

Esther Chapter 3

Esther 3:1 "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."

“After these things”: Sometime between the seventh (2:16), and twelfth year (3:7), of the king’s reign.

“The phrase “after these things” suggests that about four years had passed since Esther became queen.

The reference to the “Agagite” is reminiscent of the story (in 1 Samuel 15), when Saul is reprimanded for sparing King Agag. Later one of his descendants killed Saul (note Exodus 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Chron. 4:43). Haman was like his predecessors in that they “feared not God” (Deut. 25:18).

We do not know for sure exactly how much later this occurred. We can safely assume that it was several years however. There had been no mention of Haman, up until this time. There is nothing known about Agagites. For whatever reason, Haman had been elevated up to second in command under the king.

Esther 3:2 "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. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did [him] reverence."

Jews customarily bowed before their kings (2 Sam. 14:4; 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16). But when Persians bowed before their kings, they paid homage as to a divine being. The Spartans refused to bow before Xerxes for this reason (Herodotus). As a faithful Jew, Mordecai could not give such honor (Deut. 6:13-14), he “bowed not” before “Haman”, who expected to be revered. Daniel and his friends felt a similar conviction (Dan. Chapter 3). Mordechai is about to become the focus of anti-Semitism.

“Bowed not”: There is a question as to whether Esther and Mordecai were inclined to obey the Mosaic Law. This refusal may be more likely grounded in the family feud between the Benjamites and the Agagite, than Mordecai’s allegiance to the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6).

It was an oriental custom to bow to the king. Perhaps Haman had been someone who had not been regarded highly, and the order to bow to him would give him some respect. All of the servants of the king, who were about the level of Mordecai in authority, bowed to Haman. Mordecai refused to bow to him.

Esther 3:3 "Then the king's servants, which [were] in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?"

Observing the behavior of Mordecai towards Haman from time to time.

"Said unto Mordecai, why transgressest thou the king's commandment?" Of giving reverence to Haman, which they knew he could not be ignorant of.

It appears the servants did not want Mordecai to get into trouble for not bowing to Haman. They asked him why he didn't just go ahead and bow, and keep down trouble.

Esther 3:4 "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."

“He was a Jew”: It seems evident from Haman’s fury and attempted genocide, that there were strong anti-Semitic attitudes in Susa, which seems to explain Mordecai’s reluctance to reveal his true ethnic background.

It appears that Mordecai had explained to them that he was a Hebrew, and they were forbidden by their God to bow to a man. When he paid no attention to their warning, they told Haman. They were probably afraid that if they did not, Haman would punish them. They did not know whether Haman would accept that as an excuse not to bow, or not.

Esther 3:5 "And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath."

Josephus tells us, that Haman, taking notice of this behavior in Mordecai, asked him what countryman he was, and finding him to be a Jew, broke out into a violent exclamation at his insolence. And in his rage formed the desperate resolution, not only to be revenged on Mordecai, but to destroy the whole race of the Jews. Well remembering that his ancestors, the Amalekites, had been formerly driven out of their country, and almost exterminated by the Jews.

It is very apparent to me, that Haman never had much power before, and the power he had now as the number two man, made him excessively proud of himself.

Esther 3:6 "And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed 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."

“The people of Mordecai”: Haman was being satanically used to target the entire Jewish race in an unsuccessful attempt to change the course of redemptive history and God’s plans for Israel.

Haman was a very evil man. He would like to destroy all of the Jews in the kingdom of Persia, instead of just killing Mordecai. In the process, Mordecai and all of his relatives would die.

Esther 3:7 "In the first month, that [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], that [is], the month Adar."

According to many the subject of the origin of the Feast of Purim (lots), is the main theme of the book. (Early in April 474 B.C.), Haman had the astrologers and magicians cast the lot to determine which day of the year would bring destruction to Israel. Little did he realize that when "the lot is cast into the lap ... the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov. 16:33). The lot fell on the "twelfth month" (February – March), which not only gave Haman time to prepare but also, in the overruling providence of God, gave the Jews time to thwart his plan.

"Nisan": The time period March / April. Ironically, the Jews should have been celebrating the Passover to remind them of a former deliverance. This was the first month in the Persian calendar. The Persians cast Pur ("the lot"), to determine the day on which to destroy the Jewish race.

"Twelfth year" (ca. 474 B.C.), "Pur ... lot". A lot would be like modern dice which were cast to determine future decisions (compare the Hebrew lot, 1 Chron. 26:14; Neh. 10:34; Jonah 1:7). (Proverbs 16:33), states that God providentially controlled the outcome of the lot.

"Adar": Feb. / Mar. There would have been an 11 month interval between Haman's decree and its expected fulfillment.

This first month was the same as Abib, or our April. Esther married the king on the seventh year, so it appears she had been married to him over 4 years when this happened. It appears that Haman cast lots (Pur), to see what day and month he would set the massacre of the Jews. Adar would have been the same as our March.

Verses 8-11: Haman is careful to ingratiate himself with the king by appearing to be motivated only by "the king's profit". In effect, he offers the king a bribe (verse 9), which he expected to raise by confiscating the property of the Jews, "the thousand talents of silver", or about 12 million ounces. The king was not even interested enough to inquire who the people were. So he gave Haman his signet "ring". With this seal of executive power, Haman would be able to send letters in the king's name (verse 12). Later the ring was given to Mordecai (8:2, 8). Possibly to avoid the appearance of greed, Xerxes offered money to Haman. The king's utter indifference to the fate of millions of his subjects has found modern parallels in Hitler, Stalin, and Khrushchev.

Esther 3:8 "And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws [are] diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it [is] not for the king's profit to suffer them."

