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Haman seeks to annihilate the Jewish people. Paul in Rome.

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Transcript

Esther chapter 3. After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.

Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you transgress the king's command? And when they spoke to him day after day, and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see where the Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone.

So as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast purr, that is, they cast lots, before Haman day after day, and they cast it month after month, till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. Then Haman said to king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom.

Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries. So the king took his signet ring from his hand, and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews.

And the king said to Haman, The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you. Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps, and to the governors over all the provinces, and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script, and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed with the king's signet ring.

Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went out hurriedly, by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. In Esther chapter one we were introduced to king Ahasuerus. In chapter two we are introduced to the chief protagonists of the book, Esther and Mordecai.

Now in chapter three we meet the chief antagonist, Haman the Agagite. A number of Jewish commentators have identified Haman with Mimucan in chapter one, the man who advises king Ahasuerus concerning Vashti. The description of Haman as an Agagite is significant.

King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected from the throne because of his failure to kill Agag the Amalekite. There was an enduring antagonism between the Amalekites and the Israelites. The Amalekites had attacked Israel as they left Egypt.

On other occasions they sought to attack Israel when Israel was at its weakest. Amalek was a descendant of Esau, and in Amalek the rivalry between Esau and Jacob was

continued and intensified. The Lord declared concerning Amalek in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17 to 19, King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected for his failure to keep this commandment by the Lord.

He was a Benjaminite and a son of Kish, and here in this book we meet another son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Mordecai, this Benjaminite, reminiscent of Saul, will face one of Agag's descendants, Haman. The old conflict will be revived again.

Haman is advanced by King Ahasuerus, placed over all of the other officials. All of the officials are made to bow down before Haman at the gate. However Mordecai does not do so, and the king's servants at the king's gate interrogate him as to why.

When he continues not to bow, and does not listen to them, they go and tell Haman. We immediately have a question here. Is Mordecai wrong not to bow to Haman? What are his reasons not to bow? Some have suggested that this is a resistance of idolatry, that to bow to a human being in such a manner is a denial of the fact that the Lord alone is due such worship.

Others have seen Mordecai's refusal to bow as grounded in the fact that Haman was an Agagite. Mordecai as a Jew will not bow to this historic adversary of his people. Neither of these reasons seem to work, and the text does not really give us a direct answer to our question.

James Jordan suggests that Mordecai's refusal to bow is a rebellious action, that he really should have bowed, and that his failure to bow is a sin that precipitates much of the crisis that follows. The fact that the text does not neatly address the question that we might have about why Mordecai does not bow, and whether he is justified or not in this, raises the possibility for me that the text wants us to puzzle over this question. The text may not immediately answer this question, but it wants us to think through the question, to have it in the back of our minds as we go through the book.

When we have such questions it's usually best to consider what would help us to give an answer, and I can think of a few different lines of investigation. Biblical texts can give us a sense of how we are to view the actions of particular characters, by framing those actors as good guys or bad guys. One of the ways that it can do this is by associating figures with other figures.

Mordecai is a Joseph-like character. He prospers and he is vindicated and elevated. On the surface of the story he is a good guy and a hero throughout.

Meanwhile Haman, the man to whom Mordecai will not bow, ends up hanging on his own gallows. He is presented as a bad guy throughout. On the surface of things this makes it more likely that Mordecai has a good reason for not bowing.

People may struggle to identify this reason, but they are justified in looking. Another way

that a text can tip us off as to the character of a person's action is by significant parallels with other narratives. I believe that we have one of these with the story of Joseph.

Rabbi David Foreman notes the parallels between verse 4 of this chapter and Genesis chapter 39 verse 10. In verse 4 of this chapter, And then in Genesis chapter 39 verse 10, Rabbi Foreman observes that these are the only two places in scripture where we see these sorts of phrases. Elsewhere in the book of Esther, Mordecai is associated with the character of Joseph.

