

### ESTHER

#### Week 5, Chapters 3 and 4

We got started in Chapter 3 of Esther last week, but spent most of our time discussing the issue of the identity of Haman (the wicked villain in our story). In verse 1 we hear:

**CJB** *Esther 3:1 Some time later King Achashverosh began to single out Haman the son of Hamdata the Agagi for advancement; eventually he gave him precedence over all his fellow officers.*

Haman's identity is central to this story if we are to make sense of it. If Haman is just a random, generic Middle Easterner or Persian then indeed we are at a loss to explain his irrational hatred and homicidal actions towards the Jews as race of people. The meaning of **Agagi** (in Hebrew) or Agagite (in English) has been disputed by a number of scholars, but mainly because the more liberal ones say that there is no evidence that Haman could have actually been a REAL descendant of Agag, the king that King Saul dealt with wrongly (he didn't kill him as God ordered), so Samuel stepped in and executed this pagan king. The result of King Saul's failure to obey directly led to God's punishment by removing Saul from power and giving the throne to David. Some scholars insist that Agag was actually a title given to all the kings of Amalek, not a formal name of one of them. Therefore they reason that the mention of Haman as an Agagite in this story must be something that later Bible editors added to give the book of Esther additional spiritual meaning and drama that was never intended.

Of course liberal scholarship can't prove this, it's only an opinion and an assertion; and they prefer it this way because they don't acknowledge the supernatural or spirit world and regard the story of Esther as purely myth and fiction. It is true that there is no way to "prove" that Haman was really a descendant of Agag. But neither is there proof he wasn't. The thing is, the designation of Agagite could well be referring to the spirit of Amalek, or better the spirit of the kings of Amalek, as much or more than Haman's biological genealogy. Either way it doesn't matter because the point is that Haman is directly connected to, and identified with, Amalek whether it is only spiritual or it is physical **as well**.

We've discussed this issue of Amalek before, but it can't be dealt with strongly enough because it has everything to do with the irrational hatred of Jews by gentiles worldwide that has been expressed since time immemorial. God set up a dynamic going back to Genesis 36 when we find that Amalek was a son of Esau (Jacob's fraternal twin brother), whose mother was a Horite concubine (a gentile) named Timna.

Let's remember how this issue with Amalek came about because it is important to our story of Esther and to the present situation in the Middle East, and vital to all that will play out in these Latter Days.

### Genesis 25:21-24 CJB

***21 Yitz'chak prayed to ADONAI on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. ADONAI heeded his prayer, and Rivkah became pregnant.***

***22 The children fought with each other inside her so much that she said, "If it's going to be like this, why go on living?" So she went to inquire of ADONAI,***

***23 who answered her, "There are two nations in your womb. From birth they will be two rival peoples. One of these peoples will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."***

***24 When the time for her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.***

So there would always be a spiritual based enmity between Jacob, who was chosen as the inheritor of God's line of covenant promise, and Esau who was rejected. Both would go on to found nations that would also live out that prophetic destiny.

Later on Esau had a grandson born named Amalek, who it turns out would be the one who most embodied the spirit of hatred and enmity towards the Hebrews (Jacob's offspring) that began with Esau.

**Genesis 36:12 CJB <sup>12</sup> Timnah was the concubine of Elifaz 'Esav's son, and she bore to Elifaz 'Amalek.**

And then later in Exodus we read about the eternal war that would be fought between God (and God's people) and Amalek.

### Exodus17:13-16 CJB

**<sup>13</sup> Thus Y'hoshua defeated 'Amalek, putting their people to the sword.**

**<sup>14</sup> ADONAI said to Moshe, "Write this in a book to be remembered, and tell it to Y'hoshua: I will completely blot out any memory of 'Amalek from under heaven."**

**<sup>15</sup> Moshe built an altar, called it ADONAI Nissi [[ADONAI is my banner/miracle],**

**<sup>16</sup> and said, "Because their hand was against the throne of Yah, ADONAI will fight 'Amalek generation after generation."**

Thus the overriding issue of our story is that Haman bore the spirit of Amalek and now the question of why he wanted to destroy all the Jews in the world is answered. Without understanding this, the story of Esther doesn't make much sense and neither does the reason for a never-ending murderous anti-Semitism that has infected the human race since the days of Jacob and Esau make much sense. The story of Esther is so contemporary in many ways that we need to pay attention. Mordechai, the Jew, won't bow to Haman the Amalekite and therefore Haman determines that all Jews are bad: they are an existential threat to world peace and they must be wiped out. Of course the catalyst for all this is that this is a spiritual war of survival. God said that Amalek was to be wiped out....by whom? By God's people; the Hebrews. Only one people of between Amalek and Israel can survive and Amalek is determined that it shall be they.