“A certain people”: Haman never divulged their identity.

There were probably a large number of Jews in this area at this time. Many of them had been allowed to go back to their homeland, but some, for one reason or another, had not gone back home. Haman was trying to stir the king up against them, by telling him they did not keep his laws. He was the same as accusing them of being traitors to the king.

Esther 3:9 "If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring [it] into the king's treasuries."

“Ten thousand talents”: The exact dollar amount is uncertain, but reportedly it would have weighed 375 tons and equaled almost 70% of the king’s annual revenue. Since this sum would have been derived from the plunder of the Jews, it indicates that they had grown prosperous.

So when Haman promised the greedy, recently defeated King Ahasuerus that sum if he signed a proclamation to “destroy” (literally “wipe out”), the Jews, he was promising great wealth. No doubt the money would come from the confiscated goods of the victims.

The king had trusted Haman enough, that he made him the next in authority to him. He had no reason to doubt that what Haman said was not true. Haman was trying to prove his sincerity in protecting the king by offering to pay for the destruction of them.

Verses 10-11: The king would have easily been eager to eliminate any rebellion against his authority (3:8), although he did not seem to be interested in the money.

To sign official documents, ancient kings would press their “signet ring”, imprinted with their distinctive royal symbol, into the soft wax placed on the document. By giving Haman this ring, the king also gave him his power.

Esther 3:10 "And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy."

“The Jews’ enemy” (compare 7:6; 8:1; 9:10, 24).

This is the signet ring of the king. Anything it was stamped on was an order of the king automatically. Haman hated the Jews.

Esther 3:11 "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."

With indifference which seems incredible, but which is quite in accordance with what we otherwise know of Xerxes. The king simply hands over to his minister the whole nation and their possessions to do with as he will. The king perhaps was glad to throw the cares of government on his minister, and was too lazy to form an opinion for himself, he was content to believe that the people (Jews), were a worthless, disloyal people.

“The silver is given thee, the people also”: Not that "the silver which thou hast given me is given back to thee," for the 10,000 talents had not been given, but only offered. Rather, "the silver of the people is given thee, together with the people themselves, to do with both as it pleases thee." Confiscation always accompanies execution in the East, and the goods of those who are put to death naturally reverts their property to the crown, which either seizes them or makes a grant of them (compare 8:11). Where the property of those of the Jews who should suffer death is granted to those who should slay them.

Of course, the king would not allow Haman to use his own money for this purpose. Haman could have all the silver he found on these people for himself after he killed them. The king felt that he could trust Haman, and he told him to do whatever he felt was necessary.

Verses 12-15: The date (in verse 12), was memorable to any Jew because it was the day before the slaying of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:6). Was God able to save His people now as He had done in the past?

Haman’s plan was so carefully crafted and communicated that everyone in the kingdom knew what it meant: “all the Jews” were to be annihilated.

Esther 3:12 "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; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring."

“Sealed ... king’s ring”: This would be equivalent to the king’s signature. The date has been calculated by historians to be April 7, 474 B.C.

These scribes would draw up the edict that would be sealed with the king's signet ring. They were always handy, because the king would have them draw up edicts for himself. It seems in

this case, the king did not even know what the wording of the edict was. He trusted Haman with all of that. This was sent to every province, so it had to be sent to Judah, as well.

Esther 3:13 "And 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."

“To destroy”: An ambitious plot to annihilate the Jews in just one day. The king had unwittingly approved this provision which would kill his own queen.

The letters were sent very much like our pony express worked. The letters were taken by horseback. They would be carried, until the horse and rider came to another station, and sent them by horseback from there. The contents of these edicts were that all of the Hebrew people should be killed, even the women and the children. They should be killed on March 13, which was several months away.

Esther 3:14 "The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day."

“A commandment”: It would be irrevocable (compare 1:19; 8:5-8).

Each province was to do their own killing on that particular day. It is difficult to understand why one person could have that much hate built up within him. He had planned to kill all the Jews. This reminds me of the hate that Hitler had.

Esther 3:15 "The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed."

“Was perplexed”: No specific reason is stated. Most likely even this pagan population was puzzled at the extreme and deadly racism of the king and Haman.

There was no reason to rush to get the letters out, but Haman wanted to make sure everyone knew. The people of Shushan could not understand this. The Persians had been good to the Jews in the past. Probably the king was not informed of the exact content of the letters. At least, we have not seen a Scripture where he knew. Remember, he had given his signet to Haman. Haman did the preliminaries. It seemed that Haman and the king were drinking friends.

Esther Chapter 3 Questions

1. Who did king Ahasuerus promote to second in command?

2. Who bowed to him?
3. Who was the exception to that?
4. It was an _____ custom to bow to the king.
5. What question did the other servants ask Mordecai?
6. Why was it so important to Haman that they bow to him?
7. When did they tell Haman about Mordecai?
8. How did Haman feel about Mordecai not bowing?
9. Who did Haman really want to kill?
10. What does "Pur" mean?
11. What month is the same as the first month mentioned in verse 7?
12. What lie did Haman tell the king?
13. Did Haman tell him the people were the Jews?
14. What did Haman suggest they do about this?
15. What did the king give Haman to use, that was a symbol of his authority?
16. What benefit does the king tell Haman will be his?
17. When were the scribes called to write the edict?
18. Who will the edicts be sent to?
19. Why did the king not know what was in the edict?
20. How were the letters sent?
21. Who were to be killed?
22. When was this to happen?
23. After the edict went out, what did Haman and the king do?
24. Why did the people of Shushan not understand this edict?
25. How could the king, possibly, not know what the edict said?