So it is not surprising that we might see a connection between Joseph and Mordecai here. The question we must now ask is does this parallel give us any clue as to Mordecai's motives in his refusal to bow to Haman? I think it does. In the story of Joseph in Potiphar's house, he refuses to sleep with Potiphar's wife, the second in charge of the household, because he knows that such an act would be disloyal to his master Potiphar.

What's more, it would be a sin against God. The result of his refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife is that he is thrown out of the household and into the prison as one who is seen as disloyal. However, in truth, he is the loyal one.

Mordecai has already been presented in a very positive light. He has foiled a plot against the king's life. This does not seem to be a man who would resist the king's command merely for the sake of it.

There must be a reason. Perhaps as Joseph was loyal to his master and therefore refused day after day to lie with his master's wife, so Mordecai is faithful to his master the king and therefore refuses to bow to a man who he sees as a usurper, a man who he believes is trying to take over the rule of the king and undermine his authority. Just as Mordecai discovered the plot of Big Than and Teresh, perhaps he knows something about Haman's motives too.

I believe that the rest of the Book of Esther strengthens this reading. In addition to the way that characters are framed as good guys or bad guys, significant parallels with other narratives, we should also think about the way that as narratives progress, actions are followed by consequences and further actions. As for Mordecai, he never repents for his failure to bow to Haman.

The impression is thereby given that his refusal to bow to Haman is not in fact a sin. Indeed, Haman gets his comeuppance and Mordecai is elevated and people bow to him. Finally, the way that the themes of an episode reappear and are developed elsewhere helps us to determine the character of actions.

Bowing and playing the part of a king appears later, but decisively favors Mordecai and Haman's overstepping of his bounds also develops as a theme. It would seem then that Mordecai is justified in not bowing to Haman and events that follow will reveal why this is

the case. Haman's response to the news of Mordecai's insubordination is profound anger and a desire for vengeance.

He doesn't want to lay hands on Mordecai alone however. That would appear petty. Far better to kill all of Mordecai's people, the entire Jewish community.

As in chapter 1, this is a way of responding to a personal slight that elevates it to the level of a great law. As we saw, some commentators identify Mimucan with Haman. Mimucan's advice in response to Vashti's non-appearance is similar to Haman's approach here.

Mimucan blew up Vashti's non-appearance a great issue of state to be responded to by a great edict. Once again, in this chapter, law is a way of settling personal scores, presenting matters that in many respects are largely petty and personal, as if they were great matters of civil order. To determine the day for this empire-wide pogrom against the Jews, Haman casts lots over a period of time, seeking to determine the one portentous day upon which all of these events would occur.

This casting of Purr, also described as lots, is a surprisingly important theme of the book. Indeed, it plays some part in the naming of the feast of the Jews' victory over their opponents at this time. In chapter 9, verse 24, we read, For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Purr, that is cast lots, to crush and to destroy them.

The book of Esther, as Rabbi Fulman has observed, is a book that deals extensively with themes of chance, fate, providence, and law. Haman, Rabbi Fulman observes, is the sort of man who will blow up a personal vendetta into a great law of the kingdom on the one hand, and on the other, he will leave the decision of the day on which to slaughter tens or even hundreds of thousands of people to the casting of lots. He argues that the purpose of the casting of lots is in part to find a propitious day for the act, and also to cast terror into the Jews.

His actions suggest that chance and fate are at the helm of the universe, rather than a creator god who providentially rules over all. Haman, however, has to find a reason that would justify such extreme measures. Why single out this particular people? Haman makes the case for genocide without mentioning the name of the Jews.

Rather, he describes the Jews, mixing together elements of truth and falsehood. The Jews are an exiled people, a people scattered abroad, dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of his kingdom. They no longer have a distinct land of their own, and yet they remain a distinct people.

They observe their own customs and laws, and Haman claims, the falsehood that accompanies the truth, that they don't keep the king's laws. The existence of such a

people in his realm is more of an inconvenience for Ahasuerus than a blessing. Here is an exiled people that has not yet realized that it has ceased to exist.

