

Esther 3 Enter the dragon

Can you still trust God when *everything* seems to have fallen apart?

Each week Jenny and I will usually buy one of those cheap magazines with TV listings for the coming week. I find the front covers of most of those vaguely and strangely depressing. The pictures and layout always seem almost identical: montages of so-similar looking faces from the various soaps, and so-similar melodramatic summaries of storylines: Mel kisses Sue. Mel dumps Sue. Sue shoots Mel. Sue on trial.

To be honest, I just have very little interest in what nowadays they try to dignify with the title “continuing dramas”. Another genre that just doesn’t typically click with me is “comedy drama”. I just very seldom find them particularly funny, but it seems to me that the playing for laughs just knocks the bottom out of the dramatic side of things, too.

Now to start with, in the first two chapters of this book, there are some definite comedy-like elements. In chapter 1, Ahasuerus comes over as a prize buffoon as Vashti refuses to turn up to be ogled at his big party.

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

(Esther 1:12)

And his advisors, when he is in this towering rage, have to play along and say some absolutely nonsensical stuff. Vashti's refusal is ridiculously exaggerated and given the status of an international disaster:

Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.”

(Esther 1:16)

In chapter 2, the comedy is less evident, but you get hints of it with insight into the beauty regimes of two-thousand-plus years back:

... this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women ...

(Esther 2:12)

... after which time they should all come up very definitely smelling of roses! But the darker side of that story is not too difficult to see, if you pause for a moment and consider. This is not Miss Persia 480 BC. These girls are being paraded not onto a stage catwalk but into the king's bedroom, most likely.

But it is in chapter 3 that the gloves definitely come off. There are still some elements of farce to follow, and by the end we will be chortling along when Haman gets his inevitable come-uppance. But here, as we meet him for the first time, a chill spreads across the stage. Here is a seriously nasty piece of work. So here, in chapter, 3, ***Ahasuerus' casual vagueness and Haman's crafted vindictiveness up the book's storyline to the ultimate threat of genocide.***

Just to guide us through the three episodes here:

provocation
preparation
proclamation

■ **provocation (1-6)**

You have to hand it to them, the writer of this book really knows how to keep us on our toes. We are *definitely* being wrong-footed as we start this chapter off. Remember where we left chapter 2? Mordecai the hero!

In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai.

(Esther 2:21-22)

And this gets officially noted. We get the impression that the king was very attentive:

When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

(Esther 2:23)

And if there were *two* things that the Persian kings of those days were known for, they were the two sides of a similar coin. You did *not* want to get on their bad side – think of the king's rage in chapter 1. But if you got on their good side, as Mordecai obviously did, in chapter 2, Persian kings were famously lavish in their favour.

So the initial words of chapter 3 are a *bit* odd:

After these things ...

(Esther 3:1)

Because that is a deliberately vague way of putting things. “Some time later”. You have to check out the context to find out exactly *how* much later. But we would probably have been expecting Mordecai to be named in the next New Year's Honours List, at the very latest. However ... chapter 2 ...

And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign,

(Esther 2:16)

... and chapter 3, as we will eventually find out ...

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, ...

(Esther 3:7)

But we're left, at the beginning of the chapter, with vague timing ... but therefore all the greater expectation that *finally* Mordecai will receive the honour he deserves. Only ...

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted ...

(Esther 3:1)

And it really is written in Hebrew in this word order. We are just waiting to hear the obvious name. But ... NO!

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.

(Esther 3:1)

Folks, imagine you are Mordecai, and have been wondering for years when you're due that recognition, that promotion, maybe ... You know what the Bible says about contentment, and you keep trying to keep your thoughts from anger. And then, that honour goes to *someone else*. Is that the point that would finally cause tempers to boil over?

Actually, I've been there, back in my lab days: someone else getting a promotion that I had reckoned I was due. I still remember kicking a waste paper bin very hard. Though I think only once – as if that makes it OK!

A few years later I found out why I didn't get a promotion in that particular year, and I still think I am right that there was some injustice involved. It can take a while to get over things like that. But with hindsight, at least, I can see that if that *hadn't* happened when it did – or *not* happened when it *didn't* – then I wouldn't be here today. Now I look back and see it as part of the guidance that culminated in coming back to Cornwall, and to Tuckingmill, back in 2005.

Am I content now with that injustice of 25 years ago? I think it's a still a bit of Yes and No. But it is water under the bridge. And God's providence has brought me to a situation that I am more than happy in.

But Mordecai is going to be tested in his trust in God's providence a whole lot harder than I was. And this test is going to come as a result of this apparent injustice in v1. It's going to get a whole lot worse before it starts to get any better.

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.

