

ESTHER

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Introduction:

The Pulpit Commentary introduces the book of Esther with the following: “The Book of Esther relates an episode in Jewish history of intense interest to the entire nation at the time, since it involved the question of its continuance or destruction, but an episode which stood quite separate and distinct from the rest of Jewish history, unconnected with anything that preceded or followed, and which, but for the institution of the Feast of Purim, might as easily have been forgotten by the people as escaped perils too often are by individuals.

The main scene of the narrative is Susa, the Persian capital; the *dramatis personae* are either Persians or ‘Jews of the Dispersion.’ There is no mention, in the whole Book, of Palestine, or Jerusalem, or the temple, or the provisions of the law, nor any allusion to any facts in previous Jewish history, excepting two : —

1. The captivity under Nebuchadnezzar (... Esther 2:6).
2. The subsequent dispersion of the Jews over all the various provinces of the Persian empire (... Esther 3:8).

Thus the events related belong, primarily, not to the history of the Palestinian Jews, but to that of the ‘Jews of the Dispersion’; and it is as indicating that those Jews were, no less than their brethren in Palestine, under the Divine care, that the Book appealed to the hearts of the Jewish race generally, and claimed a place in the national collection of sacred writings.”

J. Sidlow Baxter, in his book *Explore the Book*, writes about Esther: “Esther is a *crisis* book. It is a drama—not of fiction, however, but of genuine fact. It is set on the stage of real history, and gathers round actual personages. Five figures move before us—Ahasuerus, the Persian monarch; Vashti, the deposed queen; Haman, the Jew-hater; Mordecai, the Jewish leader; and Esther, the Jewish girl who became queen. In the background are the royal palace, the Persian capital, and the several millions of Jews scattered throughout the emperor’s domains.

Esther is the crucial figure in the drama inasmuch as everything turns upon her elevation to the throne and her influence as queen. The book, therefore, is fittingly called after the name of Esther. It describes events which took place at Susa, the principal Persian capital, and covers a period of some twelve years.”

Halley’s Bible Handbook observes about Esther: “The book of Esther is about a Very Important Historical Event, not just a story to point a moral: The Hebrew Nation’s deliverance from Annihilation is the days following the Babylonian Captivity. If the Hebrew Nation had been entirely wiped out of existence 500 years before it brought Christ into the world, that might have made some difference in the destiny of mankind; no Hebrew Nation, no Messiah: no Messiah, a lost world. This beautiful Jewish girl of the long ago, though she herself may not have known it, yet played her part in paving the way for the coming of the world’s Savior.”

Date:

The date of the writing of the Book of Esther has been a topic of discussion among Bible scholars, but the story portrays the time during the reign of King Ahasuerus, which was from 464-423 BC.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, states about the date: “The origin of this book, by virtue of its dating, language and thematic content, is firmly fixed within the Persian Empire governed by the Achaemenid kings. Between 545 and 538 BC, the Achaemenid kings conquered the whole of the Middle East (including Palestine) and had established the largest of all the empires in the ancient world. Cyrus (559-530 BC) was particularly responsible for the extension of the Empire’s borders, and although his military advances were quite conclusive, even ruthless, he treated people within his Empire with respect, seeing himself as their liberator rather than a tyrant.”

Place in the canon:

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, states about Esther’s place in the biblical canon: “Esther is the only book of our present OT canon that is not found among the Qumran Scrolls. ... There is limited evidence that a council in Jamnia (Palestine) in AD 90 decided that Esther should be accepted. The Mishnah (assembled in the first two centuries AD) gives directions about how the ‘Book of Purim’ should be read, suggesting

Esther's place had been established in the canon at least by the end of the second century. ... Finally assembled in the fifth or sixth centuries AD, the Midrash (a book containing collections of exegetical studies) contains commentary on Esther (along with the Pentateuch, Lamentations, Songs and Ruth). ... Esther was affirmed by the church councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397), and at this point the Christian church considered the canon of the whole Bible to be established. Prior to this [one Bible scholar] suggests that there was a split between the Eastern church, where Esther's canonicity was questioned (for example, in the fourth centuries by Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Theodore of Mopsuestia) and the Western church, where Esther was widely accepted."

Nature of the book:

About this topic, Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "On the one hand it appears to be a simple historical account. On the other it is a carefully crafted piece of literary genius. From one perspective, its main focus is upon the individual who gives the book its name; from another the spotlight is on a whole nation. ... What is the *raison d'être* of the book of Esther? ... Take, for example the fact that God's name is never mentioned in the text. Instead of giving up on a theological quest, we find ourselves searching more earnestly for a God whose non-appearance seems to enhance his presence. ... It is my contention that the value and meaning of the book of Esther lies in its testimonial value. In this book we read of Esther's early life (living with her uncle in the Persian Empire). We read what life is like for Esther when she encounters deliverance and salvation (her unenviable position in the king's palace), and her active acceptance of her own role within these processes (*for such a time as this*, Esth. 4:14). ... Another way of reading the story is to understand that it represents the testimony not of Esther alone but of her people together. This adds further significance to the references to the establishment of the Purim festival at the end of the book. Life now will never be the same for Esther's people

Outline:

For the outline of the Book of Esther we follow the one in Debra Reid's *Esther*:

1. INTRODUCTION: THE REIGN OF XERXES (AHASUERUS) (Esther 1:1-9)

- A. The stage is set: 'in the days of Xerxes ...' (1:1-2)
- B. The royal banquets (1:3-9)
 - i. Xerxes' banquet for his officials (1:3-4)
 - ii. Xerxes' banquet for the people (1:5-8)
 - iii. Vashti's banquet for the women of Xerxes' palace (1:9)

2. ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN (Esther 1:10 – 2:20)

- A. The demise of Vashti: 'on the seventh day' (1:10 – 2:4)
 - i. Vashti is summoned by Xerxes (1:10-11)
 - ii. Vashti refuses to obey the summons (1:12)
 - iii. Xerxes takes advice from his wise men (1:13-15)
 - iv. Memucan's proposal (1:16-20)
 - v. Xerxes accepts Memucan's advice (1:21-22)
 - vi. Xerxes accepts advice of his young men (2:1-4)
- B. The emergence of Esther: 'now there was ... a Jew' (2:5-20)
 - i. Esther's family history (2:5-7)
 - ii. Ester's rise to favor (2:8-9)
 - iii. Esther's secret (2:10-11)
 - iv. Explanation of the selection process (2:12-14)
 - v. Esther is selected as queen (2:15-17)
 - vi. Queen Esther's banquet (2:18)
 - vii. Queen Esther's loyalty to Mordecai (2:19-20)

3. THE PLOT AGAINST XERXES: 'in those days' (Esther 2:21-23)

- A. The plot is discovered by Mordecai (2:21)
- B. The plot is foiled (2:22-23)

4. HAMAN'S PLOT AGAINST THE JEWISH EXILES:

- A. Haman's power (3:1-11)
 - i. Haman's rise to power (3:1-2)
 - ii. Haman's anger against Mordecai (3:3-5)
 - iii. Haman plots the destruction of all the Jews (3:6-9)
 - iv. Haman is now in charge (3:10-11)
- B. The edict of genocide (3:12-15)
 - i. The edict is written (3:12)
 - ii. The edict is distributed (3:13-15)

5. MORDECAI AND ESTHER RESPOND TO HAMAN'S PLOT: 'when Mordecai learned ...' Esther 4:1 – 5:8)

- A. Esther discovers Haman's intentions (4:1-9)
 - i. Mordecai weeps in sackcloth (4:1-4)
 - ii. Esther investigates through Hathach (4:1-4)
- B. Mordecai enlists Esther's help (4:10-17)
 - i. Esther's unenviable position (4:10-11)
 - ii. Mordecai challenges Esther (4:12-14)
 - iii. Esther accepts her role (4:15-17)
- C. Esther hosts a banquet (5:1-8)
 - i. Esther issues the invitation (5:1-5)
 - ii. The banquet is held and a further invitation is issued (5:5-8)

6. HAMAN'S PLOT AGAINST MORDECAI: 'filled with rage against Mordecai' (Esther 5:9-14)

- A. Haman's emotional turmoil (5:9-11)
- B. Haman accepts his wife's (and friends') advice to hang Mordecai (5:14)

7. XERXES HONORS MORDECAI: 'the man the king delights to honor' (Esther 6:1-11)

- A. Mordecai's loyalty is remembered (6:1-3)
- B. Xerxes takes advice from Haman (6:4-9)
- C. Mordecai is publicly honored (6:10-11)

8. PARTIAL SUCCESS: THE DEATH OF HAMAN (Esther 6:12 – 7:10)

- A. Haman's demise: 'you will surely fall ...' (6:12 – 7:6)
 - i. Zeresh and advisers predict Haman's downfall (6:12-14)
 - ii. Esther's second banquet takes place (7:1-2)
 - iii. Esther exposes Haman and his plot (7:3-6)
- B. Haman's death (7:7-10)
 - i. Xerxes' anger is aroused (7:7-8)
 - ii. Haman is put to death (7:9-10)

9. FULL SUCCESS: THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE SAVED (Esther 8:1 – 9:16)

- A. Mordecai and Esther find favor before Xerxes (8:1-4)
- B. The issue of overturning Haman's edict is addressed (8:5-14)
 - i. Esther asks for a new edict (8:5-6)
 - ii. Xerxes hands the matter over to Esther and Mordecai (8:7-8)
 - iii. Mordecai oversees the writing of a new edict (8:9-10)
 - iv. The new edict is distributed (8:10-14)
- C. The Jews' mourning is replaced by joy (8:15-17)

- i. Mordecai's honor is complete (8:15)
- ii. The Jew's gladness is complete (8:16-17)
- D. The enemies of the Jews are destroyed (9:1-16)
 - i. 'now the tables were turned' (9:1-5)
 - ii. The extent of the Jewish victory in Susa (9:6-12a)
 - iii. Esther's further request on behalf of the Jews in Susa (9:12b-13)
 - iv. Esther request is granted (9:14-15)
 - v. The extent of the Jewish victory in the provinces (9:16)

10. THE JEWS CELEBRATE THEIR VICTORY (Esther 9:17-32)

- A. Spontaneous days of feasting (9:17-19)
- B. Mordecai himself confirms the festival (9:20-22)
- C. The festival of Purim is established (9:23-32)
 - i. A summary of the festival's historical roots (9:25-26a)
 - ii. A summary of the commitment of the Jews to this festival (9:26b-28)
 - iii. Esther confirms the festival (9:29-32)

11. CONCLUSION: MORDECAI'S HONOR: 'he worked for the good of his people' (Esther 10:1-3)

The text:

1. INTRODUCTION: THE REIGN OF XERXES (AHASUERUS) (Esther 1:1-9)

A. The stage is set: 'in the days of Xerxes ...' (1:1-2)

1 This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush:

2 At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa ...

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on these opening phrases: "Xerxes is the Greek form of an old Persian name meaning 'he rules over men/heroes.' The Hebrew text has 'ahašwērōš. ... The preference for Xerxes (NIV) has emerged because it is the recognized name for the Persian king who was the son of Darius I, to whom the Greek historian Herodotus bears witness. Xerxes (b. 518 BC) ruled between 485 and 465 BC and appears on only one other occasion in the OT (Ezra 4:6), when he opposed the re-building of the temple. Xerxes was certainly a powerful oppressor but his rule ended in humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks. His desire for excessive glory led him to make military errors when all the numerical advantages had been his. Xerxes' reign is a suitable setting for the story, but it is possible that the writer did not intend to bring a historical king to mind (which may account for the humorous sound of the Hebrew name and the Greek alternative rendition Arta-xerxes), but created a world for the story that bore similarities to a historical world. However, the overlap between the author's presentation of this king and the presentation of Xerxes by Herodotus, is too great to dispense with lightly." That kind of comment on a biblical text may meet with objection from the viewpoint that all Scripture is given under divine inspiration, which supposes correctness of historical references, unless otherwise indicated.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on the historical facts mentioned in v.1: "*In the days of Ahasuerus.* This can be none other than Xerxes (486 B.C. - 465 B.C.; cf. Ezra 4:6), the son of Darius I, who attempted to conquer Greece in 481 B.C. He completely failed in this objective as a result of crushing defeats at Salamis (480 B.C.) and Plataea (479 B.C.). *This is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia.* In order to avoid possible confusion with the father of Darius the Mede, who had the same name (Dan 9:1), the author points to the vast territory over which this Xerxes ruled (cf. Est 8:9; 10:1). The India referred to was the territory corresponding to the province of Punjab in West Pakistan today, the region west of the Indus River to which Alexander's forces came in their conquests. Herodotus tells us that both India and Ethiopia were subject to Xerxes *Over a hundred and seventy and twenty provinces.* This has been confused with the twenty satrapies listed by Herodotus for Darius I ... and the one hundred and twenty satraps appointed by Darius the Mede (Dan

6:1). The word provinces (Heb. (medina) refers to the small governmental units of the empire, such as the province of Judah (Neh 1:3), whereas Herodotus was referring to the larger units, such as the fifth satrapy, which included all of Phoenicia, Palestine, Syria, and Cyprus. But the Book of Daniel speaks of neither of these territorial units, for it merely states that Darius the Mede ‘set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty satraps.’”

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on the mention of the location of Xerxes’ royal throne: “The king’s royal residence is in *the citadel of Susa* (NIV, NRSV). Although sometimes translated as ‘capital’ (RSV) or simply ‘city’ (LXX), perhaps ‘palace’ (NKJV) in the sense of palace and its environs, or ‘citadel,’ are preferable. This term, borrowed from Akkadian, was particularly used for the high ground at the center of the city of Susa where Darius built the Persian palace. This is supported by the use of the word in 1:5 (description of the palace gardens) and the fact that edicts are issued from the citadel (3:15); 8:14-15). This fortified area, a favorite winter residence for the Persian kings, was where Xerxes took refuge after his defeat at the hands of the Greeks (480 BC).

The city of *Susa* was the pre-eminent city among four capital cities used by the Persian rulers. Situated in Elam (south-west Iran), about 240 kilometers north of the Persian Gulf, it had the advantage of being situated in a fertile plain with plentiful rivers.”

B. The royal banquets (1:3-9)

i. Xerxes’ banquet for his officials (1:3-4)

3 *and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.*

4 *For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.*

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on Xerxes’ banquet: “This first feast is excessive in terms of its participants (v.3) and its duration (v.4). It is held *in the third year of his* (Xerxes’) *reign* (i.e. in 485 or 482 BC, after Xerxes’ campaigns in Egypt and Babylon). Irony may be intended here because Esther’s first readers knew that this period of carefree rule was abruptly ended by Xerxes’ unsuccessful campaigns against the Greeks. This banquet was possible part of the warm-up for Xerxes’ war council that planned the attack against the Greeks. Certainly the author schedules his banquet so that its timing is both historically viable and ironically significant.

The exact meaning of *nobles, officials, military leaders, princes* and *nobles of provinces* is debatable, though they are probably people groups honored by appointment rather than by birthright. Even the divisions within this list are not straightforward, because the conjunction is used in a seemingly random manner. The list as a whole clarifies that this banquet was for the great and the mighty, for those who upheld the structures what supported Xerxes’ rule.”

