

“Who Knows?”

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Second in a series on the Book of Esther

Esther 3-4

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The King promoted Haman above all the officials who worked with him. All the royal workers at the King's Gate would kneel and bow facedown to Haman because the king had so ordered. But Mordecai didn't kneel or bow down.

When Haman himself saw that Mordecai didn't kneel or bow down to him, he became very angry. But he decided not to kill only Mordecai. Instead, he planned to wipe out all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the King's whole kingdom.

In the the month of Nisan servants threw pur, namely, dice, in front of Haman to find the best day for his plan. They tried every day and every month, and the dice chose the thirteenth day of the the month of Adar.

Then Haman said to the King, “A certain group of people exist in pockets among the other peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of everyone else, and they refuse to obey the king's laws. There's no good reason for the king to put up with them any longer. If the king wishes, let a written order be sent out to destroy them, and I will hand over ten thousand kikkars of silver to the King's treasuries.”

The King removed his royal ring from his finger and handed it to Hamn, enemy of the Jews. The King said, “Both the money and the people are under your power. Do as you like with them.” So royal scribes were summoned to write down everything that Haman ordered. The order commanded people to wipe out, kill, and destroy all the Jews, both young and old, even women and little children. This was to happen on a single day —the thirteenth day of the the month of Adar. They were also to seize their property.

While the King and Haman sat down to have a drink, the capital city, Susa, was in total shock.

Selected verses from Esther 3

Adapted from the Common English Bible

Stop! I've heard enough!

There's always a Haman. Not just against the Jews, but often against the Jews.

Maybe Mordecai should have bowed.¹ Fine. Haman is angry. Fine. But kill Mordecai *and* all his people! It is laughable . . . but now we know better.

Haman has them throw *pūr* to pick the best day for the genocide. It is silly . . . but now we know better.

The *pūr* pick a date almost a year away. Plenty of time to plan a pogrom. (“Pogrom” is the Russian word for when they killed Jews).

Haman goes to the King. “*Big problem!*” he says. “*This people, they are spread through your Empire.*” That’s true. Jews live all over. When we clump together, trouble. When we spread out, still trouble.²

“*Their laws are different,*” Haman says. That’s true. We are different. We belong to the Lord, who has shown us that He is the only God, and all other gods are nonsense. People don’t like when we say that. We live *Torah*, God’s instructions. God is the Creator and God is good, so there is a moral law in the universe, right and wrong. People don’t like when we say that. We are special. God chose us Jews, to be God’s people, God’s nation. People don’t like when we say that.³ (Maybe next time, He could choose someone else?)

The Persian empire let people follow their own laws, if they stayed loyal to the King.⁴ So Haman throws in the kicker: “*They disobey the King’s laws.*”

We are everywhere. We are different. We are disloyal.

Then, the bribe. Ten thousand kikkers! I looked it up. That’s 300 tons of silver! That’s two-thirds of what the Empire made in a year!⁵ Haman is ridiculously rich, and ridiculously hateful. It’s good we Jews have so many comedians. If not, we might only cry.

Haman and the King sit down for drinks.

But the whole city goes crazy. It is our home. They are our neighbours. They know us. Most have nothing against us. Just Haman and a few.⁶ Everyone is shaking their heads .

¹ For ideas about why Mordecai did not bow to Haman, see Jon D. Levenson, Esther (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 67.

² Samuel Wells “Esther” in Samuel Wells & George Sumner, Esther & Daniel (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 48.

³ For analysis of the historic and contemporary persistence of antisemitism, see Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism (New York: Touchstone, 2003).

⁴ Anthony Tomasino, “Esther” in John H. Walton, ed., Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 488.

⁵ Often the term “kikker” is translated as “talent.” See Tomasino, 489 and Levenson 71.

⁶ Levenson writes, “it may be that the Susan Gentiles were severely distressed at the thought that their streets would flow with the blood of the Jews who had been living peacefully in their midst. It must not be overlooked (for it often has been) that the enemies of the Jews in Esther are a circumscribed subgroup

. . . “*Oh, how terrible!*” Meanwhile, the muckety-mucks push the paper, send out the commands, organize the killings. Bureaucracy. So everyone can say they really did not like what was going on, or were just following orders, or just knew nothing. What a joke! Except . . . you know.

Go ahead, read some more.

When Mordecai learned what had been done, he tore his clothes, dressed in mourning clothes, and put ashes on his head. In every province and place a very great sadness came over the Jews. They gave up eating and spent whole days weeping and crying out loudly in pain. Many Jews lay on the ground in mourning clothes and ashes.

When Esther’s servants came and told her about Mordecai, she sent everyday clothes for Mordecai to wear instead of mourning clothes, but he rejected them.

Esther then sent a servant to Mordecai to find out what was going on and why he was acting this way. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him. He spelled out the exact amount of silver that Haman promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave the servant a copy of the law concerning the Jews’ destruction to show to Esther and explain it to her.

Through him Mordecai ordered her to go to the King to seek his kindness and his help for her people.

