

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The story of Esther is an amazing chronicle. There is actually no mention of God in the entire book, and for this reason perhaps, the German Reformer Martin Luther went to the extreme of denying its right to a place in the scriptures. Yet it is one of the clearest demonstrations of God's providential control of history. It is an amazing demonstration of divine justice manifested in this life. But the book does raise a number of questions—questions that will be dealt with as they arise, the very first one being, why is there no mention of God? The fact is, there is a consistent reference to God in this book, but it is not by name. The power, the providence, the goodness, and the grace of God, that is, God's existence and his attributes, are clearly and consistently manifested in this book. The Bible itself teaches us that God reveals himself in various ways. These ways include:

- By his creation
- By his word as given and preserved in the scriptures
- By his providence

The Psalmist tells us that God's revelation of himself through his creation is a universal language that is heard throughout the world.

*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)*

Paul tells us that this revelation is sufficient to establish the existence, the greatness, and the goodness of God, so as to leave men without excuse in the judgments of the last day.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful. (Romans 1:18-21)*

We call this general revelation, but it is specific enough that men will be judged thereby at the last day. We also have special revelation, God's word, as revealed to us and preserved for us in the holy scriptures. And finally we have God's revelation of himself through his providence. If by his creation he proves that there is a Creator, by his preserving and sustaining that creation he establishes that there is a Sustainer and Preserver of this world. He proves that he is a faithful, covenant keeping God, who keeps the covenant that he made with mankind in the days of Noah when he made this promise:

*And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. (Genesis 8:21-22)*

The Book of Esther is a written revelation of God working through providence, and this record of his providential doings, this revelation of himself through providence and history, is preserved in his word. And although there is no mention of God by name in this book, there are indirect references to his existence, not only by creation and providence, but by acts of worship directed towards him. Both fasting and days of thanksgiving are acts of worship. They are acts of worship towards God in response to the dispensations of divine providence. In times of trial, in days of woe, men resort to prayer and fasting in their appeals to God for deliverance. In times of great blessing and prosperity, in occasions of remarkable deliverance and special preservation by the hand of God, men call for days of thanksgiving. It is fitting

therefore that in this record of God's special providence that the only allusions to God are in days of fasting and of thanksgiving.

The book starts off with "*Now it came to pass...*" This almost sounds like a fairy tale and reminds us of that familiar phrase, "*Once upon a time...*" And the book at times seems to be almost a fairy tale. It is the story of an unknown Jewish girl who becomes queen of the Persian Empire; it is the story of how she delivered her people from seemingly certain destruction; it is the story of how her foster-father, once a despised Jew slated for death, becomes the prime minister of the most powerful potentate of that day. Yes, all this does read like a fairy tale. The difference of course is that this story is no figment of the imagination. It is true; it is marvelously true; and it records an incredible tale of God's providence towards his people. All this makes the story of Esther a story of joy and triumph that has always been a delight to God's people.

The Book of Esther is a historical book. Accordingly it tells us the time, the date, the place, of all the events that it records, and it identifies all the main characters, but says nothing of the author. Who is the author? Is it Mordecai? Logical supposition would lead men to that conclusion, but there is no proof. The author was obviously someone who was intimately familiar with all these historic happenings. And the only two people familiar in every intimate detail with these occurrences are Esther and Mordecai.

Esther herself is ruled out as the author for a number of reasons, including her sex. That of course leaves us with Mordecai, and he is the one that has generally been presumed to be the author, especially by the Jews themselves. Mordecai knew these events as almost nobody else could have, but that does not necessitate that he is the author. It only establishes that it was most likely to have been written with Mordecai's assistance and under his direction.

In the New Testament we have several examples of inspired books supplying a historical record written not by, but under the direction of, those who had personal knowledge of the events. We have John Mark, who wrote a gospel under the apostolic imprimatur of the Apostle Peter. We have Luke, who wrote a gospel and the Book of Acts as an associate of the Apostle Paul. Even so, we have to allow the possibility that some godly and inspired scribe at the Persian Court under Mordecai's direction may have authored this book. We will never really know in this life. What we do know is what God in his wisdom has determined that we should know. What we do know is that our God is a great God, a sovereign God in control of history, a gracious God who cares for his people, a God who works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. If we have learned that, then we have learned the most important lessons of the Book of Esther.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A ROYAL DIVORCE

#### Esther 1:1

**1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:)**

The story begins by identifying for us a certain Persian king. Who is the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther? All we are told of him is his name and the extent of his kingdom, and even the name is not all that helpful. There are three Ahasuerus's listed in the Old Testament scriptures – the one that is set before us in the book of Esther as well as two more that are mentioned in the following texts:

*In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans. (Daniel 9:1)*

*And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:6)*

Names are confusing because of the process of transliteration. Transliteration is the process whereby a word is not translated, but simply phonetically carried over to another language and if necessary another alphabet. To give an example, I come from a country called "Nederland." This is transliterated into English as the "Netherlands." It means the low country, but is transliterated into the plural form. The French decided to translate it rather than transliterate it, and they call it Les Pays-Bas, which also means the low countries.

Names are usually transliterated with some exceptions. When they have a particular meaning they are sometimes translated. American Indian names are a good example. Some, such as Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse, have been translated for us into English names rather than being transliterated, as Geronimo, Tecumseh, Pontiac etc., were. Biblical names are usually transliterated even when they have a very specific meaning. Elijah is a transliteration and is not translated as "My God Is Jahweh," although his name, in the contest with the Baal worshippers, had great meaning.

But although the concept is simple enough, in practice it has been notoriously confusing. Even the name of God has been effected by this process. Jahweh, the Hebrew name of God occurring over six thousand times in the Old Testament scriptures, is grossly mistransliterated as Jehovah. Similar confusion attends the transliterations of the name of our Lord. In the Old Testament it has been transliterated from the Hebrew Yeshua, into the English Joshua. In the New Testament it has been transliterated from the Hebrew into the Greek, and from that into the English Jesus. This has caused some confusion in passages like this one:

*For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. (Hebrews 4:8-9)*

What it really means is that Yeshua, the Son of Nun, the successor to Moses, who led the children of Israel into the earthly land of promise could not actually give them the true rest, but that Yeshua of Nazareth, the Christ, will bring the people of God into their eternal rest.

All this should give us a better understanding of the difficulties of sorting out the name that we are dealing with. The Persian form, which would be his actual name, was Khshayarsha. The Hebrew transliteration from the Persian is Ahashverosh. When it is transliterated into Greek, the Greek form is Xerxes. The transliteration from the Greek to the Latin became Assuerus, which when transliterated again into English gives us the name Ahasuerus that is familiar to us from our English Bibles.\*

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\* See Jack P. Lewis, *Historical Backgrounds of Bible History*, Baker Book House, 1971, for a fuller treatment of Ahasuerus' names.

Since we are part of what is generally called Western civilization and get our history primarily from Western sources, it is the Greek names that we generally have to deal with. Now we can begin to examine these three kings that are called Ahasuerus in the sacred text and seek to identify them. First of all, we need the following chronological list of the kings of Media and Persia that are relevant to this period.

1. Cyaxares, King of Media
2. Astyages (Cyaxares' son), last King of Media
3. Cyrus, King of Persia
4. Cambyses (Cyrus' son), King of Persia
5. Gaumata (a usurper impersonating Smerdis, Cyrus' younger son), King of Persia
6. Darius Hystapis (Cyrus' son-in-law), King of Persia
7. Xerxes (Darius Hystapis' son), King of Persia
8. Artaxerxes Longimanus, (Xerxes' son), King of Persia

Now the scriptures tell us that the Ahasuerus of the Book of Daniel is the father of Darius the Mede, the last King of Media before the kingdom fell to Cyrus the Persian. Therefore he has to be Cyaxares. "Axares" is practically the same as Xerxes and merely has the prefix "Cy" (Kai) common to the Kaianian dynasty. So it is not surprising that its final transliteration into English would also be Ahasuerus. The Ahasuerus of Ezra was the successor of Cyrus to whom the enemies of the Jews accused them and appealed for a reversal of Cyrus' favorable decrees with respect to them. So he must be Cambyses, who is also known in history as Oxares or Axares. This name is again similar to Xerxes and therefore it is logical that its transliteration should again be Ahasuerus. That leaves us only with the question of who is the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther.

The first clue that we have is that he reigned over 127 provinces. Only the last three kings of Persia listed above would qualify as having ruled over such an extensive empire. Another clue that we have is the nature of this king's character. The Ahasuerus of the book of Esther was somewhat vicious and tyrannical. This is shown by how he treated his first queen, Vashti, by how unauthorized entrants into his throne room were dealt with, and by how he was on the slightest accusation prepared to deal with the whole Jewish race. In this he perfectly conforms to the known historical character of Xerxes. It is this king, Xerxes, who is the Ahasuerus that we will be studying. There are other factors to consider as well. Darius Hystapis' wife was Cyrus' daughter, and he would hardly have divorced the woman through whom he had his claim to the throne. Similarly we can discount the claim of Artaxerxes Longimanus to be the Ahasuerus we are seeking to identify. For of him we are related the following episode from the Book of Ezra.

*Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia...This Ezra went up from Babylon...and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel. Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand; And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem: That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God. The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem. And whatsoever more shall be*

*needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure house. And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily, Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons." (Ezra 7:1, 6-7, 11-23)*

King Artaxerxes makes this extremely favorable and generous decree to the Jews in the seventh year of his reign. He can then hardly be the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther who in the twelfth year of his reign acts like he knows nothing of the Jews and gives them over to indiscriminate slaughter on the flimsiest of pretexts.

### **Esther 1:2**

**2 That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,**

Having identified Ahasuerus, we are next told where he is. First, we are told he is on his throne. For many kingdoms that would settle the entire question of where he is and where our story takes place. But the kings of Persia were always on their throne. Even in their travels and in their battles they were always seated on a throne. But the writer specifies that it is the "*throne of his kingdom.*" That in itself might be an indication that he is on the main throne in the capital of his kingdom. But the writer goes on and specifically answers this question also. Ahasuerus is in his palace in Shushan. The Biblical city of Shushan is the city that is otherwise known as Susa. It is located between the Rivers Shapur and Dizful on the southeast end of the great Mesopotamian plain. It is a very old city, having been the ancient Elamite capital. Its history dates back to the days of Abraham and Chedorlaomer, King of Elam. But by Ahasuerus' time it was the new capital of the Persian Empire. The old capitals were Ecbatana in the North and Persepolis in the South. These were located in Persia proper, the modern country of Iran. Ecbatana was the traditional Persian capitol, but Darius Hystaspis had made another capitol at Persepolis. These may have been the respective summer and winter capitols of Persia. As the Empire grew and the newly acquired western provinces such as Mesopotamia, the kingdom of Lydia (Asia Minor), and Egypt became the more important parts of the Empire, the capitol was moved westward. It was especially important for the capitol to move west of the Zagros Mountains, which made travel westward from the old capitals virtually impossible in the winter months. So Shushan became the new capital of the expanded Persian Empire.

### **Esther 1:3-4**

**3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:**

**4 When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days.**

The author of this inspired tale of sacred history is still in the process of giving us the complete setting for the drama that is to follow. Having identified the reigning monarch and the place, we now have the time. In ancient days the time was reckoned differently from today. The calendar contained the months of the year as ours does, but the years were calculated in a more parochial way. Years were generally counted as the year of the reign of the current king.\* In a way, we do the same thing, as all our years are dated A.D. for "Anno Domini," Latin for "the year of our Lord." We count the years from the birthyear of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But we count the years from Adam to Christ simply as years B.C,

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\* For a fascinating study of how this dating system worked in the case of the kings of Israel and Judah, and how all the alleged discrepancies and contradictions can be resolved, see Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.

that is, years before Christ. This way we can arrange things chronologically very simply without being an expert in ancient history.

But obviously it is not possible for the writer to use that system, and he merely tells us that the time is in the third year of the reign of Ahasuerus. There is an event that takes place at this time and at this place that triggers the whole chain of events that is recorded in this book. The writer directs our attention to this event—a great feast at the royal palace in Shushan:

*In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him: When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days. And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. (Esther 1:3-5)*

The text can sometimes be misunderstood here. Some may gain the impression that there were two feasts and that the first feast lasted a grand total of 180 days. There is only one feast. In verse three we are told that Ahasuerus made a feast for his princes and servants. That is the only feast that takes place. The rest of verse three and verse four gives us the occasion of the feast and its exact timing. When Ahasuerus had assembled the power of Persia and Media and the princes and nobles in his presence, and when he had impressed them for 180 days with the wealth, splendor, and power of his kingdom, then he holds this feast.

The power of Persia and Media means the military forces or what we would call the army. This undoubtedly refers to his generals and other military commanders. The civil administrations of the various provinces were represented by the princes and nobles. Ahasuerus has gathered the civil and military might of his empire into Shushan for a period of 180 days. Why would he do such a thing? We have an indication from sources in secular history. There we are told that at about this time in his reign Xerxes gathered the chief men of his kingdom to Susa to consult with them concerning his planned military campaign against Greece. A military campaign of this magnitude involving logistical and military support from many of his 127 provinces would take months of planning.

It would also explain why he spent so much time impressing his guests with the wealth and power of his kingdom. It was more than mere vanity. Ahasuerus needed to strengthen weak hearts and ensure any waverers in his kingdom that he was so powerful that he could not lose. He could not afford a lot of fence-sitters or, worse, those that might take the occasion of his preoccupation with an extended campaign against Greece to revolt.

#### **Esther 1:5-8**

**5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;**

**6 Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble.**

**7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king.**

**8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.**

After six months of planning and preparation it is logical that there would be a great feast to toast the coming enterprise. The entire royal court, all those present in the palace, are invited to this seven-day feast. We can envision the excessive luxury. We sit down to dine. The Persians, as many other Orientals, recline on couches to feast. The lavishness of the setting, of these couches, and of the utensils, are

described in verses six and seven. We can imagine the great hall with its hundreds or thousands of guests ringing with toast after toast to the great king and his glorious enterprise. One could easily become inebriated, especially if one felt compelled to join in every toast because of political expediency. So the writer points out to us that, as provided by law, none were required to drink more than they freely chose to.

### **Esther 1:9**

**9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.**

It seems that the men were dining by themselves at this feast. This may have been because military campaigns are a man's business or because this was the custom with the Persians as some commentators believe. At any rate the women are not included in the great feast of Ahasuerus. Instead they are entertained at a lesser feast hosted by Vashti, the queen. Again, everyone in the palace, all the females of the royal court are invited. Commentators have had no success in trying to identify this queen from sources in secular history. The name Vashti itself may not be her real name, but merely an appellation, for Vashti means beautiful woman in Persian.

### **Esther 1:10-12**

**10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,**

**11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.**

**12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.**

As the feast reaches its Bacchanalian climax, Ahasuerus calls for his wife to entertain his guests. He instructs the chamberlains to fetch her. The word for chamberlain is "eunuch" in the Hebrew. Eunuchs were generally in charge of the king's harem. This was to ensure the sexual purity of the king's wives and concubines. The politics of a polygamous household are extremely competitive as the rival wives jockey for position and influence. This is even evidenced with Sarah and Hagar, as with Leah and Rachel. The chamberlains can be very influential in promoting one wife or demoting another. They can constantly bring one to the king's attention and cause another to be perpetually ignored. The temptations they face with power over so many beautiful women, all anxious for their influence on their behalf, causes kings not to entrust their harems to normal men, but only to those who have been emasculated and cannot be tempted. But when they instruct Vashti to come at the king's command, they are met with a determined refusal.

Why did Vashti refuse to come? It seems almost impossible that she should have refused to come. Ahasuerus was such a great and tyrannical potentate. To intrude into his royal presence without authorization was a death sentence. Women in such cultures were expected to obey. It seems incredible that she would refuse to obey, and defy the king. The only two reasons that seem logical are either modesty or pride.

Historians tell us that the kings of Persia normally dined with their wives. However, when the feast turned riotous and drunken, and all decorum was cast aside, they would dismiss their wives and call for their concubines. Wives were often married for reasons of state, but concubines were married for their beauty. The concubines would then entertain the king and his guests as Salome, the daughter of Herodias, entertained Herod at his birthday feast. In modern parlance, they were calling for the dancing girls to provide some immodest entertainment.

All this gives us two reasons why Vashti may have refused to come, and either one or both could apply. First of all, it may have been modesty. At the end of the feast, when men were the most riotous and drunken, she had no inclination to use her beauty to incite lust and to provide the subject for crude humor and immodest jesting. Secondly, she may have refused out of pride. She was a legitimate wife and it may have been beneath her dignity to be treated as a common concubine. Whatever the reason is, we can only speculate. The writer does not explicitly tell us why, but only states her refusal, as on that fact the entire story of Esther hinges.

#### **Esther 1:13-15**

**13 Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment:**

**14 And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom;)**

**15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?**

The disobedience of a wife is obviously an unusual circumstance, so unusual that Ahasuerus is clearly perplexed and decides to consult his advisers for an appropriate response. Wise men who "*knew the times*" probably refers to astrologers whose counsel is determined by the timing of certain celestial bodies in their courses. In verse 15 Ahasuerus makes it clear that he wants to deal with Vashti's disobedience according to the law. And it is in that context that we ought to interpret the parenthetical statements in verses 13b and 14. We have already been told that the king had burned with anger at Vashti. He could have simply and immediately ordered her death. While it is true that the laws of the Medes and the Persians do not change, there was nothing prohibiting Ahasuerus from making such a decree. The immutability of the law simply made such decrees irrevocable. His predecessor, Darius the Mede, discovered that to his chagrin when he was reluctantly compelled to cast his most beloved counselor, Daniel, into the den of lions.

Ahasuerus could have dealt with Vashti in his anger. He seems to have had the wisdom not to do so, but to wait until he had time to properly reflect. And having reflected he now seeks out his counselors. He wants to deal with her according to the law. And that is what the parenthetical statement in verse 13b means. It is saying that when he wanted to deal with things in anger and fury he did so, but when he appealed to his counselors it was because he wanted advice with respect to law and justice. Verse 14 then simply goes on to list seven of the princes of Persia and Media who were among his trusted counselors and had regular access to the king.

#### **Esther 1:16-20**

**16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.**

**17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.**

**18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.**

**19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.**

**20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small.**

Memucan gives the response on behalf of the council. The king's question is what shall be done to Vashti for her disobedience. This precludes any thought of defending Vashti. The council's commission from the king is to formulate the just punishment that she deserves. The counselors are wise men. They probably appreciate the fact that half-way measures could be disastrous for them. They must either vindicate Vashti, a course not open to them, or see that her power is entirely and permanently broken. To be the instruments of her temporary disgrace would leave them open to her future retribution. If she were to regain the king's capricious favor, their heads might not be safe. This is evidenced by how Esther's royal favor later spelled doom even for Haman, the king's favorite and the second most powerful man in the kingdom, once he became her enemy. Accordingly the seriousness of her alleged crime is greatly exaggerated. What may have been no more than modesty and a defense of her status as a legitimate wife is transmuted into an incipient feminist revolt threatening the social fabric of the empire. The sentence is that she is to be deposed as queen. To ensure that this deposition sticks, it is proposed that it be done by an act of irrevocable law and that her position as queen be filled by another.

One thing that is not clear in the text is the exact nature of Vashti's position after her deposition as queen. Is this a royal divorce? It is hard to imagine that she would be truly divorced and free to marry another. To marry a queen is to establish a claim to the throne. It is because of exactly such a potential claim that Solomon had Adonijah put to death when he requested the hand of Abishag, the fair maiden that David married when he was on his deathbed.\* It seems more likely that her deposition would include becoming merely another concubine in the king's harem, just one of hundreds. Forgotten and isolated in the vast harem of an Oriental potentate, she would be in fact sentenced to a living death. Hers would indeed be a cruel fate, and Ahasuerus would have a kind of ironic vengeance on her. She would become the lowest of the concubines, exactly what by her disobedience she had refused to be treated as. This is one of the unanswered questions of the Book of Esther about which one can only speculate.

At any rate, Memucan's proposal is quite comprehensive. Vashti's iniquity is to be published throughout the Persian Empire. Ahasuerus, whose riotous feast was the occasion of these unhappy circumstances, is to have his vindication and his royal justice proclaimed throughout the known world. Memucan must have been pleased with himself. He had fulfilled the royal commission par excellence. Now, some of the above is obviously based on logical speculation and not on explicit statements in the text, but one cannot but be struck by the writer's description of Memucan's overstatement of Vashti's guilt. The above is merely one way of reasonably accounting for that fact.

Ahasuerus reminds me somewhat of King Henry VIII of England, with his mistresses, his six wives, his marriages and divorces. Henry would go to his counselors and tell them what he wanted and then demand that they accomplish it all legally. Similarly Ahasuerus wants Vashti punished, but insists that it be done not arbitrarily, but according to law and justice. History tells us that in both cases the counselors were sufficiently endowed with the wisdom of this world to fully comply. They were dealing with autocrats.

### **Esther 1:21-22**

**21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:**

**22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.**

These verses briefly record the acceptance of Memucan's proposal and its publication by royal decree throughout the empire. The last verse is rather poorly translated in the Authorized Version and its meaning is brought out more clearly in alternate translations such as the following:

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\* Abishag having undoubtedly been made David's a concubine there is therefore also the matter of incest. Adonjah would have been marrying one of his father's wives. The Mosaic penalty for such incest was also the death penalty.