A look at the dates and the historical events preceding them would suggest that the six-months-long banquet was a celebration of recent victories and a preparation for planned campaigns of which victory was anticipated. According to Herodotus, Xerxes planned to attack Greece at this point.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “Banquets on so grand a scale, and extending over so great a period, have not been infrequently provided by the luxurious monarchs of Eastern countries, both in ancient ... and modern times. The early portion of this festive season, however, seems to have been dedicated to amusement, particularly an exhibition of the magnificence and treasures of the court, and it was closed by a special feast of seven days’ continuance, given to all classes of the inhabitants, within the gardens of the royal palace.” The commentators’ “modern times” must refer to the, for us, previous century, in which the Shah ruled Persia.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “Persian kings, according to Ctesias and Duris, ordinarily entertained at their table 15,000 persons! This is of course an exaggeration; but there can be no doubt that their hospitality was on a scale unexampled in modern times. The vast pillared halls of the Persepolitan and Susan palaces could accommodate many hundreds, if not thousands. The empire of the Achaemenian kings was Perso-Medic rather than simply Persian. The Medes were not only the most favored of the conquered nations, but were really placed nearly on a par with their conquerors. Many of the highest offices were conferred on them, and they formed no doubt a considerable section of the courtiers. *The nobles*. Literally, ‘the first men,’ *ha-partemim*. The word used is a Persian term Hebraized. It occurs only in this place. *And*

princes of the provinces. i.e. satraps. The presence of such persons at the great gathering at Susa preparatory to the Grecian war is witnessed to by Herodotus.”

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary observes: “It cannot, indeed, be supposed that the whole military power of Persia and Media was with the king at Susa; but *chayil* without *kol* can only signify an élite of the army, perhaps the captains and leaders as representing it, just as ‘the people’ is frequently used for ‘the representatives of the people.’ The Persians and Medes are always named together as the two kindred races of the ruling nation. See Dan 6:9, who, however, as writing in the reign of Darius the Mede, places the Medes first and the Persians second, while the contrary order is observed here when the supremacy had been transferred to the Persians by Cyrus. ... After the mention of the forces, the Partemim, i.e., nobles, magnates ..., and the princes of the provinces are named as the chief personages of the civil government.”

Xerxes’ display of his great wealth was supposed to impress the attendance, that is those who carried out their administrative duties, with “the splendor and glory of his majesty.” In doing so, Xerxes set himself up as a person, not only to be worthy of their service, but of their adoration. We do not even find any mention of an idol to which Xerxes attributed his successes. He displayed the same arrogance as Nebuchadnezzar who exclaimed: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”¹ Not giving honor to whom the only honor is due robs people of their human dignity and reduce them to the level of an animal.

ii. Xerxes’ banquet for the people (1:5-8)

5 When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa.

6 The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones.

7 Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality.

8 By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, explains about the place where the banquet for the citizens of Susa was held: “The setting is *in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace*. Excavations of Persian palaces suggest that the citadels housed the palace buildings surrounded by gardens decorated with murals and water features. The gardens also contained pavilions supported by columns serving as large outdoor banqueting halls. This area appears to be the location of the banquet.

The invitation is extended to *all the people who were in the citadel of Susa* (i.e. including people not among the select company invited to the first feast, but restricted to those who served the king in the citadel). It is likely that a residential area existed within the citadel of Susa, so there were plenty of people invited.”

We may assume that Xerxes had reasons of a political nature for inviting the residents of the citadel to the extended celebration. Although he had not become the ruler by popular vote, he must have felt the need for popular support.

The description of the garden in which this extended and lavish reception was held, supports the idea that it was reported by one of the citizens to whom entrance into this area had been out of bounds before. It is seen through the eyes of a first-time visitor. The impression was overwhelming.

Also the mention of the way wine was offered and the drinking rules that were established must have been unusual. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “Among the Greeks, each guest was obliged to keep the round, or leave the company: hence, the proverb, ‘Drink or be gone.’” This did not mean that several of the guests, if not all, must have become heavily intoxicated. All this must have helped to enhance the king’s popularity.

iii. Vashti’s banquet for the women of Xerxes’ palace (1:9)

¹ Dan. 4:30

9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

Vashti's separate banquet for the women in the palace suggests that there was strict separation of sexes at that time, probably in the same manner as can still be observed in Muslim culture. We are not told whether "the women in the royal palace" were all Xerxes' concubines, or whether they included servants. What is obvious is that Vashti's feast was a separate affair. That the two feasts would celebrate Vashti's marriage to Xerxes, as some suggest, seems rather doubtful.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: "The celebration was double; because, as according to the Oriental fashion the sexes do not intermingle in society, the court ladies were entertained in a separate apartment by the queen. She was in circumstances to provide a sumptuous entertainment on an extensive scale; because the dignified rank of queen was supported by ample revenues, not dependent on the good-will of the king, but fixed by the law and usage of the country ... She possessed great power over the women of the court-amounting, according to some authorities, to from 330 to 360 concubines-and frequently exercised it in a very despotic manner in the harem Although the queen could, to a certain extent, use great freedom, she was as completely at the will of the king as the veriest slave in the country."

2. ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN (Esther 1:10 – 2:20)

A. The demise of Vashti: 'on the seventh day' (1:10 – 2:4)

i. Vashti is summoned by Xerxes (1:10-11)

10 On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him — Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas — 11 to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.

The seven eunuchs mentioned were, evidently, the men in charge of the king's harem. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "All these are doubtless Persian names; but so disguised by passing through a Hebrew medium, that some of them can scarcely be known." An interesting question at this point is why these names are mentioned at all.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, may be right in her comment on the author's intent, when she says: "The names of the eunuchs (or officers, though castration is probably for their role) have some connection with known Persian names, but the forms are twisted, making this list (like others in this book) seem ludicrous. This, along with the number seven again, suggests that the author is concerned with the effect of the record rather than the record of history. Seven eunuchs to bring in one queen seems unnecessarily pompous, and the pronunciation of each name draws attention to the farcical nature of this episode."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: "According to Persian customs, the queen, even more than the wives of other men, was secluded from the public gaze: and had not the king's blood been heated with wine, or his reason overpowered by force of offended pride, he would have perceived that his own honor as well as hers was consulted by her dignified conduct."

Although this is not specifically mentioned, Xerxes' intention may have been more than merely showing his beautiful wife to the public eye. According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, "The Targum adds naked." If that was in fact the king's intent, it shows how drunk he was and how degrading it would have been for Vashti to obey the command.

ii. Vashti refuses to obey the summons (1:12)

12 But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes about the king's command and Vashti's refusal: "He dishonored himself as a husband, who ought to protect, but by no means expose, the modesty of his wife, who ought to be to her a covering of the eyes (Gen 20:16), not to uncover them. He diminished himself as a king, in commanding that from his wife which she might refuse, much to the honor of her virtue. It was against the custom of the Persians for the women to appear in public, and he put a great hardship upon her

when he did not court, but command her to do so uncouth a thing, and make her a show. If he had not been put out of the possession of himself by drinking to excess, he would not have done such a thing, but would have been angry at any one that should have mentioned it. When the wine is in the wit is out, and men's reason departs from them." *The Pulpit Commentary* adds: "Had Vashti complied, she would have lost the respect not only of the Persian nation, but of the king himself."

The NIV reads: "Then the king became furious and burned with anger." "Furious" is the translation of the Hebrew word *qatsaph*, "angry." The word appears twice in this book. The other time in the verse: "During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became *angry* and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes."² "His anger burned" is the rendering for the words *chemah ba`ar*. It is the same word that is used to describe the burning bush, where Moses had his first encounter with God.³ Xerxes' intoxication may have had something to do with the intensity of his violent reaction.

iii. Xerxes takes advice from his wise men, adding tension to the narrative (1:13-15)

13 Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times

14 and were closest to the king — Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

15 "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her."

We may suppose that Xerxes was enough of an absolute ruler that he could decide on his own what to do with Vashti's refusal to obey a royal command. In spite of his intoxication, the king decided not to act on his own, but to consult the legal experts. Again, we are given a list of seven names. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: "The list here sounds similar to the list in verse 10: seven eunuchs to fetch the queen, now seven advisers to deal with her." The same irony that produced the first list may account for the second one also.

We read about these counselors that the "understood the times." We find the same expression used of the "men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do."⁴ Here we may assume that these men were the king's advisers in the matter of national and foreign policy. In this case they were called in as marriage counselors.

iv. Memucan's proposal (1:16-20)

16 Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes.

17 For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.'

18 This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

19 "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.

20 Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

In these verses also irony is not absent. Memucan, speaking for the council of seven, advises the king on the matter of Queen Vashti's disobedience.

² Est. 2:21

³ See Ex. 3:2.

⁴ I Chron. 12:32

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “Memucan, one of the seven princes (v. 14), seized the opportunity to transform a private affair into a public and national crisis, doubtless because of a previous conflict between the queen and the princes. The wives of ordinary citizens would defy their husbands (v. 17), and the wives of the seven princes would even ‘this day’ (v. 18) demand equality through a desire to emulate their queen.”

Although it was a male-dominated society, the male section of society, evidently did not feel that its dominant position was safe and secure. A lot can be said about male insecurity and how it affects marriage relationships, but this study is not to right place to do so.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “One of the longer speeches in Esther is recorded in verses 16-20. Memucan puts the Vashti incident in a wide-ranging context by asserting that Vashti has *done wrong ... against all the nobles and all the people in all the provinces*. Is it possible that Memucan, aware of the king’s personal embarrassment, deliberately removes the spotlight from the king? Alternatively, it may be that Memucan’s personal insecurity drives him to be concerned with the general issue of women rebelling against their husbands. There is clearly some irony attached to Memucan’s speech (note the quantum leaps in logic and the repeated use of ‘all,’ allowing no exceptions to behavior and consequences outlined).”

We could interpret the words “let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed” to mean that the edict would become part of the constitution of the Persian and Median Empire. The same words are found later in the book when a law is issued to protect the Jews from extermination.⁵ In some instances “the law of Medes and Persians,” a phrase that has become proverbial in the English language also, became a limitation to the absolute monarch’s power, as in the case of Darius, who was forced to allow Daniel to be thrown to the lions.⁶

Some Bible scholars believe that Memucan’s advice to make the decree part of the constitution was in order to preserve himself against Vashti’s revenge, in case she would later be reinstated as queen. This could only be achieved if another young lady would be chosen to replace Vashti as the most important woman in the king’s harem. And that is the story of this book.

v. Xerxes accepts Memucan’s advice (1:21-22)

***21 The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed.
22 He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.***

V.22 is somewhat difficult to interpret. The Hebrew text reads literally: “... that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.” The NKJV reads this: “that each man should be master in his own house, and speak in the language of his own people.” The RSV: “that every man be lord in his own house and speak according to the language of his people.” The New Living Translation reads: “... proclaiming that every man should be the ruler of his own home and should say whatever he pleases.” And TLB: “stressing that every man should rule his home and should assert his authority.” Considering the context, the latter, probably, comes closest to the meaning of the text.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: “Verse 22 explains the purpose of the edict as giving men authority in their own homes. That such an edict issues from a king who has not been able to induce obedience when it really mattered to him is plainly ironic. The tone adopted is instructive and indicative of what is to come.”

vi. Xerxes accepts advice of his young men (2:1-4)

***1 Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.
2 Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.***

⁵ Esther 8:8

⁶ Dan. 6:12

3 Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.

4 Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

There seems to be a note of regret in Xerxes' mind when he got over the initial anger of Vashti's refusal. We read nothing about any severe punishment meted out to Queen Vashti, except for the fact that she would no longer be allowed into the king's presence. It seems that the fact that he "remembered Vashti" would have been the cause of his anger. But, evidently, remembering Vashti means here that he missed her and would have liked to have her back. But since her banishment had become a constitutional law, that was something this absolute ruler was unable to bring about.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "Vashti having ceased to be queen, Ahasuerus appears to have been in no haste to assign her dignity to any one else. Probably there was no one among his other (secondary) wives of whom he was specially fond, or who seemed to him pre-eminent above the rest. And he may even have begun to relent in Vashti's favor (as seems to be somewhat obscurely intimated in ver. 1), and to wish to take her back. Under these circumstances the officers of his court would become alarmed. Vashti's disgrace had been their doing, and her return to power would be likely to be followed by their own dismissal, or even by their execution. They therefore came to Ahasuerus with a fresh piece of advice: 'Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king; let officers be appointed in every province to select fitting damsels, and send them up to the court, for the king to choose a wife from among them.' So sensual a monarch as Xerxes would be strongly tempted by such a proposal (vers. 2, 3)."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary explains: "Since Esther became queen in December, 479 B.C. (Est 2:16), and more than a year must have elapsed between the decree of 2:3 cf. 2:12) and her marriage, the king's desire for Vashti must have become known while he was still engaged in the great campaign against Greece (481 B.C. - 479 B.C.). Realizing that the restoration of Vashti would spell doom for them ... the princes abandoned the precedent of providing a queen from among their own daughters, and suggested that the king choose a new queen from among the most beautiful virgins in the empire."

B. The emergence of Esther: 'now there was ... a Jew' (2:5-20)

i. Esther's family history (2:5-7)

5 Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish,

6 who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah.

7 Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

Here we enter into the actual story of the book and we are introduced to the persons of Mordecai and Esther, the daughter of one of his deceased relatives.

Evidently, Mordecai's parents had not been among the Jews who returned to the land of Israel when Cyrus issued the decree that permitted this. The Jews returned to their homeland in 536 B.C. and Esther became queen in 478 B.C. Mordecai was probably not born yet when the first return occurred.

Mordecai's ancestry is given as "the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish." The genealogy is, obviously, given in abbreviated outline since it only mentions three generations to cover period of several centuries. Mordecai was related to the family from which King Saul emerged.

His ancestors had been carried off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar and had settled in Babylon, moved to Susa when the Persian Empire defeated Babylonia and stayed there comfortably; too comfortable to consider return to the Promised Land.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary explains about the name Esther: "*H^ddacaah* signifies a myrtle in Chaldee: this was probably her first or Babylonian name. When she came to the Persian court, she was called Esther, aster, or sitara, which signifies a star in Persian. The name is undoubtedly Persian. Esther was the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai, and therefore must have been Mordecai's cousin,

though the Vulgate and Josephus make her Mordecai's niece. However, it is safest here to follow the Hebrew."

ii. Ester's rise to favor (2:8-9)

8 *When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem.*

9 *The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.*

It seems that all or most of the girls of Susa were simply rounded up by, what we could call, the palace police and were taken to the palace where they were checked out to see if they could be added to the king's harem. We don't read anything about whether young women were kept out of the public eye or how much freedom they had in mingling in society. In any case, the king's police force would be able to search houses and bring out whoever they wanted. So Esther was taken and brought to the king's palace.

The man in charge of the king's harem is named Hegai. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Some have rendered, 'was forcibly brought;' and in the second Targum on Esther there is a story that Mordecai concealed her to prevent her from becoming an inmate of the royal harem, and that the king's authority was invoked to force him to give her up; but the Hebrew word translated 'was brought' does not contain any idea of violence; and the Persian Jews probably saw no disgrace, but rather honor, in one of their nation becoming even a secondary wife to the great king."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes about the impression Esther made upon Hegai and the results: "Esther soon 'pleases' and 'lifts up favor [kindness]' from Hegai (see NKJV 'she obtained kindness of him'). Hegai's attention is drawn to Esther and he cares for her just as Mordecai has done. But Esther also works for his favor – she draw it out of Hegai (cf. also vv. 15 and 17 where she 'lifts up' favor from everyone including Xerxes himself). The word translated 'favor' is the covenant term *hesed* (usually used to describe God's loving kindness and mercy towards his people). Esther wins advantages: she gets beauty treatments, food parcels and maids straightaway. The emphasis is on the speed of obtaining these gifts rather than the fact that these were exceptional presents. Beauty treatments have already been anticipated in verse 3, and food parcels (Hebrew *mānôt* 'food delicacies'), possibly intended to fatten up or improve the complexion of consumers, were also offered to Daniel (Dan. 1:8-16). Esther is also promoted (lit. 'transferred') to the best place in the harem."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the "seven maids": "The seven maidens, one for every day of the week, were appointed to attend her in rotation. Their names are mentioned in the Chaldee paraphrase, as well as the day of waiting for each."

iii. Esther's secret (2:10-11)

10 *Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.*

11 *Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.*

Although we are not told why Mordecai forbade Esther to reveal her Jewish identity, we can guess that a certain anti-Semitic spirit in society would be the reason. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "The main plot in the story (Haman's intent to destroy the Jews) relies on Esther's Jewish identity being secret. There is no attempt to explain why Mordecai did not want Esther to disclose her relationship to him or to the Jewish people. We may surmise that Mordecai was concerned about prejudice against Esther, based on either her family or her nationality, or both." Esther's physical features must not have been typically Jewish; her beauty was not Jewish; she was just a beautiful young lady.

