LESSON 26

A Question about the Sistine Chapel

The handout shows scenes from the book of Esther as represented by various artists. The photo on the far left is taken from the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo. That image shows Haman's death (circled in red), and here is how that image is described in the book *Michelangelo And The Sistine Chapel* by Andrew Graham-Dixon:

> A number of beautiful drawings survive for the agonized, twisting Haman – considered by Giorgio Vasari as the single most beautiful depiction of the human form on the entire Sistine Chapel ceiling. … The foreshortening compresses and heightens the sense of Haman's pain. It also enhances the pathos of the hand with which he seems to be groping for something beyond his grasp. He stretches out as if to puncture the membrane of the illusion that constrains him. The gesture is that of one reaching out, in vain, towards the helping hand of another. He looks as though he wants to be pulled out of the shallow space of the painting that is his prison and into the freedom of the world.

The painting of Haman took 24 days to complete (he drew God in a single day!) and must have been very difficult given that more drawings survive for this scene that for any other scene on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. You can still see the nail holes in the scene by which the artist attached the pattern and transferred the design to the damp plaster. (*Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* by Ross King)

Although difficult to see in this photo, Haman is depicted as stripped of his golden clothing and nailed up on the twisted tree, instead of hanging from a noose.

Here is our question: why did Michelangelo depict Haman as dying on a **cross**?

Michelangelo may have relied on the Vulgate, the 4th century Latin translation of the Bible, in which the Latin word "crux" for cross is found in Esther 5:14, although everywhere else the Vulgate uses the word for "gallows."

But, more likely, Michelangelo was relying on Dante's *Divine Comedy,* which depicts Haman as having be crucified rather than hanged. Dante compares Haman with the unrepentant thief who was crucified with Christ.

But why did Dante make that comparison? Why did Dante show Haman as dying on a cross?

That decision likely came from an ancient Jewish custom of celebrating the death of Haman and the delivery of Israel by staging a mock-crucifixion of Haman. Some suspected the Jews of using that ritual as a cover to express their contempt for Christ, and so the Theodosian codex of AD 408 prohibited the Jews from:

> "Celebrating a certain feast in which they used to express very shrewdly their secret hatred of the crucified Saviour. It was a feast in memory of the fall of their enemy Haman; for they represented him as crucified, and burned his effigy on that day with great shouting and frenzy just as if he were Christ."

Whether this charge against the Jews was true or not, it is true that the suspicion caused this celebration of the Jews from persecution to instead become a reason for a renewed persecution of the Jews.

Back to Michelangelo, he was likely suggesting that Haman could be seen as an anti-type of Christ in the sense that his death led to a deliverance of God's people. That view is strengthened by the counterpoint image - the bronze serpent, which we know from John 3:14 prefigured the cross.

Esther 7:3-7, Continued

> 3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?" 6 And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

In verse 4, Esther quotes the very words used in Haman's edict – "For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" – but she uses the passive voice (e.g., "mistakes were made!") to delay mentioning Haman's name or mentioning that the king himself had been a party to the sale and threatened destruction of her people.

The ingenuity of Esther's tactics becomes evident here. Esther announcing that she had been sold must have mortified the king. And, by using the passive form of the verb, Esther cleverly avoids casting any blame on the king in this matter. In fact, as far as things stand at the end of verse 4, it would be possible for the king to imagine that Esther's distress has nothing at all to do with him.

Esther also uses the personal pronoun "I" ("For we are sold, I and my people…"), driving home the fact that Queen Esther herself, who (by the king's own admission) has pleased him and found favor in his sight, is now slated for execution. The clear implication is that this decree attacking the queen is an indirect attack on the king himself.

Esther has delayed this confrontation with the king three times – there was a delay in approaching the king the first time, there was a delay after she approached him the first time, and there was a delay after the first banquet.

What is the result of all these delays? The result is that Esther is prepared! She has had time to prepare her answer and come up with the best way to respond. If Esther has been praying, and we don't know whether she has, then she has had time to do that as well.

Once again, the book of Esther puts an ironic twist on what a Bible reader might have expected to happen here.

- In Genesis 38, Judah is confronted with his pregnant daughter-in-law, and when Judah demands to know who the father is, she announces that it is he himself.

- In 2 Samuel 12, David is confronted with the story of a man who killed his neighbor's pet lamb. When David demands to know who has done such a thing, he is told, "You are the man."

- In 2 Samuel 14, a woman presents David with a grievance. When he rules that her case is just, she reveals that the story is really about David and his son, Absalom.

The result here in verse 5 starts out the same way – the king asks, "Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?"

