

Week 52, Lecture 165.¹ Haman Plots vs. the Jews, Esther 3

Outline is for review purposes. No need to discuss in lecture.

An Outline of the Book of Esther (as found in Catholic Bibles)²

Materials **highlighted in an underlined bold font** appear only in the Greek text, not in the Hebrew text.

I. Prologue	A: 1-17
II. Esther Becomes Queen	1:1-2:23
III. Haman's Plot Against the Jews	3:1-13; B:1-7; 3:14-15.
IV. Esther and Mordecai Plead for Help	4:1-16; C:1-30; D:1-16 ; 5:1-5
V. Haman's Downfall	5:6-8:2
VI. The Jewish Victory and the Feast of Purim	8:3-12; E:1-24 ; 8:13-9:23
VII. The Rise of Mordecai	9:24-10:3; F:1-11

Order of Material in My Lectures. Today we will be looking at Part III, Haman's Plot against the Jews. The Greek Chapter B (= Vulgate 13:1-7) is inserted into Hebrew Chapter 3 between verses 13 and 14. For lecture purposes I will treat all of chapter 3 first. Then I will treat all of chapter B.

Mordecai & Haman in Conflict, 3:1-6. After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him.² And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance.

³ Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?"⁴ And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; **for he had told them that he was a Jew.**

⁵ And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was filled with fury.⁶ 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.

Translation note. I am using the RSV translation for the Hebrew of chapter 3.

However, I have borrowed the paragraphing from the NIV.

The NIV starts a new paragraph every time the scene changes. Whenever I do translations, I try to do this.

Verse 1, Note from the JSB. (I have divided the note into 3 parts, and added headings.)

The Agagite, a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king responsible for Saul's loss of the kingship (1 Sam. 15:8). The ancient enmity between Israel and Amalek informs the relationship between Haman and Mordecai.

Jewish Lectionary. The Amalekite connection is reinforced in the synagogue lectionary cycle by the reading, on the Sabbath preceding Purim, of the passage in Deut. 25:17–19 ("Remember what Amalek did to you ... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek") and the haftarah from 1 Sam. ch 15 (story of Saul & Agag). On Purim the Torah reading is Exod. 17:8–16, the battle between Israel and Amalek.

Post-Biblical Legends. Both Targumim to Esther extend Haman's genealogy back to Esau, echoing Gen. 36:12, thereby extending the rivalry between Mordecai & Haman even further back to Esau & Jacob.³

¹ Lectures numbered consecutively. This is this week's 1st lecture, but its number reflects its place in the **total** sequence.

² This outline is part of the introduction to "The Book of Esther" as found in the New American Bible Revised Edition. This introduction has been approved by the USCCB, which holds the copyright.

Targum (plural, *targumim*) is the Aramaic word for “translation.”

Jews deported to Babylon began to speak Aramaic (as most U.S. Jews speak English).

Even when the Persians freed them, many chose to remain in Babylon

-- as today, many Jews do not choose to live in Israel

Once many of the people no longer understood Hebrew, scripture was often accompanied by a translation.

At first these were done orally “on the fly.” Later they were written down.

“**Targumizing.**” Often the translators including helpful explanatory remarks -- not in the original Hebrew.

Especially in poetic sections, the translators could be quite “creative.”

When a modern scripture scholar accuses another scholar of “targumizing,” that is not a complement!

Verse 2, Note from JSB ⁴ **This section was accidentally omitted from the lecture. Skip to “Haman’s Plot.”**

Mordecai’s refusal is not based on religious principles, for biblical Jews or Israelites may bow to superiors (Gen. 23:7; 43:28; Exod. 18:7; 1 Kings 1:23), **but on ethnic grounds** so as not to give honor to an **enemy of Israel**.

Gen 23:7 reports that “Abraham bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.” (story of Sarah’s tomb).

Gen 43:28 is from the Joseph story; his brothers bow down to him.

Exod 18:7. Moses bows down to his father-in-law.

In 1 Kings 1:23 the prophet Nathan bows down before King David.

Post-biblical Jewish Interpretation. Rabbinic interpretation recasts the refusal in terms of a religious prohibition, saying that Haman was wearing an image of an idol on his chest and that in bowing to him Mordecai would be bowing to an idol. Another rabbinic explanation (**also found in the LXX** and at home in the Hellenistic and Roman periods) is that it was improper to bow to anyone but God. **[We will look at this when we do Greek C, PJM].**

Verse 4 Mordecai Had Revealed he was a Jew. [Accidentally omitted here, but added near end of lecture.]

Notice that people have to be told that Mordecai is a Jew. There is nothing about his life that betrays this.

That is: **Mordecai is not “observant.”**

The same will be true for Esther. She hides her Jewishness. She could not do this and be observant.

These details are part of the reason Esther had a hard time getting into the Hebrew Bible!

End of accidental omission. Pick up here.