They are like the cartoon character that has run off the edge of the cliff, and is still running and not falling in mid-air. They really should disappear and be assimilated into the nations and peoples around them. One of the things to note here is the way that the people are maintained in their distinctiveness in exile by their keeping of the laws of God.

Without faithfulness and commitment to the laws of God, the Jews would have swiftly disappeared into the nations that surrounded them. They would have worshipped the pagan gods, and they would have engaged in the same sort of idolatrous practices. They would have intermarried with and taken on the practices of their neighbors.

Haman, tipping his hand at this point and revealing how much he has personally invested, offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of the king. If only he will be allowed to wipe out this people. Many commentators argue that there is some sort of hyperbole being used here on the part of the author of Esther.

10,000 talents of silver was not that far removed from the annual sum of tribute received by Persia. Other commentators have argued that Haman was claiming that he would pay this sum of money in the plunder taken from the Jews. Such a vast quantity of plunder and the removal of this inconvenient people would easily compensate for the loss of tax revenue.

The king very readily acquiesces though. He takes his signet ring and gives it to Haman. The language here is very similar to that of Genesis chapter 41 verse 42, where Pharaoh gives his signet ring to Joseph.

If Mordecai is like Joseph, Haman is like the anti-Joseph. King Ahasuerus unreservedly authorizes Haman. The language of verse 11 is not clear, but one possible meaning of it is that Ahasuerus refuses to take any money from Haman.

In verse 10, Haman is described as Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews. Frederick Bush observes that there is a chiasmic pattern in the way that Haman is identified within the book. He is identified on six different occasions.

On the first and the last he is identified as the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. On the second and the fifth, the enemy of the Jews. And on the third and the fourth, the Agagite.

The king's scribes are summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, most significantly the day before the Passover. The decree was to be carried out eleven months later. Letters were sent to every single part of the kingdom promulgating this edict.

As Adele Boleyn notes, Herodotus claims that it would have taken three months for a message to travel to all parts of the kingdom. The decree is a terrible one indeed. They are to annihilate all of the Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day and plunder all of their goods.

The chapter ends with contrasting responses to this. The king and Haman give no thought to what they have just instigated. They merely return to their partying, much as the brothers of Joseph had left their brother in the pit in Genesis chapter 37 and turned to their eating, unmindful of his fate.

The lower city of Susa however responds with dismay. This response is presumably not merely from the Jews. The rest of the population will be understandably unsettled by the seemingly erratic decrees of this new prime minister.

And even if they had no thought for the Jews, they would be understandably uneasy about the prospect of a great genocide happening in their midst. Theirs is ceasing to be a society of predictable and knowable law and order, and is descending into a sort of chaos. A question to consider, what can we learn from the similarities between the advice given by Mimucan concerning Vashti and the plan of Haman in this chapter? Acts chapter 28 verses 16 to 31.

And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him. After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case.

But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain. And they said to him, We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you.

But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it has spoken against. When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement. The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this people and say, You will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

They will listen. He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. It is the end of Acts chapter 24.

Paul has finally reached his destination of Rome, where he is under house arrest awaiting his trial. Luke, who has accompanied Paul on his journey, leaves off his telling of Paul's story rather inconclusively. We don't discover the outcome of his trial.

However, the themes of the book of Acts are given some degree of recapitulation and receive some resolution in this chapter, while leaving the story of the church, which continues far beyond its pages, still open-ended. In Rome, Paul is granted a high degree of liberty, especially considering the fact that he is a prisoner. He is permitted to live by himself, presumably in rented accommodation in an apartment building, perhaps supported at the beginning by some local Christians.

He only has one soldier guarding him. Julius, the centurion to whose charge Paul was delivered, and who accompanied him on his journey, was favourably disposed to him before they left, and the journey must have impressed upon him much further that Paul was a divinely gifted and pious man, a man of good will who could be trusted. He had saved Paul's life, and had seen fulfilment of Paul's prophecies and Paul's healings on Malta.