Mordecai's concern for his niece is evinced in the fact that he could be found daily in the vicinity of the compound, hoping to see her, or to find out how she was doing. The courtyard of the place was, evidently, out of bounds for everyone, except those in charge.

iv. Explanation of the selection process (2:12-14)

12 Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics.

13 And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

14 In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

The author of the book goes into great detail to describe the preparations needed for a girl who was to spend one night in the king's bed. It would take one full year of beauty treatments to provide his majesty with a few hours of pleasure. I don't know who ought to receive the greater pity, the king or the girl. Neither would ever know what real conjugal love was.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "These verses intrude into the story of Esther's rise by explaining the details of the selection process to which all the gathered women were subjected. The author protects Esther – she is not directly mentioned while the degrading process, with all its extravagance and sexual overtones, is described. The author's tone may be ironic (especially as the length of the beauty treatments reflects the length of banquets at the start of ch. 1) but there is no criticism of these procedures, just a plain statement that this is how the system operated.

The verb meaning 'to go into/to enter' occurs three times in these verses and it is loaded with sexual overtones (cf. Ruth 4:13 and 2 Sam. 11:4). The preparation for one night with the king is extravagant in length and luxury. Whether the women literally bathed in oil and perfumes or whether these provisions were burned on incense burners is unclear, but obviously no expense was spared. The length of time for each treatment is *prescribed (dat)* – even these practicalities are governed by law.

Although it seems that the young women had no choice about the length and nature of their preparation, when their turn arrived and they were moved from the harem to the king's private quarters, they had some say about how they presented themselves. *Whatever the girl asked for* may have included items of clothing or jewelry or aphrodisiac foods (some of the descriptions of preparation for love-making in Song of Songs provide possible insight here). The writer does not supply the details but leaves that to the readers' imagination. The provision of 'anything' contrasts with Esther's modest request (v.15), and is a feature of Esther's queen-ship – she is often given the chance to ask for anything (cf. 5:3, 6; 7:2; 9:12)."

v. Esther is selected as queen (2:15-17)

15 When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her.

16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Esther's turn to be taken into King Xerxes' bedroom is dated precisely as the tenth month of the seventh year of Xerxes' reign. *The New Living Translation* reads: "Esther was taken to King Xerxes at the royal palace in early winter of the seventh year of his reign," adding in a footnote: "A number of dates in the book of Esther can be cross-checked with dates in surviving Persian records and related accurately to our modern calendar. This month of the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar occurred within the months of December 479 B.C. and January 478 B.C."

There is a note of amazement in the section which the NIV puts in parenthesis: "the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail." It is as if the author, speaking for the people involved, expresses a sense of awe that a simple Jewish girl, who would normally be lost in a crowd of displaced people, would be chosen to sleep a night with the most powerful man of that day, the king of the Persian

Empire. The same kind of amazement is expressed toward the end of the book, where this same Jewish girl issues a law that created the Jewish feast of Purim.⁷

Special mention is made of Esther's humble attitude that accepts the advice of the professionals instead of leaning on her own understanding and preferences. Before being presented to Xerxes, she simply takes the advice of Hegai who was in charge of the king's harem, believing that he knew better what would please the king than she did.

As it turns out, she did the right thing, because she makes a definite and lasting impression upon "his majesty."

The NIV reads: "Now the king *was attracted* to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins." The Hebrew verb used is *'ahab*, which has a variety of meanings from affection to intimate love. We find it in the verse in which God says to Abraham: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom *you love*, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."⁸ It is also used of conjugal love as in the verse: "Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and *he loved her*; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." And we find it as a description of Jacob's favoritism in his relationship with his sons: "Now Israel *loved* Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him."⁹

Evidently, Esther made more than a fleeting impression upon the king to the point where he crowned her with the crown that had been on Queen Vashti's head.

vi. Queen Esther's banquet (2:18)

18 And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "Whereas Vashti gave her own banquet, the king gives a banquet for Esther to which *all his nobles and officials* are invited ... and the wider community also benefits.

The exact nature of the benefits is unclear. The Hebrew word used (*hanāhā*) means 'remission,' 'suspension' or 'rest' (hence NJKV 'a release'), so translations tend to preserve one of the two possible meanings, 'remission of taxes' (RSV, cf. 1 Macc. 10:25-35) or 'holiday' (NIV, NRSV). Other unspecified *gifts* are also distributed (possibly deliberately vague, implying that all sorts of relief and gifts were granted). By such an emphasis Esther's arrival on the Persian scene is immediately perceived as good news by her people."

vii. Queen Esther's loyalty to Mordecai (2:19-20)

***19 When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.
20 But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.***

No explanation is given for the fact that, after the crowning of Esther as queen, there was a second search for virgins. Whatever the reason, the mention of the fact that there was a second search for concubines sets the stage for the conspiracy to assassinate the king, in which Mordecai would play an important role. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "The purpose of this second gathering is not explained, but it must be remembered that Xerxes (like Solomon) was a polygamist and was constantly adding to his harem."

The author of the book emphasizes that there were two important pieces of information which Esther, up to this moment, had withheld from King Xerxes. First was the fact that she was Jewish and second that Mordecai was her uncle. Keeping the first a secret may suggest that there were some anti-Semitic feelings among the Persians and, although, at this point Mordecai's discovery of a plot to assassinate Xerxes has not been mentioned, a revelation of Esther's relationship to the one who saved the

⁷ See Est. 9:29,30.

⁸ Gen. 22:2

⁹ Gen. 37:3

king's life would have been premature and would have spoiled the tension of the story. As we mentioned before, Esther may not have looked particularly Jewish and Mordecai's Jewishness must have been unmistakable.

More important is the fact that, although Esther's position as queen would normally have diminished Mordecai's influence upon her life, she still obeyed her uncle in the palace as she had done while living under his roof.

3. THE PLOT AGAINST XERXES: 'in those days' (Esther 2:21-23)

A. The plot is discovered by Mordecai (2:21)

21 During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

In introducing this part of the story, Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "The importance of this incident is sometimes overlooked on account of its brevity and style, but it presents new elements that are critical to the story's development. It takes place some time between Esther's selection as queen (the seventh year of Xerxes, 2:16-17) and Haman's plot against the Jews (the twelfth year of Xerxes, 3:7). It is reported in curtailed Hebrew sentences that mark it out from the surrounding text. In form the report here may reflect what was written in the king's record (v.23). There are no embellishments, no exaggerations, no literary finesse, but instead plain statement of fact.

The incident creates suspense, precedes the appearance of the story's crisis, and anticipates and intertwines subsequent themes. Prior to Haman's introduction (3:1), it portrays Esther and Mordecai as loyal servants of Xerxes. This positive portrayal stays with the reader as Mordecai's conflict with Haman is exposed.

Bigthana (cf. Bigtha, 1:10) and Teresh are simply introduced as officers (lit. 'eunuchs,' cf. 1:10) of the king and 'door-keepers' or 'guards of the threshold' – probably meaning they were the last line of defense for the king (like secret police or informers). There is no characterization as such for these men. Their crime is literally that 'they sought to send out a hand against King Ahasuerus,' an idiom for an assassination attempt. Certainly such attempts against the king's life were not unusual and often find a place in historical records. In fact, although Xerxes survived this attempt on his life, he was killed in a palace plot in 465 BC, which involved the assassin being taken into the king's private quarters at night-time by the king's chamberlain."

B. The plot is foiled (2:22-23)

22 But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai.

23 And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

The Pulpit Commentary states: "At this time (ver. 21) Mordecai, still serving in his humble office at the palace gate, from which he had not been advanced, since Esther had told no one that he was her relation (ver. 20), happened to detect a conspiracy against the king's life, which had been formed by two of the palace eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, whom Ahasuerus had somehow offended (ver. 21). Being still in the habit of holding communication with Esther, Mordecai was able to make her acquainted with the facts, of which she then informed the king, telling him how she had obtained her knowledge (ver. 22). There was nothing surprising or suspicious in a eunuch of the palace having had speech with the queen, especially when he had intelligence of such importance to impart to her. On inquiry, the king found that Mordecai's information was correct; the conspiracy was laid bare, and the conspirators put to death (ver. 23) — the facts being, as was sure to be the case, entered in the court chronicle, a daily record of the life of the court, and of the circumstances that befell the king. It was to have been expected that Mordecai would have been rewarded for his zeal; but somehow or other it happened that his services were overlooked he was neither promoted from his humble office, nor did he receive any gift (... Esther 6:3). This was quite contrary to ordinary Persian practice; but the court generally may have disliked Mordecai because he was a Jew."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: “Mordecai was at the right place simply to overhear the plot being construed, but verse 22 states that the plot ‘came to the knowledge of’ (or ‘was revealed to’) Mordecai, allowing the possibility that he was told about it. His response is to tell Queen Esther who in turn tells Xerxes. Later on, this pattern of communication is repeated with regard to Haman’s plot (see chs. 4 and 7). Here Esther and Mordecai are recognized as trusted sources of information for Xerxes, who has a justified level of paranoia about his personal security. It is surprising in the light of their close working relationship that the king doesn’t uncover Esther’s family secret. But maybe this too is planned for ironic effect: this administration, so full of bureaucratic safeguards, cannot see what is blatantly obvious.

On investigation the plot was ‘searched out’ and ‘found out’ (NIV *investigated and found to be true*). No explanations are given but the result is plainly stated: ‘both of them were impaled on a tree’ (NIV *the two officials were hanged on a gallows*). This does not refer to actual execution (contrast the Greek renditions of this account which use the word for crucifixion here), but to the public disgrace of dead bodied of shamed people being hung for all to see (cf. Deut. 21:22; Josh. 8:29 and 1 Sam. 31:10). This foreshadows Haman’s shaming (ch. 7), where the extraordinary height of the gallows exaggerates the public display of his shame. These verses produce an interplay of the themes of shame and honor: Xerxes should have been honored by his eunuchs but wasn’t; Esther is honored as Queen, Mordecai acts honorably but isn’t honored; and the eunuchs are totally shamed. This is in preparation for Haman’s abrupt entry as honored and elevated (3:1), but for not apparent reason.

The final comment emphasizes that the incident was *written down in the presence of the king*, and therefore presumably with his consent and approval. This practice is referred to again in 10:2, where the records of the king are mentioned as testifying to Mordecai’s greatness. These records played a role in perpetuating the memory of people and their actions.”

4. HAMAN’S PLOT AGAINST THE JEWISH EXILES:

A. Haman’s power (3:1-11)

i. Haman’s rise to power (3:1-2)

1 After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.

2 All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “According to Est 3:7, the events of this chapter occurred in 474 B.C., more than four years after Esther became queen (cf. 2:16). By now, Haman, the Agagite, had become the king’s favorite, and before him every knee had to bow (cf. Gen 41:43). It was customary for Jews to bow before their kings (2 Sam 14:4; 18:26; 1 Kings 1:16).”

No explanation is given as to the reason for Haman’s sudden rise to power. Haman is identified as an Agagite. Some Bible scholars believe that this refers to Agag, the king of the Amalekites, who was supposed to have been killed by King Saul. The fact that Saul spared Agag’s life became the reason for God’s displeasure with him and cost his family the throne of Israel.¹⁰

It seems that the requirement to honor Haman went well beyond showing civil respect to a person. The Hebrew words used are *kara* “to bend the knee,” and *shachah* “to prostrate.” The first word is used in the context of paying honor either to God or man. We find it in the first sense in Ezra’s prayer, where we read: “Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and *fell on my knees* with my hands spread out to the Lord my God.”¹¹ In the second sense we find it in Jacob’s blessing of Judah: “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he *crouches* and lies down.”¹² Abraham bowed down before God, although he may have thought at that point that he was facing a human being.¹³ But the word is also used in a sacred sense as in the verse: “Do not *worship* any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”¹⁴

¹⁰ See I Sam. 15:7-23.

¹¹ Ezra 9:5

¹² Gen. 49:8

¹³ Gen. 18:2

¹⁴ Ex. 34:14

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments: "I think it most evident, from these two words, that it was not civil reverence merely that Haman expected and Mordecai refused; this sort of respect is found in the word *cara*, to bow. This sort of reverence Mordecai could not refuse without being guilty of the most inexcusable obstinacy, nor did any part of the Jewish law forbid it. But Haman expected, what the Persian kings frequently received, a species of divine adoration, and this is implied in the word *shachah*, which signifies that kind of prostration which implies the highest degree of reverence that can be paid to God or man, lying down flat on the earth with the hands and feet extended, and the mouth in the dust."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on Haman's rise to power and Mordecai's refusal to bow: "Note that the king has to 'command' honor for Haman: perhaps the intended implication is that commanded honor is in fact no honor at all! What is clear is that Mordecai is a threat to Haman's status: a refusal to bow down implies no sense of indebtedness or inferiority to him."

ii. Haman's anger against Mordecai (3:3-5)

3 Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?"

4 Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

5 When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comment: "It was customary for Jews to bow before their kings (2 Sam 14:4; 18:26; 1 Kings 1:16). But when Persians bowed before their kings, they paid homage as to a divine being." Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "These verses make sense only in the light of the deep-rooted historical ethnic enmity between the Amalekites and the Jews. It is clear that Mordecai explains his non-compliance by referring to his ethnicity; *he had told them he was a Jew*."

The officials' question is both a request for a reason as well as a means of urging Mordecai to comply with expectations. The officials are persistent; they spoke with him 'day after day but he would not listen' (RSV, preserving the literal translation). ... The author points out that Haman had to be told of Mordecai's affront. Perhaps Haman is too full of his own importance to notice things for himself. It seems that the officials may have been concerned to find out whether ethnic rivalry was a justified reason for Mordecai's actions. In a Persian Empire that proudly defended ethnic diversity, the officials, far from being set against Mordecai themselves, may have had a genuine interest in the response."

The hostility between Israel and Amalek dates back to the time of the exodus. Amalek attacked Israel in the back while the people were traveling through the desert of Sinai and Israel had to fight them. God told Moses at that time: "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."¹⁵

The task was given to Saul, as Israel's first king. But Saul did not carry out his task to God's complete satisfaction, leaving a remnant. At that point God said to Samuel: "I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions."¹⁶ The piece of historical knowledge must have been an important part in Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman.

We are not told whether Haman had any knowledge of the historical feud between his race and the people of Israel. His plan to exterminate the whole Jewish race would suggest this.

iii. Haman plots the destruction of all the Jews (3:6-9)

6 Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

7 In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the pur (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

¹⁵ Ex. 17:14

¹⁶ I Sam. 15:11

8 Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.

