**ESTHER- INTRODUCTION**

Key Verse:

4:14b: “…Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Background:

*Esther* is one of 5 books in the 3rd section of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) called the *Ketuvim* (Writings). The *Ketuvim* includes *Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes,* and *Esther.* Unlike other *Tanakh* scrolls, *Esther* is given only one roller, fixed to the left-hand side (rather than the customary 2 rolls- one fixed on the right- and one on the left side.) *Esther* is called the Scroll (*Megillah*).

“Esther” means “star” in Persian. It was a derivative of the name of the Babylonian goddess, *Ishtar.* Esther’s Jewish name, *Hadassah,* means “myrtle.” In Latin, her name is *Hester*. Ahasuerus, meaning “mighty man,” probably was another name for famous Persian King Xerxes who invaded Greece. The name may have been one of many “tongue in cheek” elements of the book, but Xerxes referred to himself as the great king, king of kings, the king of lands occupied by many races, and the king of this great world. “Mordecai” was a derivative of the name of the primary Babylonian god, *Marduk.*

Xerxes became king in 464 and was murdered by his vizier, *Artabanas,* who then placed Xerxes son, *Artaxerxes I*, on the throne. According to Herodotus, Artaxerxes’ mother was *Amestris*, who she was known for her cruelty, vengeance, and powerful influence. *Amestris* was Xerxes only known wife and was the daughter of Xerxes’ army commander, *Otanes.*  (Imagine Artaxerxes divorcing the daughter of his army commander just before he invades his greatest enemy, Greece.) But *Amestris* may have been the person called Vashti in the book.

The historicity of *Esther* is dubious and cannot be confirmed from extra-biblical sources. The book’s author and place of writing is unknown. The author may have been a Jewish person who returned to Palestine from Persia because the author was familiar with Persian customs of the time. Some things mentioned in the book have been verified by archaeologists. But the author does not mention the Jews’ return to Palestine.

But clearly *Esther* is not straight history. The portrait of Ahasuerus (and is court) cannot have been serious. Persian kings were known for their religious tolerance. Plus the ineffective, bumbling king who allowed himself to be manipulated by sycophantic advisors does not align with history as to any of the Persian kings. Indeed, many things in the book contradict historical fact, e.g., no extra-biblical reference to a Queen Esther or Vashti has been found as a wife of King Ahasuerus. Some have called the book a farce, a fairy tale, a satire. It features great comedic emphasis and an overall display of excess.

According to *Esther,* Ahasureus’ kingdom included 127 provinces from Cush (So. Egypt between the Nile’s 2nd and 3rd cataract= So. Egypt, Sudan, and No. Ethiopia) to India (modern SW Pakistan, NW of the Indus River Valley). This probably was one of many exaggerations in *Esther*. Herodotus, who also was known for exaggeration, said the empire reached to the So. where it was too hot for human habitation and to the No. where it was too cold. He said the Persian Empire had 20 satrapies. Other historians said it had up to 30 satrapies, which may have been subdivided into provinces. [Dan.6:1, referred to 120 provinces.] One satrapy with the provinces of Judah and Syria may have been the one called “Beyond the River” in *Ezra*.]

Original *Esther* was written in Hebrew. It is the only book in the Bible that has absolutely no mention of God. (*Song of Songs* may have 1 mention of God depending on the translation of one verse.) It is a purely nationalistic book set in a totally secular world. Although *Esther* mentions the name of the Persian king more than 175 times, God, His power, and presence are only implicit in the MT. Neither God, Torah, the Law, or Covenant are specifically mentioned, nor are basic Jewish concepts like, prayer, election, salvation, Jerusalem, or the Temple.

*Esther* and *Daniel,* both of which are set in Persia, are the only OT books set entirely outside the Holy Land. *Esther* and *Ruth* are the only ones named for a woman. On the other hand, *Greek Esther* (the Septuagint/Apocryphal version) refers to God, more than 50 times Indeed, the references to God and prayer may have been “added” to include God and various theological emphases.

*Greek Esther* was written before Christ, but the NT does not allude to or quote from either version of *Esther,* nor do the church fathers. *Greek Esther* may have had more than 1 author. At least 2 Greek versions exist: LXX= the Septuagint and AT= the Alpha text or Aramaic targum. Both are generally the same, but they are not identical in all places. But *Greek Esther* must have been written by 90 AD, because Josephus referred to it in his historical paraphrase of the book.