*...that each man should be master in his own house, and speak in the language of his own people. (Esther 1:22, NKJV)*

Since the issue was to crush an alleged feminist revolt, sparked by Vashti's conduct, the decree addresses that particularly. Each man is to be master in his own house, maintaining patriarchy by royal decree. And each household is to speak the language of the master of the house. Wives and servants in this polyglot empire of countless ethnic groups and languages are to submit and speak not in their own language, but in that of their husbands and masters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SEARCH FOR CINDERELLA

#### Esther 2:1-4

**1** After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.

**2** Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:

**3** And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them:

**4** And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

Ahasuerus begins to have second thoughts about Vashti and how he dealt with her. Like most people who are driven by an anger they cannot properly control, they let their anger drive them to extreme actions that they later regret. A good example is Herod the Great who killed his favorite wife, Mariamne, and several of his sons in fits of anger and suspicion. Ahasuerus may have had plenty of time to repent, as this is probably after his disastrous Grecian campaign that ended in multiple defeats. If so, then we can logically ask, "Did Ahasuerus come back discouraged with his failure and miss his favorite wife?" Did he want to drown the misery of defeat in the delights of this life and indulge himself in the pleasures of the harem? Did he miss Vashti, the beautiful one?

At any rate, if the king wanted to erase the bitterness of defeat by the indulgence of his sexual lust, the counselors were more than happy to oblige him. First of all, it might prevent him from venting his displeasure on them for the defeat. Secondly, if our previous speculations about Vashti's situation were correct, the counselors could not afford for the king to repent of having taken their advice. Instead of Vashti's disobedience and his anger being the issue, they could be made the scapegoats for the royal divorce. And a restored Vashti could mean their doom. So if the king wanted his sexual appetite indulged in a royal way, they were more than ready to comply with his wishes. They have another proposal, one that is less threatening to their careers.

I almost hate to make the comparison, but in essence what is being proposed is a Miss Persian Empire contest. Fair young virgins will be sought out in every part of the kingdom. And the fairest of the fair will be gathered together in the palace at Shushan. They will be handed over to the custody of the keeper of the royal harem. They will undergo a process of purification so that they will be fit to grace the royal bed. Then the virgin that pleases the king the most will be selected to replace Vashti and be crowned as the new queen. If the king wants to indulge himself in the pleasures of the harem, this is a recipe that he will find hard to resist. If the counselors fear a restoration of Vashti, this is a proposal that even her beauty and charms will not be able to compete against. And so it was, for the proposal is gladly accepted by the king.

#### Esther 2:5-7

**5** Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite;

**6** Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.

**7** And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.

This passage introduces one of the main characters of the book, a Jew named Mordecai. We note that although he is a Benjamite he is called a Jew, short for Judahite. Already by this time Israelites are not

being called just by the name of their tribe for their ethnic identity. Mordecai is termed a Jew as he was a citizen of the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

Who was this Mordecai and what if anything does his name mean? The best guess to the latter question is that his name was derived from Marduk or Merodach, the Babylonian god. His ancestors were taken into captivity to Babylon, and it was common to rename the captives with Babylonian names, especially those that honored their gods. In the case of Daniel, whose Hebrew name means "Judge of God" he was renamed Belteshazzar, which means "Prince of Bel," the Babylonian deity. The main argument against this derivation is that an official at the Persian court long after their overthrow of the Babylonian Empire would scarcely be named in honor of a discredited Babylonian deity. But that may be a weak argument because Cyrus' policy was to maintain the religions of the conquered peoples, in accordance with which policy he allowed the Jews to return and rebuild their temple.

As for who he was, the only reasonably successful attempt to identify him in secular history is with the Persian court official Matacas, who was a favorite of Xerxes and very powerful. Matacas was a eunuch, which would then explain Mordecai's single life and his adoption of Esther as his only child. It would also explain his rise to power, as the kings of Persia were generally served by eunuchs (Haman being an obvious exception), and also explains his access to the court of the women. But again, this is only a guess based on the limited historical information available about the reign of Xerxes.

The writer places Mordecai in Shushan the palace. This is a clear indication that even before the elevation of Esther to the position of queen, Mordecai was already a court official, a functionary in the royal palace. The writer then proceeds to detail some genealogical information about Mordecai. (For a discussion of this data, see chapter 5.)

Then we are told that Mordecai is a child of the Babylonian captivity. The "who" in "who had been carried away" could grammatically refer not only to Mordecai, but to any of his forebearers there listed. Xerxes reigned from 486 to 465 B.C. The Babylonian captivity occurred in stages, starting in 597 B.C. and continuing in 587 B.C. and 582 B.C. But we are told that he was part of the deportation that included Jeconiah or Jehoiachin as he was called. That means he was part of the deportation that occurred in 597 B.C. Haman's plot that led to his own death and the elevation of Mordecai to his position took place in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus. If Mordecai had actually personally gone into the captivity he would have had to have been at least 123 years old when he became prime minister of the Persian Empire. This is extremely unlikely. The longevity of the pre-deluvian and even the post-deluvian era has long been history. The threescore and ten years of Psalm 90, the Song of Moses, has long since been the norm. So we can safely conclude that Mordecai was born in captivity. If he was born in the Babylonian Empire before it fell to Cyrus the Persian in 539 B.C., he would have been at least 65 years of age. This is a far more likely possibility and would account for his name's association with the Babylonian god Marduk.

Next we are told that Mordecai raised his cousin, his uncle's daughter. It is not at all unusual for cousins to be of such varied ages that one could be a foster-father or guardian to the other. Since Esther was counted among the fair young virgins and Mordecai was aged enough to have the maturity and wisdom to be counselor to and minister of the Persian king, their age difference was probably in the order of forty-some years.

Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah, meaning "myrtle." Her Persian name, by which she was better known, was Esther. Esther is Persian for "star" and that it is all that it means. It should not be confounded, as some have sought to do, with the name of the goddess Ishtar. We are told of Esther that she was fair and beautiful. These are not redundant adjectives as it appears in the English translation. The Hebrew means that she "had a fine figure and beautiful countenance," that "she was fair of appearance and beautiful of form."

Finally, we are told that Esther was an orphan and that Mordecai adopted her. Adoption is a very Biblical practice. To simply raise her is not enough. Adoption makes her his daughter and an integral part

of the family. God has adopted us. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve were children of God. Through sin they became alienated from God. Christ told the Pharisees that they were children of their father the devil. But through Jesus Christ we are adopted by God and are again the children of God. When Christians adopt children they provide much more than a home. The adopted children, as part of the family, enter into God's covenant and become part of his church. This is a great blessing.

#### **Esther 2:8-11**

**8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.**

**9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.**

**10 Esther had not showed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not show it.**

**11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her.**

This passage tells us of the execution of the counselors' proposal by royal decree and that Esther also, as one of the fair young maidens, was brought into the king's harem. Esther soon wins the favor and approval of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the royal harem. He assists her in every way and gives her and her maids the best apartments in the house of the women. This is of course very providential as we see God's purposes unfolding in Esther's life. We are reminded of a similar situation in Daniel's life when he was brought to Babylon. Of him we are told, "*Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love [i.e., compassion] with the prince of the eunuchs.*" (**Daniel 1:9**) But although Esther's status with Hegai is very providential, it is noted that God works through means. Esther has at Mordecai's request kept her racial identity a secret. The inference is clear that if Hegai had known that she was a despised Judean captive, and not a Persian or a Mede, etc., he would not have been so favorably inclined towards her.

Finally, we are told that Mordecai with faithful parental concern made a daily check on Esther's welfare. We are not told exactly to what purpose this was done except that he was obviously concerned for her. We do not know if he was upset that she had been inducted into the royal harem unwillingly and was concerned about her treatment or whether he had willingly complied with the royal decree and was monitoring her progress in this most unusual of beauty pageants. The original says that he walked to and fro in front of the court of the women daily to check on Esther's welfare. This exhibits a high degree of concern if not anxiety on her behalf and suggests that if he had complied with Ahasuerus' decree it might well have been reluctantly.

#### **Esther 2:12-14**

**12 Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;)**

**13 Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.**

**14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.**

This passage gives us the details of how the process of selecting the next queen was carried out. All the finalists from the selections of beautiful virgins from throughout the land have been brought to Shushan and placed in the royal harem. There they spend twelve months undergoing a process of purification and

preparing for their night with the king. When their turn came to spend a night in the royal bed they were allowed to adorn themselves with royal clothing, jewels, etc., as they saw fit. In other words they were allowed to be themselves and please and charm the king as they themselves chose. They spent one night with the king, and when they returned they were placed with the royal concubines. And there they stayed, perhaps for the rest of their lives, unless they had so pleased the king that he requested their presence again—a frightening prospect for many beautiful young maidens, taken from home and family with the prospect of a lonely existence, of being buried alive in the king’s vast harem until the day of their death.

**Esther 2:15-17**

**15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king’s chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.**

**16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.**

**17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.**

Esther seems to have faced the prospects before her with great courage and a rare fortitude. Her confidence in God and her trust in His providence, evidenced later in this book, seems to have sustained her. Knowing that “*the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong*” (Ecclesiastes 9:11), but that it is all in God’s providence, she does not rest her cause in fancy adornments, but accepts whatever Hegai recommends for her. And her trust is well placed. Even as with Joseph, another captive, in Egypt, so God caused all those who were around Esther to be favorably disposed towards her. And in the seventh year of the reign of Ahasuerus (479 B.C.) her turn comes to spend her night with the king.

It has been four years since Vashti was deposed in the third year of his reign. Why this long interregnum without a queen? The answer is most likely what we have already noted, the Grecian campaign. Xerxes returned from that campaign in 480 B.C. He had joined the army in the fall of 481 B.C. at Sardis and was present when in 480 B.C. he won the battle of Thermopylae and burned Athens. Later that year the Persians suffered a great naval defeat at Salamis. Xerxes then returned home and left his generals to complete the campaign. They suffered twin defeats on land at Plataea and Mycale in 479 B.C., ending the campaign. But the maidens have spent a whole year being purified and it probably took another year to search out the most attractive young virgins throughout the kingdom and send the finalists to Shushan. Thus it would have been two years since he missed Vashti and his counselors set forth their proposal. In that case all this may have been set in motion before he left for the Grecian campaign and upon his return he is now indulging himself in the results. That is the most likely, but it is hard to be sure, and it may have been, as we originally surmised, that when he returned the process of replacing Vashti was initiated.

Finally, we are told that God has favored Esther’s simple faith and trust. She has won the favor of the king. Above all others, she has become his chosen one. She is crowned queen and officially becomes Vashti’s replacement. It is marvelous. It is incredible. And as we shall see, it is not only a token of God’s faithfulness to Esther, but also of his covenant faithfulness to his people Israel.

**Esther 2:18-20**

**18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther’s feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.**

**19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai sat in the king’s gate.**

**20 Esther had not yet showed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.**

The king then conducts a great coronation feast for Esther. This feast includes a “*release to the provinces*” and many royal gifts. What this “*release*” consisted of we are not told. It could have been a remission of taxes. It could also have been a release of political prisoners. This was the later practice of Rome, as when Pontius Pilate offered the Jews the release of a prisoner according to custom on the feast day, the Passover. The release could also simply have been a release from work, an imperial holiday to celebrate the coronation of the new queen.

The most puzzling statement in this passage is that the virgins were gathered a second time. The virgins have already been gathered once and Esther has been chosen as queen, and the rest have been given to Shaashgaz and assigned to the house of the concubines. There seems no logical reason why they should be gathered again. It may be that the process for gathering fair young virgins for the king’s selection was ongoing and still in progress at the time that Esther was being chosen and coronated, and that a second group has just been gathered in Shushan. In a polygamous society, where the king had many wives and even many more concubines, this would present no special problem. The courtiers may have felt no reason to abort the program while the first batch of virgins was being processed and Esther was being chosen as the new queen.

This has no relevance for the purposes of the writer except to denote the time of certain events. At that time, when the virgins were gathered a second time, Mordecai sits in the king’s gate in which position he discovers a conspiracy against the life of the king. And this fact is of great importance and forms part of the marvelous mosaic of divine providence that runs like golden threads through the fabric of this book.

Finally, Esther continues, even after her coronation as queen, at Mordecai’s behest, to conceal her racial identity. Although she is now queen, she has not lifted up her heart with pride. She remembers the commandment of the Lord her God to honor her father and her mother. And although she is now in a very exalted position and Mordecai is probably only a humble courtier or a simple functionary in the palace, she still renders him that due obedience that God’s law requires. She may have also honored him in another way and not just with her obedience. In the ancient East the gate was the seat of civil government. To sit in the king’s gate is to rule in the king’s name. This may well represent a promotion in Mordecai’s standing in the court. Coming at this time, just subsequent to Esther’s coronation, suggests that she may have intervened to bring that to pass.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A QUESTION OF ETHICS

One of the questions that will always haunt a reader of the Book of Esther is, why did Mordecai allow his adopted daughter to be recruited into the harem of Ahasuerus? There are several good and scriptural reasons why he should not have. The first one is that Israelites were forbidden to intermarry with the heathen. The intermarriage of believers with unbelievers has always been forbidden. In Genesis we read that before the flood, “*That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.*” (**Genesis 6:2**) It was this intermarriage between the godly line of Seth and the ungodly line of Cain that produced the generation that God felt compelled to wipe off the face of the earth.

The patriarchs had always gone to great lengths to find godly wives for their sons. Their ostracism by the Egyptians because of their occupation as shepherds and later because of their position as slaves made intermarriage in Egypt an unlikely problem. When they entered into the land of Canaan they were strictly forbidden to intermarry with the people of the land.

The temptation to intermarry, however, was greatly increased while in captivity. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, probably succumbed to it in the Assyrian captivity and thus lost their identity and disappeared from the pages of history. But God’s law had not changed, even in captivity, and these prohibitions were later enforced in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. In fact this prohibition extends to Christians today. The Apostle Paul says,

*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)*

Esther is forbidden by the law to marry Ahasuerus. This prohibition stands whether she becomes his queen, just another legitimate wife, or a concubine. Why then did she marry him? And why do the scriptures not record the least resistance or protest from either Esther or Mordecai in this matter?

Secondly, this marriage was forbidden by the law because it was a polygamous marriage. Ahasuerus was already married many times over. Therefore it was forbidden for Esther to marry him. Polygamy was expressly forbidden to all Israelites.

*Neither shalt thou take a wife to her sister, to vex her, to uncover her nakedness, beside the other in her life time. (Leviticus 18:18)*

It was specifically forbidden to their kings in **Deuteronomy 17:17** where Moses stated, “*Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away.*” It was practiced by some of the patriarchs unwillingly, at the suggestion of barren wives, and with unpleasant consequences. And its practice later by the kings of Israel and of Judah was a direct violation of the Sinaitic Covenant. Again we must ask, with the law of God twice barring her from a marriage relationship with Ahasuerus, how did Esther become involved in this “contest” to become his queen?

And if the above were not enough, there is a third reason for Esther to have abhorred and for Mordecai to have forbidden any participation in this process. Esther’s chances of becoming queen were statistically very slim. The fairest of the fair are being gathered from all over the empire, but only one will become queen. All the others have the sad prospect of a lonely existence as a neglected concubine in the vast harem of the king. Since this is the likely outcome for each candidate, one would think that Mordecai would do anything in his power to spare his precious adopted daughter from such a fate. Yet the writer says nothing of any such concerns and records nothing about any opposition by Mordecai to his daughter’s induction into this strangest of all beauty pageants.

Now there is no doubt that they were faced with a royal decree. By law, Esther as a young virgin of rare beauty was required to submit herself as a candidate for Ahasuerus' harem. But could Mordecai not have done something to deliver Esther from this cruel requirement? With the seclusion of Oriental women this does not seem such a hard thing to do. Even if it was known, and it may not have been, that he had a daughter, especially since he may have been a eunuch and would not have been expected to have any children, how would it have been known that she was remarkably beautiful? With the custom of women being veiled in public, Esther's beauty would have been a private matter and not public knowledge. Logically speaking, one would almost assume that Mordecai would attempt to hide his daughter from those royal officials that were entrusted with the execution of this decree. Why there is no evidence that he sought to do so is one of the mysteries of the Book of Esther.

Why did Mordecai not appear to attempt to deliver Esther from the king's unscriptural and unlawful (by God's law) demands? He had no way of knowing how God would providentially use Esther for the deliverance of his people. And he had no right to presume that it might work out that way some day.

To study the ethics of such a situation as this, one must differentiate between the preceptive will and the secret will of God. The preceptive will of God is his law – the precepts by which he commands us to live. His secret will is his providence whereby he brings to pass all his holy will and directs history to that grand culmination of the kingdom of his Son Jesus Christ. Moses refers to this distinction. He teaches,

*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 29:29)*

What Moses is saying is that God's determinate counsel, his secret purposes, belong to God. They are His concern. But God's law, his preceptive will, belongs to us that we may keep it. A good illustration of this principle is the case of Judas the traitor. Judas by his treason fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies right down to the thirty pieces of silver. Judas fulfilled the secret purpose and eternal counsels of God in bringing to pass the death of His Son Jesus Christ. But that does not in the least exonerate Judas. Judas' duty was to conform to the preceptive will of God. He was commanded to love the Lord his God with all his heart, not to betray him for the love of money. He was commanded to seek truth, righteousness, and justice; not to corrupt these to satiate his greed. As Christ himself declared,

*The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born." (Matthew 26:24)*

In His gracious providence God works all things out for good. He works all things out for his own glory and for the good of his elect. He overrules our sins to bring good out of them and causes even the actions of the wicked to fulfill his holy purposes so that the Bible says that even "*the wrath of man shall praise him.*" But his secret counsels are his business alone and He still holds men accountable according to his moral law. So regardless of the fact that Esther's elevation to Queen of Persia was used of God to deliver his people, there is absolutely no reason for Mordecai to allow Esther to enter a marriage that is doubly prohibited by God's preceptive will. Even had he known, and he did not, his actions would still have been forbidden. We have to do our duty and trust God to work things out for good.

So why did Mordecai surrender his daughter to the king's decree? I can think of only four answers. The first we have already dealt with – that he thought it would be advantageous to his people to have a Jewess in such a high position of influence. If he did, he was wrong and his actions are condemned by the scriptures.

Secondly, he may have surrendered Esther to the royal will because he believed that he was required to obey. This was a royal decree and he was a subject of Ahasuerus. Jeremiah had warned the Jews that they had to submit to Nebuchadnezzar; it was God's will for them; it was his judgment on them. Later Paul taught the Christians in Rome,

*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” (Romans 13:1-2)*

The Apostle Peter taught,

*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.” (1 Peter 2:13-15)*

Mordecai may have felt that it was his duty to obey the king’s decree and reluctantly surrendered his daughter. If he did so, I believe he was wrong. The passages quoted are both in the context of rulers who are a terror to the wicked and a support to the righteous. There is nothing in the scriptures that requires Mordecai to surrender his precious daughter to his king’s inordinate lust, as there was nothing that required Nathan to surrender his inheritance to the covetousness of Ahab, his king. As the Apostles told the Sanhedrin, when they too came under a command that conflicted with the will of God, “*We ought to obey God rather than men.*” (Acts 5:29)

Thirdly, Mordecai may have wanted to resist the king’s decree but was reluctant to practice the necessary deception required to protect his daughter. He may have wanted to shelter Esther, but when faced with official inquiries about his daughter he felt compelled to tell the truth and thus effectively surrendered his daughter. If so I again believe that he was wrong, and this raises the age-old debate about when Christians are justified in practicing deceit. Is it morally justified to “lie” to the Nazis?

I have some personal experience in this matter. I was born in the Netherlands during the Second World War, and my family lived under the Nazi occupation. The Headmaster of the local Christian School was arrested and executed by the Gestapo (SD<sup>\*</sup>). He had been in the underground and was helping young men to evade Hitler’s draft. These young men needed hiding places, fake papers and ration coupons. When he was arrested, our minister went to SD headquarters in Leeuwarden and sought to intercede for him. We will never know what he said because they interrogated him and then took him out in the back yard of the building and shot him also. But you can be sure that he did not go there and say the man was guilty, that he was a member of the underground, that he had been active in forging and distributing false ration coupons, but would they please let him go! In matters such as these, in addition to the more celebrated matter of hiding Dutch Jews from the machinery of the holocaust, Dutch Christians practiced deceit during the occupation. Were they wrong? The Reformers practiced deceit to escape the Inquisition during the Reformation. Were they wrong? Only the scriptures can settle that issue; after all, it is God’s law that we are to obey.

The Bible forbids men to lie. The Bible says that no liar has a place in the kingdom of God. But what this all boils down to is, what is the scriptural definition of a lie? The famed Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, wrestled with this issue. He developed what he believed to be a scriptural definition of a lie. It had three components. The first was the obvious; a lie is a statement that is false. However, that alone does not constitute the statement a lie. Children make false statements routinely in their tests at school, unless they get a perfect grade. But if little Johnny says that two plus two equals five we don’t call him a liar.

That brings us to the second component of a lie, an intent to deceive. The false statement has to be made with the knowledge that it is false and with a deliberate intent to deceive. This is as far as most people’s analysis goes. For them all intents to deceive are lies and are immoral and inadmissible for Christians. When the Nazis come to your door and ask if there are Jews in the attic, you are to draw yourself up in all your moral self righteousness and say, “I cannot tell a lie, yes there are.” And when the

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<sup>\*</sup> I say Gestapo because everyone understands the nature of that organization. Actually the Gestapo operated in Germany and France and a parallel organization, the SD or Sicherheits Dienst, meaning Security Service, performed the same functions in other countries such as the Netherlands.