9 If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

Although none of this is alluded to in the book of Esther, Haman's effort to eradicate the whole Jewish race must have been inspired by the powers of hell. We don't know how much Satan understood of God's plan of salvation of mankind. He must have known that "the seed" that would crush his head would come from the offspring of Abraham. He had been present when God pronounced the first prophecy of the Bible: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."¹⁷ He also knew that God had told Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."¹⁸ He must have understood that the eradication of the whole Jewish race would make impossible the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation of all mankind. Although Haman could not know this, he was a pawn in Satan's game. Much more was at stake than the settlement of a personal vendetta.

Borrowing some of Hitler's language, Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "Haman's anger at Mordecai turns into an attempt to find a genuine 'final solution' to the 'Jewish problem.' It is possible that Haman understood Mordecai to represent all Jewish people in standing against him. Certainly this is an opportunity for Haman to take a decisive victory in long wrangling ethnic tensions. The author uses earlier vocabulary: Haman 'scorned' the idea of limited revenge ... he uses assassination terminology from 2:21 (lit. 'send out a hand against'; NIV 'killing' in 3:6), which links Haman with treacherous behavior, and parallels a threat against the king with a threat against the Jews."

In order to carry out his plan, and being under the authority of supernatural evil powers, Haman felt he had to use divination in order to find out his "lucky day." He came up with the 13th of the month. Whether this was "Friday the thirteenth" we are not told.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "Haman had the astrologers and magicians cast the lot to determine which day of the year would bring destruction to Israel (Pur is an Old Persian word meaning 'lot'). The ancients placed great confidence in astrology and divination, but little did they realize that when 'the lot is cast into the lap ... the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord' (Prov 16:33). God's overruling was particularly evident in this case, for as they cast the lot concerning each subsequent day of the year, it fell upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth and last month, allowing time for Haman's plot to be overcome and a counter decree to be issued!"

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "Having determined on a general massacre of the Jews on a given day, as the best mode of ridding the empire of them, Haman thought it of supreme importance, to select for the massacre a propitious and fortunate day. Lucky and unlucky days are recognized generally throughout the East; and it is a wide-spread practice, when any affair of consequence is taken in hand, to obtain a determination of the time for commencing it, or carrying it into effect, by calling in the arbitrament of Chance. Haman had recourse to 'the lot,' and by means of it obtained, as the right day for his purpose, the 13th of Adar, which was more than ten months distant. The long delay was no doubt unpalatable, but he thought himself bound to submit to it, and took his further measures accordingly.

The superstitious use of lots has always been prevalent in the East, and continues to the present day. Lots were drawn, or thrown, in various ways: sometimes by means of dice, sometimes by chips of wood, or strips of parchment or paper, and also in other manners. Even the Jews supposed a special Providence to preside over the casting of lots (... Proverbs 16:33), and thought that matters decided in this way were decided by God. Haman appears to have cast lots, first, as to the day of the month which he should fix for the massacre, and secondly as to the month in which it should take place. Apparently the lot fell out for the thirteenth day (ver. 13), and for the twelfth month, the last month in the year. The word 'Pur' is not Hebrew it is supposed to be Old Persian, and to be connected with Mod. Pers. *pareh*, Lat. *pars*, Greek *meros moira*. *To the twelfth month*, that is, the month Adar. Adar is, like Nisan, a Babylonian word, perhaps connected with *edder*, 'splendor.' The month so named corresponded nearly with March, when the sun begins to have great power in Western Asia."

¹⁷ Gen. 3:15

¹⁸ Gen. 12:2,3

Having set the date for “the final solution” Haman needs the king’s consent and so he asks for an audience and brings up the topic of the Jews who were living dispersed throughout the whole Persian Empire. He insinuates that their culture and traditions presented a threat the state.

In a way this part of the story is one of the strangest. It would be hard to believe that Xerxes would not ask any questions as to who Haman was talking about. Haman was careful to keep that part of the story vague. He must have been aware of Xerxes’ cupidity, for which reason he presented the plan as financially advantages to the royal treasury. Extermination of the whole Jewish race would enrich the empire by “ten thousand talents of silver.” A footnote in the NIV translates this into “about 375 tons (about 345 metric tons).” *The New Living Translation* renders this: “10,000 large sacks of silver.” *The Living Bible* brings this a little closer to home with the rendering: “I will pay \$20,000,000 into the royal treasury for the expenses involved in this purge.” This suggests that the “pogrom” would cost the state that much, but Haman would personally pay the expenses. It is not stated how much of the money would disappear in his own pocket.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “It is ironic that Haman says it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them when the latest conspiracy against him was uncovered by two of their number (2:22-23). There is perhaps a second level of irony created by the use of the verb *nwh* (here NIV ‘to tolerate’), which also occurs in 9:17, 18 and 22 (NIV ‘rested/relief’). It is a distinctive word that seems to anticipate the end of the story where the Jews are in fact granted the relief and rest that Haman here is so eager for them to be denied.”

iv. Haman is now in charge (3:10-11)

10 So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

11 "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

King Xerxes seems to show a complete lack of interest in the people who made up part of his empire. He tells Haman that he doesn’t need the money and, almost nonchalantly, takes off his ring and gives it to Haman. The Hebrew word used is *tabba`ath*, which is derived from a word meaning “a seal,” since it was used as a signet in wax.

The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary explains: “The ring was at a very ancient date a symbol of authority and dignity. That it was so among the ancient Egyptians is evident from the fact that Pharaoh gave his ring to Joseph (Gen 41:42) as a token that he transferred to him the exercise of royal authority. Such a transfer is twice related of Ahasuerus, once in favor of Haman and again in favor of Mordecai (Est. 3:10-11; 8:2). These were probably signet rings.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary adds: “In ancient times the signet ring was very important, for it was equivalent to one’s signature. With his ring, Haman was able to send letters in the king’s name (Est. 3:12). Later, the ring was given to Mordecai (8:2,8).”

Xerxes’ handing over of the royal ring to a subject of the empire is a good illustration of what Jesus does for us when we pray and act in His Name. It is not meant to be an empty formula, used at the end of a prayer, but an application of the authority He has allowed us to use.

“Keep the money” is the rendering of the Hebrew *keceph nathan*, literally “keep the silver.” Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “Without questioning Haman further, the king gives Haman the authority and the right to do as he pleases. Either Xerxes is satisfied that Haman’s planned course of action is the right one or he is simply not bothered how the Jews are handled. The ‘do as you like’ attitude is dismissive of the gravity of annihilating a whole people group and is arguably an indication of the delegated authority that Xerxes’ honored servant has achieved. Xerxes gives away his *signet ring* and his executive power to the one again identified as *the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews*, the avenger of a personal vendetta. At this point Haman reaches his menacing peak – the tag the author assigns him is affirmed by his newly found authority to execute his plan of genocide. Furthermore, regarding the sum Haman had mentioned the king says, ‘the money is given to you’ (RSV, NRSV, cf. NKJV). Whether this implies acceptance of Haman’s financial arrangements or a change of plan is difficult to judge (though *keep the money* (NIV) opts for the latter). What is clear is that Xerxes is handing over the matter to Haman, in whose hands resources and people are placed. The irony of the Hebrew text is in that Haman is literally instructed to deal with the people ‘as it seems good to you’ (maintained by the English versions except the NIV). For Haman, destruction is what ‘seems good,’ but it is in fact evil.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on “Keep the money”: “Not ‘the silver which thou hast given me is given back to thee,’ for the 10,000 talents had not been given, but only offered. Rather, ‘the silver of the people is given thee, together with the people themselves, to do with both as it pleases thee.’ Confiscation always accompanies execution in the East, and the goods of those who are put to death naturally escheat to the crown, which either seizes them or makes a grant of them. Compare ch. 8:11, where the property of those of the Jews’ enemies who should suffer death is granted to those who should slay them.”

B. The edict of genocide (3:12-15)

i. the edict is written (3:12)

12 Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman’s orders to the king’s satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: “The cumbersome administrative system relating to decree writing and distribution is described for a second time (cf. Esth. 1:19-22). Again the detail appears to mock the Persian system, not least because the system designed to meet the needs of diverse populace is now used to promote the end of the Jewish facet of that diversity.

The significance of the date (possibly part of the official text of the edict) is that it explains that the edict is written down and sealed on the eve of the Passover (thirteenth of Nisan). As the Jews are preparing to celebrate God’s act of deliverance in their distant past, a present threat to their survival emerges.

There is a level of detachment here, created by a string of passive verbs. People are summoned and things are written and sealed and sent according to established procedures. There is no indication of emotion, just actions of duty. At the same time, being sealed with the king’s own signet, there is a deathly ring of finality.”

Again we find a historical parallel with Hitler’s “final solution” in that the carrying out of the death sentence of millions was considered to be simply a matter of obeying orders. There was no place for consideration of moral implications.

ii. The edict is distributed (3:13-15)

13 Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews — young and old, women and little children — on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

14 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

15 Spurred on by the king’s command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: “These verses emphasize the totality and all inclusiveness of the edict’s remit. It is all inclusive because it is sent to *all the king’s provinces* and applies to *all the Jews — young and old, women and little children*. It means total massacre, for the order is to destroy, kill and annihilate, which amount to repetition for the sake of solemnity. In addition, even Jewish goods are to be plundered This mass destruction is scheduled for one day: the thirteenth of Adar, as determined (apparently) by lot. Verse 14 adds further emphasis and repetition, clarifying that people of *every nationality* were to respond to the edict’s instruction to massacre the Jews, for the edict was given as irrevocable law (*dāt*).

The edict was communicated far and wide, but also close at home *in the citadel of Susa*. Representative of the king’s honor and glory, it is in this city that the effects of enmity are keenly felt. Whereas the king and Haman settle back to their normal routine of self-indulgence, all pretence that this is normality is denied by the city’s inhabitants. They are *bewildered* (the NIV here conveys something of the highly agitated state contained in the Hebrew verb and is preferable to other translations such as ‘perplexed’ [NKJV, RSV]). The contrast between the king and his people is stark, and it is worth noting that

the bewilderment consumes all Susa's population: other non-Jews did not react like Haman and the king. The next time the whole city is mentioned, the contrast could not be greater (see 8:15).

The crisis point has been reached: the fate of the Jews has been sealed. Mordecai, Esther and the Jewish people have been upstaged by their most ardent enemy. The law awaits its moment of implementation and the tension is high. It is at this point in the story the re-introduction of figures of hope is required."

The way the edict was dispersed to the various centers of the empire was by courier. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: "Herodotus wrote: 'Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it. Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and horse to each day; and these man and horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to go either by snow, or rain, or heat, or by the darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second, and the second passes it to the third; and so it is borne from hand to hand along the whole line, like the light in the torch-race.'"

In spite of this relative speed of communication, it would still take considerable time before each outpost was reached and the date set for to execution of the order, therefore, was set for about one year after the issue of the edict. According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, the edict was issued April 17, 474 B.C. and the date of execution would be March 7, 473 B.C.

5. MORDECAI AND ESTHER RESPOND TO HAMAN'S PLOT: 'when Mordecai learned ...' (Esther 4:1 – 5:8).

A. Esther discovers Haman's intentions (4:1-9)

i. Mordecai weeps in sackcloth (4:1-4)

1 When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.

2 But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it.

3 In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

4 When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.

We may assume that Mordecai was not the only one in the Persian capital who put on sackcloth and ashes and went around wailing. Haman's edict would affect a considerable section of the population of the city. But Mordecai must have understood that he had played an important role in causing the edict to be issued. He must have known that Haman was the one who had issued it and that it had been issued in response to Mordecai's refusal to show Haman the honor he required. This may have given Mordecai a sense of personal guilt, as if he were the main reason for the extermination of his own race.

But Mordecai also was the only one who knew that there might be a possibility for the decree to be canceled if he could communicate with Esther and have her use her influence with the king. Evidently, Esther had thus far been ignorant of the decree. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "Verses 1-9 illustrate the distance between Mordecai and Esther and between Esther and her people. They operate in different worlds and their perspectives are different from each other." Part of the problem was the fact that Mordecai had told Esther to keep her Jewish roots secret.

Although Mordecai's mourning outfit prevented him from coming closer to Esther, he does carry his grief as close to her as he could, which was "as far as the king's gate," the entrance to the palace. Esther must have been unaware of the reason for her uncle's mourning. She sent him clean clothing in exchange for his sackcloth, but she is told by her servants, both female and male, that Mordecai sent them back.

Interestingly, no demonstrations of grief were tolerated within the palace walls. Xerxes wanted to be surrounded by happy faces. To come into the king's presence without a smile could endanger one's life. We read Nehemiah's account of what it could mean to be sad in the king's presence: "In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.' I was very much afraid, but I said to the

king, ‘May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’”

Although we may take our sadness and grief to the Lord, the essence of fellowship with God must be joy. David wrote in one of his psalms: “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”¹⁹

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes about the communications between Esther and Mordecai: “Whether or not Esther’s personal servants knew the details of her relationship with Mordecai, it seems that they knew she would be interested in his welfare. Esther appears to be on good terms with those around her (just as she had been with Hegai). Although Esther is oblivious to the reason for Mordecai’s behavior, she has the insight to know that something serious is afoot because she responds in *great distress*. The word is an unusual form of the verb *hyl*, which is used to describe the physical response to pain or anguish (cf. Job 15:20 and Jer. 23:9). With the additional adverb here it conveys the sense of ‘greatly writhing in pain.’ This description of Esther’s response to Mordecai’s mourning suggests that by sending Mordecai a new set of clothes Esther does not want a quick fix to Mordecai’s unseemly behavior, but instead she wished Mordecai to dress in a way that would qualify him for entry into the king’s gate again. However, Mordecai refuses to take the clothes, and again the author leaves us to wonder why (cf. Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman in Esth. 3:2). The effect of this verse is to emphasize the distance between Mordecai and Esther once more: she does not go and he does not come closer. Instead they communicate at a distance through intermediaries. In the light of the widespread knowledge of Haman’s edict in verse 3, it seems remarkable that Esther and her servants seem oblivious to its existence. However, the separation of court life from reality has already been established (e.g. Esth. 1:1-9; 2:12-16; 3:15).”

In spite of Mrs. Reid’s suggestion that it was Mordecai’s clothing that prevented him from entering into the king’s court, we assume that, under any circumstance, it would have been forbidden for any of Susan’s citizens to enter the gates of the king’s harem. Mordecai and Esther would not be able to have any personal meetings. All contacts must have been gone through intermediaries.

ii. Esther investigates through Hathach (4:5-9)

5 Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

6 So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate.

7 Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

8 He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

9 Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: “The meeting between Hathach and Mordecai takes place in a very public space in front of the king’s gate. The *open square* (NIV) is the place specified in 6:9 and 11 where Mordecai will be honored by the king. The contrast could not be greater between Mordecai’s present sackcloth clothing and the future robes of honor he will wear. Once more Mordecai has learned every last detail (cf. v. 5 above and 2:22), including details of Haman’s bribe money (used to underline Haman’s treachery, cf. 7:4).”

The fact that Mordecai knew how much money Haman had offered the king suggests that he had sources of information inside the palace. Earlier, these sources had revealed to him the plot to assassinate Xerxes. Now they provided the details of a “private conversation” Haman had had with the king. Solomon knew that there was no such thing as private thoughts or secret conversations. Therefore, he wrote: “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.”²⁰ Birds have ears!

At this point Mordecai lets Esther know that it is time for her to reveal her Jewish identity. Xerxes might have second thoughts about the edict if he knew that he would lose his queen in the process.