The events in *Esther* occurred in the So. (summer) capital of Persia, Susa, (SW Iran). Susa had been the royal capital of ancient Elam. Later in Susa, in 324 BC, Alexander the Great conducted a mass marriage of 10,000 of his men to the same number of Persian girls. Strabo, a Greek geographer, said Susa was so hot snakes and lizards fried trying to cross the street in Susa in the summer. But Susa was said to have had a significant Jewish community even into the 12thC AD.

In summer, the king went No. to Ecbatana, one of Persia’s 3 other capitals= Ecbatana, Babylon, and Persepolis, all of which were built by Xerxes’ father, Darius I. Persia (Iran) reached the height of its power under the Achaeminid dynasty (6-5th C BC) which began with Cyrus the Great (who conquered Babylon) and went to Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. The Medes and Persians were Indo-Europeans who, in about 1000 BC, entered E. Mesopotamia from the north.

Perhaps *Esther* was written when the Greeks under Alexander the Great conquered Persia (about 332 BC, or perhaps it was written when the Seleucid (Greek) rulers, who were antagonistic to the Jews, began to control Palestine, leading to the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BC. If it was written at the earlier date, it may have been designed to encourage the returnees to Jerusalem, who were having such a difficult time that it took them 21 years to build the Temple. Knowing of God’s providence would have been a great comfort.

Historical Setting:

The Babylonians conquered Judah in 605 BC and engaged in 3 large mass deportations. In 605 BC, Daniel and his friends were deported. In 597, Ezekiel and others were deported. Finally in 587, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and more Jews were deported. Babylon fell to Persia October 12, 539.

In that same year, Persian King, Cyrus the Great, issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Though Cyrus was not a believer, the Persians were very tolerant about the religions of all their captured peoples. However, many Jews remained in Persia and did not return to Jerusalem. Some moved further E to the great cities of Persia and rose in Persian politics and wealth, e.g., Mordecai and Nehemiah, the king’s cup bearer. [Archaeologists have found lists in the archives in Nippur, (So. Mesopotamia) from the period of Artaxerxes and Darius II (465-405 BC) with the names of over 100 Jews, some with established positions of power and wealth.

Cyrus was succeeded by Darius, son of his daughter (Queen Atossa). Darius built the palaces at Susa, Persepolis, and Babylon. In about 490 BC, Darius invaded Greece, but his forces were routed by a consortium of Greek city-states, led by Athens at the battle of Marathon. Darius was succeeded by his son, Xerxes/ Ahasuerus (Cyrus’ grandson), who ruled from 486-465 BC.

Xerxes decided to invade Greece with the largest army ever amassed. He built a bridge across the Hellespont (a 1-mile strait between the Aegean and the Sea of Marmora). It separates Asia Minor and Thrace (Turkey). The Persians confronted 300 Spartans at Thermopylae Pass, a location picked by the Spartans to force the Persians into hand to hand combat where Persia’s huge numbers did not help much. Largely as the result of a traitor’s duplicity, every one of the 300 Spartans were killed. Persia won, but at a heavy cost of lives and money.

Xerxes conquered most of Greece. He burned Athens. But the Spartan stand at Thermopylae gave the Athenians enough time to assemble 30 city/states and prepare their navy to fight Persia. They lured the Persians into the strait of Salamis, and though they had the smaller force, the Greek triremes were far more maneuverable than the heavy Persian ships. The Greeks decisively beat Xerxes’ Persians while he watched from an adjoining mountain (480 BC). This was the last great effort of the kings of the east to conquer the west (until Muslim times).

Herodotus (484-425 BC), a Greek historian, wrote much about this time. Since he was on the Greek side, he portrayed Xerxes, the Persian king, as a weak womanizer. For example, he wrote that several months after the Battle of Salamis Xerxes consoled himself by a dalliance with his daughter-in-law.