Perhaps in part due to his influence, Paul is consequently quite trusted, to the point that he is able to have large numbers of visitors at a given time in his accommodation. He was presumably also able to write. Many scholars have dated letters like Philemon and Philippians to this period, although the dating of Paul's prison letters depends greatly upon the location from which they were sent, and considerations such as the likelihood or unlikelihood of Onesimus fleeing to Rome.

There are many advocates of the claim that they were sent from Ephesus. Paul invites the local leaders to meet him after only three days. He is presumably regarded as a leader of the Nazarene sect, so they would be quite interested to have an audience with him to hear what he and his movement were all about.

Kraikina describes the large Jewish community of Rome. Most Jews lived on the other side of the Tiber from the centre of Rome, and the Jewish population of Rome, a city of about one million, was likely between twenty and fifty thousand. Earlier in Acts chapter 18, Luke had mentioned that Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome after the expulsion under Claudius.

Many scholars have speculated that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome had to do with this early Christian movement and the divisions that it caused among the Jews in the city of Rome. Presumably now, after Claudius' death, the Jewish community is again thriving in the city. They're mostly a poorer population, although there was a range and most of their leaders would have been well educated.

Kraikina suggests the main division with the Jews had occurred earlier, with the Christian community moving into house churches. C.K. Barrett notes that there are eleven synagogues mentioned in the sources. The Jewish community does not seem to be especially integrated.

There isn't a single Jewish leader representing the whole Jews of the city, but a number of independent synagogues with their various leaders. Paul lays out his situation to them. He is innocent.

This is a fact that has been recognised by the Romans and testified to already on three occasions in Luke's account. He is not opposed to the Jewish people, to the law or to their customs. However, the Jewish opposition meant that he needed to appeal to Caesar.

His imprisonment arises from his commitment to the truth of the resurrection. This is the truth that is the hope of Israel. This summarises Paul's earlier speech at his various trials and hearings and brings to a nice tidy conclusion the story of Paul's defences.

He has not done anything worthy of death or condemnation. He has been recognised as innocent by the Romans. He has walked in good conscience and he is loyal to Israel's God.

The Jewish leaders have not yet received any letter from the Judean leaders about Paul. Perhaps letters had been sent but had not yet arrived. Given the difficulty of Paul's own passage to Rome and the fact that his company tarried as little as possible on the island of Malta, sailing up towards Sicily and Italy at the earliest possible opportunity in the season, it is quite likely that any message that had been sent had yet to arrive.

The Jewish leaders, however, are aware of the widespread opposition to the Christian movement and they are curious to hear a leader of the movement explain it. Paul teaches concerning the Kingdom of God. This is language used over 30 times in Luke's Gospel but only six times in the Book of Acts, twice within this chapter.

It is also used in verse 31. It is similar to the way that the content of Christ's teaching is described. Paul presents his case, arguing from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.

The whole scripture testifies that Jesus is the Christ and some of them are in the process of being persuaded but others disbelieve. Tannehill suggests that they were not actually fully believing, they were in the process of being persuaded but they had not yet

committed themselves. This might help to explain the force of Paul's response that follows.

As a community, the Jews make some promising moves in the direction of Paul's message but apart from a few exceptions, they turn away. Paul makes a strong statement against them. He references the prophecy of Isaiah, taken from Isaiah chapter 6, the chapter of Isaiah's call.

There this prophecy precedes a statement of coming judgment in verses 11 to 13. This continues motifs that have been playing throughout the Book of Luke and the Book of Acts. We can think about Zachariah who was struck deaf and dumb.

Paul was struck blind and then later received his sight at his conversion. Eleumas the sorcerer was struck blind. Paul referenced blindness in the context of describing his commission in chapter 26 verses 16 to 18.

But rise and stand upon your feet for I have appeared to you for this purpose to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. This is not a final rejection of the Jews. A similar sort of scene has occurred in several cities previously.