Inquisition comes to your door and asks where that unlawful preacher is hiding out, you have to reply with the truth. The only other alternative that these moralists would allow a Christian is to defiantly state that they know, but refuse to tell. This is but another way of committing suicide and an invitation for them to extract the information by torture. Is this what God requires? Fortunately the Reformers did not think so, or we might still all be Romanists!

Hodge added a third requirement; the person requiring the information has to have a moral right to the truth. This was not based on sophistry, but on clear and convincing scriptural evidence.

The first case in point is that of the Hebrew midwives. They were faced with Pharaoh's decree to kill all the male infants of the children of Israel. They disobeyed and saved the children. When they were questioned by Pharaoh as to why they were not complying they "lied." They fabricated a story that the Hebrew women gave birth so fast that the babies were born before they could get there. They could have defiantly told Pharaoh that they refused to obey his command. But then they would simply have been killed and replaced with those who would, or Pharaoh would have devised another means of exterminating the Hebrews. Was God angry with them? No, to the contrary he was very pleased with them. As Moses records it:

*And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives, of which the name of the one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other Puah: And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live. But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive. And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them, Why have ye done this thing, and have saved the men children alive? And the midwives said unto Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them. Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty. (Exodus 1:15-20)*

A similar example is the case of Rahab. She hid the Hebrew spies and deceived the authorities of Jericho with respect to where they were. Was God angry with her? To the contrary, because of her actions, she and her family were the sole inhabitants of Jericho who were spared when the city fell. And she has the distinction of being an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Paul includes her in the pantheon of the heroes of the faith, declaring, "By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace." (Hebrews 11:31)

There are other examples, but that is not the purpose of this book. The point is that, in both cases, the ones faced with this issue practiced deception in order to protect the people of God. In both cases they are commended in scripture. Rather than judge them as sinful liars, the scriptures tell us that the midwives acted out of fear of God and that Rahab acted by faith in God. All of them refused to give the wicked the information that they needed to destroy the people of God. In both cases the wicked, as Hodge put it, did not have a moral right to the truth.

Now where does this leave Mordecai? Did he have an obligation to obey the king's decree? I think not. Did he have an obligation to be truthful in any inquiries by the officials with respect to this decree? I think not. Did Ahasuerus have a moral right to the truth when he will use that truth to kidnap a godly young maiden and force her into a polygamous and heathen marriage? I think not. Would he have been justified in using deception to protect his daughter? I believe so. Would you, if you had lived under Nazi occupation during the Second World War, have practiced deception to keep your daughter out of an S.S. military brothel? Those who would not must think that they are holier than God, that they have moral standards higher than his law. They are no better than Lot who offered up his daughters to satisfy the lust of wicked men, to appease a mob of rioting Sodomites.

The final reason that may account for Esther's participation in the requirements of the king's decree is that neither she nor Mordecai had any choice. Was Esther taken against her and Mordecai's will? We do not know. All we know is that the text is silent with respect to any resistance by them. And neither does

the text intimate that any force was used or required to take Esther into the royal harem. But one certainly wants to hope that this was the case, that Esther and Mordecai wanted to obey God's law and sought deliverance from this unjust decree, that Mordecai did his best to shelter Esther from this seemingly cruel fate, but that the king's officials discovered her despite his best efforts to the contrary.

That God answered their prayers for deliverance in a marvelous way that they could never have foreseen would only add to the inspiring theme of this book. If this was the case that leaves us with only one question. How would the royal officials have known of her and especially of her beauty? Had Mordecai previously shown her off? Was he now paying the price for his indiscretion? Was he like Hezekiah now suffering the consequences of his folly? Of Hezekiah, when he showed off his treasures, we are told:

*At that time Berodachbaladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah: for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. And Hezekiah hearkened unto them, and showed them all the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah showed them not. Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him, What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country, even from Babylon. And he said, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All the things that are in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not showed them. And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, Hear the word of the LORD. Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the LORD. (2 Kings 20:12-17)*

These are questions that we cannot answer. These are issues that we can only speculate about. Given the overall godly character of Mordecai that seems to be consistently presented throughout the book, it seem unlikely to me that he was vain and foolish enough to show off Esther's beauty. The chamberlains' search for beautiful young women would probably have required them to remove the veils of numerous young women, and Esther would have been no exception. Nonetheless, it remains one of the great mysteries of the Book of Esther how she ever became a candidate for Vashti's queenly crown.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GENEALOGICAL QUESTIONS

#### Esther 2:5

**5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite;**

Who was Mordecai? What can we learn from this genealogy of his? One thing that we can learn about is the extent of God's grace. We are told that Mordecai was a Benjamite, that he was from a tribe that had been slated for destruction. He was from a tribe that was almost annihilated for their reprobate behavior and their refusal to repent. And except for unusual measures taken by the other tribes to secure wives for the remnant of Benjamin, they would have become extinct. Yet, in spite of Benjamin's iniquity that nearly led to their extinction, we see God bringing much good out Benjamin.

First of all, the tribe of Benjamin produced Saul, Israel's first king. Benjamin also produced the great Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus and a Benjamite, to whom we, as Gentile believers, are all indebted. And here we learn that Benjamin produced Mordecai and Esther (his father's brother's daughter and therefore also of the tribe of Benjamin) through whom the nation of Judah, already dispersed among the Gentiles, was saved from extinction. We see poetic irony here. The other tribes by their compassion save Benjamin from extinction, and centuries later Benjamin saves them from extinction.

What else can we learn from this genealogy of Mordecai's? Who were these ancestors of his that are listed here? Were they simply the father, grandfather, and the great-grandfather of Mordecai? Were they unknown personages of whom we know little or nothing else? Were they simply unknown, nondescript people who went into captivity, as opposed to Daniel, a prince of the royal house of Judah, or Ezekiel, a priest and a prophet? Were they just people of no importance? Were they simply people that would never have been recorded in the pages of sacred history except for their famous progeny, Mordecai and Esther?

This is certainly one possibility and if so we can see the marvelous ways of God. He takes the humble from the dust and raises them up to sit with the princes of the land. As he took David from the sheepfold and made him captain over the Lord's heritage, so he takes these simple unknown people and makes them great in Israel. He raises them up to great power and prestige in this life and sees that their names will never be forgotten as long as the righteous read the word of God. In this we see the greatness and goodness of God. As the psalmist says,

*Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high, Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people." (Psalm 113:5-8)*

Of course there is one other possibility. That is that these personages are actually well known. After all, why would the writer list totally unknown people as Mordecai's ancestors? To what purpose would he list people whose names would mean nothing, even to the readers of that day? Could it be possible that these are actually not the direct forebearers of Mordecai? "Son" does not necessarily mean son in the scriptures, but can mean grandson or great-grandson etc. Could it be that these are actually just a few famous ancestors who the writer considered worthy of note? Now it is true that the most direct and the most logical meaning of the text is that these were the immediate forebearers of Mordecai. But there is a possibility that it is not so. And because some commentators including Keil, the Jewish Targums, etc., take the position that these are well known ancestors of Mordecai, I want to at least explore the ramifications of that interpretation.

Who is Jair? We really do not know. Jair means "he enlightens." There are three Jair's recorded in the Old Testament scriptures. The first is Jair, the son of Segub, who played a prominent part in the conquest of the trans-Jordan in the days of Moses. The second Jair is a Gileadite, who lived in the days of the judges,

and judged Israel for twenty-two years. He is the one with the thirty sons who all rode on donkeys. The third Jair, the one we are interested in, is either the father or a more remote ancestor of Mordecai. More than that we do not know.

Then who is Shimei? If he is a better known, but more remote ancestor of Mordecai, then the only plausible answer is that he is Shimei, the son of Gera. He is the Benjamite who cursed David when he fled before Absalom. So say the Jewish Targums, although they are hardly a reliable source with their abundance of fanciful tales. And finally who is Kish? Is he the famous Benjamite who was the father of Israel's first king? Again this is the most plausible candidate, as he is the only famous Benjamite of that name.

If all these identifications are correct, we see a parallel here with the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1. That genealogy generally lists only the male ancestors. But three times it goes out of the way to list women in the genealogy. And remarkably all three women noted are ones that the genealogist of a famous person would prefer to exclude. First of all there is Rahab the Canaanite, an innkeeper in a culture where that profession was equated with harlotry. Then there is Ruth the Moabitess and foreigner, also from a despised race, a race born of the incest of Lot with his daughters. What a contrast with the race of Israel born of the supernatural conception of Isaac in Sarah's womb in her extreme old age. And finally there is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, the adulteress who married her husband's murderer.

Is the writer of the book of Esther trying to make the same point? Is he linking Mordecai with some of Israel's more despised personages? Is the writer stating that Mordecai descended from the reprobate Shimei who cursed the Lord's anointed? If so we have very interesting contrast. Shimei curses David, the Lord's anointed, and prays for his death when he is under threat of assassination by his son Absalom. At the restoration Solomon places Shimei under house arrest and finally has him executed as an oath breaker. Mordecai faithfully serves the Lord's anointed ("*...the powers that be are ordained of God,*" **Romans 13:1**), Ahasuerus, and saves his life in the matter of the conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh when he was threatened with assassination. Mordecai ends his days in a position of great authority and respect, and after death is highly beloved and remembered by his people. Was the writer trying to bring out this contrast? Was he saying that the stain that Shimei put on the tribe of Benjamin has been erased by a greater son of Benjamin, Mordecai?

And what of Kish, the father of Saul? What can his ancestry to Mordecai teach us? A lot actually, for here we see an even greater contrast. On the one hand we have Saul the disobedient King of Israel who intruded into the priesthood; Saul the apostate King of Israel who consulted the witch at Endor and died by his own hand; and Saul who spared Agag, the cursed King of the Amalekites. Amalek had attacked Israel when they were coming out of Egypt. This was the battle that hung in the balance and was decided in Israel's favor by Moses' prayer and intercession that long day when Aaron and Hur held up his arms unto the Almighty, the Lord of hosts. God's response to Amalek's unbrotherly conduct was to declare that he would have war with Amalek forever. And centuries later in fulfillment of that vow God gave Saul the commission to go and utterly destroy Amalek. He was to leave nothing alive of man or beast. But Saul failed to obey and spared not only the best of the flocks, but also Agag, their king.

Now, centuries later, comes Haman the Agagite, of the royal house of Amalek, and in all likelihood a descendant of the Agag that Saul spared. And this man seeks to do to Israel what Saul was commanded to do to Amalek—annihilate them completely. But God raises up a greater son of Saul, Mordecai. And Mordecai is used of God to foil the plot to destroy the Jews, and he is instrumental in the death of Haman and his seed. Mordecai accomplishes what Saul failed to do—the destruction of Amalek's royal seed.

Was the writer aware of these interesting parallels? It would certainly explain a lot. It would explain why Mordecai's less than illustrious ancestors are specifically identified. This was done not to embarrass Mordecai, but to exalt him by comparison. This is another reason to believe that Mordecai did not himself author this book. We see how circumspectly the authors of the gospels keep a low profile and never exalt

themselves. John never refers to himself by name, but addresses himself as the Apostle that Jesus loved. The inspired writer must have known Mordecai and received from him his family history. But the Holy Spirit does not cause men to exalt themselves. Paul, under the guidance of the Spirit, can only call himself the chief of sinners.

## CHAPTER SIX

### BYZANTINE POLITICS

#### Esther 2:21-23

**21 In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.**

**22 And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name.**

**23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.**

In this passage we read about a conspiracy in the palace of Ahasuerus. While plots and schemes are daily occurrences in every nation's capitol, this one is extraordinary. It is an assassination plot and therefore logically involves a coup d'état. While this may be unusual in the politics of the West (the United States has a presidential assassination about twice per century, which far exceeds the rate of such occurrences in Europe) this was actually quite typical of the Oriental politics of the day.

Even Israel, the theocratic state endowed with a special revelation of God's law, was not immune to this type of disorder. When Saul discovered that David had become the Lord's anointed, he made persistent attempts to assassinate him. Later, Absalom sought to assassinate his father David and seize the throne. And at David's death, another son, Adonijah, with the aid of the high priest, Abiathar, and the army commander, Joab, attempted a coup d'état to seize the throne—a coup d'état that, if it had succeeded, would probably have required the assassination of Solomon. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, had a major problem with political instability, due to incessant revolts and assassinations, generally by the army commanders.

And it only gets worse when one examines the histories of the pagan Oriental nations of antiquity. The Old Assyrian Kingdom once had six usurpers seize the throne in succession all in one year! Sennacherib, the King of Assyria who devastated Judah, and from whom Hezekiah was miraculously delivered when the Angel of the Lord slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers overnight, returned home only to be assassinated by his own sons. This was typical. In the short history of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar's son was assassinated and replaced by his (Nebuchadnezzar's) son-in-law, and in turn his son was deposed in another palace coup. Later on, the Roman Empire treated us to more of the same spectacle. Coups led by the Praetorian Guard became the norm, but after the division of the empire the Eastern half became notorious for the politics of deceit. Countless plots and counter-plots, and conspiracies within conspiracies, made such a convoluted web that there was a name given to it—Byzantine politics.

The writer of Esther gives us a glimpse into these matters as he relates some details of the conspiracy of these two eunuchs. This was probably only one of many such plots against the life of Ahasuerus. Eventually one would succeed. He would be assassinated in his bedchamber or poisoned (accounts vary) in 465 B.C. In the struggle for the succession his eldest son would be assassinated by his younger brother Artaxerxes, who then succeeded to the throne. Such was life (and death) in the palaces of the Orient.

The writer, as is his custom, tells us when the events he is about to relate took place. They took place after Mordecai had been elevated to a position of authority so that he sat in the king's gate. This is not just a piece of information that assists in placing these events chronologically, but has a bearing on the development of these events as they unfold. Next the writer introduces two of the king's chamberlains, or, as in the Hebrew, eunuchs. Bigthan in Persian means a gift of fortune. But considering the type of fortune he wanted to bestow on Ahasuerus, only the king's enemies could find any comfort in that ironic name. Teresh, the name of the other eunuch means severe. Just how severe he could be, especially when offended, the king never suspected.

We are told that the position of these eunuchs was that they were of those who kept the door. The word for kept is “shamar” in the Hebrew, which has the root meaning of to hedge about and generally means to guard or to protect. The word for door is “caph” which has the root meaning of “contain” and can mean vestibule, threshold, gate, or door. Keil calls them threshold keepers and the interlinear says that they were of those guarding the door.

It seems unlikely that eunuchs would be soldiers and form the royal bodyguard. Instead their function probably was to control access to the king. These are very powerful and influential positions. He who controls access to the king, and thus also controls the flow of information to the king, can exert great influence on a king’s actions and decisions. They can peddle this influence and be involved in all manner of conspiracies to manipulate the king, defraud his treasuries, appoint their candidates to various offices, etc. If they are keepers of the vestibule, controlling who has audiences with the king, they are far more influential and powerful than mere bodyguards.

Next we are informed that these eunuchs, these keepers of the threshold, these guardians of the throne room, were angry. We are not told the cause of their inordinate anger. All we are told is that it was a murderous anger that caused them to plot to lay violent hands on the king. Since half-way measures are fatal in such endeavors, the only logical conclusion is that they were plotting an assassination, the routine expedient of Oriental politics.

The writer gives us no clue as to the motivation for this plot. We can only guess. The only guess that I have encountered in my studies is that these eunuchs were partisans of Vashti and were about to be deposed. This is of course sheer conjecture and coming four years after Vashti’s deposition seems somewhat unlikely. It is of course possible that in the preparations for the Grecian campaign they were left in place and now that the king has returned and Esther has just been crowned they are being removed. Whatever the offense was, real or imagined, they are about to settle it in blood.

The writer now comes to his main point. This conspiracy becomes known to Mordecai, who communicates this information to Esther, who warns the king. The question of course remains –how did Mordecai obtain this information? Again, we can only guess and are left to the speculations and assertions of commentators and historians. The most probable answer has been ventured by Josephus. He states that one of the eunuchs had a servant named Barnabazus, a Jew who knew of the plot and told Mordecai. Again, why should he tell Mordecai? Mordecai was still keeping his and Esther’s racial identity a secret at that time. Of course his Jewish identity may have been known to other Jews, and Barnabazus would be more likely to inform a fellow Jew who sat in the king’s gate. After all, what he was doing was loyal but dangerous. The eunuchs controlled access to the king and Ahasuerus would never grant an audience to a lowly Jewish servant (probably a slave) anyway. And to inform through the wrong channels would mean instant death at the hands of the conspirators. Mordecai, a highly placed Jew, would have seemed a safe choice for someone with Barnabazus’ dilemma. At any rate, in God’s providence, Mordecai and Esther are enabled to warn Ahasuerus of the plot against his life.

Ahasuerus apparently took these threats seriously. He probably had to in order to survive. He promptly investigates the matter and the conspirators are executed. The Hebrew word for tree is “ets” which can also mean timber. One should not think that they were hung on a gallows as some seem to believe. They were probably executed in another way and then their dead bodies were not granted a decent burial. Instead they were hung out in view as a mark of shame and contempt. This could have been done on a tree, or more likely the bodies were nailed to a stake in the public square in a kind of crucifixion after the fact. This procedure is an ancient one and is a long-lasting custom that has survived until recent times. It is even referred to in the laws of Moses.

*And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is*

*hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.*  
**(Deuteronomy 21:22-23)**

The procedure is as noted; the man is executed and then his body is displayed as a mark of contempt on the accursed tree. Christ suffered this curse for us as Paul says, "*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.*" (**Galatians 3:13**) As late as Tudor England, and even in Stuart times, traitors and other criminals were beheaded, and their bodies were hung from the Tower of London in a public display, and their heads impaled on the battlements. And this is probably what these traitors received at the hand of Ahasuerus.

The final important piece of information that the writer includes in this tale of conspiracy is that the king caused the particulars of this episode to be recorded in the official chronicles of the kings of Persia. The eunuchs' infamy and the loyal service of Mordecai and Esther are now a matter of public record. Unfortunately these records are lost to us, for neither historian nor archaeologist have been able to discover them. But they lasted long enough to serve God's purposes. They will play an important part as the story of Esther unfolds.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### AMALEKITE VENGEANCE

#### Esther 3:1

**1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.**

The previous episode about the conspiracy of the eunuchs was not only an integral part of the story, but also serves to establish the timing of the events before us. Mordecai has just been God's providential instrument to preserve the king's life. However, he gains no recognition or reward for his service. Instead the king promotes to the highest position of the realm an Amalekite, the arch-enemy of the Jews. The Bible teaches us patience. As Paul instructs the Christians of Galatia, "*And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*" (**Galatians 6:9**) Mordecai's time will come, but only when it is God's time.

In the meantime Mordecai must follow the example of Abraham. Abraham was promised the land of Canaan, but he was only a sojourner there among the Canaanites. Then came the conflict among his shepherds and those of his nephew Lot. Abraham generously gave Lot the first choice of grazing lands, and Lot did not hesitate to quickly grab the best. Abraham, to whom God had promised everything, was now just a sojourner in the less desirable parts of the land. But God comforts him by renewing his promise:

*And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee. (Genesis 13:14-17)*

Abraham had to wait a long time, but he waited in faith. As Paul puts it,

*By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:8-10)*

Stephen, in his defense before the Sanhedrin, stated that Abraham had never possessed any of the land of Canaan in this life:

*The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child. (Acts 7:2-5)*

Abraham was willing to wait for his inheritance until the time of the resurrection if necessary. He absolutely trusted in the promises of God. And so must Mordecai, especially when he sees himself neglected and an Amalekite promoted over the kingdom.

Haman and Hammedatha are both Persian names indicating that Haman's family has probably lived in Persia for generations and he was raised there, far from the native wilds of Amalek around Kadesh-Barnea. This would help account for the facility with which he rose to power in the Persian court. The name Haman is probably derived from the Persian deity Humman. Agag appears to have been the name of the kings of Amalek. Whether this was the title of the kings of Amalek as Pharaoh was of the kings of Egypt, or whether this was a recurring name in the royal family, as Louis was in the royalty of France, we

do not know. But the use of the term Agagite would incline me to the former opinion. In any case, being an Agagite, Haman was not only an Amalekite, but of the royal blood, a prince of Amalek. He was promoted by Ahasuerus far above all the other princes of the court to a position of probably second in the empire only to the king himself.

The phrase "*set his seat above*" can probably be taken literally as well as figuratively. The pecking order at the court was probably literally displayed in the seating arrangements at royal feasts and at the imperial councils. Haman obviously relished these trappings of power and marks of distinction. But Christ warns against them in his condemnation of the Pharisees, rebuking them because they "*...love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.*" (Matthew 23:6-7)

#### **Esther 3:2-4**

**2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.**

**3 Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?**

**4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.**

The consequence of Haman's promotion and of the king's favor upon him is now explained by the writer. All the court officials, all those who served in the imperial administration in the palace at Shushan, were commanded by the king to give Haman certain signs of respect. This respect was evinced by kneeling before him at his presence and then bowing down to earth in submission to him.

This Mordecai refused to do and his refusal was noted by the other court officials. They spoke to him repeatedly about his refusal to obey the king's command, but to no avail. Finally they resorted to reporting his disobedience to Haman himself. The only explanation that Mordecai gave to the court officials who questioned him in this matter was that he was a Jew. Thus Mordecai finally, when pressed on this issue, reveals his ethnic identity. Since this is such a critical issue that placed the entire Jewish people at risk of annihilation, I have treated it at length in the next chapter.