Canonicity:

Inclusion of *Esther* in the Canon was hotly debated, and it was one of the last books included. It is the only book in the Bible of which no copy has been found at Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls). Also, no evidence exists of *Purim* in the Qumran Covenanter’s liturgical calendar. This may have been because intermarriage was a capital offense at Qumran; hence, though Esther declared she despised being married to a Gentile but had no choice, the community at Qumran would not accept her or the book. But the Essenes, who lived at Qumran, might not have had it because it was not in the Hebrew canon at the time. On the other hand, the deliverance of the Jews was celebrated in the 2ndC and was mentioned by the rabbis and called *Megillar Taanet.*

Early Christians were divided about inclusion of *Esther* as Scripture. But at the Councils of Hippo and Carthage (393 & 397 AD), it was added to the canon. So, it has been accepted as Scripture by Jews and Christians for over 2000 years.

Jews and Protestants translated Scripture from the Hebrew (MT) text. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics translated from the Septuagint (LXX)- Greek version. The Greek/LXX includes 6 passages (107 verses) of *Esther* that are not in the MT text. In the 4thC AD, Jerome placed the “Additions” (*Greek Esther*) at the end of *Esther* because he could not find them in any Hebrew (MT) test.

In the 16thC, the Reformers moved the Additions to the *Apocrypha*, which was not accepted as part of the canon. Roman Catholics responded at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) by affirming the canonical status of the *Apocrypha*, including the Additions to *Esther* (also called *Greek Esther*.)*.*

Purim:

*Esther* provides the basis for the Jews’ last feast of the year, *Purim*. It was designed to encourage and comfort the Jews by remining them about God’s continuing care for the Jews. *Purim* means “lots,” referring to the drawing of lots to fix the date for extinction of the Jews.

The date is the 14th day of *Adar* (and in Jerusalem and ancient walled cities, it continues on the 15th day of *Adar*. [The 2nd day is called *Shusham Purim* because the fighting in walled cities continued into a 2nd day. Now, the 2nd day only is celebrated in Jerusalem.] 13 *Adar* was the day the lot designated for the Jews’ extermination. They fought back; prevailed; and celebrated on the 14th.

*Purim* is one of great celebration with much eating and drinking. Jews exchange gifts of food and drink; give charity to the poor; eat a celebratory meal; and publically recite the scroll of *Esther* in the synagogue. Some not only eat and drink but wear costumes and have plays as part of the celebration. When Haman’s name is read (54 times), the congregation shouts and makes noise to blot it out. The *Talmud* says a person should drink to the point where he cannot tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai.”

Like *Hanukah, Purim* is a rabbinic, not Mosaic, celebration with strong nationalistic overtones, different from *Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah*, *Passover*, etc. Neither *Hebrew* nor *Greek Esther* have had much impact on the Christian church. *Purim* seems to be the main reason for the MT version

Chapter 1:

*Esther* opens with a banquet which took place in the 3rd year of the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus- after he had quelled uprisings in Egypt and Babylon. [According to Herodotus, Xerxes began his Greek campaign in 483 BC, the 3rd year of his reign. So, shortly after time of the banquet, Xerxes defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae Pass and conquered most of Greece, including burning Athens. But the Spartans’ famous stand at Thermopylae gave the Athenians and other Greeks time to assemble a united navy and lure the Persians into the straits of Salamis. Even though they had a much smaller force, the Greek triremes were far more maneuverable, and they decisively defeated Xerxes’ Persians. Xerxes purportedly watched the entire battle from and adjoining mountain (480 BC).]

New queen Esther was chosen in the 7th year of Xerxes’ reign. Her marriage was in 479 BC, one year after Xerxes’ ignominious defeat by the Greeks. Xerxes would have been fighting the battle of Salamis, which he lost, when Esther was brought into the harem (480 BC).

The lavish banquet/feast was called a “*shathah,*” which meant a “drinking party.” Persians thought they were more spiritual and had better judgment while drunk, so they made their big decisions while drunk and ratified them after they were sober. (Confirmed by both Strabo and Herodotus). Any decision made while sober was suspect; therefore, they had to get drunk before ratifying it. Several Greek writers noted the Persians’ penchant for drinking.

