

Haman, Hamas, and Hercule Poirot



Esther Denouncing Haman to King Ahasuerus by Ernest Normand

by Robert Lyon

For the past few months I've been listening each night before bed to Sir David (Poirot) Suchet's brilliant reading of the Bible in the New International Version. I was halfway through the book of Esther when news broke of Hamas' recent terrorist assault on over 900 Israelis attending an outdoor concert. The coincidence of the news and the reading was so uncanny that one might be tempted to see in it some divine intent. That night I understood the book of Esther as I never had before.

Many scholars, though certainly not all, regard the story of Esther not as history but as pious fiction. I don't know whether they're right or wrong. But I do know, as Aristotle taught, that history tells us what was true at one place and time, but fiction tells us what is true in every place and

time. Hearing Sucher read Esther that night, I understood how poignantly Esther's story is true in every place and time.

When Xerxes, King of the Persian Empire, selected young Esther to replace his deposed queen, Esther had not yet revealed that she was a Jew. But when Haman, the king's chief advisor, devised a plot to exterminate all Jews because, as he alleged, they had strange and dangerous customs and would not bow down to him, Esther appealed to the king. Haman was removed and a royal decree was issued that the Jews should forever have the right to defend themselves against all who hate them. They did so with great success, and they proved to be a blessing to Xerxes' empire.

Haman is gone, but his hatred of Jews has continued down to the present day. As likewise has their right to defend themselves.

The problem in dealing with Haman's kind of hate, which explicitly calls for the destruction of Israel, is that it leaves no room for negotiation. And it treats moderation as a breathing space to organize the next jihad. Suddenly I understood the "herem," the condition of enemies being devoted to destruction that you find in the Bible from Joshua through to the establishment of the Jewish kingdom. I understood the compelling rationale for such seemingly unconscionable decrees as the slaughter of the Amalekites.

A curious thing about the book of Esther is that the Name of God does not appear anywhere in the narrative. Well, that's almost true, but not quite. The sacred Name, Yod He Vav He, does in fact appear four times, but it is embedded in the text, typically overlapping two adjacent words. In two instances, it reads from right to left, and in two from left to right. What might that mean?

Remember that the book of Esther was written either during or shortly after the Babylonian Exile of 597 to 537 BC. It was

written for a Jewish audience who must have wondered where God was in such an event and what on earth he was doing. The embedded sacred Name seems to imply that God was and is at work behind the scenes – “playing his checkers” as A. W. Tozer would say – and that he has a grip on his people whether they’re coming or going. It signifies their faith that God will keep his promise to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

Lord Suchet’s character Poirot, the nemesis of bad guys, might relish such a plot, if it were not so horribly real-life.