#### **Esther 3:5-7**

**5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.**

**6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.**

**7 In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar.**

Haman apparently had never noticed Mordecai's failure to bow before him. Mordecai was probably very unobtrusive about it, and Haman, as many proud men, probably barely regarded lesser mortals as he strode through the palace with his nose literally in the air. But once it was pointed out to him, he was filled with anger at Mordecai, an anger that could not be appeased by the death of Mordecai alone.

The officials who had betrayed Mordecai's disobedience to Haman had pointed out his ethnic identity as the source of his refusal to honor him. The inference to Haman was clear – not only Mordecai, but all Jews would refuse him the honor that the king's command required. Therefore not only Mordecai, but all the Jews must perish for their affront to him, Haman, the king's favorite. Therefore all the Jews throughout Ahasuerus' vast empire of 127 provinces, all the Jews that were within Haman's grasp, must die.

Haman's vanity may seem petty to us, but his response is certainly not. This is a man who thinks big and is not afraid to act, probably some of the very qualities that endeared him to Ahasuerus and assisted him in his rise to power. However, his apparent decisiveness and his proficiency in the exercise of power has an Achilles' heel.

Haman is a captive to the superstitions of astrology. He has his astrologers cast lots before him to select the most propitious day for carrying out the extermination of the Jews. That they cast lots from day to day and from month to month means they cast a lot for each day of the month till the most propitious day was chosen and then they cast lots for each month right up to the twelfth month Adar until the most propitious month of the year was chosen. Just how the astrologers practiced this superstitious art we do not know, only that Haman trusted the entire success of this project to the power of this pagan art.

### **Esther 3:8-11**

**8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.**

**9 If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.**

**10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.**

**11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.**

Having consulted with the astrologers and fixed the day, Haman now proceeds to obtain a decree from the king for the execution of his plot against the Jews. He proceeds to lay a charge against the Jews without even naming them. This may have been part of his cunning. Cyrus, the founder of this dynasty, had been very favorable to the Jews. Had Ahasuerus known this, he might have reconsidered before giving Haman a blank check for their destruction. Cyrus had issued several favorable decrees with respect to the Jews, allowing them to return to Palestine and rebuild the temple. Since the decrees of the kings of the Medes and the Persians are irrevocable and cannot be changed, this might have been a legal stumbling block for Haman.

The first charge against the Jews is that they are a scattered people without a homeland. The connotation is that they are the Gypsies of the Persian Empire, a parasitic unproductive people whose extermination will not damage the king's power or revenues. The second charge is that they are different and have their own laws. Now in an empire of 127 provinces, stretching from India to Ethiopia, with probably even more ethnic groups, languages and religions, this charge is somewhat puerile. Haman is being deceptive here. The policy of the Persian Empire was to allow all the subject peoples to practice their own religion. Therefore the diversity of the Jewish law which was part of their religion was perfectly legal. This shoe fits almost everybody. But Haman may have stumbled on one characteristic of the Jews that has often brought offense, their unassimilability.

The third charge is that they do not keep the king's laws. This is a far more serious charge. But again Haman is being deceptive. He has no evidence that the Jews of the dispersion or of the Jewish community in Jerusalem are in revolt against the laws and decrees of the king. All he really has is evidence that one particular Jew, Mordecai, is refusing to obey one particular decree, and the assumption that this disobedience would be typical of the entire race. And of course he does not tell the king that their chief offense is that they have wounded his vanity. From the shaky edifice of these charges Haman draws the conclusion that the king would be better off without these people.

Haman now requests the imperial permission to destroy these people and offers a bribe of ten thousand talents of silver. If he will be allowed to destroy them and seize all their assets, this is the sum he will hand over to the king's treasurers. In today's money it is quite a significant amount, about \$100,000,000. The king requires no deliberation. Haman is his favorite, and these people mean nothing to

him. There is no question of verifying the charges, of requiring evidence, of any due process, or of justice. The text clearly implies that Ahasuerus condemns these people out of hand, without even knowing who they are, simply to please the royal favorite, Haman. He hands Haman his signet ring, the ring that will be required to certify the necessary decrees in the king's name, as a sign of his approval of Haman's request.

This is a dramatic moment in the life of the Jewish nation. They are being consigned to destruction and annihilation. And the writer stresses the nature of this awesome moment by emphasizing Haman's identity as he records this incident: "*And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.*" The king then scorns to accept Haman's bribe. He, the great king, does not need Haman to enrich him, rather the contrary is true. So he consigns all the spoil, as well as the people, into the hands of Haman.

### **Esther 3:12-15**

**12 Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring.**

**13 And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.**

**14 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day.**

**15 The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.**

Haman's slavish devotion to his superstitious practices is now again manifested. As he prepares to issue the decrees in the king's name he assembles the king's scribes on the thirteenth day of the month. This is the day of the month that the astrologers, the magi, found most propitious for his enterprise. The issuance of the decrees as well as their execution must conform to astrological practice. In all this Haman is acting typically. When Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, decided to bite the bullet on the issue of Indian Independence, and unilaterally announced the date that India would be free of British Imperial rule, the nation was horrified. The astrologers foretold disaster if the new nation was to be born on that day. Under heavy pressure Lord Mountbatten had to rescind his declaration and announce a new date set by the astrologers as more propitious for the welfare of the new nation.

The decrees are now formulated and dispatched. They are Haman's decrees; they are a transcription of his words and his wishes; they reflect his commands, but they are sealed with the king's signet ring and issued in the king's name. They are issued in all the languages of this vast empire and sent by the royal posts to every province. These posts were extremely efficient and a decree from Shushan would reach every province in a time of no more than three weeks.

We have noted the writer's emphasis of the significance of the king handing Haman his signet ring, the royal seal. There is a triple identification of him, as Haman, as an Agagite, and as an enemy of the Jews. Now again there is a triplicate, a triplicate command to exterminate the Jews. The decree commands, "*to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews.*" The word for destroy is "*shamad*" and is properly translated. It means to desolate, to destroy, to bring to nothing. The word for kill is "*harag*" which means to smite with deadly intent, to kill, to murder. The word for perish is "*abad*" and has a little more complexity of meaning. Its root meaning is to wander away and can mean to lose oneself and by implication to perish. It can also mean to be undone, to have no way to flee, and thus to perish.

The triple command makes Haman's wishes abundantly clear. The Jews are not simply to be robbed. Neither are they simply to be killed. They are to be destroyed as a people. They are all to be killed to the point of extermination. Steps are to be taken to see that none flee, but that all perish. There is to be no pity;

there is to be no mercy; there are to be no exceptions. Young and old, male and female, they are all to suffer the same common fate.

And the date for this holocaust has been set. According to the astrologer's art, according to the lot, the date has been set for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. And here both God's providence and Haman's Achilles' heel manifest themselves so clearly. This date is a full eleven months away, a delay that will prove to be fateful for the completion of Haman's design. A delay that will work out, not for the Jew's destruction, but for his own. And in this we see the hand of God. As Solomon said centuries earlier, "*The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.*" (**Proverbs 16:33**)

Finally, the writer tells us that the deadly business having begun, the king and Haman sit down to drink. This fits the known character of Ahasuerus as a cruel despot. Once, when one of his bridges collapsed, he had all the engineers put to death. Now he drinks a toast to the death of thousands of innocent people. One can almost picture a parallel scene two and a half millennia later. One can almost see Adolph Hitler and a group of his henchmen toasting each other after a meeting in which the final solution to the Jewish problem has just been resolved.

Ahasuerus and Haman may have been pleased, but the city of Shushan was perplexed. As the decree was published they were the first to be confronted with the king's strange and bloody commands. To those unaware of Haman's personal vendetta these decrees were certainly perplexing. Why would the king destroy an entire people from out of his realm for no sensible reason? Again we are reminded of the folly of Adolph Hitler and his decrees for the extermination of European Jewry. It too made no sense. Division after division of S.S. were troops tied up for years in the bloody business of the final solution. Scarce resources, especially transport, being diverted from critical combat support to fulfill his personal vendetta. Millions of people, who could have been recruited into his armies and who could have been drafted into his war industries, were senselessly killed. When a man is blinded by hatred, his actions can certainly be perplexing.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### TO BOW OR NOT TO BOW?

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman? His refusal nearly resulted in the destruction of the remnant of Israel. All the Jews in all 127 provinces of the Persian Empire were slated for extermination because he refused to bow to Haman. Why did Mordecai disobey the royal command and provoke Haman in this matter? This is an extremely serious question. The whole theme of the book of Esther is about God's providential deliverance of his people. But why was this deliverance even necessary? Was Haman needlessly provoked? Was Mordecai wrong? Was this nothing more than sinful pride? Did he by his foolish actions endanger his whole people? Or was there a moral principle involved here? Was Mordecai, like Daniel and his three friends in Babylon, fearlessly obeying his God without regard to the personal consequences? These questions just beg for an answer. At this point all we know is that his actions, right or wrong, brought his people to the edge of destruction.

What was it that Mordecai was refusing to do? The Authorized Version says, "*But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.*" The New King James Version says, "*But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage.*" Green's Interlinear says, "*But Mordecai did not bow nor worship.*" What was involved in doing this? What did the king's command really require? Unfortunately I think that the above statements may be somewhat misleading. They involve a degree of interpretation rather than just bare translation. The word generally translated as "bow" technically does not mean that. The word is "*kara,*" and although it can loosely be translated as "bow" it literally means to bend the knee. Strictly speaking it means to kneel, not to bow. The translation of the word translated as to reverence, to pay homage, to worship is similarly defective. The word in the Hebrew is "*shachah.*" Its root meaning is to depress and it generally means to bow or to prostrate oneself. So what the king's command required, what the other courtiers were performing, what Mordecai was refusing to do, was to fall to his knees and bow down to the ground in Haman's presence. That is all that the text is really saying. More than that is a matter of interpretation. If this constitutes worship then it will have to be established on other grounds. Keil's interpretation that they were "*to kneel before Haman and bow themselves to the earth*" is still the best.

Now we can begin to legitimately ask the question, why did Mordecai refuse to perform these acts of respect towards Haman? There are basically three logical answers to this question. The first is that this was a personal thing. Mordecai sat in the gate of the king. He was a court official. He had personal knowledge of Haman. He knew what a wicked, corrupt, and evil man Haman was. And Mordecai simply decided that he would not show honor and respect to such a reprobate character. This would be analogous to a German citizen of moral integrity refusing during the Third Reich to salute Hitler or refusing to use the Heil Hitler salute. This would be analogous to an American citizen, disgusted with the immoral character of President Clinton, refusing to shake his hand in some public function—except of course that in Mordecai's case, as in the former case, the consequences could be deadly.

The second possibility is that this was an ethnic issue. Mordecai refused to show these signs of respect to an Amalekite. Then the question becomes was this a manifestation of the age-old hatred between Amalek and Israel? Was this conformity to the declaration of God that he would have war with Amalek forever?! God had commanded Israel to destroy Amalek, to annihilate them as a nation. God had severely censured Israel's first king for not carrying out that commission ruthlessly. Israel's first king was rejected of God and his dynasty cut off because he spared Agag, the King of Amalek. Did Mordecai have all these examples in mind? Did Mordecai consider reverence to Haman as treason to Jahweh? This is a definite possibility.

Finally, the third possibility is that Mordecai considered these acts of respect towards Haman as constituting idolatry. Haman was a mere man. Did Mordecai consider such reverence as was required to

constitute religious worship? Did he believe that this was a violation of the first commandment? Did he believe that such reverence should be reserved for God alone? This is definitely the most popular theory, and, as we have noted, the prevailing translations have certainly given it some support. I believe that we must withhold judgment and decide this based on the testimony of scripture and not on the preferences of the translators. And when we study the scriptures we find some convincing arguments against this position.

First of all, we have scriptural precepts that not only authorize, but command that honor and respect be given to kings and governors, to all those whom God has placed in authority over us. Paul commands us to give honor to whom honor is due:

*For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. (Romans 13:4-7)*

Similarly, Peter commands,

*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward. (1 Peter 2:17-18)*

Biblical precepts would seem to allow, yea to command, Mordecai to show such marks of submission and respect that Ahasuerus required to be shown to himself and his prime minister. The scriptures teach this principle not only by precept, but also by example. Even in the nation of Israel, a nation acutely sensitive to the sin of idolatry, we have several examples of exactly such marks of respect shown to the king. In fact the same Hebrew word is used to describe the bowing or obeisance that is recorded. They range from a female petitioner, to a messenger, and include even the queen Bathsheba, who all enter David's presence with the same marks of submission and respect.

*Now Joab the son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's heart was toward Absalom. And Joab sent to Tekoah, and fetched thence a wise woman, and said unto her, I pray thee, feign thyself to be a mourner, and put on now mourning apparel, and anoint not thyself with oil, but be as a woman that had a long time mourned for the dead: And come to the king, and speak on this manner unto him. So Joab put the words in her mouth. And when the woman of Tekoah spake to the king, she fell on her face to the ground, and did obeisance [shachah], and said, Help, O king. And the king said unto her, What aileth thee? And she answered, I am indeed a widow woman, and mine husband is dead. (2 Samuel 14:1-5)*

*And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings. And Ahimaaz called, and said unto the king, All is well. And he fell down to the earth upon his face before the king, and said, Blessed be the LORD thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king. (2 Samuel 18:27-28)*

*And Bathsheba went in unto the king into the chamber: and the king was very old; and Abishag the Shunammite ministered unto the king. And Bathsheba bowed, and did obeisance [shachah] unto the king. And the king said, What wouldest thou? And she said unto him, My lord, thou swarest by the LORD thy God unto thine handmaid, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne. (1 Kings 1:15-17)*

From this it is impossible to conclude that there is any sin per se in the use of these physical tokens of respect and submission to a king. It is true that these tokens were directed to David, the Lord's anointed. But David was also a mere man and at times a very sinful one. If there was sin in these actions, it had to be because of the specific interpretation that the Persian court put on them. And there we have food for

thought. The conditions for an audience with the monarchs of Persia are described by ancient historians thus:

*Among our many excellent laws, we account this the most excellent, to honour the king, and to worship him, as the image of the great preserver of the universe; if then, you shall consent to our laws, and fall down before the king and worship him, you may both see him and speak to him; but if your mind be otherwise, you must make use of others to intercede for you, for it is not the national custom here for the king to give audience to anyone that doth not fall down before him.\**

The Persians seem to have considered this form of obeisance as worship to the king. Ahasuerus certainly acted like a god. He had an automatic death sentence for those who intruded into his throne room. This reminds us of the rules for appearing before the true God. We cannot intrude into God's presence by ourselves, but only through a mediator, only through the one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. In Israel, God's throne room was the Holy of Holies in the temple. There the shekinah glory manifested his presence and from there he ruled the nation. Only the high priest could enter once a year on the day of atonement and only with the blood of the sacrifice. At any other time, or without the mediation of a blood sacrifice, he too would have died. When Uzzah inadvertently touched the ark he was struck dead by God. When the children of Israel came to Sinai they were not to touch the mountain when God appeared to Moses, or they would have been struck dead. And like God, Ahasuerus guards his throne room with the same penalties.

There may be some substance to the view that what Mordecai was refusing to do was idolatry. But the most effective argument against it is that Esther, a Jewess, and raised by Mordecai and under his authority, did not hesitate to pay this homage unto Ahasuerus and probably did it repeatedly and with a clear conscience. What was required of Mordecai with respect to Haman was most certainly required of Esther with respect to the king himself, and the scriptures record at least one instance of her submitting to this requirement:

*And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king. (Esther 8:3-4)*

This was probably routine for Esther's appearances before the king. The fact that her appearance the first time she went in unannounced to intercede for her people does not record it, does not mean that it did not happen. It is also never recorded of Mordecai, but it would be presumptuous to assume that it never happened based on the silence of scripture. I cannot imagine how he could have later functioned as Ahasuerus' prime minister without submitting to these requirements.

The only real clue that we have is that Mordecai told the other courtiers that his refusal was related to the fact that he was a Jew. That would seem to rule out the first possibility. Haman's refusal was therefore either the second possibility or the third or perhaps a combination of both. We may never know for sure. In my own opinion the second possibility is the most likely. Mordecai, like other godly men, was placed in a providential situation where he had to pay this kind of homage to a pagan monarch. Like them, I believe he submitted to God's will in the matter. I believe that he humbled himself, recognizing God's righteous judgment on Judah, and submitted to his captivity and all that it entailed. Like Daniel and Nehemiah and others, I believe that he paid this kind of homage unto men and did not consider it an act of worship in violation of the first commandment. But I believe that he could not in good conscience bow before an Amalekite, an Agagite, one who was under a scriptural sentence of death by his God.

My own view is that Mordecai was blameless in this matter. I believe that when dealing with the heroes of the faith, with the godly men and women of the Old Testament, that when the issue is not clear, that we ought not to lay blame where the Bible does not. I am tired of the personal attacks on the character

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\* R. J. Rushdoony, *World History*, 1974, p. 28.

of heroes of the faith such as Jacob and Jephthah, when God does not condemn them in his word. The entire spirit of this book is that Mordecai is a hero of the faith, a great and godly Israelite, a man greatly used and blessed of God, and a man beloved by his people. This does not comport with the theory that this is a man who by his sinful pride exposed his people to extermination. It simply does not fit.

## CHAPTER NINE FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

### Esther 4:1-3

**1** When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;

**2** And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

**3** And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Different cultures express their grief differently. In the West stoicism seems to be the order of the day. We try to hide and suppress our grief. We try to internalize it and minimize its public expression. We try to keep a "stiff upper lip," as the British put it. Our response to an expression of grief is universally the same. We say, "Don't cry. Everything will be all right." But this is not what we see in the scriptures. The scriptures teach that everything is not all right. There we see that the world is under God's just curse on sin, and full of pain, misery, and death. There we see that public expressions of grief are not only normal, but are expected.

When Jesus came to the home of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, this is the scene that awaited him: "*And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly.*" (**Mark 5:38**) Some commentators believe that these were professional mourners paid to add to the public expression of grief. Jesus himself wept publicly at the grave of Lazarus. Why is there such a difference between them and us? Are these merely cultural differences? Or has our society replaced a more scriptural example with Roman stoicism? Or is there a legitimate difference between them and us? At one point Jesus did forbid weeping when he told the widow of Nain, "Weep not."

*Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother. (Luke 7:12-15)*

She was told not to weep because her son was about to be raised from the dead. And we of the New Testament dispensation have a far stronger testimony to the resurrection of the body since the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his victory over the grave. And we have the testimony of the Apostle Paul who taught that "*to die is gain and to be with Christ is far better.*" So Christians have less reason to weep than the believers of the old dispensation. Still I find it strange to attend funerals and see people engaging in light chatter and even joking. And funerals today seem incomplete without all the participants sitting down to feast together. It was not so in Mordecai's time.

Mordecai's reaction to the king's decree was the same as the reaction of the Jews throughout the kingdom. Everywhere there was a rending of clothes; there was a resorting to sackcloth and ashes; there was weeping and wailing; and finally there was fasting. God's people are fasting. Although the Book of Esther may not mention God by name, here is a clear allusion to the reality of his existence and a clear expression of faith in his controlling providence. Fasting is an appeal unto God. It is a more extreme form of prayer; it is a form of desperate pleading with the Almighty for his deliverance.

Mordecai particularly engages in a dramatic display of grief and he does so publicly. In the midst of the city he vents his grief with a loud and a bitter cry. This grief is not just expressed emotionally but also in one's dress. One's normal apparel is rent, and in its place the mourner puts on sackcloth and ashes. One's grief and lowliness of spirit is displayed in lowliness of dress. In cultures where dress was very indicative

of one's status, sackcloth and ashes was the ultimate way of dressing down. It was also a way of humbling oneself before God, of confessing one's unworthiness, and casting oneself as an abject penitent upon the mercy of God.

This used to be done to a lesser degree in our culture. People traditionally wore black suits to a funeral to reflect the seriousness, sobriety, and sadness of the occasion. Widows used to go into mourning at the death of their husband and be little seen in public and always dressed in black. Mordecai pushes his public expression of grief to the limit, right to the king's gate. It was unlawful to go any further with his grief. The king is not to be disturbed by our grief. His honor and majesty are not to be tarnished by expressions of grief and misery. The privilege of being near the great king should make all men supremely happy. And, being treated almost as a god, he is to be perpetually surrounded by happiness. After all, there is no weeping in heaven. For this reason Nehemiah did his best to hide his grief at the status of Jerusalem from Xerxes' successor, Artaxerxes, when he was his cupbearer.

#### **Esther 4:4-9**

**4 So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received it not.**

**5 Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.**

**6 So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate.**

**7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.**

**8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.**

**9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.**

Esther is still sequestered in the house of the women. Although she is the queen, she is still cloistered in the royal harem. She therefore knows nothing of either Haman's decree with respect to the Jews or of Mordecai's reaction to it. However, the eunuchs in charge of her and her maids know Mordecai, probably from his daily inquiries on her behalf noted before. They therefore inform her of Mordecai's state. She is concerned that he is pushing his public expression of grief to the point of breaking the king's commandment. She sends him proper clothing, but he refuses it. She then sends a eunuch to inquire into the cause of his inconsolable grief, and Mordecai informs her of what has happened. And Mordecai, the foster-father whom she has always obeyed, even after her elevation to Vashti's crown, now gives her a most difficult command; she is to intercede with Ahasuerus for the life of her people. She is to reveal her racial identity and risk all that that entails in the cause of preserving her people.

