

A King-Sized Crisis
1 Samuel 15: 10-16a, 22-29 and Esther 3
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When the curtain fell last week, the newly crowned Queen Esther, together with her uncle Mordecai, had discovered and successfully foiled a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Act II closed with the two treasonous palace eunuchs hanging from the gallows and the incident duly recorded in the king's ledger book.

Act III, Scene 1: So, when Act 3 opens with the words, "After these things King Ahasuerus promoted...", we naturally expect Mordecai's name to be the next word we hear. But, we've been set-up. It's not Mordecai but a previously unnamed character, Haman, who receives promotion.

Haman comes from ominous ancestry that is largely lost on modern readers of Esther, but it's important enough for us to dig into his family tree a bit. We're told that Haman is the "son of Hammedatha the Agagite," and it is an identification that recalls a bitter memory for the Hebrews. 1 Samuel 15 records the story of King Saul's failure to kill King Agag when Israel defeated the Amalekites. This failure to follow God's instructions resulted in Samuel, the prophet, pronouncing the oracle that effectively stripped Saul of his kingship. Since Mordecai and Haman are direct descendants of these two arch-enemies, there is every reason for "bad blood" between them on the basis of their family history alone. When Ahasuerus promotes Haman instead of Mordecai, it adds insult to injury.

This bit of information may go a long way in explaining Mordecai's behavior in chapter 3. The king has issued a decree that all the empire's subjects are to show respect to Haman by bowing in his presence which was the ancient custom. Mordecai refuses to do so which is an act of civil disobedience, as direct and uncompromising a refusal as Queen Vashti's was in chapter 1. Some have suggested that Mordecai was refusing to worship Haman which recalls the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in similar circumstances. But, that explanation doesn't really fit the book of Esther and requires conjecture that goes beyond what the narrator actually tells us. It seems that the audience is left to wonder about Mordecai's motivation, just as we were with Vashti.

Mordecai, remember, is now in service to the king, being one of the officials that sits at the king's gate. His colleagues, to their credit, seem concerned about

Mordecai and the consequences of his decision. Rather than rush off and immediately report Mordecai's infraction, they try for several days to reason with him, hoping to prevail upon him to change his mind. Mordecai, however, remains steadfast and in addition, for the first time publicly reveals that he is a Jew. There is some sense in the language of verse 4 that, given this new information, the servants want to test Haman's prowess against the strength of Mordecai and his God, or perhaps, to test the Jewish God's loyalty to Mordecai.

Haman is, not surprisingly, enraged when he learns of Mordecai's refusal to bow down. What we are not prepared for is the intensity of his rage. Thinking it beneath him to "lay hands on Mordecai alone," Haman plots "to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai" throughout the entire Persian empire.

The disproportionate scope of Haman's rage is staggering. The fact that Haman is proposing genocide as a solution to one individual's lack of respect is unimaginable. Yet, we have seen clues, dropped like breadcrumbs along a path, that have served to hint at horrors to come. Disproportion, remember, was characteristic of the Persian court in each of the last two weeks. Ahasuerus's lavish banquets strained credibility in both length and opulence. The king's reaction to both the disobedient Vashti and the search for her replacement were "over the top." Then there is the matter of the apparently unjust promotion of Haman coming on the heels of Mordecai's act of loyalty. Throughout the story there has been a pattern of people getting far less—or more—than they deserve. Excess, disproportion, and overreaction are the order of the day in Ahasuerus's court. What we realize now, however, is that we "haven't seen anything yet." Haman makes Ahasuerus look like Mr. Moderation.

Act III, Scene 2: For all his fury, Haman is still a highly methodical man. In an act of ludicrous irony, he calls together a group of unnamed prognosticators to determine the auspicious day on which this mass murder will occur. Note that he doesn't use the casting of lots to determine a lucky day on which to take his outrageous proposal to the king. He is so confident of his success in that regard that the "lot," the *pur*, is cast to set the day for the genocide itself. This being settled, he can proceed to lay his plan before Ahasuerus, confident that everything has been done decently and in good order.

A brief aside about the casting of lots might be helpful. This was a practice that was common in the ancient world, including inside Israel. Haman was throwing the lot before his gods, relying on them to determine his "lucky day," the day on which his plans would meet with success and favor. The irony that the

audience sees that Haman does not, is that it is actually Mordecai's God who providentially uses the casting of lots to accomplish God's divine purposes. The date is set a full eleven months in the future, giving the Jews time to prepare and time for the story's plot to unfold.

With the date set, Haman goes before the king, and his argument before Ahasuerus is a triumph of misconstrual and manipulation. He implies that a certain people, as yet unnamed, have infiltrated the kingdom. They have different laws, holding themselves aloof from the Persians and perhaps, thinking they are better, they refuse to assimilate to local custom or submit to political accountabilities. Before the king can speak, Haman rushes on to help Ahasuerus draw the right conclusion by saying, "so it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them." Not wanting to appear to be overreaching, he continues, "If it pleases the king . . .", but what follows is what pleases Haman, and he wants it badly enough to even offer to pay for the genocide out of his own pocket. The excessive sum Haman offers is proof of just how much he hates Mordecai and by extension, all the Jews.

