman — Mordecai.

Why did Mordecai disobey the orders of the emperor to do honor to Haman? We are not told, unless Mordecai's bold revelation that he was a Jew had something to do with his reason for disobedience. There is a Jewish tradition (Midrash) that Haman wore an image of an idol on his clothing, and Mordecai disobeyed considering such obeisance tantamount to idolatry. It is possible that promotion to second in the kingdom would bring with it the office of high-priest to the pagan religion of Persia. It has also been suggested that advancement to the second highest position in the empire may have caused Haman to claim divine honors for himself. We know that men in high positions of other empires did claim deity and demand worship from their subjects. Daniel's three Hebrew companions were thrown into Nebuhadnezzar's fiery furnace for refusing to worship the emperor's image.

All the other gate-keepers of the king's palace were obeying the king's commandment. The word for *commandment* is *mitzevath* in Hebrew and not the word *dath* (law) which we had in chapter one. Mordecai's contemporaries seem very anxious to protect Haman's honor. Their concern was very plainly prompted by jealousy. At first they probably said to themselves, "How does Mordecai get by without humbling himself before Haman, the low-born upstart, when we have to bow down and demonstrate servility every time Haman passes by this gate?" They thought Mordecai esteemed himself better than they. These gate-keepers kept badgering Mordecai for some explanation as to why he did

not show reverence to Haman until Mordecai told them he was a Jew. That was his excuse. Perhaps Mordecai added more than is recorded; perhaps he told them of his religious scruples. Whatever the case, the gate-keepers made it a point to inform Haman of Mordecai's disobedience to the royal edict. The text says they wanted to see whether Mordecai's "matters" would stand. The word translated "matters" is *davar* in Hebrew and means fundamentally, *speech, word*. *Davar* may also mean *business, occupation, reason* or *cause*. Apparently, these contemporaries were anxious to see if Mordecai's reason (Jewishness) was sufficient to keep Haman from taking his position of gate-keeper away from him.

v. 5-6 *Indignation of Haman*: Apparently Haman was not aware of Mordecai's irreverence until told by the other gate-keepers. When Haman saw it for himself he was infuriated. The Hebrew word *chemah* is translated *wrath* and means literally, *on fire, inflamed, burning* with anger. It is the same word used to describe Nebuchadnezzar's anger (Dan. 3:13, 19) when the Hebrews would not bow down and worship his image. The LXX (Septuagint) describes Haman's wrath with the Greek word *sphodra* which means *vehement, exceedingly*. Haman dismissed the idea of taking out his rage on just one Jew. He wanted every Jew in the empire of Persia to die because Mordecai refused to show him honor.

Mordecai's insult was based on his ethnic origin—he would not do obeisance *because* he was a Jew. Perhaps if Mordecai had offered some other excuse Haman might have demanded only the life of Mordecai. Jewish commentators see anti-Semitism as Haman's basic motive rather than wounded pride. It is very evident that Haman's first reaction was from wounded pride. And if one Jew refused to honor Haman's position, they all would, reasoned Haman, therefore they shall all be slain.

B. Subterfuge of Haman

TEXT: 3:7-11

7 In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before

Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

- 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.
- 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.
- 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.
- 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

Today's English Version, 3:7-11

In the twelfth year of King Xerxes' rule in the first month, the month of Nisan, Haman ordered the lots to be cast ("purim" they were called) to find out the right day and month to carry out his plot. The thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, was decided on.

So Haman told the king, "There is a certain race of people scattered all over your empire and found in every province. They observe customs that are not like those of any other people. Moreover, they do not obey the laws of the empire, so it is not in your best interests to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, issue a decree that they are to be put to death. If you do, I guarantee that I will be able to put 375 tons of silver into the royal treasury for the administration of the empire."

The king took off his ring, which was used to stamp proclamations and make them official, and gave it to the enemy of the Jewish people, Haman son of Hammedatha, the descendant of Agag. The king told him, "The people and their money are yours; do as you like with them."

COMMENTS

v. 7-8 *Perjury*: In the first month which is called Nisan, Haman made his genocidal plans for the Jewish people. Nisan was the first month of the Jewish religious calendar. The word *Nisan* (meaning, "the month of flowers") was the word the Jews of the Babylonian exile substituted for the old Mosaic name of the first month, *Abib*. Nisan is comparable to March-April of the Gregorian calendar. The twelfth year of Xerxes is 474 B.C. The word *Pur* in Hebrew is probably a word borrowed from the Assyrian word *puru* which means *stone*. It came to mean a *lot* for casting to determine an issue. The casting of lots was a familiar practice of ancient Eastern civilizations, even of the Hebrews (cf. Prov. 16:33; Num. 26:55; Ezek. 48:29; Prov. 18:18; Jonah 1:7; Acts 1:26, etc.). Lots were drawn or thrown in various ways; sometimes by means of stone or ivory dice; sometimes by sets of intricately carved wooden sticks; by strips of parchment and other means. Haman's lots were probably some type of numbered or figured stones.