It is interesting that Mordecai is aware of the bribe that Haman offered to the king in exchange for the royal assent to his plan for the destruction of the Jews. Ahasuerus rejected the bribe, scorning to stoop to receive money from his counselors, so one would think that this piece of information would only be known to Haman and the king. Mordecai must have had excellent sources of information as to what transpired in the court to be aware of this.

#### **Esther 4:10-14**

**10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;**

**11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.**

**12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.**

**13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.**

**14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?**

Esther's response is not disobedience. She feels that Mordecai does not really appreciate her situation and that to obey his command would cause her to put her life in jeopardy. By her uninvited intrusion into the throne room she would place herself under an automatic sentence of death and would be totally at the king's mercy for a commutation of this sentence. And on top of all that, she may be somewhat out of favor at the moment, for it has been thirty days since the king has sent for her. This also explains her isolation from the events that Mordecai is mourning so bitterly. Mordecai's response is that her reluctance to hazard her life is but false safety, that she cannot purchase her own life with her silence, and that if she does not act, she too will perish with her people.

And then we come to what may be considered the key verse of the entire book. This verse alone is enough to silence all the critics of this book. For those who discard it because it fails to mention God by name, here is their answer. There can scarcely be found in all of scripture a clearer expression of faith in God's promises and God's providence. For such as Luther, who denied its canonicity because he thought it did not contain the gospel, here is their answer. It is found here, in Mordecai's statement of absolute faith that salvation is of the Lord and that he will deliver his people. There is a wealth of sound doctrine in this verse.

First of all, Mordecai has a sound grasp of the sovereignty of God. To God nothing is contingent. For God there is only his sovereign and immutable plan conceived in the counsels of eternity and worked out in every detail in his providential control of history. He points Esther to her duty, but does not confuse that with God's sovereignty. Mordecai knows nothing of some contemporary Arminian preachers who try to impress their hearers that God's plan was dependent upon the faith and the obedience of some hero of the faith. He points her to her duty, but does not make God's salvation dependent upon her actions.

Secondly, Mordecai believes not only in a sovereign God, but that God has an immutable plan. Parts of that plan have been revealed by God through his prophets to his people in specific promises. Mordecai knows these promises and has utter faith in their sure fulfillment in God's own time. The children of Israel may be temporarily scattered among the Gentiles, the nation may temporarily be no more except for a pitiful remnant in Jerusalem, the temple may be in ruins and the city's walls reduced to rubble, the daily sacrifice may have ceased and the throne of David may be vacant, but Mordecai has faith in God's promises. Someday God will restore his people. Someday the Messiah, the promised Son of David will come. Someday the Messiah will sit on the throne of David in a kingdom that will have no end. And until that day comes God will preserve his people. God will have war with Amalek forever, but he will never allow his people Israel to be blotted out.

Thirdly, Mordecai understands God's justice. God's promises do not mean that Israel can sin with impunity. When they sinned in the wilderness God told Moses,

*And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. (Exodus 32:9-10)*

When they sinned in Christ's day John the Baptist warned them,

*O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. (Matthew 3:7-9)*

And so Mordecai warns Esther. If she fails to do her duty, God will still deliver his people, but God will judge her and her father's house. Esther was an orphan and it appears that she was probably an only child

and thus adopted by Mordecai. If she dies, her father's house will perish with her. There was almost no greater judgment for an Israelite than for his seed to be cut off from the face of the earth and for his name be no more. And this is what Esther will bring on herself and on her father's house by her sinful refusal to intercede for God's people, Israel.

And finally, Mordecai has a marvelous understanding of God's providence. He, as the Apostle Paul, understands that all things work together for good. He believes that Esther's royal position in the Persian court is not by chance or accident, but was providentially worked out by God as part of his grand design and as part of his plan for his people Israel. If God has placed Haman the Amalekite, the Jews' enemy, in a position as the right-hand man of the king, God has also placed Esther next to Ahasuerus as his queen. God will work all this out for good and in fulfillment of his gracious purposes to Israel. Mordecai challenges Esther to share his faith in God's providence when he says, "*And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*"

**Esther 4:15-17**

**15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,**

**16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.**

**17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.**

Esther's response to Mordecai is a beautiful response; it is the response of faith. She too will trust in God with a firm faith in his providence. She will put her life and the lives of her people in God's hands. Her only request is the request of a desperate soul that has no recourse but the Almighty God of Israel, no hope but in the one and only true God who is the hearer and answerer of the prayers of his people. She bids Mordecai and all the Jews of Shushan to join her and her maidens in three days of prayer and total fasting, before she submits her fate and the fate of her people into the hands of a fickle and despotic monarch. Her ultimate appeal, however, is unto God and not to him. She knows, as does Mordecai, that "*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.*" (**Proverbs 21:1**)

## CHAPTER TEN

### A LIFE IN THE BALANCE

#### Esther 5:1-2

**1** Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house.

**2** And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.

Esther has asked for three days of prayer and fasting and now the third day has come. David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, in his trials said, "*My times are in thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me.*" (Psalm 31:15) Jesus, when his hour had come, said, "*My time is at hand.*" (Matthew 26:18) And now Esther's time has come. The text says that this is the third day since her request to Mordecai for three days of fasting. So she has actually had only two days (two half days and one whole day) of prayer and fasting. It is by this kind of computation, counting any portion of a day as a day, that the standard calculation of the day of the crucifixion is determined as being on Friday. In Esther's case it is accurate. She has had her three days, although only about forty-eight hours, not seventy-two, have transpired. In the case of Christ's crucifixion, this would not be not accurate. The prophecy specifically stated not only three days, but also three nights. This places the day of the crucifixion on Thursday.\* And like Christ, when her time has come, she goes willingly with faith and courage. She goes to do her duty and if necessary to die. As she herself put it, "*If I perish, I perish.*" She goes with her faith in the Almighty, who is sovereign over history, with her faith in El Shaddai, the All Sufficient One, who delivered the patriarch Isaac, when he too was at the point of death, and provided a substitute.

But faith in God does not preclude doing whatever we can on our own behalf. She puts on her royal robes. She does not boldly intrude into the throne room, but discretely and demurely stands inside the entrance. She does not announce herself, but humbly waits to be recognized. With her life in the balance it is inconceivable that she did not kneel and bow before the king. When she was seen of the king she obtained his favor, that is, she was invited into the king's presence, and he held out to her the sign of his favor, the golden sceptre. At that point I believe she entered, prostrated herself before the king, arose, and touched the royal sceptre. This would then exactly follow the procedure that is described for us in a later audience of Esther's with the king, when she again pleads for the life of her people:

*And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet...Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king.*  
(Esther 8:3-4)

#### Esther 5:3-5

**3** Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.

**4** And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

**5** Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

Esther has come to see the king. She has intruded into the throne room unannounced and without an audience. This is an extraordinary action on her part and the king understands this. He understands that some imperative need must have driven her to do this. She must have something terribly important on her

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\* For a thorough study of this subject, see Roy M. Allen, *Three Days in the Grave*, Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1942.

mind that she needs help with, and the king generously responds. Ahasuerus offers to grant her request up to one half of his vast kingdom. Kings seem to have a predilection for making statements of extreme generosity. We are reminded of Herod's pledge to Salome:

*And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. (Mark 6:21-23)*

And also of a similar pledge by Belshazzar to Daniel:

*I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee. And now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing, and make known unto me the interpretation thereof: but they could not show the interpretation of the thing: And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom. (Daniel 5:14-16)*

These latter statements are a little more explicable. Both kings are at a feast and have been drinking. Ahasuerus, by contrast, is in his throne room and conducting the business of state. And of course, Herod and Belshazzar were not granting anything like half their kingdoms. All Salome requested, under her mother's tutelage, was the head of John the Baptist. Belshazzar could not give half the kingdom because it was not his to give, but he offers the next best thing. Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. His father Nabonidus was the king. Belshazzar himself was only the regent, the second ruler in the kingdom, holding Babylon while his father was away on a military expedition. Accordingly he offered Daniel the position of third ruler in the kingdom. Daniel treated him and his gifts with contempt. And actually they were not worth much, for Babylon was under siege by the Persians. That night the city fell to Cyrus, Belshazzar was slain, and his promises were worth no more than Confederate bonds are today. So we can take Ahasuerus' generosity with a grain of salt. All Esther wanted was her life and the lives of her people.

Esther's response is somewhat of an anticlimax and her request is rather minimal. After having hazarded her life and having piqued the king's interest, all she asks is his and Haman's attendance at her banquet. But there is wisdom in what she does. Her matter is not one she wants dealt with publicly at the court. To openly embarrass the king with the destructiveness and folly of his decree would be counterproductive. To publicly before his counselors ask him to reverse an irreversible decree would itself be folly. Esther prefers to make her appeals to the king in private.

But why invite Haman? It seems so strange that the queen, desiring an audience with the king to intercede for her people, would also invite the villainous Haman, her arch-enemy. Perhaps she is afraid that if the king is later alone with Haman, this influential and cunning counselor will overrule the king's inclination in her favor. She puts Haman in the situation of having to resist the king's favor for her in her very presence as queen. Haman will have little time or opportunity to maneuver. He will be between a rock and a hard place. He will either have to await the king's wrath for giving his now disastrous advice with respect to the Jews, or he will have to oppose and denounce Esther in her presence at a time when the king is offering her half the kingdom. There will be no opportunity to get the king's ear alone and by craft and deceit begin to poison his heart against Esther. Esther will bare her heart before the king, something that Haman dares not do.

The king grants Esther's initial request with alacrity and hastens to issue the commands that will ensure Haman's presence.

#### **Esther 5:6-8**

**6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.**

**7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is;**

**8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.**

At the banquet the king again repeats his pledge to Esther. This would seem to be the perfect occasion for her to now make her request. All that she and her people have fasted and prayed for now seems to be within reach. God in his gracious providence has brought her to this glorious moment, to this incredible hour of opportunity. Why does she not seize it? It seems not only inexplicable, but almost madness, almost sinful, to let such an opportunity for deliverance escape. Yet that is what Esther does. Why?

Subsequent events show us that God worked out this delay for good. Mordecai's ascension from sackcloth and ashes to rise over Haman and become the second ruler in the kingdom will begin over the next twenty-four hours. Haman will appear at the subsequent banquet already a crushed man and rendered impotent by his superstitious regard for these ill omens. But Esther cannot know that. Why does she hesitate and desire more time? Perhaps she wants to continue in prayer one more day. Perhaps she wants Mordecai and the Jews of Shushan to fast one more day. Perhaps she just senses that God's time is not yet. Ultimately her heart is in the Lord's hands as much as the king's. Her hesitation, which works out for good, is another testimony to the marvelous providence of God that flows through every detail of this story.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL

#### Esther 5:9-10

**9 Then went Haman forth that day joyful and with a glad heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up, nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai.**

**10 Nevertheless Haman refrained himself: and when he came home, he sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife.**

Haman has just dined with the king and queen. Alone, of all the men in the earth, he has been invited to join in the banquet that Esther has prepared for Ahasuerus. Haman is at his zenith. He knows it and rejoices in it. What he does not know is how precarious and short-lived his tenure at the top will be, and as he leaves the royal apartments he sees Mordecai. So far, apparently, he has only had hearsay about Mordecai's disrespect, but now he sees for himself. Mordecai appears to have been sitting. Haman notes that he does not rise so that he can kneel and bow as required. He is filled with anger. The Hebrew word for his anger, "chemah," has the root meaning of hot. Haman is hot with anger; he is furious.

However, Haman is far too wise and crafty a man to be carried away with his anger. He did not rise to such power in the Persian court by letting his emotions drive his actions. He wisely restrains himself. He is of the "Don't get mad, get even" school of thought. He goes home and calls for his wife and friends. He intends to consult them. He is calling a council of war about the Mordecai situation. Like Solomon he believes, "*Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established.*" (**Proverbs 15:22**) Unfortunately for Haman, he is seeking advice in the wrong place, from vain and worldly counselors steeped in superstition and idolatry. He is acting contrary to the admonition of the psalmist who taught, "*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly.*" (**Psalms 1:1**)

#### Esther 5:11-13

**11 And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king.**

**12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king.**

**13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.**

Haman explains his situation to his wife and his friends. He recounts in detail all his prosperity. The "glory of his riches" is literally the "weight of his riches." While it is true that money was weighed in those days and one's wealth was counted in specific weights of gold and silver one should not think that the phrase is limited to this meaning. Haman probably also recounts the splendor of his palaces, the multitude of his servants, etc. Next he specifically recounts the multitude of his sons. The word translated as children is "ben." It does not mean children. It means sons. Sons were important in such patriarchal societies. Sons were a source of power. Through sons one can transmit one's power and establish a dynasty. Haman was undoubtedly a polygamist and this would account for his having a multitude of sons. The number of his sons is not necessarily limited to the ten sons listed later on in the text. These are possibly only the sons of the legitimate wives. He may have had more sons from his concubines.

Finally Haman lists all the offices to which the king has promoted him. As the king's favorite he probably held not only the highest office, but also a plurality of offices. These he now recounts to the council. Haman lists his incredible prosperity in three forms—his wealth, his family, and his power. He caps it all with the icing on the cake, his status with Esther the queen. Surely his cup is overflowing and he should be a happy man. He should be the most content man in the kingdom.

Haman's problem is that he cannot be content. Even in his most exalted state he cannot find contentment. Unlike the Apostle Paul he cannot say, "*For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to*

be content." (**Philippians 4:11**) He does not understand that "godliness with contentment is great gain." (**1 Timothy 6:6**) He cannot apply Paul's admonition, "And having food and raiment let us be therewith content." (**1 Timothy 6:8**) All that he has, all that he has recounted to his inner circle, means nothing to him. He wants everything; he wants perfection. He must destroy this irritant, this fly in the ointment, this man Mordecai, who dares insult him to his face.

Haman has everything, but this everything includes a wounded pride. And this he cannot suffer. His heart is lifted up with pride and he will do anything to deal with this rebellious Mordecai. He may have restrained his anger, but he cannot control his pride. And as Solomon said centuries before, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." (**Proverbs 16:18**) But Haman is in no mood to heed such warnings or to consider the wisdom that says, "A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit." (**Proverbs 29:23**) Haman will learn the hard way that, "Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility." (**Proverbs 18:12**)

Haman vents his hatred at "Mordecai the Jew." Part of the reason for Haman's hatred of Mordecai is his race. It is not just Mordecai's disrespect. It is not just Mordecai's defiance of the king's command. It is that this insult is coming from a Jew. Here again is a manifestation of that age old hatred between Amalek and Israel. But now Amalek has the upper hand and he will destroy this son of Israel. So are the thoughts of Haman.

#### **Esther 5:14**

**14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.**

There is no safety in these counselors. There is no caution or wisdom in their advice. There is no consideration of all that he has to lose by rash and precipitate action. There is no pausing to build a proper case against Mordecai to satisfy the king's justice. Their advice is universally the same, to proceed forthwith to accomplish Mordecai's destruction on the morrow. Again the term gallows should not mislead us into thinking of the type of gallows we use to hang criminals. The word for gallows is "ets" and can mean a tree, stake, timber, etc., not a gallows as we would imagine it. It is the same word that was used in Esther 2:23 to describe the "tree" on which the two conspiring eunuchs were hung. Haman has a similar fate in mind for Mordecai. It is a very tall stake, 50 cubits, which works out to about 75 feet. The higher the stake the more public the display and the more extensive the disgrace.

Pride is a deceptive thing. It blinds one to reality. It causes men to be extremely presumptuous, especially about themselves and their own worth. It made Haman very presumptuous. He presumed on the king's favor. He presumed on the king's approval. There is no discussion of what charges to bring against Mordecai to satisfy the king's justice. To Haman, Mordecai is but a worm, but he, Haman, is the king's favorite. All he has to do is speak. All he has to do is express his wishes to the king and they will be granted. This is pride indeed. And in God's providence his pride is in for a rude awakening. Haman is about to receive a much-needed lesson in humility.

Finally, after dispatching Mordecai, Haman intends to go merrily to the royal banquet. The word for merrily is "sameach" which means gleeful. This gives us an insight into Haman's heart. He plans to go gleefully to the royal banquet after he has hung Mordecai's body on the accursed tree. This is totally different from the psalmist rejoicing in his deliverance, giving thanks for the destruction of his enemies, and praising God. While Mordecai's body is hanging for public viewing he plans to go to the royal "banquet of wine" and have a gay old time. Haman is just plain wicked.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE KING'S HEART IN THE LORD'S HAND

#### Esther 6:1

**1 On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.**

**2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.**

**3 And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.**

We speak of sacred history and secular history, the former being the narrative portions of scripture. But this, although it may be a valid distinction in that restricted sense, can be misleading. It is all sacred history in that it is a revelation in time of God's eternal plan and purposes. We speak of history as his, that is man's, story, but it is actually God's story. He wrote it, in every minute detail, before the foundations of the earth were laid. Whatever happens, God's secret will, his eternal purposes, are always being fulfilled. God is always in control; to God nothing is ever contingent on the creature. He numbers the hairs of our head. He does not suffer the sparrow to fall before its time. He is the one who opens and closes the womb. All our tears are in his bottle and they are written in his book. (**Psalm 56:8**) And he regulates our sleep (**Psalm 127:2**). And on this night he takes Ahasuerus' sleep from him.

God is weaving that beautiful tapestry of his providence that will cause men to praise him for all eternity. The Lord has taken away the king's sleep, but he puts something in the king's heart. He causes him to call for the book of the chronicles of the king to be read to him—the very book where God had providentially caused the king to have recorded the meritorious service of Mordecai that saved his life.

Much of life is a matter of timing. As Solomon said, *"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."* (**Ecclesiastes 3:1**) And God's timing is perfect. It is perfect for his purpose in delivering his people, perfect for his purpose in Mordecai's life to use him as his instrument to deliver his people, and perfect in Haman's life to set him up for that destruction that is God's righteous judgment on him and a fulfillment of God's ancient promise that he will have war with Amalek forever. And it is perfect for recording for posterity this little portion of the matchless artwork of his providence that his saints might marvel at his greatness, be humbled by his goodness and mercy, rejoice in his faithfulness, and be strengthened in their faith. And in God's purposes the time has now come for Mordecai's exaltation, and this starts with Ahasuerus' recognition of and reward for his loyal service that he providentially was able to render.

#### Esther 6:4-9

**4 And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.**

**5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in.**

**6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?**

**7 And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour,**

**8 Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head:**

**9 And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback**

**through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour.**

The king has been up all night. It is now daylight. Morning has come and Haman is up early. He also may have had a sleepless night. He cannot rest until he has dealt with Mordecai. He is like those that Solomon describes, *“For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood.”* (**Proverbs 1:16**) Little does he consider the prayer of the righteous that ascends unto the true and righteous God; an appeal of God’s people against their enemies; an appeal unto him to whom vengeance belongs; an appeal from the ruthless purposes of men like Haman; an appeal for his destruction that beseeches God to *“let destruction come upon him at unawares; and let his net that he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall”* (**Psalms 35:8**); an appeal that God will shortly answer.

The king wants to reward Mordecai, but he seeks counsel as to what would constitute proper recognition for such meritorious service. So he asks what counselors are available at this early hour. Haman is, and he will shortly rue his early morning zeal to shed blood. With Mordecai in mind, the king asks of Haman what is the fitting way to honor the man that the king delights to honor. Mordecai’s name is not mentioned. Whether this is deliberate on Ahasuerus’ part so that he can get unbiased advice from Haman or it was thoughtlessly done as the Lord guided his lips we do not know. But it gives Haman enough rope to hang himself.

Again, his pride is his undoing. He arrogantly presumes that there is no one that the king would delight to honor as much as himself. And then his pride gets him in even deeper. A true servant, if he were inclined to think that the honor in question might really be intended for him, would in all humility counsel a simple and reasonable reward. But in his pride and self love Haman counsels the most extravagant honors imaginable. First of all, the king’s own robes, the ones that he himself wears when he appears in public, are to be used to clothe the man that the king delights to honor. Not just royal robes such as kings might wear are to be used, but the very robes that the king has worn. He is not to just be arrayed as royalty, but to be dressed so that he himself appears to be the king. Secondly, he is to be mounted on the royal steed, on the very horse that the king himself rides in public. Again, to all appearances, he is to be arrayed as if he were the king. Thirdly, the steed, not the man, is to be crowned with the royal crest. The horse as well as the man is to be fully arrayed with the royal livery and appear in every way as the royal steed. Fourthly, the horse and the man are to be led through the city by one of the king’s most noble princes. And fifthly, this noble prince is to act as a town crier, constantly proclaiming to the wondering public that this is how the king honors those whom he delights to honor.

It is quite a program. A more humble servant might have been perplexed when consulted about the subject of honors, as a subject that he generally does not think on. Haman seems to have responded with alacrity to this question. One has to wonder if he had already given this subject some thought. One must wonder if he has already in his proud imagination dreamt of just such honors being awarded him.

**Esther 6:10-12**

**10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king’s gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.**

**11 Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and brought him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour.**

**12 And Mordecai came again to the king’s gate. But Haman hastened to his house mourning, and having his head covered.**

God chose to bring Haman down in three blows. This is the first. Like a thunderclap it must have struck Haman’s ears. While he was still entertaining delusions of grandeur, reality catches up with him. Mordecai, not him, is the man whom the king delights to honor. And all his extravagant advice now rebounds on his own head. He had thought to have the king’s most noble princes serve as his lackeys as

he rode the royal steed. They would have to proclaim his honor. Now he must eat his words. He must array Mordecai. He must serve as the lackey of the hated Jew. He has no choice. He is commanded. He is specifically required to follow his own advice in every detail. Oh the bitter fruit of sinful pride! He who had thought that very morning to be the instrument of Mordecai's death becomes instead the very instrument of Mordecai's public exaltation. This is bitter indeed.