As we look back in history, what other substantial people group has, for millennia, been under such constant attack, chased around the world.....and survived.... maintaining their ancient identity? Gentile governments (such as in our story of Esther) have tried to wipe out the Jews. Christians have tried to wipe out the Jews. The Muslims continue to wipe out the Jews. Atheists and secular people and governments have a bent against the Jews and want them gone. It is illogical if not insane; so why does this enmity of gentiles towards Jews persist? It is the spirit of Amalek that is alive and well. So when you hear even of Christian denominations who stand with the Palestinians against the Jews, demand that Jerusalem be given over to them, insist that the Holy Land belongs to the Arabs, understand that this is the spirit of Amalek that is present in that particular denominational leadership. Are you associated with such a denomination? Then understand that no matter how you all may hold hands, pray and sing hymns to Jesus Christ, you have made yourselves God's sworn enemies. Do not be part of such a deception, and do not thank me for telling you and warning you, because now you know; you can't plead ignorance to the Father. Now you are without excuse no matter how clean your own heart might be in that regard because even so, you chose to stand with the Enemy. So what should you do?

**CJB Revelation 18:4 Then I heard another voice out of heaven say: "My people, come out of her! so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not be infected by her plagues,(Rev 18:4 CJB)**

I plead with you to heed God's call to repent, to disconnect entirely from such a group and to disown such wickedness. But I also plead with you to stand with Israel and the Jewish people in spirit and in deed, because you can't stand with God and do otherwise.

Let's re-read part of Esther chapter 3.

### **RE-READ ESTHER CHAPTER 3:6 – end**

So Haman has decided to destroy all the Jews. But this was precipitated by Mordechai refusing to submit and to show respect to Haman. And when pressed by fellow servants and officials of King Xerxes' royal court as to why he wouldn't do something as simple and customary as to bow to Haman, Mordechai's only response was that he is a Jew. And then most Bible commentaries go on to say that because the Jews recognized God as their king and sovereign they couldn't and wouldn't bow down to any man or it would be idolatry. And that is simply incorrect information. The Jews had no issue bowing to a king, a governor, or even merely an aristocrat (gentile or Jew) because that was standard Middle Eastern custom. God never told the Jews to refuse to bow before their government authorities. They bowed before their own Hebrew kings and nobility as well and these Persian officials who were puzzled by Mordechai's stubbornness had no doubt seen him and his fellow Jews bow to countless people because it was common everyday custom and courtesy.

Frankly, Haman was rightly humiliated and angry to have such disrespect shown in public. Can you imagine meeting the American President, or your State Governor, in public, cameras rolling, and refusing to shake his outstretched hand? Even in Western culture we don't have to like someone, or agree philosophically or politically with them, to be civil and acknowledge their position and status. Bowing before a person to acknowledge their status and to be civil was usual in Bible times among all known cultures; it's just that in the modern Western world handshaking has generally replaced bowing.

And when we add in that we know that Mordechai was one of the king's officials who fully understood these protocols, and the consequences for mocking them, it makes the offense all the worse. Thus when we factor in that Haman is called the Agagite, then we understand what it was that Mordechai refused to show respect to: the living, breathing spirit of Amalek that stood before him as Haman. And as a bit of an editorial, it appalls me to see officials of Israel's government do the opposite of what Mordechai did. Why Jewish leaders would show respect towards eternal enemies who continue to vow to wipe out the Jewish people and to dissolve the State of Israel I'll never understand. And brethren, we should be more like Mordechai as well. Being an instigator and stubbornly refusing to go along with the crowd is not always a bad thing. God's eternal enemies do not deserve, and should not receive, our acknowledgement or respect. It won't be popular on earth especially since tolerance for all things is the new creed of the secular world and sadly it has become popular, even doctrinal, within some elements of Christianity. But God will applaud it from Heaven, I assure you. So we have to decide: do we

want the praise of our fellow men, or the praise of God? Easy when it's theoretical or put in spiritual terms; not so easy when we're actually confronted with it and our action is required, and opposition and scorn (even from our family and closest friends) might be the result.