(Esther 3:2)

There is possibly still a bit of wry humour there, because if the king has to *command* that Haman be honoured ... is that a hint that he still did not cut a very impressive or dashing figure – perhaps he was quite generally disliked and derided, though most likely behind his back? – and that, were it down to the other courtiers, they wouldn't *otherwise* have given any special honour to their new Prime Minister?

But there was one man who refused to play ball. And we need to wonder why.

But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.

(Esther 3:2)

Now it could be just human. Mordecai, it has been suggested, is just sour about *his* being overlooked and Haman's being elevated. That's not impossible. But I don't think this is the answer here. We're given what I think is a clue in the following verses. Curiously, Haman initially seems not to notice this – perhaps we shouldn't imagine Mordecai remaining very obviously standing in a crowd of people, with everyone else down on their knees. Perhaps Mordecai just takes pains to *avoid* those circumstances when he can, or, when he can't, at least to be somewhere inconspicuous to Haman – but there are certainly plenty of people who *do* see what is happening.

Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king's command?”

(Esther 3:3)

And the patience of these guys eventually runs out. Or perhaps they reckon that Haman would eventually twig to what is going on, and *they* would have been in trouble for allowing it to continue. So ...

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 stand, ...

(Esther 3:4)

What words? Here's our clue, I think, as Mordecai's words give us some insight into his actions:

... for he had told them that he was a Jew.

(Esther 3:4)

So he's not just awkward, or sulky, I think. He might give due *political* honour to his superiors at court – just as Christians are told to do nowadays:

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

(Romans 13:7)

Honour, yes. But worship, no. Not for a *Jew* – whom God has forbidden to giving *religious* worship to anyone or anything other than himself. So Christians in the Roman Empire would make that astoundingly bold declaration:

... no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 12:3)

But they refused to say, even under pain of torture and death, that *Caesar* is Lord. Mordecai, you remember, is in the same Medo-Persian empire that Daniel was, at a similar level in the hierarchy, and of him too it was said:

Then these men said, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”

(Daniel 6:5)

Folks, is that true of you and me today? What is the most likely cause of your or my having a criminal record to our name? Driving without due care and attention, or refusing

to bow down to political correctness and deny the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, or the plain and obvious meaning of the Scriptures?

Now notice how Haman responds. The other officials mention Mordecai's disobedience to the *king's* edict. But Haman takes it as a *personal* insult.

And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.

(Esther 3:5)

Folks, isn't it strange that when we most claim to be standing on our dignity, we can most easily go on – as Haman does – to behave in a way most unbecoming to dignity! One of the least edifying spectacles you'll ever witness is two Christians or Christian groups having a real slugging match, and each of them claiming that it's on a point of principle from which they can't back down, for the glory of God's name. Believers or not, we still fall into the trap that Ahasuerus in chapter 1 and Haman here in chapter 3 do: just plain, simple, *ugly* pride.

And in this case too, it is ugly to an almost unbelievable extent:

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.

(Esther 3:6)

Once again, we're stopped in our tracks, thinking, how on earth did we get to something *this* extreme? Over-reaction isn't a strong enough word. This is totally bizarre.

Only we had been warned, as we read earlier on, as Haman was introduced. We thought it was just the way Bible people are so often referred to by means of their tribal lineage, or as “son of”, as, in effect, part of their name. But I think something significant had slipped beneath our radar. Who is this Haman?

... Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, ...

(Esther 3:1)

We don't know anything about Hammedatha, but the name Agag could ring a bell. Back to 1 Samuel 15, and a battle from way, way back, when Saul was the first king of Israel. A defining moment in the story of Saul, which results in his being removed from position.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have.'

(1 Samuel 15:2-3)

And Saul leads his forces into battle, and wins. But despite the command to wipe out everything – if that prompts a question, as it might, come back to me about this later – Saul *doesn't*. The king, in particular, is spared. A king by the name of – or perhaps title, like “Pharaoh” is the name of Egyptian rulers” ...

But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them.

(1 Samuel 15:9)

And Haman, somehow, is of that subsequent lineage of *Agag*. So he will be no friend of the *Jews*. That old grudge has been nursed for centuries. And oh, this could not be more fitting!! Mordecai! Mordecai *who*?

... Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, ...

(Esther 2:5)

Now that Kish, I said last time, was probably the name of the person carried into exile from Jerusalem a couple of generations back. But are we meant to read that as a name perpetuated down through a family line? Because you might remember another Kish in Scripture, relevant to *Agag* and *Saul*. *Saul who*?

... Saul the son of Kish ...

(1 Samuel 10:21)

So what more perfect a victim could be found for that ancient festering revenge to finally envelop and destroy? All that old stored-up bigotry and hatred can be brought to bear and to overflow. Old scores can finally be settled. By *genocide*.

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.

(Esther 3:6)

But you can go deeper than even that, just like in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* there is a deeper magic that pervades and underpins Narnia. This is why I've used this rather odd

Overhead: title

today. This is just one of numerous episodes throughout the Bible. It's not just the title of a cult Martial Arts film, but also a picture from the last book of the Bible:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.