Haman’s Plot, 3:7-11. ⁷ In the **first month**, which is the month of **Nisan**, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast **Pur**, that is the lot, before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the **twelfth month**, which is the month of Adar. [i.e., about a year into the future]

⁸ 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 for the king's profit to tolerate them. ⁹ 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."

¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ 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."

³ Adele Berlin, “Esther,” *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), note to Esther 3:1.

⁴ Berlin, “Esther,” *JSB*, note to 3:2.

Verse 7, *Pur* means “lot.” Note from the *NABRE*.⁵

the Hebrew text preserves the Akkadian word *pur* because its plural, *purim*, became the name of the feast of Purim commemorating the deliverance of the Jews . . . The lot functions as a kind of horoscope to determine the most favorable day for the pogrom (persecution).

Verse 9, Note from *JSB*.⁶

Haman offers an inducement to the king in the form of revenue for the royal treasury. Perhaps it is to offset any loss of taxes that might have been paid by the Jews, or perhaps simply a bribe.

Ten thousand talents of silver, estimated to be **333 tons** . . . of silver—an enormous amount, close to the total sum of the annual tribute of the entire Persian empire. Another exaggerated number in a story full of exaggerations.

Verse 11, Note from *NABRE*.⁷

Although Ahasuerus seems to refuse the bribe, this is probably a polite way of accepting it that makes him appear munificent (compare Gn 23:11–15, where Ephron tells Abraham that he “gives” him the field and, after a few more pleasantries, sets a very high price for it). Both 4:7 and 7:4 seem to assume Ahasuerus has accepted the money.

Note to graduate students: this is NOT a note of the *CSB*. (Omit from spoken lecture if it is going long).

Even though this note appears in *The Catholic Study Bible*, it is incorrect to give the *CSB* as the reference.

It is important for users of the *Catholic Study Bible* to distinguish between:

- 1) Notes to the *NABRE*. These are the same in **every edition** of the *NABRE*, and are not unique to the *CSB*. The US Catholic bishops, who hold the copyright, demand that these notes appear in **every** edition of the *NABRE*. There have been proposals to omit these notes from certain editions, e.g., from “youth bibles.” However, as of 2108 no exception has yet been made. Every edition of the *NABRE* (hard-copy or software) includes these notes. **These notes, originally drafted by scholars, have been edited and approved by the American Bishops, and ultimately by Rome, and as such are part of the teaching of the hierarchical magisterium of the Catholic Church.**
- 2) Notes to the *CSB*. These appear in the “Reading Guide,” and are unique to the *Catholic Study Bible*; other editions of the *NABRE* do not have them. Each article in the “Reading Guide” is signed by a particular scholar. **These notes are part of the teaching of the theological magisterium of the Catholic Church.**

The Plot Is Carried Out, 3:12-15.¹² Then the king's secretaries 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 princes 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 ring.¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, 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.¹⁴ 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. **[According to 3:7 & 3:12 we are in the month of Nisan; so this is ca. 1 year away.]**

¹⁵ The couriers went in haste by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the capital. And the king and Haman **sat down to drink**; but the city of Susa was perplexed. (RSV)

⁵ *NABRE*, note to Esther 3:7.

⁶ Berlin, “Esther,” *JSB*, note to 3:9.

⁷ *NABRE*, note to Esther 3:11.

[Mordecai's "Jewishness." At this point I remembered the remarks on verse 4 that I had forgotten (bottom of page 2)]

Verse 14: Sat down to Drink. Banquets "structure" much of the book of Esther.

When here is a banquet, an important event has happened, or is about to happen.
Recall that the decision to depose Queen Vashti was made at a banquet.

Verse 15, The City of Susa was perplexed.

This shows that although Haman hated the Jews, not everyone was filled with such hatred.
Consequently they were "perplexed" by this hateful behavior of their leader.

Week , Lecture 166. Haman's Letter against the Jews, Esther B.

A New Commentary. I have been following mostly *NABRE, JSB, NJBC*.

Sidnie White Crawford has written two articles in volume 3 of the *New Interpreter's Bible* (1999).

"The Book of Esther: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," pages 853-941.

"The Additions to Esther: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," pages 943-972.

Translation Note. The translation is essentially the Douay, slightly modified.

I have updated old-fashioned forms, Americanized the spelling, and standardized names ("Haman" for "Aman").

Chapter B:1-7 (= Vulgate 13:1-7)

And this was the copy of the letter:

Salutation. Artaxerxes the great king who reigns from India to Ethiopia, to the princes and governors of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces, that are subject to his empire, greeting.

A Standard Salutation.

As in all ancient letters, the name of the sender comes first. The first word in all of Paul's epistles is "Paul."

There follows a description of the sender. For Paul this might be "an apostle of Jesus Christ . . ."

Then comes the recipients, along with a description of the recipients

Paul "to the church of God in Christ Jesus, which is in [name of city]"

Then comes the greeting / salutation itself.