Now that Haman has irrationally decided to commit genocide upon all the Jews of the Persian Empire, he begins a long process of planning. You don't just eradicate perhaps 3 million people with some planning. So this was no spur of the moment overreaction by Haman to Mordechai's humiliation of him in front of his peers; he was literally possessed by this evil intent. So in the month of Nisan, the first month of the Hebrew religious calendar year, he began to have lots cast to determine the most propitious day for the slaughter of the Jews. This might be a good time to mention that the names for the 12 months of the year that we find in the Bible are not actually Hebrew, they are Babylonian. The Jews called the months much like they did the days of the week; with a number designation not a name. But after their time of exile in Babylon month names became introduced and woven into Hebrew culture, and has remained so to this day. The Magi of the Empire would have been consulted by Haman and were the operators of the lots and the interpreters of their meaning, as that was their function. If we're getting the sense of it correctly in our English translations then these lots were cast every single day so that a conclusion could be reached for an optimal time, as determined by the gods, for this extermination.

Here we find the only use of the word **Pur** in our Bibles, and it is where the word Purim comes from. **Pur** is an Akkadian word that means lot (singular). The "i-m" added to the end of the word kind of Hebrew-izes this Akkadian word by giving it a Hebrew plural suffix, and thus making it lots. But this is NOT the regular Hebrew word for lots, which is **goral**. Purim is a term that is ONLY used to refer to the outcome of the story of Esther (the deliverance of the Jews from Haman), and thus the name for a joyous annual Jewish celebration of remembrance called Purim.

The casting of lots for answers to questions and for solutions to problems and to establish timing for important matters was standard in the Middle East. Haman had these lots cast for 11 straight months, which gave him ample time to devise his plan and the lots revealed the day and month to carry it out. Once he had all his ducks in a row he went in to see King Xerxes because there was no way for this to happen unless the king went along with it. But why would Xerxes want to do such a thing? Would it not cause as much alarm among other ethnic groups fearing they might be next, as it might a bit of joy for some who didn't much care for the Jews? So Haman has to give the king an awfully good reason for his plan.

And Haman does what has been done since time immemorial: he first tells a truth, then follows it up with a half-truth, and then pulls it together with a conclusion that is a lie. First he tells the king that there is a particular people who is scattered and dispersed all over his empire. True. And that is a bit unusual because almost all the provinces and kingdoms that were captured to create the Empire were taken largely intact, and the people of those provinces and kingdoms were allowed to remain there, in their homes. But it was different for the Jews. They were among a tiny minority who had their homeland destroyed (albeit by the Babylonians and not the Persians) and were taken as captives to Babylon. Thus while the other ethnic groups were essentially being occupied by the Persians, for the Jews their homeland was a shambles and it

was a somewhat foreign place to most of the living Jews, who were born in the Empire. So indeed they were a scattered and dispersed people.

Next Haman tells the king (verse 8) that these people have their own laws and customs which are different from everyone else's. A half-truth. Indeed the laws of the Jews (the Law of Moses) were the core of their religion and it was unique from the religious laws of gentiles. But in fact we see the Jews assimilate well within the cultures they are immersed into, and usually join in with most cultural traditions even to the point that it at times causes a problem with God's commandments.

Finally Haman tells the king the conclusion of these accusations: the Jews don't obey the laws of the king. That is they don't obey the laws of the Persian Empire. A lie. Therefore this puts the king's authority in great danger and something must be done about it. What ancient Persian documents tell us is that the Imperial Persian Law extended to every province and district of the Empire. However, local laws and customs were to be allowed providing it didn't conflict in any meaningful way with Persian Laws and customs. The common point was that despite the various districts having their own customs in the end everyone was to declare allegiance to the Persian King. Provided that happened, there was a wide tolerance for variation of customs (just as no common Empire-wide language was required). Thus Haman is saying that the Jews refuse to acknowledge the sovereignty of Xerxes.