Haman cast lots to decide the day of the month and the month of the year. The lots fell upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (according to the Jewish calendar) Adar. *Adar* is the same as February-March (3:13). It appears that Haman tried the lot over and over until it finally signaled the above date. We are not to suppose that Haman took a whole year to cast the lots. In approximately 365 throws of the lots a decision would have to be reached. That would take no more than an hour or two. Casting the lots was, according to pagan superstition, leaving the decisive choice up to the gods of Fortune or Fate. This was to give divine sanction to the choice. Little did Haman know that the God of Mordecai and the Jews and of all men—the only real and true God—was taking a divine hand in the affairs of the Persian-Jewish confrontation. Having "religiously" decided which day he should kill the Jews, Haman proceeds with the next phase of his planned mass murder. He will go to the emperor with his lies about the Jewish people.

Haman's casual statement, "There is a certain people scattered

abroad . . ." does not immediately impress us with the enormity of what he is about to propose. He is about to call for the extermination of the whole world-wide Jewish community. "All the provinces of thy kingdom" would include the vast territory from India in the east, to Asia Minor in the west, Ethiopia in the south and the Caucasus Mountains (of southern Russia) in the north. It would include the Jews who had returned to Palestine a hundred years earlier. How many Jews would this include? We can only conjecture—perhaps two or three million. The first captivity of the Jewish nation took place in 721 B.C. (at the hands of the Assyrians); the second captivity took place in 606-586 B.C. (at the hands of the Babylonians.) Esther, Mordecai, and Haman are one hundred years and perhaps three generations later. This allows plenty of time for wide dispersion and extensive multiplication of the Jewish people. Josephus records that a million Jews were slain in the siege of Jerusalem alone in 66-70 A.D. There may have been even more than 3,000,000 Jews dispersed throughout the Persian empire in Esther's day. The Sibylline Oracles (250 B.C.) said, "Every land and every sea is full of thee." (see *ISBE*, art., "Dispersion," Vol. II, pg. 855-859 for detailed information on world-wide Judaism). The magnitude of the atrocity is almost incredible when it is realized that Haman is planning to eradicate a whole race of people—all because his pride has been wounded by one man! Haman's first assault upon the Jewish people is that they "are all over the place."

Next, he brings up their cultural peculiarities. "Their laws are diverse from those of every people." That is a true statement but it should be qualified. Of course, the Jews had religious doctrines and practices quite different from the heathen peoples among whom they lived. Because the Jews worshipped the One, True God, and had His Divine revelation in human language, their ethics were much higher and their human relationships much more benevolent than that of the heathen. Their laws of diet and dress were directly connected to their religion. Sometimes the religious scruples of the Jews were in conflict with the political ideologies of pagan nations because pagan emperors claimed divinity and required worship from all subjects. When Jews were

left free to worship according to the dictates of their *torah*, they were otherwise good and loyal citizens of any land in which they might dwell (e.g. Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, etc.). The Jewish Talmud represents Haman as saying, "They do not eat with us, nor drink with us, nor intermarry with us." Since the Persians allowed all conquered nations to retain their own religious and cultural practices so long as they did not constitute sedition, Haman's information poses no real threat to the security of Xerxes' empire. Haman's next accusation, "They do not keep the king's laws" is, *if true*, a serious threat to Xerxes and Persia. This was not true (except for cases mentioned earlier having to do with Jewish scruples against any form of idolatry). The Jews were law abiding citizens. Many Jews made great contributions in politics, science, the arts and finance in every country where they dwelt. Jeremiah the prophet instructed his countrymen who were about to be exiled into the Mesopotamian area, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5-7). Rabbinic principle was established from Jeremiah's instructions, "The law of the country in which you live is binding." The Jews were faithful and loyal subjects of the Persian emperors from Cyrus the Great to Darius Codomannus.

v. 9-11 *Payoff*: Haman's rage is so consuming he is willing to pay a tremendous bribe to the emperor. Haman's offer is ten thousand talents of silver. This is a sum equivalent to approximately \$10,000,000 U.S. currency. Herodotus estimated the sum equal to the annual revenue in silver of the whole Persian empire. Haman's offer was probably tempting since Xerxes' recent military fiasco in Greece had drained the Persian royal treasury. When Xerxes gave his signet ring to Haman he was allowing Haman to do what he asked with full sanction and authority of the imperial crown. The immediate response of Xerxes to the request of Haman, without any royal questions or investigations into the ethics or practicality of such genocide, reinforces the

characterization of Xerxes as an immature, quick-tempered, vacillating despot.

Xerxes' reply, "The silver is given to thee . . .," makes it appear that he refused the offer of Haman's ten thousand talents. But Mordecai's report of the incident to Hathach, Esther's attendant, implies that Xerxes did, after all, accept the money (cf. 4:7). What is apparently meant by Xerxes' reply is that Haman is authorized to destroy the Jews and plunder their possessions. The "silver" of v. 11 is the silver of the Jews that shall belong to Haman. Haman's bribe of ten thousand talents may be nearly recouped in his royal mandate to pillage the property of the whole Jewish citizenry of Persia.