The feast was held in the So. capital of Persia, Susa in the palace garden. Persian palaces had sumptuous gardens with every known plant and animal enclosed within a wall. They provided a welcome relief from the Middle East heat. [The hanging gardens of Babylon supposedly were created for the king’s Medean wife.] The Persians developed gardens into an art form called “*paridaida*” meaning “beyond the wall.” [The Greek cognate, “paradeisos,” became the English word, “paradise.”]

The garden was attached to a palace, which 2 two main parts: residence and audience room. The residence included the king’s living quarters, those of his wives and concubines (harem), administrative offices, and royal treasury. The audience hall was about half the size of the residence and included the throne room with a raised ornate platform. The royal garden was accessed from the audience hall and had an attached “summer house.” [Archaeologists have found the remains of Xerxes’ palace and have verified its opulence.]

A key feature of *Esther*, and certainly of this chapter, is excess. Everything is out of proportion. The length of the party, the drinking, the detailed description of lavish decorations, the king’s reaction to Vashti’s refusal to appear, and the consequences the king meted out on her. However, evidence exists of a Persian party for 15,000 people.

How could a party extend for 6 months/180 days/½ year, especially a drinking party? No work would have been done in the capital. It would have extended into the summer when it was too hot to party outside, and the royal family had left for Ecbatana. Although the banquet appeared to have been only for men, Persians of the time, unlike Jews, regularly had mixed parties. Perhaps this party was intended to entertain and impress the king’s fighting men for the impending invasion of Greece. The guest list included all officials, ministers, the army of the Persians and Medes, all nobles, and governors of the provinces.

At the end of the time, everyone should have been fully sated, but the king then gave a 7-day party for the locals, which also was conducted in the palace garden/courtyard. The quantities were the same, but the description of the lavish décor indicated the quality was even better. For example, golden goblets were used for wine, not glass. Each one was an individual artistic piece. (Commoners used pottery cups.) According to the *Targum,* the glasses were those referred to in *Daniel* as having been stolen from the Lord’s house by the Babylonians in 587 BC and used at the feast on the night of the handwriting on the wall and the Persian capture of Babylon. [Queen Vashti had her own party for women but not much detail was provided about it.]

On the 7th day of the banquet, after a 187-days of drunken feast, the king’s heart was “merry with wine.” [For Jews, the “heart” was the locus of the will, mind, and emotions.] So, the king decided to show off his most precious possession -his queen. He demanded that she must appear before all those drunk men wearing her royal crown. The king thought this would be the fitting climax to his ostentatious demonstration of splendor. [Centuries of debate have occurred about whether she was commanded to appear wearing *only* her crown. Some *Targums* indicated she was to wear nothing but the crown, but that suggestion has been widely discredited. Her refusal to appear, knowing the king would be furious if she disobeyed his order, would have been even more understandable of that were the case, however.]

The king sent 7 eunuchs to fetch her. One would have been enough. But Vashti would not go. The king was preparing for war, and he needed his men to follow him, but despite all his wealth and prominence, he could not control his own home (or his own mouth). He had been publicly humiliated before the world and he could not figure out what to do about it so he sent for his 7 sages.

As it was for Jewish people, 7 was a sacred number for Persians. 7 eunuchs were sent to fetch Vashti, now 7 sages/advisors were summoned to the king for consultation. [Ezra 7:14 mentioned a council of 7 and so did Xenophon, a Greek writer. Herodotus said the advisors were the continuation of a group established by Darius I. When Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great, was assassinated, 7 men from noble Persian families made a pact to overthrow the usurper and replace him with a legitimate king- one of them. The 6 others who were not selected would have high rank and special, free access to the king for all time.] Note: Each advisor (and each of the 7 eunuchs) was individually named.

Memucan (probably the leader and spokesman for the advisory group) deflected the focus from the king by declaring Vashti had committed a crime against everyone in the Empire; every man now was vulnerable. In other words, he declared that one woman who had defied her husband, had created a national crisis, the result of which should be nationwide legislation. Or, the king’s ego was wounded, so a domestic dispute became a state crisis requiring him to take draconian measures to restore the façade of power.

The king declared every man was master of his own home. Men had the right to do as they wished to enforce that status. The advisors wanted to assure Vashti never again saw the king or had an opportunity to change his mind or take vengeance on them. So, they had her sent away- perhaps shut up in the harem or sent to another city. Note: Vashti had been “Queen Vashti,” but in here, she was just Vashti.