127 provinces. These are nowhere else attested.

Preamble.² Whereas I reigned over many nations, and had brought all the world under my dominion, I was not willing to abuse the greatness of my power, but to govern my subjects with clemency and leniency, that they might live quietly without any terror, and might enjoy peace, which is desired by all people.

In Praise of Myself. Many despots in the ancient world liked to "pat themselves on the back."

Haman, writing in the king's name, flatters him. Would a politician in a democratic society allow such flattery?

Statement of the Problem.³ But when I asked my counsellors how this might be accomplished, one that excelled the rest in wisdom and fidelity, and was second after the king, Haman by name, ⁴ told me that there was a people scattered through the whole world, which used new laws, and acted against the customs of all nations, despised the commandments of kings, and violated by their opposition the concord of all nations. ⁵ Wherefore having learned this, and seeing one nation in opposition to all mankind using perverse laws, and going against our commandments, and disturbing the peace and concord of the provinces subject to us,

Haman excels all advisers in "wisdom and fidelity."

This is especially *ironic*. First: recall that Haman himself is dictating this letter!

Furthermore, **Greek Addition A** seems to imply that Haman was behind the assassination attempt of the 2 Eunuchs.⁸ In the Hebrew version, Haman's anger is kindled when Mordechai refuses to bow down to him.

In the Greek version, Haman's anger is the result of the foiled assassination attempt.

After reporting the failure of the 2 eunuchs to assassinate the king, their arrest & execution, the Greek narrator says:

But Haman the son of Amadathi the Bugite was in great honor with the king, and sought to hurt Mordechai and his people, **because of the two eunuchs of the king** who were put to death. (Douay).

Anti-Semitism. Sidnie White Crawford notes that a similar anti-Semitic letter is found in 3 Macc 3:12-29.⁹ She notes that the anti-Semitism here is more blunt than that found in the Hebrew of 3:8.

Such anti-Semitism was common throughout the Hellenistic Empire.

This Greek letter reflects a problem which has become greater in post-Persian times.

The Persians themselves were generally tolerant of ethnic & religious diversity.

The Charges are those that have been echoed across the centuries -- to our shame, often by Christians!

Jewish laws are in conflict with the laws of our society.

Jews are not loyal citizens. They "keep apart" because they hate other people. They want to undermine the state.

The Decree.⁶ We have commanded that all whom Haman shall mark out, who is chief over all the provinces, and second after the king, and whom we honor as a father, shall be utterly destroyed by their enemies, with their wives and children, and that none shall have pity on them, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month Adar of this present year ⁷ so that these wicked men going down to hell in one day may restore to our empire the peace which they had disturbed.

Reflections from White Crawford.

Unfortunately, between the time of the writing of MT Esther and the writing of LXX Esther, the nature of the charges leveled against the Jews had grown in strength and violence. That pattern has continued into the twentieth century: The Jews have been accused of forming a worldwide economic cabal, of drinking blood, of sacrificing Christian babies, and of corrupting Christian women. None of these charges has been proved true, but that has not stopped some Christians (and some Muslims as well) from believing them. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a scurrilous diatribe against the Jews, first circulated in czarist Russia, is still available in the United States. **Christians, as a group, have not had the will to condemn anti-Semitism as wrong and to fight against it.** This would not surprise the redactor of LXX Esther, since **he did not believe, as did the author of MT Esther, that it was possible for Jews and Gentiles to live together harmoniously.** He believed, rather, that Jews will survive only with the active and overt intervention of God.¹⁰

Some Recent Good News. It seems this Episcopal scholar is unaware of some of the more recent "good news" Pope John XXIII invited the Jewish leaders to the Vatican

Vatican II [text from *Nostra Aetate* added after the lecture was given.]

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6); still, **what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.** Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews **should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God,** as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

⁸ Sidnie White Crawford, "The Additions to Esther," *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 3 (Abingdon, 1999), 951.

⁹ White Crawford, "The Additions to Esther," *NIB* vol. 3, 953.

¹⁰ White Crawford, "The Additions to Esther," *NIB* vol. 3, 954.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any person, **the Church**, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, **decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.**¹¹

Pope John Paul II went to the Jewish synagogue in Rome to pray.

PBC (Pontifical Biblical Commission) declaration *The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible* -- This received favorable reviews from Jewish scholars.

This good news does not negate the sad fact that much of White Crawford's charge is still true.

Post-Lecture Note. In the Q & A after the lecture someone asked about the PBC. The Pontifical Biblical Commission is composed of 24 scholars, chosen to advise the pope on biblical matters. 12 of the scholars are specialists in the OT; 12 of them are specialists in the NT. Currently the majority of the scholars are clerics; all of them are male. To this date (2018) no woman scholar has yet served as a member of the PBC.

¹¹ Vatican II, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: *Nostra Aetate*," paragraph 4.