Apparently the edict had made so little an impression on the king that Esther's direct quotation from the edict does not even ring a bell with Xerxes! But I bet the queen's quotation from the edict was sure ringing a bell with Haman!

The king, of course, was himself responsible for selling the Jews into destruction. And when the king expresses his outrage over the act, the stage is set for Esther to reveal that it is Xerxes himself who is guilty. I doubt any of us would have been surprised had Esther done to Xerxes what Samuel did to David - “You are the man!”

But that is not what happens. Instead, Esther points her finger at Haman, but she builds the suspense by not revealing Haman’s name until the end of the clause in verse 6: “The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman.” Or as the ESV translates it, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”

Yes, Esther is accusing Haman in the conspiracy against the Jews, but the text’s use of language about God’s people being sold may be taking this opportunity to remind us all of the real reason why Israel found itself in this predicament. It is not only Haman who has “sold” the Jews, but they had sold themselves.

> Isaiah 50:1 – “Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.”

The Jews were not in Persia by accident. They were in Persia because of how the Jews had lived prior to the exile. They had, in effect, sold themselves to their oppressors. There is a lot of Biblical baggage attached to that little word “sold” in verse 4.

We might ask whether the king even knows yet that Esther is Jewish.

Haman never mentioned the Jews by name when he convinced the king to issue the edict, and Esther does not mention the Jews by name here. The King knows that Mordecai is a Jew (6:10), but the king does not yet know that Esther and Mordecai are related. That fact is not revealed to him until Esther 8:1.

Just how clueless is the great king Xerxes? Did he even now know that Queen Esther is Jewish? He know it now if he had bothered to read his own edict against her people, which mentioned the Jews by name (3:13), but had the king ever read his own edict of genocide?

Esther’s genius really shines through in verse 4, where she bases her appeal in part on the king’s own self-interest. Haman had done the same thing in 3:8-9 when he first proposed the massacre. There, Haman appealed to the king’s greed: “it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.” Esther does the

same here. That fact alone tells us a great deal about Xerxes and his motivations.

In verse 4, Esther says: “But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue.” Why? Because, presumably, such a sale would have brought revenue to the king. This destruction, however, will not prove profitable to the king.

But what about the 10,000 talents of silver that Haman has promised the king back in Esther 3:9?

This question brings us to final clause in verse 4, translated in the KJV as “although the enemy could not countervail the king’s damage.”

That short clause has been called the most difficult and controversial phrase in the entire book of Esther. One commentary says that the phrase is “undoubtedly the most difficult clause to translate in all of Esther, primarily because the meanings of three of the six words in it are uncertain.”

The difficulty arises from several factors:

- The conjunction (“although” in the KJV) is typically rendered “because,” and can have several different meanings, including “that” or “but.”
- The noun can mean “the enemy,” or it can mean “the trouble” or “the distress.”
- The verbal phrase (“could not countervail” in the KJV) generally has the sense of comparison, but it can be rendered “equal to,” “worth,” “fitting” or “sufficient for,” depending on context.
- The noun (“king’s damage” in the KJV), though common in post-biblical Hebrew, occurs only here in the Old Testament, and its meaning is disputed.

These problems have led to the clause being translated in a variety of ways.

- “For our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.”
- “For the adversary who has done this is not worthy of the king’s court.”
- “For the man who did evil against us has changed his behavior.”
- “Because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

- “But no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.”

One commentary makes a good case for the following translation: “but the money of the oppressor is not equal to the financial loss of the king.” And I think that translations makes the most sense based on the context in which the phrase appears.

First, it seems best to take the opening noun to refer to an enemy rather than just to distress. The same word is used two verses later to refer to an enemy. (“The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman.”)

This choice also makes sense when viewed in context with the king’s question in 7:5. He asks who the person is who has done this thing. That would be the natural response if Esther had just stated that an enemy was attempting to swindle the king. If Esther had instead merely mentioned “distress,” then the natural response from the king would have been to ask, “How have you been sold?” rather than, “Who has done this?”

Second, the second noun in the phrase, as we said, occurs only here in the Old Testament. But in non-Biblical writings, the same noun typically means financial damage.

In light of the fact that Esther is portraying the edict against the Jews as a financial transaction, a similar meaning would make sense here. What financial loss would the king suffer? Lost income from taxation, as well as lost services that the Jews might otherwise provide.

Haman had argued that the king should not put up with the Jews because they were not “profitable.” Esther argues here that the loss of the Jews will represent a huge financial blow to the king that Haman has not adequately compensated.

Third, the verb phrase “could not countervail” in the KJV is also uncommon.