Paul will be rejected by the Jews in one city and he will go to the Jews in the next. However, this is part of a progressive judgment of blindness falling upon them. We should also appreciate the importance of the quotation from Isaiah at this point.

It sums up something of the thrust of the book. Among other things we should notice that it alters the quotation. Isaiah reads as follows and he said, Acts by contrast reads, The book began with Jesus teaching in chapter 1 verse 3. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And it ends with Paul speaking in the same manner. The fate of Paul is not actually given to us in this book. Considering that so much of the book is concerned with Paul, this might seem anticlimactic.

It might seem as if Luke has left us hanging. Very early tradition in 1 Clement chapter 5 verses 5-7, likely written before the end of the first century, suggests that Paul survived this trial. Through envy, Paul too showed by example the prize that is given to patience.

Seven times was he cast into chains. He was banished, he was stoned. Having become a herald, both in the east and in the west, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith.

And having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the west, and having born witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, writes in Book 2, chapter 22, Vestus was sent by Nero to be Felix's successor. Under him Paul, having made his defence, was sent bound to Rome.

Aristarchus was with him, whom he also somewhere in his epistles quite naturally calls his fellow prisoner. And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint. Thus, after he had made his defence, it is said that the Apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time, he suffered martyrdom.

In this imprisonment he wrote his second epistle, Timothy, in which he mentions his first defence and his impending death. But hear his testimony on these matters. At my first answer, he says, 1. No man stood with me, but all men forsook me.

I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge, notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me, that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear, and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. He plainly indicates in these words that on the former occasion, in order that the preaching might be fulfilled by him, he was rescued from the mouth of the lion, referring in this expression to Nero, as is probable on account of the latter's cruelty. He did not therefore afterward add the similar statement, he will rescue me from the mouth of the lion, for he saw in the same spirit that his end would not be long delayed.

Various theories for why Luke ends at this point in the story of Paul have been given. Daryl Barke lists four. First, that Luke might have planned a third volume.

This is highly unlikely, there is very little within this volume that points forward to an expected third. Second, that Paul was released after two years because his opponents failed to appear as witnesses. Joseph Fitzmyer defends this position.

Again, this suggestion seems unlikely. Third, that Paul died or was martyred, and the outcome was negative or anticlimactic. That again would be surprising.

Luke already recounted the martyrdom of Stephen, and it would seem to be quite fitting for him to bring the book to an end with the martyrdom of Paul, who was first introduced to us as a participant in the martyrdom of Stephen. Fourth suggestion is that the book was about the arrival of the word of Christ to the highest levels of Rome. The eye of the narrative is following Paul on his missions, but the book is not ultimately about him.

It's about the continuing work of Christ and the growth of the word of the gospel. Hence

the book ends with the bold preaching of the kingdom of God in Rome, rather than with the outcome of Paul's trial. The book began with the movement out from Jerusalem.

Fittingly, the book ends in Rome, the heart of the empire. This movement out is anticipated in chapter 1 verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. Paul's arrival in Rome has been anticipated at several points previously as well.

Acts chapter 19 verse 21. Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, after I have been there, I must also see Rome. Acts chapter 23 verse 11.

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. Acts chapter 27 verses 23 to 24. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand before Caesar, and behold God has granted you all those who sail with you.

Ending with this quotation from Isaiah also throws our mind back to the ministry of Christ himself. In Luke chapter 8 verses 9 to 10, he also refers to this quotation. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

The book of Acts begins with the question of what Christ's death and resurrection means for Israel, and whether Israel will accept it. Will the kingdom be restored to Israel at that time? The book relates not just the movement of the gospel out into the wider world, but the Jews' ongoing rejection of the message, anticipating the judgment that will later fall upon Jerusalem in AD 70. Paul still has hearers among the Jews, as we see in these final verses, but for the most part the people have rejected their Messiah.

A question to consider, are there any other prominent themes from the book of Acts that you can see reappearing in this final passage?