What to do? Haman went in to the king knowing that one of the king's issues with Haman's plan would be that citizens pay taxes and tribute, and dead citizens pay nothing. In other words, why would the king destroy a meaningful section of his tax base and harm his treasury? And there were 2 or 3 million of these Jews living in Persia and it is proverbial that wherever the Jews went they always seemed to be a substantial portion of the local economy. So to head off the king's concern over the loss of treasury money, Haman offered to give the king 330 talents of silver, which was an enormous amount of money, so that he could carry out his plan. Now, you or I might look at this and ask some questions: 1) wouldn't the king be suspicious of the motive of a man who was willing to give away a fortune to kill these Jews? 2) Even for the richest of men 330 talents of silver was an incredible amount of wealth. Was Haman really willing to give away that much money just to settle a personal vendetta with Mordechai?

The king might well have been a bit suspicious, but on the other hand he probably thought that this Haman was so loyal to the king and the Empire that he understood the downside of killing so many taxpayers. Thus Haman's offer was proof of his deep selfless dedication to the well-being of the king and of Persia. However as much money as this was, it also means that Haman was a fabulously wealthy man. And now we can understand why he was able to gain an audience before the king whenever he wanted one, and eventually found a way to gain governmental power. It is typical the world over that the wealthy often get bored with their wealth and now want power to go with it. So they go into politics. Obviously that was the case with Haman. But also there is little doubt that Haman had a plan in place to confiscate the wealth of the Jews that would be exterminated and so he would likely recoup all if not more of the 330 talents of silver that he offered Xerxes. All this has such a familiar ring to it because we saw this almost exact scenario occur within Nazi Germany in WWII.

Now to this point notice that the king doesn't seem to inquire, nor is it made known, that it is the Jews who are being talked about. Would that have mattered? Probably not. The Jews weren't a significantly populous ethnic group when compared to all the many others of the Empire. Besides, Haman convinced the king that they were a danger to him. The king agreed and handed Haman his signet ring as a symbol that the king's authority had been given to Haman. Further Xerxes responds that the money is given to Haman. This is a rather cryptic comment that could have a number of meanings. It could mean, I don't need your money, keep it. It could mean, yes I accept the money but use it to carry out your plan since you want it so badly. It could mean, yes I accept it and it is to your honor that I do accept it. But what is not cryptic is that king says that the people, the Jews, are now Haman's to do what seems good to him. Good of course doesn't mean good as in the sense of good versus evil. Rather it just means Haman can do whatever it seems best to him to do.

Verse 12 says that on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month the plan was executed. The scribes were brought in and they were to write down and send the plan in the form of a proclamation to the king's army commanders and the governors of the many provinces and all the other officials so that they all heard about it more or less at the same time. The language and script (alphabet) of each province and district was to be used (this was a usual practice with the Persians). And, to prove that it was under the authority of the king, the seal of the king's signet ring was affixed to each copy so that there would be no doubt. After all, this was a sobering, disturbing decree. All the gentiles were not only given the right, but given the instruction, to kill every Jewish man, woman and child in their neighborhood. Even more they were given permission to loot the possessions of these Jews once they were dead.

Let's be clear: this was NOT the day the killing was to occur; this was only the day the proclamation was issued. Oddly, it wouldn't be for 11 more months, in the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the year, called Adar, on the 13<sup>th</sup> day that the extermination was to take place. Why wait so long? Preparations had to occur, and the people who were to carry it out needed some time for this to sink in. Herodotus says that it was known that it would take close to 3 months for a royal message to finally reach every corner of the Empire. But probably the major reason for the delay is that the lots indicated that the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar was the propitious day. However notice something else: the day the plan was put to paper and distributed to the provinces was the day before Passover (Passover being the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, Nisan). This was no coincidence.

The decree was posted in Shushan (Susa) the administrative capital of the Empire and home to Xerxes, Haman and Mordechai. The king and his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command, Haman, self-satisfied, above it all, and sure the right thing was being done, casually sat down for a drink. But we are told that the residents of Susa were thrown into confusion. In other words, this rattled the citizens of Susa to their core. Susa was the place where so many aristocrats and central government officials lived. No one saw this coming. And for most it must have made for many sleepless nights as they wondered what could have happened for the king to take such severe action against an entire people group? But even more that the king fully expected that ordinary citizens would rise up and participate in this genocide. What might happen if you refused?