¹⁹ Ps. 16:11

²⁰ Eccl. 10:20

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “It is possible that Hatach was a Jew who knew of the relationship between Esther and Mordecai. At least he soon learned, for among other things Mordecai told him to charge Esther to make request before the king for her people (v. 8).”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the phrase “to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people”: “If this was the phrase used by Mordecai to Hatach, Esther’s nationality must now have ceased to be a secret, at any rate so far as her immediate attendants were concerned. Probably Mordecai felt that the truth must now be declared. It was only as the compatriots of the queen that he could expect to get the Jews spared.”

B. Mordecai enlists Esther’s help (4:10-17)

i. Esther’s unenviable position (4:10-11)

10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai,

11 "All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

The word “unenviable” in the heading of this section sounds like an understatement. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “Her words explain her precarious situation to Mordecai. He needs to know that the king has not recently shown her any of the favor she originally received (cf. 2:15-16), and therefore she can expect only the death penalty (just like any other *man or woman*) if she goes into the king as Mordecai has suggested. Esther does not disobey Mordecai, but she does ‘argue the impossibility of compliance’ ... this is the first time in the story that she dares to question Mordecai’s wisdom. On the surface Esther seems at pains to indicate to Mordecai that she may not be the solution he thinks she is – after all, Vashti was deposed for breaking the king’s law and Esther can expect no better treatment. But Esther mentions the possibility of the king making an exception by holding out his gold scepter, so there is an element of hope. Maybe the beginnings of a plan are forming in Esther’s mind, although she doesn’t underestimate its danger.”

It could very well be that Mordecai was aware of the danger of entering into the king’s presence without a specific convocation, but he figured that the alternative, that is the extermination of the whole Jewish race, was a far greater risk. It could also be that the risk to approach the king unbidden was much greater for a man than for a woman. The law probably meant to be a protection of the king’s life from eventual assassins.

ii. Mordecai challenges Esther (4:12-14)

12 When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai,

13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape.

14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Mordecai’s answer to Esther contains some contradictions that require a closer look. On the one hand he is convinced of God’s protecting hand upon his people. This confidence must have been based upon the fact that the Jews knew themselves to be God’s people and that they were the keepers of “the promise,” the ones through whom the Messiah would come into the world. That must be the reason Mordecai sent Esther this message.

On the other hand he shows insight in the fact that it must have been God’s hand that placed Esther in the royal palace where she could, as a Jewess, counteract Haman’s “final solution.” It is not clear, however, why Esther and her family, including Mordecai, would perish if Esther failed. Mordecai may have seen this as a possible punishment by God for failing to respond to God’s purpose.

It remains true that God is consistently not mentioned in the whole book of Esther, but His presence is difficult to ignore in Mordecai’s words. We know very little about the spiritual life of the Jews at that time, particularly of those who had not returned to the Promised Land at the end of the captivity.

There may have been a group of “atheist” among them. But in the words of G. K. Chesterton: “If there were no God, there wouldn’t be any atheists!”

It is clear that Mordecai believed that Esther’s position at the royal court was at least providential, meaning that God had something to do with it. Mordecai wanted to be sure that Esther understood that her life had a purpose. It wasn’t “fate” that had placed her in King Xerxes’ harem; it was “for such a time as this.”

iii. Esther accepts her role (4:15-17)

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:

16 "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.

In answer to Mordecai’s charge, Esther calls for prayer and fasting. Again, prayer is not specifically mentioned, and God is again left out of the picture. But fasting by itself would have been inconceivable in the Jewish mind without prayer.

The call to fast would be issued to the whole Jewish community of the city of Susa. There was no time to communicate with all the Jews in the empire. And the fast was to cover three days and three nights. This may have been fewer hours that we would think. The Jewish day began at 6 P.M. and, consequently, a Jew would consider 5:50 P.M. through 6:05 P.M. as “two days.” That is the reason the Bible states that Jesus was in the grave for three days and three nights, although He was buried Friday afternoon and rose early Sunday morning, a time span of, maybe, only a little more than thirty hours.

The fast was to be a complete one. The Muslim fast, as observed at the month of Ramadan, is only for the daylight hours; people are allowed to eat after sunset and until sunrise the next morning. Esther demanded a complete fast: day and night.

Esther was willing to risk her life, going into the king’s presence, saying “If I perish, I perish.” The Hebrew word used is *‘abad*, which can be rendered “to lose oneself.” The word is used in connection with the Day of Atonement, which was to be a complete Sabbath when no one was allowed to work. We read that God said: “Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people. I will *destroy* from among his people anyone who does any work on that day.”²¹

Al Lewis, a mission pilot for The Christian and Missionary Alliance, used these words when he decided to risk his life by landing a twin-engine float plane on the water of the Baliem River in Papua, Indonesia. No one had ever tried this before, but it was the only way missionaries would be able to bring the Gospel to the Stone Age tribes living in that valley, which was inaccessible over land. He said: “I will go and if I perish, I perish.” He went and today there is a large Christian church in that part of the world among people who had lived in darkness for centuries. Al did eventually die in a plane crash in the area, but that was years later.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “The Jews are not out of the woods yet but there is a glimmer of light. In a perplexing way God is most present and most absent in this chapter in which his presence seems to be suppressed. In this critical scene where questions of destiny meet human response, the author appears most ‘hard pressed to write God out of the story.’”

C. Esther hosts a banquet (5:1-8)

i. Esther issues the invitation (5:1-5)

1 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance.

2 When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

3 Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

²¹ Lev. 23:29,30

4 "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

5 "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared.

When King Xerxes saw Esther standing at the entrance of the throne room, he must have known that she had something on her mind that was of extreme importance, otherwise she would not have risked her life, coming into his presence without being called by him. And the only reason a king would call one of his concubines would be for sexual relations. And that could not be what Esther had in mind.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "Esther, we must suppose, kept her fast religiously for the time that she had specified (... Esther 4:16), and then, 'on the third day,' made her venture. It has been asked, why did she not request an audience, which any subject might do, and then prefer her request to the king? But this would probably have been wholly contrary to Persian custom; and to do such a thing may not even have occurred to her as a possible course. Set audiences were for strangers, or at any rate for outsiders, not for the members of the court circle. To have demanded one would have set all the court suspecting and conjecturing, and would certainly not have tended to predispose the king in her favor. She took, therefore, the step which had seemed to her the one possible thing to do from the time that Mordecai made his application to her, and entering the inner court, stood conspicuously opposite the gate of the king's throne room, intending to attract his regard."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary writes: "The Septuagint represents 'the king as being at first greatly enraged when he saw Esther, because she had dared to appear before him unveiled; and she, perceiving this, was so terrified that she fainted away; on which the king, touched with tenderness, sprung from his throne, took her up in his arms, laid the golden scepter on her neck, and spoke to her in the most endearing manner.' This is more circumstantial than the Hebrew, but is not contrary to it." We find nothing in the text that would give any credence to Adam Clarke's quotation.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "Esther's maneuvers are paced and planned most carefully. There is no sense that events run away with themselves. Instead the pace is slow, even deliberately ponderous, as Esther introduces delay tactics to the uncovering of her plan.

The opening phrase *on the third day* connects this narrative with the previous one and means Esther's approach to the king coincides with the third day of the Jewish fast. The Hebrew word *malkût* ('royalty') is used three times in this verse. Esther literally 'puts on royalty' and Xerxes sits on 'his throne of royalty' in 'the house of royalty.'"

Esther may have taken some risks also in delaying to make her actual request known to the king. The fact that Xerxes promises Esther "up to half the kingdom" must, of course, not be taken literally. It just means that the king would be generous to her.

Kings Xerxes also must have understood clearly that Esther would not risk her life, merely to invite him and Haman to a banquet. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Such an invitation as this was very unusual. Ordinarily the king and queen dined separately, each in their own apartments; family gatherings, however, not being unknown But for the queen to invite not only the king, but also another male guest, not a relation, was a remarkable innovation, and must have seemed to the fortunate recipient of the invitation a high act of favor."

The invitation must have heightened the king's, as well as Haman's curiosity as to the request that Esther would going to make. And the fact that she postponed making the request during the first banquet, although that may have been risky, increased the expectations and suggested that the matter was of extreme importance. It would make it virtually impossible for Xerxes to refuse any request made under such circumstances. Esther demonstrates not only "guts" but also "smarts."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "It seems appropriate that the king asks Esther what she want in the light of her unusually bold move to get herself noticed. His question is literally 'What is to you?' He does not seem to recognize Esther's distress, but rather simply expects a request. She has not been called 'Queen Esther' since chapter 2, but now Xerxes addresses her in this formal way. His offer that she could be given *even up to half the kingdom* is probably a conventional phrase, indicating that the supplicant can expect generosity and should express their request with confidence. Coming from Xerxes' lips, it is reminiscent of the 'have what you like, do as you please' mentality already exhibited towards Haman (3:10-11).

The stage has been set for a climactic moment. The reader expects Esther to make an immediate move to save the Jewish people. Instead Esther's response is a dramatic anti-climax. She begins with the

expected flattery (cf. Haman's approach to getting what he wants, 3:9) but then invites Xerxes, along with Haman, to a banquet. It seems that the author wants us to understand that Esther is biding her time rather than losing her nerve. After all, having read the edict of annihilation for herself, she knows she has time to play with Esther also adds flattery to flattery by suggesting she wants to honor Xerxes with a banquet. By so doing she surpasses any flattery Haman has ever afforded him. In chapter 1, Xerxes had to put on a banquet to applaud himself as a means of self-honoring. Esther here offers him the more meaningful honor that comes by other people's recognition. She also makes refusal almost impossible by indicating that she has already prepared the banquet.

Nothing works as well as pandering to Xerxes' ego, and Xerxes consents immediately. He gives instructions for Haman to come immediately, which is the first time Haman comes under the authority of Esther's wishes. In 3:15 'the word of the king' (*dēbar hammelek*) signified the king's authoritative command (see also 5:8). Here Xerxes does not hesitate to refer to 'the word of Esther' (*dēbar 'estêr*). The toning down to *what Esther asks* (NIV; cf. NRSV 'as Esther desires') seems to underplay the significance of Esther's role at this juncture."

ii. The banquet is held and a further invitation is issued (5:5-8)

5 "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared.

6 As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

7 Esther replied

, "My petition and my request is this:

8 If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

Bible scholars have argued about Esther's reasons for not voicing her request during this first banquet. Some see in it an indication of Esther's hesitation to come to the point; others believe that the postponement was intentional. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "There is nothing equivalent to the 'this is' that is placed either at the beginning or end of the verse in English versions. The sense seems to be that Esther begins to answer and then breaks off and doesn't answer, perhaps enticing the king's curiosity rather than losing her confidence."

I believe that the postponement was intentional. It made Xerxes understand that the matter that weighed on Esther's mind was of the utmost importance. Accepting a second invitation would make it virtually impossible for the king to refuse the request.

6. HAMAN'S PLOT AGAINST MORDECAI: 'filled with rage against Mordecai' (Esther 5:9-14)

A. Haman's emotional turmoil (5:9-13)

9 Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai.

10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife,

11 Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials.

12 "And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow.

13 But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

There are three, rather conflicting emotions that characterize Haman at this point in the story: he is "happy and in high spirits" because of Esther's second invitation; he is "filled with rage against Mordecai," and "restrained himself." The latter, however, was no indication of self-control. The picture reflects, on the one hand, Haman's inflated ego and on the other his complete lack of understanding. Had he known that

Mordecai was Esther's uncle, he would have become suspicious of the reason for Esther's invitation. His ignorance and mental blindness prevented him from realizing his personal danger.

The Hebrew text of v.9 reads literally: "Then Haman went 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." The Hebrew word used is *chemah*, which can be rendered "poison" as in Job's complaint: "The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their *poison*."²² The word is usually rendered "wrath." Rebecca used it in her advice to Jacob to flee to uncle Laban, saying: "Stay with him for a while until your brother's *fury* subsides."²³

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary calls Haman's attitude: "An interesting example of the deceived sinner, glorying in self and hating God and God's people." The commentary states: "Although Esther's attendants knew of her relation to Mordecai, Haman obviously did not. This ignorance proved to be his undoing."

The Pulpit Commentary comments on Haman's "self-control": "That is to say, so far as speech and act went. He said nothing; he did not strike his insulter; he did not order his servants to drag the fellow outside the gate and give him the bastinado."²⁴ But he did not 'refrain his *heart*.' He allowed the affront that he had received to remain in his mind and rankle there. It poisoned his happiness, marred all his enjoyment, filled him with hatred and rage. When he came home, he sent and called for his friends. It was not so much to be partners in his joy that Haman called his friends around him as to be companions in his grief. It is true that his speech to them was chiefly occupied with boasts; but the true intention of the discourse is seen in its close — 'All this availeth me nothing,' etc."

The main reason Haman refrained himself was because he was looking forward to the greater feat of the eradication of the whole Jewish race. He felt that the end result would give him more satisfaction than the killing of a single individual.

The description of Haman's meeting with wife and friends at home further depicts the narrowness of Haman's mind. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on Haman's bragging: "Although Haman clearly *boasted* (NIV) to his friends and his wife, it is a form of the verb *spr* (meaning 'to relate/to recount') that is used (hence NKJV 'told' NRSV 'recounted'). The original meaning brings a greater sense of irony than the NIV here, because Haman is found to be gathering people around him to tell them things they already know. This is particularly realistic, as merriment often produces this sort of unnecessary behavior. Haman speaks about 'the glory of his wealth' (in preference to NIV *his vast wealth*), his many sons, how the king had made him great and how the king had 'lifted him up' above his other officials. In this short summary things that really matter to Haman are emphasized. They are the same things as those that matter to Xerxes (cf. 1:4) and are essentially wealth, recognition and abundance. The emphasis here is highly ironic, anticipating the outcome of the story whereby Haman's riches are given to Esther (8:1) and his sons are killed by the Jews."

Boasting is often a sign of insecurity. Haman had enough things that ought to have made him proud of his achievements, but he is unable to rejoice in what he has. There is in his hatred for Mordecai a recognition that the Jew may be right by withholding honor to him. He is honored by King Xerxes and Queen Esther, but he isn't worth the honor. Mordecai was right, the others were wrong. That is at the core of Haman's problems.

B. Haman accepts his wife's (and friends') advice to hang Mordecai (5:14)

14 His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.

This verse is heavy with exaggeration. The Hebrew word, rendered "gallows" in the NIV is *`ets*, which first of all means "a tree." The Persian did not use hanging as a way to execute a criminal, but they impaled their victims. To use a seventy-five foot high pole for this purpose is, to say the least, rather impractical. The measurements in the verse seem to refer more to Haman's inflated ego than to the means of disposing of an enemy.

²² Job 6:4

²³ Gen. 27:44

²⁴ Beating the soles of one's feet with a stick.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments: "For the pleasing of his fancy they advise him to get a gallows ready, and have it set up before his own door, that, as soon as ever he could get the warrant signed, there might be no delay of the execution; he would not need so much as to stay the making of the gallows. This is very agreeable to Haman, who has the gallows made and fixed immediately; it must be fifty cubits high, or as near that as might be, for the greater disgrace of Mordecai and to make him a spectacle to every one that passed by; and it must be before Haman's door, that all men might take notice it was to the idol of his revenge that Mordecai was sacrificed and that he might feed his eyes with the sight. For the gaining of his point they advise him to go early in the morning to the king, and get an order from him for the hanging of Mordecai, which, they doubted not, would be readily granted to one who was so much the king's favorite and who had so easily obtained an edict for the destruction of the whole nation of the Jews. There needed no feigned suggestion; it was enough if he let the king know that Mordecai, in contempt of the king's command, refused to reverence him. And now we leave Haman to go to bed, pleased with the thoughts of seeing Mordecai hanged the next day, and then going merrily to the banquet, and not dreaming of *installing*²⁵ his own gallows."