Massacre of an entire race shocks the modern western mind. However, the Persian emperor just before Xerxes, Darius Hystaspis, ordered the extermination of the Magi (a whole race of Medes who had rebelled under Cambyses). This great massacre was commemorated annually in Persia. About 100 years before that a massacre of the Scythians had occurred. Recent modern totalitarian tyrants have also attempted genocide on various races and cultures.

C. Sentence of Xerxes

TEXT: 3:12-15

- 12 Then were the king's scribes called in the first month, on the thirteenth day thereof; and there was written according to all that Haman commanded unto the king's satraps, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the princes of every people, to every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written and it was sealed with the king's ring.
- 13 And letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, 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.

- 14 A copy of the writing, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published unto all the peoples, that they should be ready against that day.
- 15 The posts went forth in haste by the king's commandment, and the decree was given out in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was perplexed.

Today's English Version, 3:12-15

So on the thirteenth day of the first month Haman called the king's secretaries and dictated a proclamation to be translated into every language and system of writing used in the empire and to be sent to all the rulers, governors, and officials. It was issued in the name of King Xerxes and stamped with his ring. Runners took this proclamation to every province of the empire. It contained the instructions that on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, all Jews— young and old, women and children— were to be killed. They were to be slaughtered without mercy and their belongings were to be taken. The contents of the proclamation were to be made public in every province, so that everyone would be prepared when that day came.

At the king's command the decree was made public in the capital city of Susa, and runners carried the news to the provinces. The king and Haman sat down and had a drink while the city of Susa was being thrown into confusion.

COMMENTS

v. 12 Penned: *Scribes* were specially trained men who were held in great esteem by most ancient civilizations. They not only wrote the decrees of kings but also recorded histories and were often called upon to interpret past precedents and offer advice to kings

in making immediate decisions inasmuch as their whole lives were devoted to recording and studying royal chronicles. Xerxes called for the royal scribes and on the thirteenth day of Nisan (first month, cf. 3:7) and ordered that all Haman had suggested should be written in all the languages currently used by conquered peoples throughout the whole Persian empire. To each copy of the decree that was to be sent to governors and princes of provinces, the emperor affixed an impression of his signet ring in wax (sealed). Thus it became an official policy of the Persian empire that all Jews were to be slain.

v. 13-15 *Posted*: The Hebrew word *haratzim* means literally, *the runners*. The documents were sent out into the provinces of the empire through the Persian postal system. This was one of the outstanding contributions of the Persian culture to the civilizations following theirs—a fast and proficient postal system. The Persian emperor could expect to be in touch with the farthest reaches of his vast empire within one week's time (see Introduction, page 264). Persian mail-carriers were mounted on fast horses and had relay stations every 14 miles, much like the Pony Express in 19th century America.

What utter chaos and consternation such a decree would have. There is an ancient decree of Mithridates king of Pontus in Asia Minor (died 63 B.C.) sometimes cited as a parallel to this shocking decree of Xerxes: "He sent secret order to all the satraps and the mayors of cities that they should within the space of thirty days fall upon the resident Romans and Italians, upon their wives and children and upon all the freemen of Italian origin, and kill them and take their goods as possessions. When the appointed day came, there was wailing and lamentation in the whole of Asia."

The Persian empire (including the Jews in all provinces) had from nine to eleven months warning of the massacre that was to come. Haman had decided action was to begin on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar (Feb./Mar.). Modern Jews keep three days (13th, 14th and 15th of Adar) in connection with the feast of Purim; but they make the 13th a fast to commemorate the fast of Esther (4:16) and they keep the feast itself on the 14th and 15th. We shall discuss the feast of Purim in our comments on chapter nine.

Orders had been officially sent throughout the empire to massacre perhaps millions of people and the emperor and his prime minister sit down to feast and drink. How brutally callous! Well did the apostle Paul describe heathen civilizations in Romans, chapter one, who having refused to have God in their knowledge, become "foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." The majority of the Persian populace (especially of the royal city, Susa) was perplexed. It was an ominous decree for any citizen to read. If Haman was capable of such ruthless rage against the Jews, he could vent the same rage on any other segment or people within the vast empire of Persia. Perhaps there were also many non-Jews feeling compassion and sympathy toward their Jewish neighbors.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely!
2. Racial or cultural distinctives are often used as rationalizations for the real motives (pride, greed etc.) behind hatred and persecution.
3. Some people will compromise even the most fundamental standards of humaneness for a bribe.
4. When people refuse to have the One True God in their knowledge and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1), they inevitably harden their own consciences so that they can order millions to be murdered and sit down and celebrate it.

CHAPTER THREE REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did Haman come from?
2. Why did Mordecai not bow down and pay Haman homage?
3. Were the Jews not observing the king's laws?
4. In what ways are the "laws" of the Jews different from all other people?

5. How much did Haman offer to put in the king's treasury?
6. When is the month Adar?
7. How could the king's edict ever be delivered and understood by so many different races and cultures within the vast Persian empire?
8. How many Jews were to be killed?
9. What effect did this edict have upon the citizens of Susa?