It is used two other times in Esther. First, it is used in 3:8, where Haman advises the king that it would not be “worth it” for him to put up with the Jews, and, second, it is used in 5:13, where Haman states that all his riches and honors are “worth nothing” to him so long as Mordecai sits in the king’s gate.

With the preposition found here, the verb typically means “equal to,” “comparable to,” or “worth,” as in Proverbs 3:15 – “She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.”

Literally, then, this clause could be translated, “The oppressor is not worth the financial loss of the king.”

Given how much the book of Esther loves reversals, that reading seems right. In 3:8-9, Haman told Xerxes that it was not profitable for the king to tolerate the Jews, but, now, Esther tells the king that it is not profitable for him to tolerate Haman.

Perhaps when Esther mentions the oppressor, she is really referring to the oppressor’s bribe. But it would have been indelicate for Esther to explicitly mention the money that Haman had promised the king because that detail would have drawn attention to the king’s own responsibility in the affair and would have cast him a bad light.

In short, Esther’s appeal here is a request for her people to be spared, but it is couched in terms of the king’s financial interests.

The Jews have been sold, but not as slaves. Presumably they would have brought market value in the slave trade, and the king would received a large sum. But they have been sold simply to be destroyed, and the compensation the king received (as large as it was) was not sufficient to offset the loss of revenue from tribute, gifts, and labor that the king would receive from allowing the Jews to live.

There is certainly merit to Esther’s argument. While we do not know how many Jews lived in the Persian Empire, it could have numbered more than a million. If there were a million Jews in the Persian Empire, their value on the slave market would have far exceeded Haman’s bribe. As Esther presented the issue, Haman appeared to be swindling King Xerxes out of a huge sum of money.

Another clever aspect of Esther’s plea is that it invites the king to consider the question of whether the Jews really deserved to be enslaved.

According to Herodotus, rebellious vassals could indeed be sold as slaves. But how could Xerxes brand the Jews as rebels on the very day when he had ordered Mordecai the Jew to be honored for saving the king’s life? If the Jews could not reasonably be painted as insurrectionists and sold as slaves, then they would surely not be deserving of the much harsher penalty of genocide.

Esther finally reveals the villain in verse 6, but, as we said, even then she delays mentioning his name until the very last word – “A hateful man and an enemy! This vile Haman!” We can almost hear Esther emphasizing each word with a stabbing finger pointed straight at Haman.

There is a key phrase at the end of verse 6 that tells us exactly how this will all turn out for Haman – "the king and the queen." The fact that the king and queen are mentioned together shows us how her status has risen, even as she must beg for the king's mercy. Haman trembles before both the king and the queen, recognizing that she is at least as dangerous as her husband.

Yet another reversal has occurred: Haman was enraged when Mordecai did not shake before him (5:9), but now it is the king who is enraged, and it is Haman who is trembling in terror.

Have you ever had a bad day? I mean, a **really** bad day? Your bad day has probably never been as bad as the day Haman was now having.

Remember that Haman had just returned from leading Mordecai on horseback throughout the city, and now Haman learns that the Queen is Jewish, and so she is subject to the edict of death that he convinced the king to sign. Can things get any worse for Haman? Yes! (And one should never ask that question!)

The king has good cause to be enraged. Earlier, his anger flared when Queen Vashti refused to appear before him, and so the king got a new queen. Now, it appears that someone is trying to deprive him of his new queen – and that someone is none other than his trusted advisor, Haman.

Torn between loyalty to his wife and to his second in command, the king does what any good commander would do in such a situation – he leaves the room!

We already know that Xerxes is not a decisive man, and we already know that he does not commit himself to a course of action without input from his advisors. But now, it is his chief advisor who stands accused. From whom can the king seek counsel?

Is the great and powerful Xerxes finally going to be forced to make a decision all on his own? Will he be able to stand the strain? Can the king punish Haman for a plot that he himself approved? If so, won't the king have to admit his own fault? And how can the king or anyone else revoke an irrevocable law?

And what does Haman do while the king is outside thinking? Haman has moved to Plan B. He stays behind with Esther to beg for his life.

Court protocol dictated that no man other than the king himself or a eunuch could ever be alone with

a woman from the king's harem. We don't know if Harbona in verse 9 was with the king in the garden or remained behind with Esther. In any event, Haman should have left the queen's presence when the king left the room. But wouldn't that make Haman look guilty?

Even in the presence of others, no other man (who either wasn't a eunuch or didn't want to quickly become one) was allowed to come within seven steps of a woman from the king's harem. Haman forgets this rule as he falls on the couch where Esther is reclining. This was so unthinkable that some early Jewish commentaries said that Haman fell on the couch only because the angel Gabriel had given him a firm shove!