The courtiers were aware of Mordecai's refusal to bow before him. They were the ones that had drawn it to his attention. And now he is forced to bow as it were before Mordecai. And again his pride has done him in. That very morning, as he was waiting in the outer court for his audience with the king, he had bragged to them about his imminent vengeance on Mordecai. He had boasted that he would hang Mordecai's body on a 75-foot high stake (this is a logical conclusion from Esther 7:9). And now he is required to honor him as no man in the kingdom has ever been honored.

Haman does as he is commanded. Then Mordecai returns to his place in the palace. But Haman hurries home. Is the proud peacock of that morning now ashamed to show his face in the court? He returns home in mourning with his head covered. The covering of the head is a sign of deep mourning, of shame, and of confusion of face. So did David when he had to flee Jerusalem at the time of the conspiracy of Absalom:

*And David went up by the ascent of mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot: and all the people that was with him covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up.*

**(2 Samuel 15:30)**

And so did Judah mourn at a time of severe drought and famine:

*The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah concerning the dearth. Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up. And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the pits, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded, and covered their heads. Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads. (Jeremiah 14:1-4).*

In such a state Haman returns to his home. To such a state the Lord has reduced him in a few hours. Pride comes before a fall and the proud Haman has begun to fall. He has forgotten the testimony of a previous king who declared,

*Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase. (Daniel 4:37)*

#### **Esther 6:13-14**

**13 And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.**

**14 And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hastened to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.**

Again Haman confides in his inner circle. Again it says "Zeresh his wife." It is of course possible that he had just one wife and that she bore him all the ten sons enumerated later on in the text. Polygamy would be the norm for a high prince at the Persian court. Besides that, being an Amalekite, he was descended from Esau who was a polygamist by choice and not by circumstance as Jacob was. Polygamy may also therefore have been common for the Amalekites. It would be highly unlikely to have had ten sons by one wife. Jacob had twelve sons. But this was only by God's special providence as he had an unusual sex ratio among his children of one daughter to twelve sons, and it took a total of four wives and concubines to do it. Zeresh was probably his chief wife. God is not mocked. His creation order will assert itself sooner or later. God's design was for one man to have one woman for all of his one life. God's order cannot be consistently denied. What goes up comes down and polygamy ultimately tends towards monogamy. Abraham only had one real wife, Sarah, and Hagar was sent away. Jacob only really had one wife, his

beloved Rachel. David, for all his wives, ultimately had only one true wife, his queen Bathsheba, whose son Solomon was his heir. In spite of all his wives and concubines, Ahasuerus needed one true wife who would be his queen and bear his heir. That is why Vashti had to be replaced and Esther had to be found. So even if he was a polygamist, Haman would have had one real wife. In this case that would have been Zeresh, who is treated as a real wife and in whom he confides and whose advice he respects. To her and his circle of close friends he confides the debacle of the past morning. This circle includes his most trusted counselors, his wise men, in whom he trusts for advice. These may well have been the same ones who advised him on the astrologically correct day for appointing the destruction of the Jews.

Their unanimous advice is not very heartening. Their advice is paralyzing. Its effect is chilling. It must render Haman somewhat numb. The evening before, he returned home on top of the world. This morning he arose confidently to pick the only fly out of the ointment that was marring the perfection of his existence. Now he has been publicly shamed and humbled. He has sought support and refuge among his wife and closest friends and they have foretold his doom.

Mordecai has done his best to keep his and Esther's racial identity a secret. But it has come out. And so many times at crucial phases of this story his racial identification has made a critical difference. If Josephus is correct, and also our analysis of his version, then Mordecai was able to warn Ahasuerus of the plot against his life because he was a Jew to whom his fellow Jew, Barnabazus, turned for help. Because he is a Jew he refuses to bow to Haman. Because of his refusal to bow he reveals his racial identity to the courtiers who press him about his disobedience. And because he is revealed to be a Jew, Haman plots and secures the appointed destruction of all the Jews in the empire. And now Haman's wife Zeresh and his closest friends prophesy his destruction based on the fact that Mordecai is a Jew. Although we know that this is the basis of their prediction, we do not know their reasoning. It could be mere superstition based on that morning's ill omen or it could be that the morning's events have brought to remembrance the futility of Amalek's ongoing struggle against Israel. In that struggle Israel had always prevailed. It was so from the very beginning. As Paul sums it up,

*For this is the word of promise,... when Rebecca also had conceived; (For the children being not yet born...), It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*

**(Romans 9:9-13)**

Esau never prevailed in his struggle with his brother Jacob. Esau was rejected of God, but Jacob was his chosen. Jacob received the birthright so that someday the Messiah would spring from his loins. Jacob received the promise of a land for his people. And Jacob received the patriarchal blessing that he would rule over his brother. And so it has always been. Israel defeated Amalek in the wilderness in the days of Moses. Israel almost annihilated Amalek in the days of Saul. And Israel smote Amalek again in the days of David. And all Haman's advisors can see is history repeating itself again. They had been hopeful that the odds were on their side this time. They too are crushed by the day's events. They too are already psychologically defeated and disarmed. They cannot even encourage Haman or give him good counsel. All that can do is add to the weight of doom that is already on Haman's brow.

The prophecy of his friends foretelling his own destruction is the second blow that the Lord uses to smite Haman. And while he is still absorbing this blow the king's eunuchs arrive. The king has promised Esther any request up to the half of his kingdom. The first time all she requested was his and Haman's presence at her banquet, and the king hastily sent messengers to ensure Haman's swift compliance with the wishes of the queen. Now Ahasuerus does so again; the chamberlains are here, and Haman is commanded to depart. He is in no shape to attend a royal feast. This is the banquet that less than twenty-four hours ago his friends had advised him to attend gleefully after the execution of Mordecai and the public shaming of his carcass. How things have changed. And Haman is now far from the wise and crafty courtier, the powerful and confident prince, who would have been a dangerous rival to Esther in her coming appeal to the king for the lives of her people. Before that contest has even started God has already begun to crush Haman and set him up for destruction. Hallelujah!



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE QUEEN INTERCEDES

#### Esther 7:1-2

**1 So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen.**

**2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.**

The king and Haman have come to Esther's banquet as she had requested. The king now calls Esther to honor her promise and tell him what her request is. The king desires that she now divulge the request for which she hazarded her life to enter his throne room unannounced, the request that she deferred to announce at the first banquet, the request that she is to announce at this time. The king seems anxious to hear it and assures her by renewing his promise of granting her desires up to the half of his kingdom. If Haman is in a state that can only contribute to his destruction, Esther could not conceivably have a more favorable setting for her request. If God's providence is weaving a net around Haman so that he will be caught in his own snare, it is also weaving the tapestry of the deliverance of his people.

#### Esther 7:3-4

**7:3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:**

**7:4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage.**

The great moment has now come. The crucial moment concerning which the Lord's people have prayed and fasted for three days is now at hand. The Lord's time has come. And although Esther has had repeated assurances from the king, she is neither proud nor presumptuous. Although she is the queen she shows a humility that is totally alien to her enemy Haman. She does not insist on her rights according to the king's pledge. She does not allude to her rights as the queen. She humbly petitions the king, prefacing her remarks with, "*If I have found favour in thy sight,*" and "*if it please the king.*" She does not up the ante and try to take advantage of the king's statements of extreme generosity. She asks only for the minimum. She asks only for her life and the lives of her people.

She then explains this seemingly inexplicable statement, for Ahasuerus must have been astounded at what he was hearing. With total accuracy she then bares the condition of her and her people. She says that they are sold, alluding to the bribe that Haman offered to secure their destruction. Then she quotes from the decree that Haman had issued in the king's name and signed with the king's seal. She says that her people are sold to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. In the Hebrew the exact same three words are used as are used in Esther 3:13 where the writer quotes from Haman's decree. The king may have never even seen the decree. He may be totally unaware of these details. But to Haman, the author of this document, these familiar words must strike him as a knife to his vitals.

Esther then proceeds to further humble herself and her people before the king. Ultimately Esther is humbling herself before her God. The Jews as a nation have sinned. They have by their national wickedness and idolatry brought this captivity upon themselves. They recognize the righteousness of God's judgments. Like David, Esther can say of herself and her people, "*Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight; That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*" (Psalm 51:4, NKJV) She is saying that she and her people are willing to submit to God's righteous judgments. They are willing to endure slavery, if that is the will of God, but the annihilation of their race, that they cannot endure. For that is against the revealed will of God, that is against all his covenant promises. For someday he will regather them in the land; someday he will send the Messiah to them;

someday he will reestablish the Davidic dynasty; someday he will redeem his people. And for those things they long; for those things they wait; those are the things that they cannot yield. So, with faith in God's sure promises, Esther pleads for the lives of her people. She is willing to die. She has said, "*If I perish, I perish,*" but her people cannot perish because God's promises cannot be broken.

Haman has sought to advance his career with pride and arrogance. He has sought to use his power to destroy any and all who offended him. Esther has sought to advance her cause and the cause of her people with the lowliest humility. Can the outcome ever really be in doubt? Not as long as there is a God in heaven, for our "*God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*" (**James 4:6**)

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### POETIC JUSTICE

When it comes to dealing with Amalek the Lord seems to love to indulge in poetic justice. Israel was enslaved in Egypt. The Lord brought them out with many mighty signs and wonders. And as they came up out of the wilderness on their way to the land of promise, they were met by Amalek – Amalek, who was descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother, of whom the Lord had said, “*the elder shall serve the younger.*” But Amalek’s actions were not very brotherly.

Instead of welcoming Israel and rejoicing in their liberation, they attacked them. Israel was no threat to them. Their lands were not part of the land that God had promised to Israel. Israel could have been an ally to them in their struggle with the Canaanites. Instead, these wilderness warriors, these desert raiders, these predatory bands, were more than ready to take up the centuries-old struggle between Jacob and Esau. They may have felt like sharks smelling blood when they heard of a band of two million ex-slaves coming up out of Egypt. It must have seemed like easy prey. They should have known better in light of the awesome things that God had done to liberate the Israelites from Egypt. They attacked, but they failed. However, there was some truly easy prey, a prey that was not under God’s protection – Egypt.

As Pharaoh’s counselors had told him, Egypt was destroyed. It had been ravaged by the ten plagues. Every home was in mourning for its firstborn. Pharaoh and the Egyptian army lay under the waters of the Red Sea. The nation was devastated and defenseless, and the Amalekites moved in for the kill. There is a period of Egyptian history during which they are mysteriously ruled by the Hyksos, a dynasty of foreign “Shepherd Kings.” The identification of the Hyksos has long been a matter of scholarly interest. They appear suddenly, and then after their tenure in Egypt they disappear again from the historical record. The scriptures hold part of the answer, and a historian named Courville has published a solution to this old mystery.\* The Hyksos are the Amalekites.

After their failure to defeat Israel, the Amalekites went on and conquered a helpless Egypt. They were the primitive people who managed to conquer an advanced civilization such as Egypt. And they ruled it for centuries. It was not until almost four hundred years later in the days of Saul, Israel’s first king, that the Egyptians were able to throw off their rule and drive them out.

And here we see the poetic justice of the Lord. When the helpless Israelites fled Egypt at the time of the Exodus, Amalek ambushed them in wilderness and greeted them with violence. When Amalek fled Egypt four centuries later, they were met in the wilderness by Israel. They were met by a well-armed and powerful Israel, an Israel armed with a divine commission for their extermination. God had never forgiven them for their attack on his people centuries earlier and now was the time for God’s vengeance. As the Lord himself had told Moses,

*And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovahnissi: For he said, Because the LORD hath sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (Exodus 17:14-16)*

It may have taken centuries, but “*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*”

**(2 Peter 3:8)**

Under Saul, Amalek was virtually annihilated. Only a remnant escaped. And now, again, centuries later, God is preparing to deal with Amalek, with a remnant of Amalek that has again sought to destroy his people. And the Lord will again do so with an incredible display of poetic justice.

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\* Donovan A. Courville, *The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications*, Vol. 1, 1971, Challenge Books, Loma Linda, California.

### Esther 7:5-7

**5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?**

**6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen.**

**7 And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.**

Haman is now about to reap the fruit of his duplicity. When he obtained the royal permission to destroy the Jews, he identified them only as a homeless people scattered throughout the empire whose customs and laws were at variance with the king's. Now the king is about to realize the hand that Haman has been playing. The king is about to be informed as to what he has in reality consented to. The people whom Cyrus the Great protected, the people whose restoration to their ancient homeland Cyrus had decreed, the people of Mordecai to whom he owed his life, these are the people that Haman has maneuvered him to destroy. And these are facts that Haman, as his counselor, either knew or should have known. And now both Haman and Ahasuerus discover that these are also the people of Esther, the queen.

Once God was angry at Amalek because they had lifted up the spear against his people Israel. Now Ahasuerus is furious. Who has dared lift up his hand against his chosen queen, his Esther? His statements are menacing. Who is he? Where is he? This is the information that he needs so that he can exercise his vengeance on the guilty. Haman must already be desperate at this point before he has even been named. He reminds us of the powerful men of the end of the age, of whom we read,

*And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'*  
**(Revelation 6:15-16, NKJV)**

Ahasuerus is not only showing determination to avenge his queen and judge the guilty, but his statement includes a further indictment. Literally he says, "Who is he...whose heart has filled him to do so" (Keil). Ahasuerus sees this as no accident; he does not allow the possibility that this is a mistake. Someone has planned, someone has plotted, someone's heart has filled them to carry out this wickedness. And he wants to know who! Ahasuerus realizes, as Jesus taught, that out of the heart are the issues of life, "*For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.*"  
**(Matthew 15:19)**

Esther now delivers the coup de grace. She identifies Haman. Less than thirty-six hours ago he had sought to point out Mordecai's wickedness to the king. Now his wickedness is being pointed out to the king by Esther. He is identified in triplicate. In triplicate he had spelled out the decree for exterminating Esther's people. Now in triplicate he is pointed out as the proper object for the king's wrath. He is the adversary of his chosen queen. He is the enemy of his beloved Esther. He, Haman, is that wicked one.

Who can stand under such an onslaught? Certainly not Haman. He is speechless. He is struck dumb by fright and terror. This is the third blow. In less than two days Haman is tumbling from the heights he had scaled with sinful pride to the pit of woe where he belongs. And now we get the ultimate irony. Esther has just made her appeal to Ahasuerus to deliver her and her people from the vengeance of Haman. And now minutes later Haman is making an appeal to Esther to spare his life from the vengeance of the king. This is poetic justice. God continues to pay back Haman in his own coin.

Ahasuerus is known in history for his temper and his cruelty. His anger has boiled over to the point where he has to leave and take a walk in the garden so that he can collect his thoughts, contain his emotions, logically process the incredible facts that have just been revealed to him, and begin to rationally sort out the response of his justice. Haman is no fool. He knows his king all too well. He could read his doom in

Ahasuerus' face. There is no escape. Ahasuerus lived under the constant threat of assassination. All courtiers were probably searched and disarmed in his presence. The royal bodyguard was undoubtedly also present. The only option he has, his only hope, is his ironic appeal to Esther's mercy. But it is in vain. He is under a greater wrath than Ahasuerus'. It is of people like Haman that God's word says,

*Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the LORD; and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out. Let them be before the LORD continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. Because that he remembered not to show mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart. As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him: as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him. (Psalm 109:14-17)*

In God's justice there is no mercy for the merciless.

#### **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.**

The proud Haman has now been reduced to a pathetic figure. He cannot even beg properly. Orientals, unlike contemporary Westerners, recline on couches to dine. Casting himself at her feet to implore her intercession, Haman miscalculates and falls on her couch, just as the king returns. Misinterpreting his intentions the king exclaims that Haman is seeking to violate the queen in the very presence of the king. Haman's fate was already sealed, but his final and futile attempt to obtain mercy has only added to his condemnation.

Humanly speaking this additional and unwarranted condemnation may seem unjust. But in God's eyes it is perfect justice. Haman had unjustly condemned all the Jews to death. Tens of thousands of loyal subjects of the king were condemned to extermination by Haman's unjust and deceptive charges. Now Haman is himself unjustly accused of seeking to violate the queen. Again he is being paid back in his own coin. Now he whose deceptive practices made a mockery of justice must endure the pain and frustration of being himself falsely accused. Helplessly he watches as the king's anger boils over again. As Solomon said,

*For jealousy is the rage of a man: therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance. He will not regard any ransom; neither will he rest content, though thou givest many gifts. (Proverbs 6:34-35)*

He is made to feel like David, who complained, "...they laid to my charge things that I knew not." (**Psalm 35:11**)

The proud man, who has finally brought himself to fall to his knees and beg, has even been condemned for that action.

The word that goes out of the king's mouth is not the statement just referred to concerning Haman's actions. Rather it is his official word, his royal decree with respect to Haman; it is the sentence that he pondered on in the garden. That word is the official sentence of death. As a result of this word the courtiers act with alacrity. The king's word must not have allowed for any delay. Immediately Haman's face is covered. The covering of the face is an ancient practice of preparing the condemned for execution. The custom has survived into our century, in which the condemned were generally blindfolded prior to being hung on the gallows or facing a firing squad. Haman is being led off for imminent execution.

But the end is not yet. The proud Haman must have made many enemies in the palace during his rise to power. He certainly does not appear to have any friends among the king's counselors. Harbonah, one of the seven eunuchs that continually served in the king's presence, suggests additional punishment. The "behold also" suggests that he is not the first one to so speak. The eunuchs, like jackals on the carcass of a lion, are now only too glad to inform the king about the extent of Haman's crimes. Harbonah points out that Haman had erected a tall stake on which to expose Mordecai's body. He adds that Haman had sought to do this to a loyal courtier who had spoken the words that had delivered the king from an assassination plot. Harbonah's words have a clear implication and they are not wasted on the king. Haman's body, not Mordecai's, is to be desecrated; Haman's body, not Mordecai's, is to be exposed to public shame and contempt. Haman himself will in the resurrection be exposed to everlasting shame and contempt.

Harbonah's advice adds one more layer to the irony; it adds one more dimension to God's poetic justice. As the Psalmist prayed centuries before so has it come to pass,

*The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken (Psalm 9:15); For without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit, which without cause they have digged for my soul. Let destruction come upon him at unawares; and let his net that he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall. (Psalm 35:7-8)*

Ahasuerus' wrath is now pacified. But God will have war with Amalek forever. God's wrath against the wicked will burn for all eternity. Haman is now in the place "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:44) Praise God for his deliverance, for his great salvation.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### DIVINE DELIVERANCE

#### Esther 8:1-2

**1 On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen. And Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he was unto her.**

**2 And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.**

The destruction of the wicked and the elevation of the righteous seem almost complete with these verses. In triplicate God has in his ironic justice elevated his people at the expense of their enemies and his. Truly God has shown that He will have war with Amalek forever! First of all, Haman is slain and his body hung on the accursed tree that he had prepared for Mordecai. Secondly, Esther receives the entire estate of Haman, including his personal palace, slaves, and all his possessions, for "house" in the Bible generally means the entire household, not just the physical building. Thirdly, Mordecai, having been identified as Esther's stepfather, receives the king's signet ring and thereby enters into the office of the slain Haman. One is reminded of Psalm 113 and of the Magnificat.

*Who is like unto the LORD our God, who dwelleth on high, Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people. (Psalm 113:5-8)*

*And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. (Luke 1:47-52)*

One wonders if Mary was thinking of Esther as she, under inspiration, uttered these lines? Esther was used of God to deliver his people from destruction. Mary was used of God to bring forth a Saviour who would deliver God's people from sin, and death, and hell. The parallel is striking and Mary is somewhat of a second Esther. Like the first Esther, succeeding generations will remember her and call her blessed.

#### Esther 8:3-6

**3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews.**

**4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king,**

**5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces:**

**6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?**

Esther again falls down before the king—this time not for her own life, as when she made her unauthorized entrance into the throne room, for she is in no danger now, but to plead for the lives of her people. Esther personally has been delivered and is in the highest favor of the king. Mordecai has been delivered from Haman's plot against him and has been elevated to the highest post of the royal court. Haman has been thoroughly discredited and destroyed. But God's people are still at risk of their lives.

Haman may still appear to have the last laugh, although there is no laughter in the place of eternal torment to which God's justice has assigned him. His irrevocable decree still stands. The Jews of the empire are still slated for destruction on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. Therefore Esther pleads with the king to "put away," or "cause to depart" (Keil), or "cause to pass over" (Green) the plans of

Haman for the destruction of her people. The phrasing here is important. Haman had signed and sealed his decree with the king's seal and in the king's name. The decrees of the kings of the Medes and the Persians were irrevocable. Esther can plead all she wants. The king can desire to grant her petitions. He has promised to grant her anything up to half of his kingdom, but he cannot revoke his own decrees. He cannot undo what Haman has done in his name. He is as trapped in his own folly as Darius was in the days of Daniel.