To use the analogy of Nazi Germany, no doubt most citizens of the Empire were horrified and

wanted no part of such a thing. The Jews were interspersed in society; they were friends and neighbors and even family members by marriage; mostly good and decent people. But thousands upon thousands of Germans hated the Jews (for various reasons), or simply were so amoral that they cared only to impress their government in order to advance themselves and/or to pad their personal bank accounts with the property of those they would help to murder. But what shall never be forgotten by the Jews, is that in Germany the sign of the Cross led the way for professing Christians to carry out these pogroms against the Jews. Christians shouted Christ Killers at the Jews, sang Christian hymns as the Jews were rounded up and their possessions confiscated, as Synagogues were torched (often with Rabbi locked inside) and countless Pastors and Ministers at the thousands of Churches in Germany told their parishioners that they were doing the Lord's work in ridding Germany, and soon the world, of people that God hated: the Jews.

Let's move on to chapter 4.

### **READ ESTHER CHAPTER 4 all**

We won't get far today, but let's see if we can put this in perspective for now. The fun, frivolous mood of our watching the often silly antics of the super wealthy and super powerful who have nothing better to do than drink and party and attend social events has given way to darkness and fear. The lush of a king, King Xerxes, who we chuckled at when his new laws seemed best to him when he was drunk, and who was mainly concerned with finding the prettiest new wife possible, has now been duped by his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command into signing the death warrant of millions of his own subjects, based on a lie. So from the bounty of the banquets and the opulence of palace life, the scene changes to mourning and grief.

When Mordechai reads the decree he falls to pieces, no doubt understanding that there was no way he could disassociate himself from being the cause of this coming horror. You slap the lion on the nose, there's every chance you'll get eaten. And yet, we don't hear of him expressing regret and wishing he had just submitted to Haman who bore the spirit of Amalek. Everything Mordechai has done it's as though deep down in the recesses of his soul he knew the inevitability of this day happening no matter what he might have done, because Haman would have come up with some other pretext for the genocide he wanted to commit upon the Jews of Persia. A genocide based on little more than some kind of inexpressible hatred from a source he no doubt had no knowledge of himself.

Thus the scene of chapter 4 opens with Mordechai displaying all the usual highly dramatic Jewish and Middle Eastern symbols of mourning and grief: tearing his clothing, changing into sackcloth, pouring ashes over his head, and wandering through the city loudly crying, wailing, and lamenting his and his people's fate. Let's understand that this crying and wailing is not directed at God, he is shouting to the city of Susa.

For we moderns who live in Europe and America this extroverted and open expression of shameless emotion is uncomfortable if not disturbing. Goodness, for most Christians in most congregations in the West, it is all but impossible to raise one's hands beyond their beltlines at even the most moving moments of praise and worship lest they might get noticed. A loud



“AMEN!” might just get you a just as loud shushes from a number of annoyed participants. But in the ancient times, it was usual to project your feelings so that the public noticed; that’s why you did it. People had no problem sharing their emotions and displaying them in overt ways for all to see; in fact it was customary and therefore NOT to express them would have been seen as a lack of honor or perhaps a lack of caring. Mordechai was doing nothing unusual.

We are told that he well knew he couldn’t approach his usual hang-out, the King’s Gate, in his mourning clothes: it was illegal to do so. And Mordechai only represents what was going on in every town and village and city where a colony of Jews lived. We’re told that throughout the Persian Empire the Jews fasted, wept, wailed, and donned sackcloth.

They were in for a long 11 months. One imagines a condemned man on death row; a calendar with a date certain has been set for his death and he has no control over it. We can conjecture that some probably fled for Judah, which was legal for them to do. But it must have been an insignificant handful because it isn’t even mentioned. It shows all the more how disconnected from their homeland, Judah, most the Diaspora Jews had become in only a century or so away.

We’ll continue chapter 4 next time and re-read most of this chapter as well as 2 Greek additions that include what is usually titled Mordechai’s Prayer and then Esther’s Prayer.