7. XERXES HONORS MORDECAI: 'the man the king delight to honor' (Esther 6:1-11)

A. Mordecai's loyalty is remembered (6:1-3)

1 That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him.

2 It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

3 "What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

Although God is never mentioned in this book, His sense of humor comes through clearly. As Haman enjoys a good night of sleep, dreaming of revenge, King Xerxes is kept away, thinking completely opposite thoughts about the same person Haman is dreaming about.

We are not told whether Xerxes had frequent bouts of insomnia, or whether this is a rare occasion at which God kept him awake in order to save Mordecai from being hanged the next morning. We may take it for granted that Xerxes' wake was the Lord's doing.

There is an indication that Xerxes also was in need of a boast for his pride, since the books he ordered to be read were the chronicles of his own reign. He expected to hear it read to him how well he had done. Ironically, the chapter describes a plot to assassinate him, indicating that some at least thought that Xerxes was not the person Persia needed for that time. The record shows that Mordecai had been instrumental in preventing the plot. So Mordecai became the topic of conversation both in the royal palace as in Haman's house. Xerxes wants to honor the man who saved his life; Haman wants to kill the same person.

B. Xerxes takes advice from Haman (6:4-9)

4 The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him.

5 His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered.

6 When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?"

7 So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor,

8 have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head.

9 Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

²⁵ I put this word in exchange of the outdated one "handselling" which Matthew Henry used.

The plot thickens and the irony continues. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: “The humor in this interchange between Xerxes and his most trusted adviser is built upon a combination of further coincidences and the fact that the readers know more about what is going on than the characters do themselves.

Just at the time when Xerxes is considering how to reward Mordecai with suitable honor and recognition, by coincidence Haman enters the court. There is nothing in the text to suggest that night-time has passed and that Haman has kept to his wife’s advice to go to the king in the morning (5:14). It seems that Haman takes up a position very similar to that taken by Esther when she wanted an audience with the king (5:1), but this time there is no need for a gold scepter (cf. 5:2). But neither does the king ask Haman what he wants (cf. 5:3). The king is blissfully unaware of Haman’s purpose, just as Haman is unaware of Xerxes’ consuming dilemma. For the reader’s benefit, just in case the situational irony is missed, the author states plainly why Haman had come to tell the king about his plan to impale Mordecai. The providential nature of Haman’s appearance at this very moment when the king needs advice is emphasized in the text by the formal introduction Haman is given by the king’s attendants: ‘Behold Haman is standing in the court’ (see KNJV).

The height of the dramatic irony is reached here through what the king does not say to Haman and what Haman does not say to Xerxes. The reader, privy to both Xerxes’ intentions and Haman’s thought processes, sees their conversation in a different light than they both do. The king does not mention Mordecai’s name as the intended beneficiary; neither does he repeat the word *recognition* (or ‘promotion’) which he used to his attendants (v. 3). As already a promoted man, Haman might have presumed that Xerxes did not mean him if he had used the term *recognition* here. Although he has in fact been honored (3:1), he is of course ‘a glutton for honor’ ... and Xerxes’ curtailed question whets his insatiable appetite for honor. It is possible that Xerxes is actually setting Haman up here. Such an interpretation provides an interesting angle on Haman and Xerxes’ relationship and adds support to a sarcastic reading of Xerxes’ words in verse 10. Haman’s own thoughts are consistent with his pride and self-obsession and set up the forthcoming scene based on this ‘comic misunderstanding of enormous proportions.’”

As far as the last observation is concerned, it seems unlikely that Xerxes intended to “set up” Haman in any way. There is nothing in the story that suggests that Xerxes was aware of Mordecai’s “insubordination” or of the relationship between Mordecai and Esther. And, obviously, Haman was also unaware of the family relationship between Mordecai and Esther.

Haman was so possessed by the concept of his own importance that when the king mentions the word “honor” he could not conceive of anyone else the king might want to honor than Haman. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “This is a clear illustration of the text: ‘Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall’ (Prov 16:18; cf. 11:2; 18:12). Haman immediately began to list those honors which would be most highly esteemed in the Orient, as though he had often meditated on this possibility and was ready to give an answer if the king should ever ask him!”

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on Haman’s suggestion about honoring someone whom the king favors: “It is ironic that in an environment where riches, land or position might be given to benefactors, Haman’s utmost desire is for a moment of glory and a passing experience of public prestige. To some extent his plan therefore underplays expectations, but in reality Haman is asking for royalty and all its trappings and thereby surpasses expected norms. ... Haman wants to wear a royal robe that the king has actually worn and ride a horse he has ridden, with *one of the king’s most noble princes* in attendance. All this amounts to something comparable to a bid for the throne and perhaps legitimizes an understanding of 2:21-23 that includes Haman’s involvement and explains Mordecai’s response to him (3:2). As it turns out, Haman’s suggestion of an accompanying noble backfires, as it necessitates his own involvement in a different role to that which he expected. The location of all this activity in ‘the open square of the city’ (NRSV, cf. NIV *the city streets* ...) suggests that Haman planned his finest moment to take place directly in front of Mordecai as he sat in front of the king’s gate. It appears the old enemy has not been forgotten amid his present enthusiasm. The thought of Mordecai embitters even the best moments of his life, and every moment is an opportunity to score a proverbial point.”

C. Mordecai is publicly honored (6:10-11)

10 "Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

11 So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

There is probably no other moment in the history of mankind where a man wanted to be able to eat his words than this one. God, who still is not mentioned, has turned around all that man intended to do. The words of Asaph's psalm can be literally applied to Haman: "To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns. Do not lift your horns against heaven; do not speak with outstretched neck.' No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another."²⁶

The question has been asked how Xerxes could have forgotten that he had given his signet ring to Haman for the very purpose of destroying all the Jews in his entire empire. We must remember, however, that when that conversation took place between Xerxes and Haman, the king never asked what segment of population "whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws"²⁷ Haman had been talking about. Xerxes may have been drunk at the time of that audience, or maybe, he was just forgetful. Evidently, he was not the kind of monarch for whom the wellbeing of his subjects was a top priority.

What was most in his mind at this particular moment was what had just been read to him during his insomnia, that his life had been saved by a Jew, named Mordechai.

So Haman got the robe and the horse which he had intended for himself and went through the city, proclaiming the words he had meant to refer to himself, but which applied now to the man whose gallows he had prepared.

Esther Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "The scene with which this episode ends is farcical but also acutely symbolic of a deeper reality. It has been reached by coincidences that have been carefully created and left unexplained. It marks the beginning of a series of reversals in favor of the Jews by empowering their representative Mordecai and humiliating their enemy Haman. The irony relies on misunderstanding and confusion that is entwined in the event but resolved at its conclusion. The resolution means that Haman is humiliated, though the king never intended that, and Mordecai is raised to royal status, though the king never really intended that either. The incident is highly illustrative of the old adage that pride comes before a fall, and anticipates the story's outcome. The reader still awaits Esther's second banquet, but while the suspense is prolonged, the agony is not. By the time Esther is reintroduced, a positive outcome for the Jews is already visible."

8. PARTIAL SUCCESS: THE DEATH OF HAMAN (Esther 6:12 – 7:10)

A. Haman's demise: 'you will surely fall ...' (6:12-7:6)

i. Zeresh and advisers predict Haman's downfall (6:12-14)

12 Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief,

13 and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him — you will surely come to ruin!"

14 While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

No one in the history of mankind was ever humiliated as Haman was. It was as if Adolf Hitler would have been forced to present the Nobel Peace Prize to Elie Wiesel.²⁸ The Hebrew text of v.12 reads literally: "And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hastened to his house, mourning and having covered his head."

The honor given to him did not go to Mordecai's head. We do not read that he relished his victory or looked for a more visible place to receive recognition. His was true humility; Haman's was true

²⁶ Ps. 75:4-7

²⁷ See Est. 3:8.

²⁸ Jewish author of the book "Night."

humiliation! Interestingly, the same people who had advised him to build a gallows for Mordecai, the Jew, not told him that he had fallen, because Mordecai was a Jew. No reason for this reversal of opinion is given.

All this had taken up time and it almost caused Haman to be late for Esther's banquet to which he had been invited. Little could he have guessed it would be the last meal of his life.

ii. Esther's second banquet takes place (7:1-2)

1 So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, 2 and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Esther's timing was perfect. As observed before, the fact that she postponed her request one more day heightened the expectations. It was clear that she had something in mind that was of great importance. The fact that the king had accepted her invitation guaranteed that her request would be granted.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes about the way Xerxes addresses her: "These two verses mirror almost exactly the introduction to the first banquet of Esther (cf. 5:5b-6). It is significant that Esther is called *Queen Esther* (rather than just *Esther*, cf. 5:5b) in the light of the role she now assumes. Her plea to Xerxes will be made on the basis of her royal role."

Esther waited till everyone had eaten. The drinking of wine after the meal was the time at which everyone felt satisfied and relaxed. To present her request for the cancelation of the planned massacre at this moment make it virtually impossible to be refused.

iii. Esther exposes Haman and his plot (7:3-6)

3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life — this is my petition. And spare my people — this is my request.

4 For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

5 King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

6 Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

Esther uses the same two words *she'elah*, "petition," and *baqqashah*, also meaning "petition." *She'elah* is common word, but the second word is only found in this book.

In order to make her petition, Esther must reveal her Jewish identity that she had earlier been ordered by Mordecai to keep a secret. The fact that she was Jewish must have been a shocking revelation to Haman.

The fact that Esther pleads, first of all, for the sparing of her own life was not a demonstration of egoism, but an important point that would help Xerxes to grant her request. Esther made it clear that, if the edict about the extermination of the whole Jewish race were put into effect, the king would lose his wife in the process. That more or less guaranteed the cancelation of the edict. Esther makes sure that the king understood that, for her, it was a matter of life and death.

Esther also makes sure that Xerxes is kept out of the picture as the one issuing the edict, although he was, of course, ultimately responsible. All the blame is put on Haman.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "Now Esther's moment has arrived, she wastes no time. She treads a thin line because she needs to accuse Haman explicitly without implicating Xerxes. She does this by unveiling Haman as an enemy of Xerxes.

Esther's words are poetic and climactic. In the context of this cozy scene of wining and dining, their shock value must have been high! Esther passionately implores her king. (*O king*), throwing herself on his mercy and favor and in so doing invokes the honor of the one who called the relationship into being."

In making her plea Esther uses the very words that were in the edict to which the king had put his name. We must remember that when Xerxes gave Haman authority to exterminate the Jews, he never bothered to ask what segment of the population it was about. It is, however, difficult to believe that King

Xerxes would not have remembered that he had given that kind of authority to Haman. Esther made sure she gave her husband the opportunity to put all the blame on Haman.

B. Haman's death (5:7-10)

i. Xerxes' anger is roused (7:7-8)

7 The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

8 Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

King Xerxes' rage may have been more directed toward himself than to someone else. After all, he had given the authority to Haman to do what he wished to whomever he wanted to do it. As we saw, he had never bothered to ask which people Haman had been talking about. It was probably true that he never knew Esther to be a Jewess. His aids could have told him, had he bothered to listen.

He may have felt that Haman had tricked him into doing things, which allowed him to direct his anger toward Haman and keep himself clean of any blame. That didn't change the fact that the bug stopped at the throne and at him who sat on it.

Haman knew enough about Xerxes to realize that the king would put all the blame on him. So he made a last desperate effort to save his life by pleading for Esther's intervention on his behalf. In his despair he forgot all etiquettes and threw himself upon the couch where Esther reclined. At that same moment Xerxes came back into the room where they had eaten and saw Haman on Esther's couch.

Xerxes' exclamation: "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" is, of course, ridiculous. The Living Bible reads: "'Will he even rape the queen right here in the palace, before my very eyes?' the king roared." Xerxes must have understood that Haman was pleading for his life, not trying to rape the queen. But this incident gave him the opportunity to clear himself and declare Haman to be guilty. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: "So the final blow to Haman's life comes by way of a false accusation, not dissimilar to the injustice of false accusation that the Jewish people themselves have suffered at Haman's hands."

Evidently, Esther and Haman were not alone in the room during the time that Xerxes had gone into the garden. There were servants present who cover Haman's face in the understanding that he had been condemned.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments: "When a criminal was condemned by a Roman judge, he was delivered into the hands of the sergeant with these words: 'Go, sergeant, cover his head, and hang him on the accursed tree.'" Evidently, the Persian observed the same ritual for someone condemned to death.

ii. Haman is put to death (7:9-10)

9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!"

10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

For the second time Harbona is mentioned in the Book of Esther. He was one of the eunuchs who had been ordered by Xerxes to fetch Queen Vashti.²⁹ There must not have been any love lost between Haman and the eunuchs who served in the king's harem. Some Bible scholars suggest that the seventy-five feet high gallows, on the compound of Haman's house, would have been visible from the palace grounds.

The information that the gallows had been meant for the execution of Mordecai, the man Xerxes had recently singled out to be given special honor, sealed Haman's fate. It made him appear as a conspirator against the king's life.

²⁹ Esther 1:10

No further details are given about Haman's execution, apart from the fact that he was hanged at his own house. Once Haman was dead, the king could afford to forget his anger. There was no need to be angry at himself either anymore.

9. FULL SUCCESS: THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE SAVED (Esther 8:1 – 9:16)

A. Mordecai and Esther find favor before Xerxes (8:1-4)

1 *That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her.*

2 *The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.*

3 *Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.*

4 *Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.*

Two things happen after Haman's execution: His property is given to Queen Esther and Mordecai is introduced to the king. One might wonder why, after Xerxes learned about Mordecai's role in saving his life, he never summoned him to the palace earlier to get to know him personally. The honoring of Mordecai had been referred to Haman.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "Two consequences followed immediately on Haman's execution. His property escheating to the crown, Ahasuerus made the whole of it over to Esther, either simply as a sign of favor, or in compensation of the alarm and suffering which Haman had caused her. Further, Haman's office being vacant, and Mordecai's close relationship to Esther having become known to the king, he transferred to Mordecai the confidence which he had been wont to repose in Haman, and gave him the custody of the royal signet. Under these circumstances Esther placed Mordecai in charge of the house which had been Haman's, as a suitable abode for a minister.

When a criminal was executed, everything that belonged to him became the property of the crown, and was disposed of according to the king's pleasure."

The fact that Xerxes presented his signet ring, which had been taken off from Haman's finger prior to his execution, to Mordecai means that he appointed him prime-minister with full authority to issue decrees in the king's name. As we mentioned earlier: Xerxes' handing over of the royal ring to a subject of the empire is a good illustration of what Jesus does for us when we pray and act in His Name. That is not meant to be an empty formula, used at the end of a prayer, but an application of the authority He has allowed us to use.

It seems that, when Esther invites herself to a second audience with the king, her life was not really in danger, as it was at the first time. Xerxes merely extends his gold scepter to Esther in order to allow her to stand up instead of pleading while lying on the ground.

Bible scholars have wondered why Mordecai did not approach King Xerxes and arranged for the verdict that ordered the extermination of the Jews to be revoked. He may have been aware of the fact that, as we read in v. 8, "no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." Esther, being the king's favorite, might be able to achieve the impossible.