*Then they came near, and spake before the king concerning the king's decree; Hast thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. Then answered they and said before the king, That Daniel, which is of the children of the captivity of Judah, regardeth not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou hast signed, but maketh his petition three times a day. Then the king, when he heard these words, was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he laboured till the going down of the sun to deliver him. Then these men assembled unto the king, and said unto the king, Know, O king, that the law of the Medes and Persians is, That no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed. Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. (Daniel 6:12-16)*

To put away the decree of Haman may pose a legal impossibility. However, Ahasuerus is favorably inclined toward Esther and her request. He extends the golden scepter to her that she may arise and proceed with her request. She repeats her request with even more precise language. She pleads for the king to "reverse," or "put out of force" (Keil), or "cause to return" (Green) the decrees of Haman. Esther humbles herself again before the king. She is pleading on her knees physically and emotionally, but it cannot avail. The king's decrees must stand.

Esther adds another argument. She states that these are her people, these are her kindred, and she cannot bear to see their destruction. Her sentiments are a rebuke to present-day internationalists who scorn ethnic ties and say that nation-states are obsolete. These Jews are Esther's people in two senses. First of all, ethnically, they are all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Such racial kinship as Esther is expressing is natural because it is a part of God's design.

In Genesis chapter 10 we have a table of the nation-states as they developed after the flood. The scripture makes plain that these nations were based on a common language and a common racial identity: "By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations." (Genesis 10:5) This is God's creation order and Esther's sentiments reflect this.

The second sense in which these are Esther's people is that they are the people of God. They are her people because they serve and worship her God. They are her people in the sense that Israel became Ruth's people when she said, "...Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Christians are commanded to love each other. Christians are commanded to care for each other. The texts are legion that require us to help our brothers and sisters in the faith when they are in need. Christ says that when we do so it is as if we have done it unto him, and if we fail to do so we will be held accountable by him on the last day. It is the people of God who are still under the threat of Haman's decree, and Esther cannot but do all she can for their deliverance. And so should we when fellow Christians face peril and persecution in any part of the world.

#### **Esther 8:7-9**

**7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews.**

**8 Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.**

**9 Then were the king's scribes called at that time in the third month, that is, the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language.**

The king now gives his response to Esther's request. The response is given to both Esther and Mordecai, who is also present. Mordecai is prime minister and the king also addresses him, perhaps because he will understand better than Esther the impossibility of reversing or revoking the decree of Haman with respect to the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai and Esther have probably conferred and decided that it is best that Esther, rather than Mordecai, make this request, perhaps because an emotional appeal from the heart will be more effective rather than a lawyerly appeal from his new prime minister, but probably because Ahasuerus has already committed himself to granting any request of Esther up to one half of the kingdom. Esther had already made this request at the second banquet, but a proper response was never received because of the interruption caused by Haman's identification and subsequent execution. Now that the queen has renewed her request, the king needs to deal with the conundrum of his most generous promise versus the legal realities.

The king is in a difficult situation. He has the combined difficulties of Darius, who wanted to save Daniel in the face of another unalterable decree, and of Herod who wanted to save John the Baptist in the face of his foolish oath. He has before him an irrevocable decree to which he is now opposed, and he has a solemn promise whose fulfillment seems a legal impossibility. He starts off with recounting what he has already done for Esther, to show his good faith and put his limited response in as good a light as he can. He states that he has already partially fulfilled her request by the destruction of the man who had raised his hand against her people. And then he does the best that he can do to honor his word and her request.

He gives Mordecai the same blank check with respect to the Jews that he gave to Haman. Mordecai can make any decree he desires with respect to the Jews, to seek their deliverance as Haman sought their destruction, and sign it with the king's seal and publish it in the king's name. This decree, as Haman's, will be unalterable. In essence the king is granting Esther's request within the room that he has to maneuver, as he is somewhat on the horns of a dilemma, and is leaving the legal details to be worked out by Mordecai. If there is a way out, Mordecai has the unqualified authorization of the king to implement it. One may question the wisdom of Ahasuerus in doing this. He has gotten into his difficulty by issuing a blank check for an unalterable decree to Haman and now he repeats that mistake. But he has little choice if he is to keep his word to Esther. And ultimately he is fighting fire with fire, and maybe that is the best policy in this case.

Mordecai does not hesitate to avail himself of this opportunity to deliver his people. The king's scribes are quickly called. The royal court of this vast empire is like the United Nations with a veritable army of scribes and translators. They will issue the decree of Mordecai in every alphabet and every language of the kingdom. It will be sent to every community of Jews dispersed throughout the empire and to all the royal officials in charge of each province.

#### **Esther 8:10-13**

**10 And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus' name, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries:**

**11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey,**

**12 Upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.**

**13 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.**

Although there is an abundance of time Mordecai makes haste. It is only the third month and the execution of Haman's decree is set for the twelfth month, but Mordecai's decree is distributed throughout the empire expeditiously. But what are its contents? The writer has almost kept us in suspense while all these details are elaborated upon. Now we get to the issue of what Mordecai has written. He has all the knowledge of this situation. Knowledge, however, is not enough; he needs wisdom. The king and Mordecai have both had to wrestle with the same dilemma—how to undo Haman's decree without revoking it. The king has done his part. He has fought fire with fire and given Mordecai the same authority to save the Jews that he gave to Haman to destroy them.

Now Mordecai does his part and he follows a similar strategy. He too will fight fire with fire. Haman's decree authorized all the enemies of the Jews to attack and exterminate them on a particular day. It authorized them to kill them all, men, women, and children, and to seize their property. Mordecai's decree does the same for the Jews. It authorizes them to gather on that same day and to kill and destroy their enemies, men, women, and children, and to seize their property as forfeit. At worst he has evened the odds. The Jews have the same authority as their enemies, and they now have nine months to arm themselves and plan their defense. At worst what was to be a massacre of a despised minority has become an equal battle in which the Jews are recognized as a specific subject people with definite rights.

But in his wisdom Mordecai has actually accomplished much more. The original decree not only consigned the Jews to slaughter and empowered their enemies, but it required the support and assistance of the provincial officials and their forces in the execution of this decree. For that reason Mordecai's counter-decree authorized the Jews to defend themselves from "*all the power of the people and province that would assault them.*" And Mordecai's decree authorizing that defense is now sent to all the provincial governors and officials. By implication they are to support and implement this decree also. That would be the logical requirement as both decrees are in force and signed by the king. But that is a practical impossibility. They are going to have to choose and the choice is simple. Haman, the Jews' enemy, is dead and disgraced. Mordecai the Jew is in favor and in power. Without legally revoking it, Mordecai has for all practical purposes made Haman's decree null and void as far as these officials are concerned. The Jews' enemies are still authorized to attack and destroy them, but they are now on their own. They will enjoy no official support from the empire and its forces. The Jews are now authorized to attack their enemies in self-defense, and they will probably enjoy imperial support throughout the provinces. God has answered the prayers of his people. God has honored his covenant promises. In God's providence Esther and Mordecai have been his instruments to deliver his people.

#### **Esther 8:14-17**

**14 So the posts that rode upon mules and camels went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment. And the decree was given at Shushan the palace.**

**15 And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.**

**16 The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour.**

**17 And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.**

Mordecai's decree is immediately posted to all the provinces and is published in Shushan. The city that was perplexed at the decree of Haman rejoices at the counter-decree of Mordecai. And not only are the Jews delivered, but Mordecai is given even more tokens of the royal favor. The colors of his apparel are

the colors that are prominent in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was typical of Christ. Does Mordecai's being arrayed in these colors set him up as a type of Christ? That is possible because Mordecai, like Christ, can be seen as a redeemer of God's people. But if the city of Shushan rejoiced at these developments, the Jews in the city were especially glad—not only glad at their deliverance, but glad that their kinsman according to the flesh was now, like Daniel had been in Babylon, in charge of this vast empire and willing to use his power for the good of his people. Not only were they filled with joy and gladness, but they were now held in honor.

As the decree went out through the empire, the Jews of the various provinces shared in these feelings. One result of this was that many people converted to Judaism. When the Jews were a despised minority in captivity there was little incentive to be a Ruth or a Rahab. But now that they are a favored minority, and now that Mordecai has come to power, many are willing to become proselytes to Judaism. This was not an unusual phenomenon. The scriptures record a similar event at the time of the exodus after the ten plagues.

*And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them such things as they required. And they spoiled the Egyptians. And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children. And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle. (Exodus 12:36-38)*

The mixed multitude included many Egyptians who had come to fear the God of Israel and wanted to identify with his people rather than with the Egyptians who were being destroyed. A similar conversion was experienced by Rahab, the innkeeper of Jericho who hid the spies.

*And she said unto the men, I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath. (Joshua 2:9-11)*

Zechariah prophesies that this will occur again at the end of the age.

*Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you. (Zechariah 8:23)*

And with the Jews in favor and in power it was happening also in Esther's day. There is of course always a danger in this. While many may be impressed with God's power and his providence in preserving his people, and while many may be thus led to truly fear the God of Israel, there may also be those who convert for the wrong reasons. There may be those who convert to curry favor, who are merely conforming to what is now politically expedient. This is what happened when Constantine converted and multitudes of pagans entered the church when Christianity was suddenly proclaimed the official religion of the Roman Empire. The church was seriously corrupted as thousands of nominal pagans entered the church and syncretism became the order of the day.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WICKED

#### Esther 9:1-5

**1 Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them;)**

**2 The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people.**

**3 And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them.**

**4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.**

**5 Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them.**

The day has now come – the day that Haman had appointed because his astrologers and wise men had told him that this was the most favorable day for the destruction of the Jews. But it happened according to word of Isaiah who prophesied,

*Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish; That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers. (Isaiah 44:24-26)*

God has indeed frustrated the wisdom of Haman's wise men and shown them to be fools. He has truly exposed the folly of liars and of diviners or fortune tellers, who think that they can predict the course of events and expose the secret things of God concerning his eternal will and purpose as it unfolds in history.

God has most graciously confirmed his promises to his people and preserved them according to his covenant. And he has done this by a most unpredictable series of events in the lives of Esther and Mordecai. What fortune teller could have possibly predicted that Esther would become queen and Mordecai would replace Haman? Who could have foreseen that the king's unalterable decree by the hand of Haman would effectively be revoked by the king's unalterable decree by the hand of Mordecai? Who could have foreseen the fall of Haman from the heights of power to disgrace and death in a mere thirty-six hours? Truly he drives diviners mad! But God has not only worked in a marvelous way through his providential control of history to deliver his people. He has also dealt with their enemies as he did in the days of Moses and Joshua. He has filled them with fear, with fear of his people, and with fear of Mordecai, their leader and their defender at the imperial court. As Moses promised his generation so has God again done in the days of Esther.

*This day will I begin to put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble, and be in anguish because of thee. (Deuteronomy 2:25)*

*There shall no man be able to stand before you: for the LORD your God shall lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that ye shall tread upon, as he hath said unto you. (Deuteronomy 11:25)*

*"If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)* With such a God on their side the Jews could not fail to overcome and destroy their enemies. And the irony of God's poetic justice continues. The day over which the Jews had mourned throughout the empire, the day over which Mordecai had clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes, has been turned into a day of rejoicing over their enemies. The day in which they

were consigned to death in triplicate by the decree of Haman turns out as the day that their enemies are slain in triplicate, smitten with the stroke of the sword, with slaughter, and with destruction.

**Esther 9:6-10**

**6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men.**

**7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha,**

**8 And Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha,**

**9 And Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vajezatha,**

**10 The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew them; but on the spoil laid they not their hand.**

Solomon in his wisdom said, *“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven... A time to kill, and a time to heal... A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:1,3,8) In God’s providence this is a time to kill, a time of war. God has sent his people a great deliverance and has granted them this opportunity to destroy their enemies. When God grants such a time in the dispensations of his providence, it would be sinful to deny it. Of those that cry peace when God has declared war the scriptures say, *“Cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood.”* (Jeremiah 48:10) The Jews of the empire understand God’s purposes and are not slack to take advantage of God’s mercies to them. In Shushan alone they slay 500 of their enemies. Particularly they slay the ten sons of Haman. In the ways of the Orient these sons were probably committed to plotting to avenge their father. And to destroy Haman’s seed is to cut off his name from the face of the earth, the ultimate judgment. But preeminently this is necessary because God had long ago decreed to blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven and this is therefore the obedient fulfillment of his will and the completion of the commission that he gave to Saul centuries before. Also, the Jews wisely restrain themselves and show no covetousness with respect to the property of their victims. They do not mar the execution of their just vengeance on their enemies by appearing to the world as pirates and robbers. They nobly carry out the commission of their God, seeking no other reward than his deliverance and his blessing. Although the decree allowed them to seize the goods of their foes, unlike Saul and the Israelites of his day, they refuse to “fly upon the spoil.”

**Esther 9:11-15**

**11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.**

**12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king’s provinces? now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done.**

**13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow also according unto this day’s decree, and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged upon the gallows.**

**14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and the decree was given at Shushan; and they hanged Haman’s ten sons.**

**15 For the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan; but on the prey they laid not their hand.**

Esther, for all her humility and gentle ways, seems to understand the ways of the Lord. She is not about to hold back the sword at this time of divine deliverance for her people. Saul had held back the sword centuries earlier when he had a divine commission to smite Amalek, and the Jews of Esther’s day were paying the price for that sin. She understands that in the economy of God this is a time to kill. So when the king, upon notification of the events in Shushan, asks if she has any further requests, she does not hesitate. In revolutionary times, as the proverb goes, *“He who hesitates is lost.”* And these are revolutionary times. Haman has been overthrown and Mordecai has assumed his office. The Jews who were slated for destruction have arisen and destroyed their enemies. When a former king of Israel was granted an opportunity to destroy his enemies he hesitated and came under the rebuke of God’s prophet.

*Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died. And Joash the king of Israel came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said, O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And Elisha said unto him, Take bow and arrows. And he took unto him bow and arrows. And he said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow. And he put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands. And he said, Open the window eastward. And he opened it. Then Elisha said, Shoot. And he shot. And he said, The arrow of the LORD'S deliverance, and the arrow of deliverance from Syria: for thou shalt smite the Syrians in Aphek, till thou have consumed them. And he said, Take the arrows. And he took them. And he said unto the king of Israel, Smite upon the ground. And he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice. (2 Kings 13:14-19)*

Joash's lack of militancy cost Israel, but Esther makes the proper response to the opportunity afforded her and her people by the king's continued generosity. She requests that the Jews of Shushan be granted an additional day to destroy their enemies. Like Joshua in his battle with the Amorites she does not want the day of the destruction of the enemies of her people to cease. Joshua had prayed for more time to complete the destruction of Israel's enemies.

*Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the LORD hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the LORD fought for Israel. (Joshua 10:12-14)*

And Esther's desire is the same and the king graciously grants her request for another day of slaughter of her people's enemies. She also shows her mettle in her attitude towards the sons of Haman. They have been slain, but she requests more. Her desires are, let them be hung like their father, let their carcasses be displayed to their public shame and contempt, and let this be a warning to all who lift up their hands and seek to cut off the people of God. The fact that they are to be hung after they are clearly slain again confirms our earlier exposition that these are not gallows, but stakes that are used for a grisly after-the-fact crucifixion.

#### **Esther 9:16-19**

**16 But the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy and five thousand, but they laid not their hands on the prey,**

**17 On the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same rested they, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.**

**18 But the Jews that were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.**

**19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwall'd towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.**

The day of slaughter for the Jews' enemies was extended only in Shushan. This was not due to benevolence on Esther's part, but because there would have been no way to communicate the authorization of this extension to the provinces overnight. The Jews of the provinces therefore slew their enemies only on the appointed day for a total of seventy-five thousand, and on the next day they feasted and rejoiced. The similar celebrations in Shushan were of course delayed by one day to allow for the extra day of battle.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### A PERPETUAL MEMORIAL

#### Esther 9:20-22

**20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far,**

**21 To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly,**

**22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.**

The Babylonian captivity is over. The seventy years ended with the decree of Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem, but not much has been accomplished in Jerusalem. Under Ahasuerus' successor, Artaxerxes, Nehemiah is in tears because "*the remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.*" (**Nehemiah 1:3**) Jerusalem is still in ruins in Esther's time and those that have returned from the exile are dispirited. There is no thought of rebuilding the temple as authorized by Cyrus' decree. Without a viable city and a temple, Jerusalem is not functioning as the heart of the nation and the religious center of the theocracy. So by default, Mordecai, the most prominent and powerful Jew in the dispersion, in far-away Shushan, is functioning as the head of the nation. In the decree that brought about their deliverance he is acting as the prime minister of Ahasuerus. Now he is acting as the acknowledged leader of the dispersed Jewish nation. And as such he gives them another decree. They are to establish the fourteenth and fifteenth day of Adar as annual feast days to commemorate their deliverance from the conspiracy of Haman the Agagite. These are the days on which they had rested and rejoiced in their victories of the previous day.

Even as they commemorated God's creation on the seventh day when God rested, so they commemorate their deliverance, not on the day that it occurred, but on the day that they rested from it and rejoiced in it. This resting was spread out over two days because in Shushan there was an additional day of fighting before they rested. This commemorative feast day, or holiday as we would term it, is to be observed annually. The means of its observance is "*that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.*" Gifts to the poor does not mean gifts to poor Egyptians, Babylonians, or Persians. It refers to the poor of their people as provided for by the laws of Moses.

#### Esther 9:23-28

**23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them;**

**24 Because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them;**

**25 But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.**

**26 Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them,**

**27 The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year;**

**28 And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.**

The Jews acceded to Mordecai's decree and covenanted that they, their seed, and all proselytes to their nation would observe these memorial days from generation to generation in every family throughout all the provinces of the empire. These days were named Purim after the lot that Haman had cast for their destruction, but which God overruled as appointing the day for their deliverance.

**Esther 9:29-32**

**29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim.**

**30 And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth,**

**31 To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry.**

**32 And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.**

This is undoubtedly the most difficult passage in this chapter. It engenders numerous questions. When was this second letter written? Why was it written? Why was a second letter necessary? And what does this second letter require that the first did not? The text does not explicitly answer any of these questions. That leaves us with reasonable deductions and logical suppositions, but these are no substitute for inspired statements from the text itself.

To answer the first question of when this second letter was written, the Jewish chronologers say a year later. This answer seems reasonable. If it was written almost a year later, it could have been used to remind the Jews of their commitment to keep the festival of Purim and ensure its faithful observance. If it was written slightly over a year later it could have been used to follow up whatever observance took place and to exhort to a more comprehensive or more correct observance the next time. If the latter was the case it would explain the change in tone of the letter.

The original letter as sent out by Mordecai may only have exhorted and recommended that they institute the festival of Purim. But of this letter we are told that it was sent out in the name of both Esther the queen and Mordecai the prime minister and that they "*wrote with all authority.*" This letter addresses the Jews as subjects of the Persian Empire and commands them with respect to its contents. If this be so, then that answers the second question of why it was written. It was written to legally strengthen the requirement of its observance and to define exactly what the requirements of that observance were.

And that brings us to the third question, "What does this letter require that the first one did not?" The answer may be nothing. It may only have been a reminder. It may only have been to establish the festival of Purim on a more solid footing. It all depends on one's interpretation of the phrase, "*and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry.*" This can be taken as a simple affirmation of the requirements of the first letter. The Jews had already vowed to keep the fourteenth and fifteenth day of Adar as feast days. This simply reaffirms their vows to feast on those days, concerning their deliverance from the national catastrophe about which they had fasted and wept. This can also be taken to mean that the Jews, at Esther's and Mordecai's direction, had vowed to also fast and weep as part of the festival of Purim. This is Keil's view. We are not told when this fasting and weeping was to take place, but logically it would take place on the thirteenth of Adar, the anniversary of their proposed day of execution. This fasting and weeping would then be followed by the two days of feasting to commemorate their deliverance. But this would seem to be a strange requirement. Why would one fast and weep over a calamity that did not occur? How can one sincerely fast and weep over an event that God providentially turned into a day of deliverance and the destruction of their enemies? I can think of no other example in the scripture where the children of Israel observed a commemorative day of fasting or of weeping over a national event, not even over calamities that did occur. There was no annual fast in remembrance of the decree of Pharaoh to kill all the male babies of the Hebrews and thus to blot out the race. There was no annual fast to commemorate the decree of God that condemned an entire generation to wander in the

desert until they had all died without seeing the land of promise. The only commemorative fasting and weeping that comes to mind is over the daughter of Jephthah. The scriptures relate that when he told his daughter of his vow this was her response.

*And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the LORD, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the LORD hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon. And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows. And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months: and she went with her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel, That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year. (Judges 11:36-40)*

Jephthah's vow was to offer her up to the Lord. The Authorized Version's use of the phrase "burnt offering" is inaccurate and misleading. Jephthah's daughter was offered up to the Lord not by some gross device of a human sacrifice on the altar, but was dedicated to God's service in the tabernacle exactly the same way as Hannah later offered up Samuel. This vow therefore required that she remain a perpetual virgin and never marry. In such a society this was indeed a great sacrifice and she therefore asked for two months to go and weep over the fact that she would never have a husband or bear children. And as the scriptures record it, the effect of the vow was that she remained a virgin and that "she knew no man." Now this was personal, not a national tragedy, but it resulted from a prayer and a vow for national deliverance. And therefore it became a custom "that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year." But they were lamenting an event that actually occurred. Actually the only significant argument in favor of this view is historical. The Jews still observe a fast on the thirteenth of Adar known as Esther's fast.\*

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\* The origin of this fast is hard to determine. Josephus does not mention it. In the Apocrypha, in II Macabees 15:36, the victory of Judas over Nicanor is celebrated on the thirteenth of Adar. It is hard to imagine instituting an annual celebration on a day that was already set aside for commemorative fasting. But if it was instituted later, then it has nothing to do with our understanding of the verse in question. The subject seems to be rife with confusion. Concerning when it was to be observed, Keil says in a footnote, "From all this it is obvious, that a diversity of opinions prevailed among the Rabbis concerning the time of this fast of Esther." I contacted a local rabbi who confirmed that the Jews still celebrate Purim today but it is a minor feast. He stated that only the Orthodox Jews still celebrate it as a fast. In the Reform branch of Judaism it is a children's feast, and they dress up as the characters of the Book of Esther and read the book. They have special noisemakers, and every time the name of Haman is read, it is drowned out by the noisemakers. In Israel it is celebrated in a big way with everyone, including the adults, dressing up in all kinds of costumes in a sort of Mardi Gras type carnival with huge public parades.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### EXTRASCRIPTURAL HOLYDAYS?