At this point, we wait along with Haman for the king's decision. Also, along with Haman, we know more than King Ahasuerus does. Haman, remember, has left out several significant details, not the least of which is a description of the incident that inspired his indignation. We might reasonably hope that a wise king would make some inquiries about the situation and thus discover the "spin" Haman has placed on the facts. If Ahasuerus had bothered to ask, he would certainly have discovered that the punishment was wildly out of proportion to the crime. But, Ahasuerus does not inquire. Just as we saw him do in chapter 1 with regard to Vashti and in chapter 2 with regard to the search for her replacement, the ever-pliable Ahasuerus takes the advice of his courtiers after hardly a moment's pause for consideration. The king removes his signet ring and hands it to Haman. This act gives Haman the power to do as he pleases, and with the king's backing, no less. Lest we miss the magnitude of this act, the narrator hammers it home by reminding us again of Haman's unambiguously ominous credentials: the king gave his ring to "Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews." As this scene draws to a close, Haman has his hands full, both literally and figuratively. He has the king's signet ring, of course. But, he also has the money to carry out his plan. Finally, in a terrifying flourish, Ahasuerus places the people themselves in Haman's hands, telling him to "do with them as it seems good to you." From Haman's perspective, he has it all.

Act III, Scene 3: With speed and efficiency to rival modern express mail, the edict is transcribed, translated and sent "to every province in its own script and

every people in its own language.” This description echoes chapter 1 exactly. There, remember, the decree attempted to dictate that all women should submit to their husbands. But, while the first decree was tinged with comic irony, this one is deadly serious. The only hint of irony is tragic irony, in that the edict is issued on the eve of Passover. For all intents and purposes, it looks as if the order for the Jews’ destruction has been issued on the eve of the anniversary of their greatest deliverance. Whether the juxtaposition is intended to inspire bitterness or hope is impossible to say.

The irrevocability of the edict is emphasized with the words, “it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king’s ring.” And, no one is to escape. Young and old, women and children are specified, and the attackers are given express permission to plunder. Haman is nothing if not efficient.

Yet there is a hint that he is even more sinister than we imagined. In his original proposal to the king, Haman had asked that a decree be issued for the people’s destruction. The written version of the decree stated that they were to “destroy, to kill and to annihilate all Jews.” While this might seem like an example of literary overkill, in the original language, it appears that Haman actually pulled the rhetorical wool over the king’s eyes. The words for “destroy” and “enslave” sound almost identical. A comparison in English would be the words “altar” and “alter”. In written form, their very different meanings would be impossible to confuse, but in Haman’s oral presentation before Ahasuerus, it would have been easy to sell the king on the enslavement of this unnamed people, without revealing his true intent to destroy them.

In the words of theologian Carol Bechtel, that Haman could stoop to this kind of rhetorical deception “catapults him into the category of evil genius. And it leaves [us] wondering if he will ever meet his match.”

This story continues to be rich with timeless truths that speak to our lives today. The first, I believe, has to do with anger. The Hebrew word *hamah* is a very strong term referring to an inner and emotional heat which rises and is fanned into a burning and consuming wrath. In the book of Esther, the term is used six times—four times of Ahasuerus and twice of Haman. In the king, anger seems to arise quick and then to subside, leaving a trail of impulsive, destructive damage in his wake. But, Haman seems to get mad, stay mad and then stoke his rage to get even. Men and women, anger that we feed and stoke, that we coddle, that we defend and indulge is ugly and far worse, it is dangerous—to ourselves and to others. Anger can serve a healthy function, to warn us of something that is wrong,

that is dangerous, or that is unjust. But, as theologian Dallas Willard challenges us, angry action is not an appropriate means to justice. “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.” (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 151) The truth is that the vast majority of our anger is about us and especially about defending our egos. Pay attention to it and get to the root of it.

Secondly, I was struck in this chapter with just how tempting it is to manipulate others by telling them only part of the truth, or by putting a particular “spin” on the facts in order to lead them to the conclusion or decision *I* want them to make. I find in this story a profound call to truthfulness and honesty, to tell the whole truth without trying to manipulate outcomes. It’s a call that invites me to carefully and honestly reflect on how truthful I really am with others.

Third, this is a cautionary tale about leadership. Haman didn’t rise to the ranks he did because he was stupid. His was a terrifying combination of an evil heart mixed with an exceptional mind. He was strategic and organized, efficient and effective. But, no amount of skill or polish can cover up the fact that he was driven by greed for power and self-aggrandizement. Once again we see in scripture that God looks at our hearts and character does matter.

Finally, the casting of lots is a powerful reminder that God works in ways we don’t see and can’t begin to imagine. It’s a thread that is carefully woven throughout this drama and woven throughout our lives as well. Are we paying attention?

Act three closes with one last stroke of irony. While the couriers are carrying out their appointed rounds in every far-flung province of the empire, the decree is issued close to home as well. As Haman and the king sit down for a drink after their hard day’s work, all of Susa is “thrown into confusion.” One needn’t wonder why.