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Introduction

THIS BOOK is about a character by the name of Haman, who is considered a villain in virtually all varieties of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As the book is labeled a “biography,” I will dutifully describe Haman’s life—including his background, family, career, and death. Readers who are acquainted with Haman from scripture and wish to discover more about him are invited to go straight to Part III (“Haman’s Life”), where they will (hopefully) find what they are looking for.

However, outside of the Bible and the Qur’ān (and the commentaries on these texts that their interpreters authored), there is very slim evidence for Haman’s existence as a historical figure. What we possess, instead, is an abundance of material concerning what those who read the Bible and the Qur’ān have thought about Haman. And although we will explore such evidence as there is for the historical Haman, it will become clear throughout this book that his biography has been repeatedly overlaid by exegetical expansions that make it nigh impossible to recover a historical Haman with any degree of confidence.

In practice, this means two things: First, this book is primarily about Haman as a literary character, whose depictions reflect the perspectives of the religious traditions and scholars that produced our sources. Second, these sources come from diverse regions, periods, and civilizations, a diversity reflected in the multitude of Hamans whom we will encounter. In Part II (“Haman in History”), we examine the various contexts in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims developed Haman’s character (Chapter 6) and deployed it polemically (Chapter 7).

Haman’s importance in the Abrahamic religions originates in his appearances in scriptures. Although these are limited to a single book of the Hebrew Bible and six verses of the Qur’ān, Haman’s descriptions in versions of these texts (and in the commentaries that they spawned) evolved in fascinating ways that will be analyzed in Part I (“Haman in Scripture”). Moreover, as we will see throughout

the book, despite Haman's limited coverage in the Bible and the Qur'an, his impact over the past two millennia has been enormous, making him one of history's great overachievers.

To the best of my knowledge, this book is the first biography of Haman, and—more generally—the first book-length attempt to trace a biblical character both backwards and forwards in time. In addition to the expected Jewish and Christian treatments of Haman, we will explore his prebiblical origins in the ancient Near East and his reception in Islamic cultures. Along the way, we will encounter ancient Iranian history and culture, Hellenism's impact on Second Temple Judaism, Abrahamic transformations in late antiquity, the development of classical Islamic civilization, and various episodes of medieval and early modern European history. We will consider Haman's refraction through the lenses of varieties of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as the interactions of these religious traditions with Zoroastrianism, Samaritanism, and ancient Near Eastern pantheons. And we will process Haman's roles in scriptures, inter- and intra-communal relations, religious theater, history, and historiography, in varieties of Near Eastern literatures that do not usually feature in discussions of the Abrahamic religions, and in social media.¹

Clearly, I have bitten off more of the Abrahamic pie than one person can reasonably be expected to chew, and a reader looking for weaknesses, shortcomings, faults, and deficiencies of whatever nature will probably have no problem finding them in this book.² And yet, I believe that a comparative study of this sort is justifiable, despite the clear pitfalls, for three reasons.

First, there is merit in adopting a comparative approach to Near Eastern studies in general—by drawing on sources and materials from across a wide spectrum of cultures, languages, and religious traditions—rather than carving up the field along geographical, linguistic, or religious lines so as to produce discrete and largely independent areas of research. The broad, comparative approach envisaged here was instinctive to Orientalists in the nineteenth century (for instance) but is no longer common, for mostly practical reasons. Max Müller (d. 1900), a pioneer in the academic study of religions, once remarked that “to know one [religion] is to know none.”³ Accordingly, limiting oneself to a single community's Haman means not knowing about even that particular manifestation of the character. My aim, therefore, is to chart and analyze the various ways in which Haman's character evolved across time and space, which will allow us to draw broad conclusions about the communities and traditions that produced their own Hamans.⁴

Second, the study of biblical reception history has traditionally privileged the biblical context in which a character first appears as the “original” one, from which

subsequent texts diverged. By considering Haman's prebiblical origins (Chapter 8), we are accepting the possibility that the book of *Esther* was receiving Haman and reconfiguring him for its author's purposes no less than did later versions of *Esther* or the Qur'ān. Similarly, the study of "biblical" characters in the Qur'ān has traditionally focused on the pre-Qur'ānic origins of a character. Here, by contrast, we trace Haman's evolution along a chronological spectrum that culminates in the Qur'ān's adaptation of the character to his new scriptural surroundings, allowing us to highlight the Qur'ānic Haman's *originality* rather than his *origins*.

Third, adopting a broad, comparative approach to Haman affords us a panoramic view of Near Eastern or Abrahamic civilization that is rarely seen nowadays, for it has become a casualty of the hyper-specialization that pervades most corners of Near and Middle Eastern studies. In charting Haman's path through history we will see that he was a divisive figure both within religions (on account of stirring debates about his status), and between religions (as his name was used polemically, to denigrate rivals). But we will also see ways in which Haman served as a unifier for competing communities where, for example, celebrations of his demise were attended by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

Bearing the above in mind, this book is less a Haman encyclopedia and more an exploration of Near Eastern history and religious culture through the example of Haman, who is, for some, one of the most evil characters who ever existed, and for others, one of the most maligned characters who never existed.

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