One issue that is raised by the institution of the festival of Purim in Esther's day is the entire question of extrascriptural holydays. Do we have the authority to institute special holydays? In the laws that God gave to Moses, Israel was given three feasts to celebrate annually.

*Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year. Thou shalt keep the feast of unleavened bread: (thou shalt eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded thee, in the time appointed of the month Abib; for in it thou camest out from Egypt: and none shall appear before me empty:) And the feast of harvest, the firstfruits of thy labours, which thou hast sown in the field: and the feast of ingathering, which is in the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field. Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD. (Exodus 23:14-17)*

Not only the three annual festivals, but all the holydays of the Old Testament Hebrew calendar were also instituted by God.

*And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. And ye shall do no work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before the LORD your God. (Leviticus 23:26-28)*

And this of course raises the questions of whether the Hebrews had the authority to add to this religious calendar holydays of their own choosing. It seems pretty clear that they did not. Not only did God indirectly teach this by example, in himself instituting all their holydays and establishing an annual religious calendar by divine legislation, but it was also specifically prohibited by the laws and the precepts that God gave unto Moses.

*Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2)*

*Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:32)*

The children of Israel were commanded to rigidly and faithfully observe all these divinely decreed festivals and holydays. They were also commanded not to tamper with this religious calendar by either adding to it or deleting from it. Such was God's clearly revealed will on the matter.

This of course also raises the question of whether the church in our day has the authority to institute extrascriptural holydays. Religious holydays such as Good Friday, Christmas, and Easter that the church has added to her calendar come to mind. The Reformers thought not and eliminated all these extrascriptural holydays from the observances of the church. This was based on a number of reasons which can be enumerated as follows:

1. The Regulative Principle of Worship:

They carried over the argument that bound the Hebrew Church. They stated that Christ is the only and sovereign Head of his Church and that man has no authority to institute holydays in God's Church without a divine mandate, without Biblical warrant.

2. The New Testament Argument:

They quoted Paul's opposition to the Galatian Christians observing extrascriptural holydays.

*But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain. (Galatians 4:9-11)*

They noted that Paul treated the Gentiles' submission to the ceremonial law as another gospel. They particularly noted that he treated the observance of an ecclesiastical calendar with special holy days that was now suspended with the ceremonial law and thus without Biblical warrant as a threat to justification by faith.

### 3. The Logical Argument:

The Reformers argued that we know neither the dates of the crucifixion, of the resurrection, or of the birth of Christ. From this they logically concluded that if God had wanted us to celebrate these days he would have providentially revealed the correct dates for these observances. They also noted that the birth of Christ was certainly not in the winter, but that all the scriptural clues pointed to a birth in the early fall (i.e., late September or early October).

They also pointed out that there are scriptural and divinely mandated means to observe the death, resurrection, and birth of Christ. Christ's birth is celebrated every time we observe the Lord's Supper and set forth the bread and the wine, the consecrated symbols of his incarnation. Similarly they believed that the celebration of the Lord's Supper was the prescribed way to observe his death as Paul taught, "*For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.*" (1 Corinthians 11:26) And finally that the observance of the Christian Sabbath on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, the day on which Christ rose from the dead, is the scriptural way to observe his resurrection.

### 4. The Historical Argument:

The Reformers considered all these unscriptural holydays to have their origins in pagan practices and to be corrupted by Romish idolatry. As such they uniformly rejected them and purged them from the church at the time of the Reformation.

All of this now brings us back to the question before us. Was Mordecai justified in establishing a new holyday in the Jewish calendar? It is not an idle question. Moses was more than explicit on this point. That the Jews were forbidden to add to the ecclesiastical calendar as instituted by God is beyond dispute. Therefore it is not surprising that Keil states in his commentary that many Jewish elders opposed the institution of the feast of Pur as an innovation in the law.\* Keil's source indicates that the opposition was considerable, amounting to eighty elders and including thirty prophets. Only the silence of scripture and the unblemished scripture testimony to Mordecai's greatness and goodness seem to militate against the conclusion that he may have sinned in this matter.

Ultimately, I believe that this entire issue rests on how these extra holydays of Purim are regarded. If they are ecclesiastical holydays that are being added to the church's calendar, then their institution has to be regarded as definitely wrong, as an unauthorized intrusion into God's prerogatives. However, they can be regarded another way. They can be regarded as simply civil holidays. Civil holidays (holydays) to commemorate great and providential historic occurrences in the nation are altogether appropriate and have commonly been observed by nations. These may be civic in nature, but they are in a sense holydays. They are days of giving thanks unto Almighty God for his providential care for and preservation of the nation, specifically in some great historic trial that the nation experienced.

There are many examples that can be brought to mind. In the American republic the chief civil holiday is July Fourth. This is a civil holiday, but it has religious aspects. The Declaration of Independence that it is dated from recognized that all our rights come from the Creator. Traditionally this day involved not only civic parades and other functions, but also prayer and public thanksgiving for our nation and church services to thank God for his gracious providence toward the American Republic. But it is not an

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\* Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, The Book of Esther, p. 313, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

ecclesiastical holyday. It is not part of a church calendar. Ecclesiastical holydays are instituted by God for his church and are obligatory on all Christians of whatever nation. A civil holyday is by nature national and is only to be observed by the citizens of a particular nation.

There is a civil holyday that closely parallels the festival of Purim. It is Verbond's Dag (Covenant Day) celebrated by the Afrikaners of South Africa. The Dutch had settled Cape Colony at the Southern end of Africa, but during the Napoleonic Wars the British seized it. By the 1830's the Dutch settlers (the Boers) were fed up with British rule and trekked north into what is now Natal. They were traveling into Zulu territory, and an advance expedition under Piet Retief went to make a peace treaty with Dingaan, the Zulu king. They were well received, and a treaty was worked out which among other things established clear borders between Zulu territory and Boer territory. On the final day of the conference Dingaan had scheduled a great feast and had his warriors dance for Retief and his men. The warriors danced in a circle around them, which kept narrowing until the warriors fell on the unsuspecting and unarmed Boers and slaughtered all seventy of them. Dingaan then sent out his warriors to massacre the scattered Boer wagon trains trekking North. About 600 Boers, mostly old men, women, and children, were thus treacherously massacred. After several desperate skirmishes with the Zulus, in which the Boers hung on against tremendous odds, Andries Pretorius, the second in command after Reteif, raised a militia (commando) of 500 Boers to attack the Zulus.

This was an act of great courage and faith and by today's standards would have seemed suicidal, but it was typical of the Boers and their great confidence in God's deliverance. They moved deep into Zulu territory, chose a defensible position with their backs to a river, and circled the wagons. They chained the wagons together, blocked up the spaces between the wagons with thorn bushes, and awaited the Zulu onslaught. The results are history.

*There, on 16 December 1838, the Zulus found them and launched a savage unsuccessful attack. Unable to close with their enemy, a tactic imposed on them by the short assegai (Ed. note. A short native spear) they fell before the flintlocks of the Boers. It is said that 3000 Zulus were killed at the cost to the Boers of 3 wounded... It is still remembered, for 16 December became Dingaan's Day (now called Day of the Covenant in keeping of the oath of perpetual remembrance taken by Pretorius and his men), and each year is celebrated by Afrikaners as a proud day of solemn thanksgiving.\**

As it was later described by Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal, who was present at the battle as a boy,

*'I do not say what I have heard,... but what I have seen with my own eyes.' He went on to describe the battle in his homely way: the circle of covered wagons chained together in the laager; the gaps between the wagons closed by bundles of mimosa thorn; the attack of the Zulus, the air thick with assegais; the children melting down lead for bullets; the women hacking off the arms of the Zulus who tried to break through the thorn bushes. And the Lord, praise the Lord; He had given His people a great victory.\*\**

The battle was incredible as wave after wave of Zulus threatened to engulf the beleaguered Boers, who were outnumbered ten or twenty to one. As the women reloaded their rifles the men kept firing until the river ran red with Zulu blood, and it was later renamed the Blood River. The Boers remembered their vow and never forgot this day. They felt, as Israel of old, that they had seen the deliverance of the Lord. The felt that God's covenant promises had been fulfilled before their eyes:

*You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you. For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you. (Leviticus 26:7-9)*

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\* Byron Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1976, p. 9.

\*\* Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Random House, New York, 1979, p. 30.

Not a single Boer died, and they must have exultantly sung Psalm 91,

*A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look, And see the reward of the wicked. Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place, No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. (Psalm 91:7-11).*

Over six decades later the Boers were still remembering this day. At the height of the Boer War, when they faced national destruction from the juggernaut of British Imperialism, they again celebrated it.

*In addressing his people, on the day after Colenso, Kruger had no need to refer to the British dead. It was Dingaan's Day, the Day of the Covenant, the day when the Lord had shown, by the destruction of Dingaan and the Zulus at Blood River, that he had made a covenant with the voortrekkers. For the sixty-first time, Kruger celebrated the great anniversary. In the small Dopper (ultra-Calvinist) church, packed with women, he shuffled to the rostrum, eyes blinking painfully, black suit hanging in folds, voice hoarse and frail; yet in spirit the epitome of strength and defiance. Perhaps he took his text, as did a speaker elsewhere that day, from Exodus 15:10, "The enemy said: 'I will pursue. I will overtake. I will divide the spoil. My lust will be satisfied upon them...' They sank as lead in the mighty waters." To Kruger, there was indeed a marvellous symmetry about the pattern of his long life. Blood River, Majuba – now Colenso. Three times in the green hills of Natal, the Lord had delivered them from their enemies. Hence the overpowering simplicity of his call to the volk: put your trust in the Lord; He will protect His people as He protected your forefathers from Dingaan.\**

It is hard to find fault with the conduct of the Boers in this matter. They sought God's blessing; they pleaded for his deliverance; and they promised a perpetual day of remembrance and thanksgiving if they should experience his salvation. And when they saw the salvation of the Lord they did not forget, but year after year renewed their thanksgiving to Almighty God on the Day of the Covenant.

However, this was a national, a civic, holyday. It was not an ecclesiastical holyday added to the Christian church and obligatory on all Christians, but a day to be remembered by the Boers of Natal and of Transvaal and by their descendants. As such I believe that its institution and observance were legitimate and within the scope of God's law as revealed in scripture. And the parallel with Purim is inescapable. For the Jews of the captivity, for the Jewish dispersion, in all the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire, its annual observance was logical and legitimate. They too had faced imminent death and national destruction, and they too had determined to annually commemorate their deliverance in thanksgiving to God. As long as it is a civic holyday for the portion of God's people and their descendants that had experienced a particular historic deliverance, I see no wrong in it.

The Church of Jesus Christ in this world, the visible church, is meant to be one. Paul likened it to an olive tree and not to a pile of branches. And any ecclesiastical holyday that is added to its calendar would be obligatory on all believers everywhere, and this can only be done by Jesus Christ its Head. But godly nations can and should give God the glory and the thanksgiving for their national blessings and providential preservation. This they do, not by nature of the fact that they are Christians, but because they are Christian citizens of a specific nation. Mordecai was not a priest. He was not a High Priest of Israel seeking to add to the ecclesiastical calendar instituted by God at Sinai. He was a civil magistrate, and as the Prime Minister of the Persian Empire he gave a civil command to the Jewish citizens of that empire, and of that empire only, to commemorate their deliverance annually by the observance of the Feast of Purim. Seen in this light, I believe that we can acknowledge his actions to have been lawful.

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\* *Ibid.*, p. 266

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### THE RIGHTEOUS EXALTED

#### Esther 10:1-3

**1 And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea.**

**2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?**

**3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.**

The first verse in this chapter deals with the taxes levied by King Ahasuerus. At first glance it does not seem to fit in with the main thrust of this chapter, which is the greatness of Mordecai and his stature both in the Persian Empire and among the Jews. Why put this seemingly incongruous piece of information here? It doesn't seem to fit with the theme of the text. To what purpose did the inspired writer insert it here? Several conjectures have been put forth by commentators. One is that this great program of taxation was levied to replenish the depleted imperial treasuries after the disastrous Grecian campaign. If so it could be regarded as another detail confirming the identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes. Another conjecture is that this relates to a resumption of taxes after the release from taxation recorded previously at the time of Esther's coronation:

*Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king. (Esther 2:18)*

The problem with either of these explanations is that the timing does not fit. Esther became queen in the seventh year of Ahasuerus' reign (**Esther 2:18**). We have already previously noted that Esther's selection and coronation took place after Ahasuerus' return from the Grecian campaign. But Haman's plot for the destruction of the Jews occurred in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus' reign (**Esther 3:7**). Almost a year later on the thirteenth of Adar the plot rebounded on the heads of the enemies of the Jews. And the events of this chapter are after the second letter of Purim which was probably a year after that. So we are at least in the thirteenth year of Ahasuerus and probably in the fourteenth year or later. This places us a minimum of six or seven years after Esther's coronation. Ahasuerus would not have waited that long to replenish his treasuries, and he certainly would not have remitted the provincial taxes for such an extensive period.

There must be another reason for the insertion of this statement about Ahasuerus' taxation, and the reason should fit in with the theme of the chapter, which is Mordecai's greatness. The only logical reason is to show the great power of Ahasuerus. He had the power to tax what seemed to be the very ends of the earth and even the isles of the sea. Since the 127 provinces that are constantly mentioned, to display the size of the empire, are not mentioned here, it may indicate that they are not in view here. This program may indicate a taxation of areas that are not officially part of the empire. The word for isles is "'iy'" and can mean either islands or coastlands. The sea of course refers to the Mediterranean Sea. What the verse may be saying is that even the islands and coastlands of the "Great Sea" beyond the bounds of the empire were paying tribute to the great king, Ahasuerus. This certainly exalts Ahasuerus to a great degree and leads right into the exaltation of his prime minister, Mordecai. For this power was wielded for him through the administration of Mordecai, and thus the writer is by reflection showing the great power and might to which Mordecai had risen. This view would also then make verse one logically flow right into verse two, which speaks of all the acts of the power (authority) and might of King Ahasuerus. And this leads right into the statement of the greatness of Mordecai, who was second in the kingdom.

Mordecai exercised regal power, and he is listed here almost as a co-regent and included in the regal summation of the acts of Ahasuerus' life ("are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media

*and Persia*"), which reminds us of a similar formula applied to the kings of Israel and of Judah. But Mordecai's greatness was not limited by the extent of his political power, for unlike Haman he was an upright and godly man who was beloved of his people. He was a man who, although he rose to great heights, he was not lifted up with pride, seeking his own wealth, but seeking the welfare of his people. This is reaffirmed by the final phrase, "*and speaking peace to all his seed,*" because he was a eunuch and his seed must logically refer to his kinsmen according to the flesh, the seed of Abraham.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### CONCLUSION

This is a marvelous story. It has strengthened the faith and sustained the trust in God of many a saint. It reads somewhat like a fairy tale. Fairy tales frequently have a moral. We are all familiar with the story of Cinderella. The humble are exalted. The wicked are humbled. And there is an overruling providence, exemplified by the fairy godmother, that ensures that things are so. But this is no fairy tale. This is no fanciful flight from reality. This is no retreat into the imagination from the bitter realities of life under the curse. This is history. This is the history of God's people. And most particularly it is the history of God's deliverance of his people. And this is one of the great lessons of the Book of Esther; God is in control of history.

The story of Esther is also a miraculous story. The chain of events seems not just incredible, but almost miraculous. Yet there is not a single miracle that takes place in the narrative. During the time of the old covenant, the times of the prophets, there were many miracles performed. During the life of Christ and during the Apostolic age there were many miracles performed. But the age of miracles has long ceased and God has, in his sovereign will and purpose, chosen to work through means in our day. Or, at the very least, he has not granted to any the power of working miracles in our age, the claims of Charismatics notwithstanding. And this makes the book of Esther especially relevant for us.

What is a miracle? This is not as easy to define as one might imagine. It is very easy to fall into error in this matter. One is tempted to think that God has set up the world to run according to certain natural laws. When God leaves matters alone and allows things to operate in terms of these laws, that is then the normal state of affairs. When God actively interferes and overrules the operation of these laws, then that is a miracle.

But that is not the scriptural position; it is the Deist position. God is not an absentee landlord. The universe is not on autopilot. God does not occasionally check in and make an adjustment in the operation of his creation. God actively upholds his creation and micromanages it unto the last detail. Therefore Christ can say concerning the providential care of our heavenly Father,

*Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. (Matthew 10:29-30)*

And that is one of the great teachings of this book. God did not leave things to go on by themselves and then, when the Jews got into a difficulty, interfere with a miracle to bail them out. Rather, the book of Esther demonstrates that God is actively controlling all the events in the lives of his people, working them all out for his glory and for the good of his elect. God is not named, but he is ever present in the narrative of this book. We sometimes think of guardian angels who are unseen, but watch over us. As the Psalmist said:

*Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. (Psalm 91:9-12)*

And as Christ said:

*Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 18:10)*

But God is the ultimate guardian angel. And so the Psalmist praises God, saying:

*My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. (Psalm 121:2-4)*

And in the book of Esther we have a dramatic testimony to God's faithful care for and preservation of his people. He may chastise them for their sins. He may send them into a long and grievous captivity. He may so humble them that the world has long since ceased to think of them as the favored race, as the chosen people, as the select people of an Almighty God. But God never leaves or forsakes his people. Even after they rejected his Son and concurred in his death, Paul can say:

*I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. (Romans 11:1-2)*

*For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins. (Romans 11:25-27)*

And it is exactly that, God's covenant faithfulness to his people, even when they are in captivity due to his just judgments, that shines through so beautifully in the Book of Esther.

Another lesson that is preeminently displayed for us in this book is that God indeed works all things out for his own glory and the good of his people. God was greatly glorified when Egypt and its proud Pharaoh were crushed underneath a succession of his judgments and his people were delivered by his mighty and outstretched arm. In fact Paul says that was the very purpose of God in bringing that historic drama to pass.

*For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. (Romans 9:17)*

And here again, God, even though he is not specifically named, is being glorified in the events that transpire. His ancient decree that he will have war with Amalek forever is upheld. His power to deliver his people from even the most powerful of enemies is again demonstrated. And his everlasting mercy and his unfailing covenant faithfulness shine forth to his eternal glory.

Similarly, God's ability to work all things out for good redounds to his glory. One would have thought that the Jews in Jerusalem might render some assistance to their brethren in captivity. One might have thought that the weak but recently resurrected State of Judah might start to deliver some of their countrymen from captivity and restore them to the land. But instead God works the captivity of the captives, his own penal judgment for their sin and idolatry, out for good.

It is the Jews in captivity that deliver the Jews in Judah and provide deliverance for Jerusalem. It is Mordecai and Esther that the Lord raises up as deliverers of their people. It is Esther's terrible situation, trapped in a polygamous and heathen marriage, that God works out for the good of his people. God uses Mordecai's status as a despised Jew to place him in position to rescue the king from assassination. God uses the murderous spite of the king's eunuchs, the sleeplessness of the king himself, and Haman's inordinate pride to both raise up Mordecai and bring down Haman. Truly God uses the wrath of man to praise him! Rarely in the scriptures do we see such a marvelous display of God's providential control of history, in every minute detail, to work out his holy purposes and establish his eternal will.

And God clearly uses this control to work all things out for the good of his people. Esther is made queen. She is given a great mission in life, and her life has a purpose that transcends her status in Ahasuerus' harem. God uses her, not only to deliver her people, but also to be an inspiration and an encouragement to them. Mordecai is made the administrator of this great empire. Together they are used, not only to redeem God's people from destruction, but also to unite them in the worship of their God. The Northern Kingdom had gone into captivity and disappeared to be swallowed up in the mists of history. They forgot the land of promise and the covenant of their fathers. Ultimately they forgot the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And this was a danger that also threatened the Judean captives. But the Lord used this persecution to unite them to stand for their lives and defend themselves. And he used Mordecai

as a unifying force to lead them as a people. And he caused Mordecai and Esther to give them an annual feast to remember the mercies of their God lest they too should forget him in a strange land. And so we can see that in many ways, more than we can either recognize or count, God worked the events of this book out for the good of his people.

And finally, God caused the history of Esther and of Mordecai to be preserved in the book that bears her name. God raised up a scribe to prepare an inspired account of these events for the instruction of his people. As Paul put it,

*Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:11)*

And so today this story is still working out to God's glory and the good of his elect. Who can help but worship such a great God who so wondrously brings things to pass to accomplish his holy will! And who can help but be inspired, encouraged, and uplifted by this story of God's faithfulness to his people! And as we face the trials that God sends us in this life, we can take comfort that he who changes not will graciously order them for our good as well. If we learn that, we have gained an ongoing blessing from this book that will strengthen us all our days. By God's grace may the study of this book be the blessing to his people that God intended it should be. Amen.