B. The issue of overturning Haman's edict is addressed (8:5-14)

i. Esther asks for a new edict (8:5-6)

5 *"If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces.*

6 *For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?"*

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: "Esther's opening words pile on the flattery in a way that goes beyond her previous attempts (cf. 5:4, 7-8; 7:3). The four individual phrases perhaps indicate her own awareness that she is about to ask for the almost impossible! The new phrase here is *if he ... thinks it is the*

right thing to do, which shows deference to the king's opinion in a way, incidentally, that Haman has never done. Esther dares to add *and if he is pleased with me* (not **'with it'** i.e. my idea), providing contrast to other occurrences of this phrase in the story (e.g. 1:19; 5:9). Esther's confidence is based in Xerxes' respect for her.

Esther refers to Haman's edict by the term 'dispatches' (NRSV 'letters'), which means that the irrevocable overtones attached to the word *dāt* ('law') are avoided. She also describes Haman in terms associated with his most evil moment (3:1), reminding the king that *the Jews in all the king's provinces* are facing destruction. Her request amounts to 'let it be written to overrule/annul' Haman's dispatches. The verb is *šūb* ('to turn around,' here in a form meaning 'to turn back, to revoke'; cf. Judg. 11:35 where it is used of a vow that cannot be broken). The choice of verb matches Esther's description of Haman's edict as 'dispatches' – if she had called that 'law' then the verb *br* ('to pass over') would be expected.

Esther's personal agony is emphasized by adding the rhetorical question to her request. The rhetoric amounts to Esther claiming that it is impossible for her to survive the pain of seeing disaster come upon her people (cf. Song 5:3). Esther has identified herself with the Jewish people by taking up their cause; now she identifies herself with them emotionally (as Mordecai had done, 4:1)."

ii. Xerxes hands the matter over to Esther and Mordecai (8:7-8)

7 King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows.

8 Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring — for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

Although in the previous verses Esther was the one talking, Mordecai was obviously present because the king replies to both of them. The impression we get of King Xerxes is that, while he was the absolute ruler of a world empire, he acted as if he did not want to bear the consequences of making decisions in matters that were of vital importance to the fate of his subjects. He easily delegated responsibility and washed his hands when things didn't turn out as they had been expected.

It had not merely been Haman who had attacked the Jews; Xerxes had given him permission and full freedom to do so. He may have been drunk when he did that, but that did not relieve him of responsibility. The fact that the laws of the Persians were irrevocable ought to make the person issuing them more careful, not less. Xerxes bore responsibility for what was done in his name. And there was a limit to absolute power, however contradictory that may sound.

Here, Xerxes tells Esther and Mordecai that he is powerless to counteract his own decrees, but he allows them to find a way around it. He made it their problem, not his, thinking that since it was their life that was a stake, they might find a way out.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: "Xerxes' tone is 'sharp and exasperated' ... although this is hidden in the NIV because the two words indicating such emotions (*hinnēh*, 'behold/look,' v.7, and 'attem, emphatic 'you,' seems to be, 'Now look here I have given ... You, you write about the Jews as you like.' This reaction is consistent with what we expect from an impetuous king, who doesn't like responsibility and would rather delegate to someone else when his quick and easy response to a crisis is not received as a solution. Maybe the irony is not lost on Xerxes: is he impotent, bound by his own laws and therefore less powerful to achieve what he wants than is the dead man Haman?"

iii. Mordecai oversees the writing of a new edict (8:9-10)

9 At once the royal secretaries were summoned — on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language.

10 Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The king had said enough. Mordecai saw a means of reconciling the king's scruple with the safety — or if not with the absolute safety, yet with the escape and

triumph — of his people. The Jews should be allowed to stand on their defense, should be encouraged to do so, when the time came should be supported in their resistance by the whole power of the government (... Esther 9:3). A new decree must issue at once giving the requisite permission, and copies must be at once distributed, that there might be no mistake or misunderstanding. So the 'king's scribes' were summoned and set to work. In the third month, the month Sivan. This is another Babylonian name. The month was sacred to the moon-god, Sin, and its name may be connected with his. It corresponded with the latter part of our May and the early part of June."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments: "The section explains that a second edict was written and distributed in the same way as the edict of Haman, but with the clear purpose of reversing its effects. The differences between the two passages reflect the changed circumstances. The administrative strength of the Persian communication system is now utilized by Jews for Jews with the same sort of haste, efficiency and urgency that was applied to Haman's edict."

As far as the time factor is concerned, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "The date was June 25, 474 B.C., a little over two months after the first decree was issued, allowing more than eight months for the Jews to prepare their defenses (v. 9)." The vastness of the Persian Empire and the relative slowness of the communication system, however fast it may have seemed at that time, meant that several months would be needed for the edict to reach the limits of the king's territory and inform all of the inhabitants of the empire.

We assume that in Haman's edict, the state would have taken the initiative to carry out the extermination of the Jews. In Mordecai's counter-edict the state plays no longer a role and the Jews would be allowed to defend themselves against any popular antagonism against them.

There seems to be some linguistic problem in v.9 as far as the languages in which the edict was written is concerned. The NIV reads: "These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language." The NKJV reads: "to every province in its own script, to every people in their own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language." The New Living Translation reads: "The decree was written in the scripts and languages of all the peoples of the empire, including that of the Jews." The Hebrew text only has "and it was written according to all."

Another interesting variation is in the way the edict was distributed. The NIV reads that it was "sent ... by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king." The Hebrew text has "riders on horseback, mules, camels and young dromedaries." That was the closest way the old world came to today's instant messaging.

iv. The new edict is distributed (8:10-14)

10 Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.

11 The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies.

12 The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

13 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

14 The couriers, riding the royal horses, raced out, spurred on by the king's command. And the edict was also issued in the citadel of Susa.

Continuing the matter of transportation, Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes: "The terms describing the types of horses used to distribute the edict are difficult to translate into English (in fact the Hebrew writer has just transliterated Persian terms into Hebrew characters). Together they imply that the very best royal-bred horses were used to ensure the express delivery of the new edict. So the descriptions associated with this second edict supersede those relating to the first; hence Mordecai's edict (and its author) is elevated as superior.

Verse 11 summarizes what the edict permitted. It enabled Jews to 'assemble and protect themselves' (TNIV, lit. 'to stand up for themselves'), term used for positioning an army to defend against an attack. The rest of the verse has been variously translated, especially by those trying to avoid the

meaning that the Jews killed and plundered men, women and children. However, by appreciating the literary design of the story, and the importance of reversal to its structure, the meaning of this summary of the edict's instructions can be understood. The verbs *to destroy, kill and annihilate* are lifted from Haman's edict (see 3:13). The next phrase also mirrors the description of Haman's edict except for the fact that *all the Jews* (3:13) becomes *any armed force* (8:11). 'Children and women, and to plunder their goods (NRSV, 8:11) is also lifted from 3:13 (with slight changed in word order). Similarly in verse 12, 'on one day' is taken from 3:13, along with the identification of the date (the thirteenth of Adar) and the phrase 'in every province of the king.' Each phrase in 8:13 is also found in 3:13, with the exception of the final phrase *to avenge themselves on their enemies*. The author is obviously concerned to show that this edict permits an exact reversal of the Jews' fortunes. Mordecai's edict reverses Haman's edict by giving power to those from whom all power had been removed. It is this point that is primary and that dominates the author's description of the new edict. He chooses to extract sections from chapter 3 that make this reversal clear because this is consistent with his story's design and purpose. The moral issues are not meant to detain the reader, although some are addressed at a later point (e.g. only men are mentioned in the head count of the dead and the Jews did not take plunder ... and the attack is limited to one day)."

The date set for the attack on the Jews, which originally had been determined by Haman's throwing of dice, had been "the twelfth month of Adar."³⁰ *The New Living Translation*, using a modern calendar, reads: "And the day selected was March 7, nearly a year later,"³¹ and "The day chosen for this event throughout all the provinces of King Xerxes was March 7 of the next year,"³² making it the same day.

So the attack upon the Jews could not be cancelled because the edict issued was part of "the law of the Medes and Persians." But the law was counteracted by the permission given to the Jews to, not only defend themselves, but even to attack those who had planned the attack.

All this reminds us of the famous incident that began the harassment against the Jews in Nazi Germany that was initiated by the famous "Crystal Night" in which Hitler's henchmen, representing "popular resentment against German Jews" demolished Jewish shops. *The Institute for Historical Review* writes: "'Chrystal Night' is the name that's been given to the night of 9-10 November 1938. In almost all large German cities and some smaller ones that night, store windows of Jewish shops were broken, Jewish houses and apartments were destroyed, and synagogues were demolished and set on fire. Many Jews were arrested, some were beaten, and some were even killed. The 'Reich Crystal Night' (*Reichskristallnacht*) was one of the most shameful events of National Socialist Germany. Although the Jews suffered initially, the greatest harm was ultimately done to Germany and German people."

At that time Jews had no means to defend themselves. The event initiated Hitler's "final solution" in which eventually six million Jews would lose their lives. What happened in the days of Esther foreshadowed one of the darkest pages in the history of mankind.

The Hebrew word rendered "to avenge" is *naqam*, which originally means "to grudge," or "to punish." The word occurs for the first time in the Bible in the verse: "But the Lord said to [Cain], 'Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will *suffer vengeance* seven times over.'"³³ It also occurs in "Do not seek *revenge* or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."³⁴

We suppose that in the context in which it is used in Esther, it means that the Jews had a right to defend themselves when they were attacked.

Again, we emphasize that this must mean that attack upon the Jews would not be initiated by local governments. In case individuals or groups of people would take advantage of the first edict and launch attacks, the Jews would have the right to oppose them and beat them off.

C. The Jews' mourning is replaced by joy (8:15-17)

i. Mordecai's honor is complete (8:15)

15 Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration.

³⁰ Esther 3:7

³¹ Est. 3:7

³² Est. 8:12

³³ Gen. 4:15

³⁴ Lev. 19:18

As Mordecai left the audience he had had with King Xerxes he was given the clothing that came with the government position to which he had been elevated. As Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “The irony works at a number of different levels, but the emphasis is that the honor Mordecai receives goes beyond that which Haman ever achieved. Fortunes have been reversed, but the outcome supersedes reversal expectations. The description of Mordecai’s present garb contrasts with the sackcloth and ashes described in 4:1. There Mordecai’s clothing was accompanied by his own wailing and also that of the Jews ... Here the city of Susa is united again, the Jews are not distinguished from the other inhabitants, and this time the mood is joyous celebration.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the clothing given to Mordecai: “The Persian monarch himself wore a purple robe and an inner vest of purple striped with white The robes of honor which he gave away were of many different colors, but generally of a single tint throughout ...; but the one given to Mordecai seems to have been blue with white stripes. These were the colors of the royal diadem ... *A great crown of gold*. Not a tall crown, like that of the monarch, which is called in Hebrew *kether* (Greek *kitaris*), but ‘*atarah*, a crown of an inferior kind, frequently worn by nobles.”

ii. *The Jews’ gladness is complete (8:16-17)*

16 For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor.

17 In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments on the reaction to the new edict, both by the Jews and from the side of other people groups: “The four words ‘happiness,’ ‘joy,’ ‘gladness,’ ‘honor’ (v. 16) are the antitheses of the four words ‘mourning,’ ‘fasting,’ ‘weeping’ and ‘wailing’ in 4:3. In fact, the word ‘*ôr* (translated happiness) means ‘light,’ which can be used as a symbol of joy and ‘participates in the semantic field of honor [One Bible scholar] suggests that honor is confirmed by these words that denote public acclaim ...: by the people’s response Mordecai and the Jews experience the removal of their shame and the reinstatement of honor.”

The public response to the Jewish victory, in what could have been their extermination, is probably the most interesting feature in these verses. It is obvious that the Jews would be relieved and celebrate the reversal of the edict. But the reaction of the non-Jews is fear! The Hebrew text of v.17 reads literally: “And many good people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.” The Hebrew word used for “fear” is *pachad*, which usually refers to “alarm.” But Jacob used it in his response to his uncle Laban, referring to God: “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and *the Fear* of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed.”³⁵

The reaction of many of the non-Jews in the Persian Empire was that the deliverance of the Jews from the fate that awaited them must be attributed to the God they worshipped. The fact that God is consistently kept out of the picture in this book, accounts for the fact that this is not clearly stated.

Many pagans became Jewish proselytes, meaning that they not only submitted to circumcision, but that they also accepted the Jewish worship of Yahweh.

Although Debra Reid, in *Esther*, expresses some doubt about people submitting to the rite of circumcision, she writes: “The meaning of the final sentence is unclear. First, the meaning of the phrase *many people of other nationalities became Jews* is not clear. The subject is ‘people of the land’ (i.e. non-Jews) and ‘became Jews’ might equally be translated ‘professed to be Jews’ ... this translation is helpful because it can carry the various ideas associated with the term, including pretending to be Jews and identifying with Jews. (There seems to be no justification for the addition in the Septuagint ‘and were circumcised,’ which limits the understanding of this phrase to a cultic one). Of importance is the parallel that this phrase created with Esther’s own journey: she chose to identify herself with her people despite the risks involved; now non-Jews choose to identify themselves with Jews because they see only benefits from doing so.”

While respectfully disagreeing with Ms. Reid, we observe that, if non-Jews would pretend to be Jews without submitting to the rites that would allow them to participate in the Jewish religion, they would

³⁵ Gen. 31:42

certainly not be accepted by the Jewish community as proselytes. Physical features would not corroborate their claim to be Jewish when they would not look Jewish.

D. The enemies of the Jews are destroyed (9:1-16)

i. 'Now the tables were turned' (9:1-5)

1 *On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.*

2 *The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them.*

3 *And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them.*

4 *Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful.*

5 *The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them.*

The English idiom “the tables were turned” is obviously not a literal translation of the Hebrew text of v. 1. The Hebrew word used is *haphak*, meaning “to turn about or over.” The same word is used in the story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where we read: “Thus he *overthrew* those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities — and also the vegetation in the land.”³⁶

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, explains: “The Hebrew verb is *hpk* (‘to overturn’) and is emphatic here. It implies a complete turnaround of fortune (such as when a curse becomes a blessing, see Deut. 23:5 and Neh. 13:2). It occurs with similar overtones in 9:22, where sorrow is ‘overturned’ to joy (cf. Ps. 30:11; Lam. 5:15; Isa. 61:3). The verb conveys changed circumstances and accompanying changed emotions. There are two appearances of the verb *šlt* (‘to rule over’), though this is not easily seen in the NIV. This verb explains the nature of the complete turnaround, whereby the ‘overpowered/ruled over ones’ become the ‘overpowering/ruling over ones.’ This is the author’s summary of the change of fortunes that has taken place. He avoids referring to bloodthirsty victory, but uses terms that are associated with status and honor. The Jews’ power is exercised against *those who hated them*; they now rule over those who, following Haman, wanted to strip them of all dignity and honor.”

One important feature in the story, one that helped the Jews to defend themselves against any attackers, was the fact that the Jews gathered together in the larger cities of the country. Evidently, originally Jews were living spread out throughout the country. It would have been difficult for Jews, living in far away and isolated areas to oppose those who came to attack them. Sticking together in major centers helped them to fend off attackers and it also gave them a sense of solidarity. Evidently, there were no Jewish ghettos in the Persian Empire as developed in later times throughout the world.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The Jews of all the provinces, having had ample time to prepare themselves, ‘gathered themselves together in their cities,’ as the day fixed by the first edict approached (ver. 2), and made their arrangements. Their ‘enemies’ no doubt did the same, and for some time before the 13th of Adar two hostile camps stood facing each other in each of the great towns throughout the empire. Mordecai’s position at the capital being known, and his power evidently established, the Persian governors of all grades understood it to be their duty to throw their weight into the scale on behalf of the Jews, and lend them whatever help they could (ver. 3). At last the day arrived, and the struggle took place. The Jews everywhere got the better of their adversaries. In ‘Shushan the palace’ as it was called, or the upper town, of which the palace formed a part, they killed 500 of them (ver. 6). In the rest of the empire, if we accept the numbers of the present Hebrew text, as many as 75,000 (ver. 16). The Septuagint translators, however, who would have no reason for falsifying the text, give the number as 15,000, which seems to be intrinsically more probable.”