Selected verses from Esther 4.1-9
Adapted from the Common English Bible

Stop there.

Mordecai has a meltdown. Tearing clothes, sackcloth, ashes, wailing. . . . All the Jews do the same.

Not Esther. She hasn’t got a clue. She thinks the crisis is his wardrobe! She wonders, “*What’s he making a big tsimmis⁷ about?*” She’s the Queen, stuck up in her palace. The

of the imperial population and do not include the provincial officers, the satraps, or other royal officials in their number (see, e.g., 9:1-4). The book of Esther does not present Gentiles as inveterately or even geneally anti-Jewish or the Jews as inherently set against the populace of the host culture.” Levenson, 77.

⁷ Yiddish for “fuss, disturbance.”

whole city is going nuts, and she's worried about fashion! (Wait for it, she gets better.)

You wonder what Esther is going to do. What about God?

This is in your Bible, right! Ours too! It's God's book, right! But this whole Esther scroll, no mention of Him. Not a word. Not a whisper.⁸ What's with that?

When God sent the Jews into exile — remember, that's how we got to Persia — it was terrible. Such suffering. Such danger. But still, God gave us prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah — to tell us what was going on, what God was up to, and give us hope.

This time . . . nothing.

When we were in Egypt, such a long time . . . slavery, killing the firstborn. Terrible. But then, Moses and Passover and freedom. God did something!

This time . . . nothing.

Didn't Jesus — your Jesus, also a Jew — didn't he cry out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Not the first Jew, or the last, to say that.

Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, wrote this play. Rabbis — rabbis! — are putting God on trial. They charge God with abandoning His children to be massacred. God doesn't even show up to defend Himself. So after all the witnesses, these rabbis — rabbis! — say God is guilty! Then, "an infinity of silence."⁹

But in this story, does Mordecai even hope that God might show up? Torn clothes, sackcloth, ashes, wailing . . . is he praying? What?

Is He listening?

Some more. Remember, Mordecai has just said Esther must see the King, to save her people.

⁸ For a discussion of the canonical form of the Book of Esther, and the so-called additions (or subtractions), see Levenson, 27-34.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649 in Shamgorod). Trans. Marion Wiesel. (New York: Schocken, 1979, 1995).

In reply Esther ordered the servant to tell Mordecai: "All the King's officials and the people in his provinces know that there's a single law in a case like this. Any man or woman who comes to the King in the inner courtyard without being called is to be put to death. Only the person to whom the King holds out the gold scepter may live. In my case, I haven't been called to come to the King for the past thirty days."

Mordecai had the servant respond to Esther: "Don't think for one minute that, unlike all the other Jews, you'll come out of this alive simply because you are in the palace. In fact, if you don't speak up at this very important time, relief and rescue will appear for the Jews from another place, but you and your family will die. But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family."

Esther sent back this word to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa and tell them to fast to help me be brave. They are to fast for three whole days, and I myself will do the same, along with my servants. Then, even though it's against the law, I will go to the King; and if I am to die, then die I will."

Selected verses from Esther 4.10-17
Adapted from the Common English Bible

You're going to end it there? Leave them hanging? Your minister decide that? He's a schlemiel! (I'm not going to tell you what that means!) Okay, I'll talk about that part, and we'll do the rest later.

What's Mordecai saying? Esther, we are all in this together. We Jews can try to hide, can stop believing, can fit right in, become Queen of Persia even . . . they'll still come for us.

I'm not a rabbi . . . still, there are some things here . . . I wonder. No burning bush. No parting sea. No walls falling down. No Voice from heaven. Still, some things.

Like the date. Remember, they threw the *pūr*. They did that on the 13th of Nisan. Passover starts two days later. God saved us then! Now? . . . Maybe?

Mordecai says to Esther that even if she does nothing, help will come from "another place." Where is that? Who is that? . . . Maybe?

"Who knows?" he says. As in, "We don't know, but maybe. . . ." Esther goes from an adopted orphan in exile, to winning a beauty contest, to being Queen of Persia. Maybe this just happens; things happen. But who knows, maybe Someone is working in all this. Yes, it's messy. Yes, it's scandalous. Because it's real life. But who knows? Maybe

Someone is bringing it all together.

Who knows?

What do you do then? What's faith, when you don't know?

Remember Elie Wiesel's story, about the rabbis who put God on trial and found the Creator guilty. Here's what happened next. They went out and prayed.¹⁰

What's faith, when you don't know?

Remember, Mordecai had told Esther to keep her Jewishness a secret. But look now. She's asking all the Jews to fast for her courage. And she and all her servants will fast too. That's prayer! Fasting says, "God, I depend on You!"¹¹ Whatever happens, she will be a Jew. She'll belong to God, again.

"Then, I will go to the King," she says. "If I am to die, I will die."

Who knows? Maybe Esther' story is part of the bigger Story of God's salvation.

Who knows? Maybe yours is too.

¹⁰ Robert McAfee Brown, in his Introduction to Wiesel's The Trial of God, vii.

¹¹ Wells, 53.