It was the custom of Persian nobles to recline on couches when they dined. Haman had risen from his couch, but Esther remained recumbent, seemingly unmoved by Haman's plight.

According to Plutarch, touching the Persian king's wife was a capital offense. Haman must surely have been out of his mind to have made such an error.

Why did Haman stay with Esther rather than follow the king? Perhaps because Haman knew that the real power in this situation lay not with King Xerxes. The King had made a promise to Queen Esther, and so in Haman's mind she was the only one who could save him now. But, of course, the real power was not with either Xerxes or Esther, but rather was with one who is not mentioned in the book. Who is really in charge here? The text has been calling upon us all to ask ourselves that question for seven chapters so far.

Esther 7:8-10

> 8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the bed whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. 9 And Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon. 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

Remember when we asked whether things could get any worse for poor Haman? They do so in verse 8 with yet another remarkable coincidence.

The king walks back into the room at the very moment that Haman falls on the couch, causing the king to ask, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?”

When the king returns from the garden, Haman has fallen before Esther, prostrating himself in a manner that Mordecai had refused to do before him. Mordecai would not bow (3:2), nor would he stand (5:9), nor would he tremble (5:9). Haman is forced to tremble (7:6), then to stand (7:7), then to bow (7:8).

The Jew could not be forced to humiliate himself before the Amalekite, even by the order of the king, but the Amalekite humiliates himself before a Jew willingly.

Many consider this scene to be the funniest scene in the book of Esther. The king has returned from his walk to find Haman sprawled atop the queen. Haman is begging for his life, but the king accuses him of trying to assault the queen. But the attack does not seem to be the real issue for the king: it is the fact that the attack occurs in his presence, “with me in the house.” It is not the insult to the queen, but the insult to the king that really matters here.

What is really going on here? The king must have known that Haman had not seen this time as the perfect opportunity to assault the queen. Instead, the king interprets Haman’s actions that way so that he can condemn Haman without implicating himself in Haman’s plot against the Jews. Haman’s apparent assault will allow the king’s own complicity to remain hidden and unexamined. Even though Haman is guilty of many crimes, Haman is about to be executed for a crime he did not actually commit!

The end of verse 8 ends with an interesting detail – “they covered Haman’s face.”

While it may have been customary in ancient Greece and Rome to cover the head of condemned prisoners, we are told that there is no evidence for such a practice among the Persians. (But, of course, that statement forgets that the book of Esther could itself be evidence of such a practice!) Most likely this covering was done simply to keep the king from having to see Haman’s face.

This covering also reminds us of Esther 6:12, where Haman rushed home with his head covered after his humiliation before Mordecai. That verse, we now see, foreshadowed this event where others covered his face for him.

Is it still possible for things to get even worse for Haman? Yes!

A very helpful eunuch (likely the same Harbona mentioned in 1:10) points out that there is a ready-made gallows that can be used to get rid of troublesome Haman. Clearly, this eunuch had little love for Haman. He, and many others, had likely been mistreated by pompous, self-important Haman.

The eunuch tells the king that Haman had built a giant gallows for the purpose of killing Mordecai – the very person who had saved the king's life and who had just been honored by the king.

The king no doubt saw this revelation as a threat to his own life by the villainous Haman, who must, the king likely reasoned, have secret sympathies for the attempted assassins (whom the king must have feared, and rightly so because he would later be assassinated).

Haman, the king had discovered, wanted to murder the king's rescuer and attack the king's wife all on the same day!

Once again, the narrator gives us an ironic twist. Haman's death occurs on the same instrument of doom that he had created for Mordecai. The pike that was going to show everyone what happens to those who oppose Haman became the place for demonstrating what happens to those who oppose the Jews.

With Haman executed, the king's anger abates. The wording in verse 10 reminds us of 2:1, where the king's wrath against Vashti abated.

In Chapter 1, the flaring of the king's anger led to the removal of the queen; when it abated, he chose a new queen. In this chapter, the king's wrath meant the removal of Haman. The abating of Xerxes' wrath signals the coming of Haman's replacement, which will occur in the next chapter.

Of all of the reversals in the book, Haman's reversal may be the greatest and most sudden. One day he was on top of the world, and the next day he was standing at the top of his own gallows. Overnight the tables had turned for Haman, and he did not see it coming.

This entire scene is steeped in irony. Both Esther and Haman plead for their lives in Chapter 7. Mordecai the Jew initiated the conflict by refusing to bow before Haman the Agagite, but here we see Haman the Agagite falling down before a Jewish woman. And, in the end, Haman's fate was sealed by something as seemingly insignificant as the king's sleepless night.

#ezra-esther