Reading the NIV’s version “they did what they pleased to those who hated them,” the question arises what kind of revenge was taken. The Hebrew word used is *ratsown*, which is sometime used in the sense of “delight.” But in this context it can be read as “acceptable.” As such it is used in the text: “Make a

³⁶ Gen. 19:25

plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: HOLY TO THE Lord. Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban. It will be on Aaron's forehead, and he will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be. It will be on Aaron's forehead continually so that they will be *acceptable* to the Lord."³⁷

ii. The extent of the Jewish victory in Susa (9:6-12a)

6 In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men.

7 They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha,

8 Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha,

9 Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha,

10 the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

11 The number of those slain in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day.

12 The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces?"

The Hebrew text of v.1 reads literally: "And in the Susa palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men." It strikes us as strange that such a massacre would take place on the actual palace compound. *Barnes' Notes* suggests: "By 'Shushan the palace (or the fort),' is probably meant the whole of the upper town, which occupied an area of more than 100 acres, and contained many residences besides the actual palace. The Jews would not have ventured to shed blood within the palace-precincts."

The Pulpit Commentary states about "the citadel of Susa": "*i.e.* the upper city, where the palace was. The area of the hill is above a hundred acres, and there are many remains of residences on it besides the palace. It was probably densely peopled."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes about the mentioning of the names of Haman's sons: "Selected for special mention are the ten sons of Haman. Previous lists of names have added a comical quality to the text (see 1:10, 14), but here the layout of the Hebrew text is different, adding solemnity to the list. Each name stands alone, separated from the next by a line space and the sign of the direct object (cf. similar layout in Josh. 12:9-24). It is as if the author wants the reader to ponder each name, for with each death comes the final blow to Haman's pride (see 5:11) and all the enmity that history has nurtured ... The names themselves are Persian and are spelt with variation in the versions."

The significant phrase *but they did not lay hands on the plunder* occurs here for the first time and then punctuates the text (vv. 15 and 16). This is unexpected because the edict allowed such taking of booty (cf. 8:11). Whether this deliberately establishes the Jews here as morally superior to those who had taken a different path (cf. 1 Sam. 15:17-23) is disputable, but it clearly reiterates that the horrors of enmity have been halted."

We do not learn whether Haman's sons had been in any way involved in their father's plan to exterminate the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. It may be assumed that, if they were left alone, they would have plotted revenge upon the Jews when a future opportunity for this arose. It may be that the extermination of Haman's family would be quite the expected thing in the culture of that day, although the Old Testament prophets warned against it. We read: "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him."³⁸

iii. Esther's further request on behalf of the Jews in Susa (9:12b-13)

12 Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted."

13 "If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on gallows."

The Pulpit Commentary observes about Esther's response to the king's question: "Esther's request for a second day of slaughter has a bloodthirsty appearance; but, without a more complete knowledge of the

³⁷ Ex. 28:36-38

³⁸ Ezek. 18:20

facts than we possess, we cannot say that it was unjustifiable. It would seem that the Jews in Susa gathered themselves in the upper town on the appointed day, and were engaged there the whole day with their enemies. Esther asks that they may be allowed a second day — either in the upper or the lower town, it is not clear which, to complete their work, and free themselves from all danger of further persecution from their foes. She is not likely to have made this request unless prompted to make it by Mordecai, who must have had means of knowing how matters really stood, and, as the chief minister over the whole nation, is likely to have been actuated rather by general views of policy than by a blind spirit of revenge. Still it must be granted that there is something essentially *Jewish* in Esther's request, and indeed in the tone of the entire book which bears her name."

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, adds about Esther's request: "Rather than being indicative of her blood-thirsty nature, it is more likely that the reader should notice Esther's determination to eliminate hatred against the Jews. She doesn't ask for a new edict, nor for license to do as she pleases. Instead, she operates within the confines of the edict Mordecai has already designed, focusing on the remaining opposition in Susa. By hanging the bodies of Haman's son, Esther will resolve the remaining tension in the story: Haman's body has been disgraced, but now the line of enmity against the Jews is also permanently disgraced. This is the final act of victory over their enemies."

iv. Esther's request is granted (9:14-15)

14 So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they hanged the ten sons of Haman.

15 The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Again, we are left in the dark as far as details about, what may have been a very tensed situation in which anti-Semitism in Susa made life for the Jewish section of the population near to unbearable. We may assume that the three hundred men that were killed in the city of Susa alone, were not slaughtered randomly, but that they had constituted a threat to that part of the population. To put it in modern terms, the "Nazi sympathizers" were rounded up and exterminated before they could do any damage to the Jewish part of the population.

v. The extent of the Jewish victory in the provinces (9:16)

16 Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Barnes' Notes observes: "The Septuagint gives the number as 15,000; and this amount seems more in proportion to the 800 slain in Susa." Many Bible scholars concur with the fact that 75,000 is likely to be an exaggeration that crept into the text and that the Septuagint preserved the more correct number.

We assume that those killed by the Jews were the ones that attacked the Jews in accordance with the original edict issued by Haman.

THE JEWS CELEBRATE THEIR VICTORY (Esther 9:17-32)

A. Spontaneous days of feasting (9:17-19)

17 This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

18 The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

19 That is why rural Jews — those living in villages — observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other.

The New Living Translation sets the date for this event on March 7 and 8, 473 B.C. Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “These verse confirm that the Purim festival began as a spontaneous response from the Jewish community to the deliverance experienced in Esther’s time.”

The name “Purim” which was given to the feast is derived from the Persian word for “lots.” It was the lots that Haman had used to determine the date for the extermination of the Jews that became the feast that celebrated their deliverance.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The writer of the Book of Esther, practicing his usual reticence, says nothing of the character of the ‘gladness;’ but we can scarcely be wrong in believing it to have been, in the main, religious, and to have included gratitude to God for their deliverance, the ascription of praise to his name, and an outpouring of the heart before him in earnest and prolonged thanksgiving. The circumstances of the struggle caused a difference, with regard to the date of the day of rejoicing, between the Jews of the capital and those of the provinces. The metropolitan Jews had two days of struggle, and could not ‘rest’ until the third day, which was the 15th of Adar (ver. 18); the provincial Jews began and ended their work in one day, the 13th, and so their thanksgiving-day was the 14th, and not the 15th of the month (ver. 17). The consequence was, that when Mordecai and Esther determined on commemorating the wonderful deliverance of their time by an annual festival, analogous to that of the Passover, to be celebrated by all Jews everywhere throughout all future ages, some hesitation naturally arose as to the proper day to be kept holy. If the 14th were kept, the provincial Jews would be satisfied, but those of Susa would have cause of complaint; if the 15th were the day selected, the two parties would simply exchange feelings. Under these circumstances it was wisely resolved to keep both days (ver. 21). Nothing seems to have been determined as to the mode of keeping the feast, except that both days were to be ‘days of feasting and joy,’ and days upon which the richer members of the community should send ‘portions’ and ‘gifts’ to the poorer ones (ver. 22). The name, ‘feast of Purina,’ was at once attached to the festival, in memory of Haman’s consultation of the lot, the word ‘Pur’ meaning ‘lot’ in Persian (ver. 24). The festival became a national institution by the general consent of the Jews everywhere (ver. 27), and has remained to the present day among the most cherished of their usages, it falls in early spring, a month before the Passover, and occupies two days, which are still those fixed by Mordecai and Esther, the 14th and 15th of Adar. The day preceding the feast is observed as a fast day, in commemoration of Esther’s fast before going in uninvited to the king (... Esther 4:16).”

And Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “The emphasis on rest seems significant, because at other points in Jewish history the purpose of victory was connected to the relief that followed rather than to the honor of victory itself (see for example, Deut. 3:20; 12:9-10; Josh. 1:13, 15). In these other contexts, Yahweh is identified as the giver of rest to his people, and, although this religious interpretation is omitted in Esther, it is seemingly implied by the people’s cultic response. As they are ‘given’ rest, so they ‘give’ gifts to each other. The word *mānôt* (NIV *presents*) means ‘portions’ (cf. RSV ‘choice portions’ or ‘food portions,’ NRSV ‘gifts of food’; TNIV ‘presents of food’; see also Dan.1:5, 10) and has already appeared in 2:9. Sending gifts on occasions of celebration and joy is also mentioned in Nehemiah 8:10-12, where the people are encouraged to send gifts as part of their journey from grief to joy. This provides a parallel to the emotional journey the people of God have experienced in the Esther story. It seems that sending gifts not only expresses joy but distributes and increases it, for it has communal as well as personal dimensions (see v. 22).”

B. Mordecai himself confirms the festival (9:20-22)

20 *Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far,*

21 *to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar*

22 *as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*

The question could be asked why the celebration was spread out over two days instead of one. In some European countries feasts like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are celebrated as two-day feasts.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary explains: “Apparently after several years had passed, Mordecai reviewed the events relating to their victory and decreed that there should no longer be two distinct holidays (the fourteenth in the provinces and the fifteenth in Shushan) but that both days should be

observed as the Feast of Purim (vv. 26-28). In fact, many Jews had already begun to observe both days (v. 23).”

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, observes: “It is possible that the verse intends to establish uniformity in Judaism (both days celebrated by all Jews annually), but in the light of the fact that Jewish practice today still differs between the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar, it appears that this was not the received meaning.”

The Pulpit Commentary writes: “Mordecai seems, in the first instance, to have written to the provincial Jews, suggesting to them the future observance of two days of Purim instead of one, and explaining the grounds of his proposition, but without venturing to issue any order. When he found his proposition well received (vers. 23, 27) he sent out a second letter, ‘with all authority’ (ver. 29), enjoining the observance.”

C. The festival of Purim is established (9:23-32)

i. A summary of the festival’s historical roots (9:23-26a)

23 So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them.

24 For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction.

25 But when the plot came to the king’s attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

26 (Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word pur.)

V.23 probably indicates that the Jews not only agreed to extend the celebration of Purim to two days instead of one, but also that the feast was determined to become a national holiday to be celebrated on a yearly basis.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, writes about the present-day celebration of Purim: “The festival of Purim is still celebrated in Jewish communities today. The festival celebrated the inviolability of the Jewish people due to God’s decisive acts of deliverance for their sake, and it provides a religious framework for the interpretations of the events of the story.

The Purim festival has become a Purim season that begins with the *Shabbat Shekalim* (the Sabbath of Shekels) that occurs on the Sabbath before the beginning of the month of Adar. The readings on this Sabbath commend the giving of money (shekels).

The Sabbath immediately before the fourteenth of Adar is called the *Shabbat Zachor* (the Sabbath of Remembrance ... when the history of the enmity between Jews and Amalekites is recalled.

On the thirteenth of Adar, the Jews fast as they remember the risk Esther took on behalf of her people. The requirements on this solemn day include abstention from eating, drinking, wearing of leather shoes, washing and engaging in sexual activity. At the conclusion of the fast (on the eve of Purim), the book of Esther is read out in its entirety, preceded by the pronouncement of three blessings that praise God for his miraculous deeds. The concluding blessing reads:

*Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the universe,
who has contended for us and defended our cause,
avenging us by bringing retribution on all our mortal enemies and
delivering us from our adversaries.*

*Blessed are You, Lord, who delivers His people from all their adversities –
God who saves.*

On the morning of Purim the Esther scroll is read again in the synagogue, but the mood is lighter. In fact, children dress up as the main characters in the story, and the carnival atmosphere is enhanced by the telling of jokes and the singing of songs. When Haman’s name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using various home-made shakers. Two types of gifts are sent: food parcels to friends and family, and charitable donations for the poor. Towards the end of the day, Jewish families gather together for a relaxed meal. Today it is only the Jews in Jerusalem (a walled city) who celebrate Purim on the fifteenth day of Adar – all other Jews celebrate it on the month of Adar.

So the Purim celebrations today follow the events and procedures laid out in the book of Esther, providing a theological framework for its interpretation. The festival is thus a vivid reminder that

unexpected reversals do happen in history, and such reversals have a permanent impact upon the life of the community of faith who celebrate the powerful presence of God among them.”

II. CONCLUSION: MORDECAI’S HONOR:

‘He worked for the good of his people’ (Esther 10:1-3)

1 King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores.

2 And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?

3 Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

Debra Reid, in *Esther*, comments here: “Although it is surprising that the opening verse of this ‘coda’ is concerned with the fact that *King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire*, it is probably more significant than it seems. First, this verse parallels 1:1 by emphasizing the vastness of the king’s realm, but this time the text goes even further. It uses a phrase to describe the extent of his rule (lit. ‘the land and the coastlands of the sea,’ see NRSV and NKJV) that signifies the whole known inhabited earth (cf. Isa. 42:4 and 10 where the same words are used for the extent of the servant’s rule and the sources of the Lord’s praise). So it seems that by the end of the story, Xerxes’ rule was even more secure: his power and honor have increased. Secondly, this phrase also indicates the normality has returned in the Persian Empire. The story has seen Xerxes tempted to gain wealth through acquiescing to Haman’s evil intent ..., but now he has reverted to the more acceptable means of government (Tribute [NIV] is actually the translation of the word *mas*, which elsewhere in the OT is used to mean forced labor. It is generally agreed that by this point in history it has assumed the meaning of monetary tribute or taxation). So life in the Persian Empire has settled down again. But it seems that things are no longer the same for Xerxes: instead things are better! Like the promoted Joseph before him, the promoted Mordecai has brought better times for the one who recognized his talents and secured his promotion (cf. Gen. 47:26).”

The words “distant shores” are the translation of the Hebrew word *‘iy*, which is, in some cases translated “islands of the sea,” as in the verse: “Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs *the islands* as though they were fine dust.”³⁹ The reference is probably to the Mediterranean.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on this phrase: “This phrase was used specifically to designate known isles of the Mediterranean, the coasts of Greece, Italy, and Spain, with the western countries visited by the Phoenicians. In the crippled state of Persia, after the unfortunate expedition into Greece, Xerxes could not lay a tribute upon the nations of western Europe, and the phrase, therefore, must be considered as bearing a more restricted meaning, namely, the islands in the Persian Gulf, etc. The notice of this tribute is a natural and appropriate conclusion of the book of Esther; and without the mention of some such fact, there would have been a want in the filling up or completeness of this record, which would have detracted very much from its value as a historical document. It was with a view to defray the expenditure, to repair the ruin of his expedition into Greece, that he ‘laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea.’”

The author of the Book of Esther refers to an outside source of information which he calls “the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.” This does not mean that he used those annals as his (only) source of information. His intent may have been to indicate that outside sources would confirm what he wrote.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary states: “The Persians have ever been remarkable for keeping exact chronicles of all public events. Their Tareekhs, which are compositions of this kind, are still very numerous, and indeed very important.”

The Book of Esther gives us further proof of the fact that the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom was not merely a terrible disaster. Even though it was a punishment for Israel’s disobedience to God’s law, the stories of Esther and Daniel show that God used the Jews in exile to be a blessing to the pagan nations. Although Israel as a whole had not obeyed God’s intent for them to be “a kingdom of priests

³⁹ Isa. 40:15

and a holy nation,”⁴⁰ God’s purpose was fulfilled, at least through the lives of some individuals. Esther and Mordecai were some of God’s chosen instruments “for such a time as this.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ex. 19:6

⁴¹ Est. 4:14