(Revelation 12:1-2)

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

(Revelation 12:3-4)

She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, ...

(Revelation 12:5)

The child, in case you needed a clue ... that is Christ, the one who will rule all the nations. And the dragon? Way, way back, when the dragon appeared first as a serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”
(Genesis 3:15)

And so, over and over, that pattern reappears through Scripture. The dragon seeks to destroy “the offspring of woman”, the child of promise. The dragon and the child appear in different guises, like a musical set of variations, the same tune, changed, but still recognisable – but sometimes only just.

So, says God,

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ...’
(Exodus 4:22)

But it is the dragon, so to speak, that sits on Pharaoh's throne, and seeks to destroy God's “firstborn son” with an earlier genocidal decree:

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”
(Exodus 1:22)

If the Hebrews are wiped out, there will be no Promised Child, capital letters, to crush the dragon's head.

Run through to the NT, and the dragon sits on a Roman throne, and seeks by only slightly less bloody means to nip the truly royal line in the bud of Bethlehem – and save the dragon's head from the heel of the promised dragon-crusher.

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.
(Matthew 2:16)

If I had time, I could enlarge upon this and give you more examples. Only I don't, right now. Some homework for you, if you like.

But just see more to this passage in Esther 3 than just a ridiculously proud man, a Hitler of his time seeking a final solution of his time. What we see as an island is actually just the tip of a mountain which reaches down beneath the waves to the seabed in the depths. That old battle. That ancient serpent rearing his head. The thief of souls, who

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”

In contrast to the Good Shepherd who

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”
(John 10:10)

And a battle that was finally and decisively turned at seemingly the point of final defeat:

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

(John 19:30)

But, quickly now, back to the two final sections – and still some little nuggets to dig out and consider briefly.

■ **preparation (7-11)**

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (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.

(Esther 3:7)

Things have to be just right to make an approach to the king. And so the old superstitions come in, I think. Something like rolling three dice once a day, and only going to see the king when you have rolled three sixes. Only it is the best part of a year until fortune favours, in this case, the timid.

At least Haman has had plenty of time to work out what to say. And a real masterpiece of persuasion it is, too. Start with truth.

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. ...

(Esther 3:8)

Then twist things a bit. Stir in a bit of personal affront – that has to work well with an immensely proud man like Ahasuerus! And personal financial interest.

"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."

(Esther 3:8)

And now, an attractively incentivised plan. I don't know about you, but such a ridiculously huge sum of money here – it's something like half of the Persian empire's GDP – should raise some alarm bells. Possibly, just like with the arguments for HS2, Haman is saying this will be self-financing, in the end – when you confiscate all the property of these Jews ...

"If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 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."

(Esther 3:9)

But the king on the throne seems just about as aware of what is going on in his court as Young Mister Grace is up to speed with his employees' shenanigans at Grace Brothers' department store. *Yes, Haman, you're all doing very well!*

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.

(Esther 3:10)

The signet ring of the Persian King. This is the historic version of the *One Ring To Rule Them All*. With this in his control, Haman can initiate *anything*. And his eyes are set very firmly on the people of whom Scripture now record him as “the enemy”.

■ **proclamation (12-15)**

It's now written in very turgid almost legalese, all very precise:

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.

(Esther 3:12)

But here is the bottom line, the deadly payload:

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.

(Esther 3:13)

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.

(Esther 3:14)

Job done. And with incredible callousness, these two power-brokers of the Persian empire, the doddery emperor and the scheming Prime Minister sit back and raise their glasses to a rosy future ... oblivious (on the one part) or uncaring (on the other) of the turmoil on the capital streets down below:

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.

(Esther 3:15)

The question is one that the people of God have had to face in various ways, in various times, over the years: **Can you still trust God when *everything* seems to have fallen apart?**

Folks, in these last few verses, if you can see it, there is a curiously-shaped seed of a plant named hope.

The hope is not that this scheduled day of outrage is still one year in the future. That year will just be used for the full and terrifying preparations to be made all the more thorough. But did you notice that date? Does it ring any bells?

... the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, ...
(Esther 3:13)

It's the twelfth month by *Persian* reckoning. In Jewish reckoning, it's the first. The thirteenth of the month is Passover Eve.

A thousand years earlier, lambs had been slain, and the people of God had been delivered from the mouth of the Egyptian dragon.

Do you think that on (read verse), a *second* miraculous deliverance could be possible?

Let me give you a hint, just in case. Five hundred years later, on a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. When God did it a *third* time.

So folks, let's sing, and then remember ... let's put a name to this saving and redeeming God that is, for whatever reason, not spoken in the book of Esther. Let's bow together in joy and amazement as we remember *Jesus Christ*. Liberator. Dragon-killer.