A *Targum* indicated Memucan was having trouble with his own wife and wanted to discipline her. This was an opportunity to kill 2 birds with 1 stone. Memucan’s advice converted a private dispute into a public decree that assured everyone in the Empire would learn of Vashti’s affront and the king’s humiliation. The episode foreshadowed the ominous thing that could arise from an excess of pride. All women in the Empire suffered from one person’s actions (Vashti). Later, all Jews might be exterminated due to one Jew’s refusal to bow to Haman.

Both *Esther* and *Daniel* (6:8) indicate Persian decrees could not be repealed, but that is unlikely. Persian kings were well known for their extensive decrees and written documents, as well as for their luxurious banquets/feasts and excessive drinking, but historians have found no evidence of irrevocable decrees. In fact, evidence exists that Darius changed his mind and decree.

Xerxes’ decree was written in every language and sent all over the Persian Empire; thereby publishing the king’s humiliation to everyone. The official language of the W.Persia was Aramaic even though that was not Persia’s native language. [The Achaemenid rulers saw the advantage of adopting the language of the Babylonia Empire, which already was the official language of law.] Ordinarily, the decree would have been written and published only in Aramaic, but by publishing the decree in every language, the king ludicrously elevated this small matter into a huge problem and published his own embarrassment. It also assured that wives understood the decree.

Distributing the decree was easy with the Persian postal system, which resembled the old US pony express. Herodotus greatly respected Persia’s excellent roads and postal system, which had stations every 14 miles. Herodotus spoke of them with these lines: “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stays these valiant couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

Chapter 2:

The scene was set; God was at work even in these preposterous events. Esther soon would be queen. Esther and Mordecai, which meant “little,” did not return to Israel when Cyrus allowed Jews to return. They lived like other Persians.

Later, when his anger subsided, Ahasuerus began to remember Vashti and what he had done, but he was unsure about what to do. So, he sought advice from his courtiers. Again, the king was passive and needed others to tell him what to do. They suggested the king should gather all the pretty young women in the empire (clearly a fairy tale) and place them the harem in the charge of *Hegai, t*he king’s eunuch. They were to be given creams, perfumes, and ointments to augment their own attractiveness. The king liked this advice.

Now, Mordecai and Esther/Hadassah finally were introduced. Mordecai, whose father was *Jair* (a good Jewish name), had been taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (an improbable amount of time earlier). He was Esther’s cousin and had adopted her because she had no father or mother. According to the story, Esther was incredibly beautiful (mentioned twice). [This begins a continuing parallel between Joseph (Gen.39:6) and Ester. Both were good looking Hebrews who ended in grand positions of power at a royal court.]

Esther was taken to the royal harem and placed under *Hegai’s* care, and she won his favor. He gave her special food, beauty treatments, 7 maids, and the best place in the harem. [Note the importance of eunuchs, primarily as caretakers and messengers but also as would-be assassins throughout the story. Also Note: the eunuchs’ names always were specified.] Unlike Daniel and friends, Esther did not refuse the palace food, and although *Greek Esth*er differs, she seemed willing to marry a pagan, but God still used her.

For a year, each girl received beauty treatments and advice on etiquette and king pleasing. One girl was selected each night and then return to the harem the next morning under the care of another eunuch, *Shaashgaz*, the eunuch in charge of concubines. She would not return unless he was pleased with her and called her by name.

Esther’s turn came and she followed *Hegai’s* advise, and in the 10th month (*Tebeth*) of the 7th year of his reign, she went to “King Xerxes.” He fell for her and approved of her more than any of the other girls. So, he put the crown on her head and made her queen. And of course, he had a great banquet and holiday.

The story then turned to the 2nd time the girls were assembled. (*Greek Esther* begins with an embellished, apocalyptic version of this story.) Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate and overheard *Bigthana* and *Terest*, 2 of the king’s gate guards, conspiring to assassinate the king. He told Queen Esther about the conspiracy, and she reported it to the king, giving Mordecai credit. On further investigation, the report was confirmed. The 2 conspirators were hanged on a gallows (foreshadowing). The event was recorded in the king’s book of annals.

Chapter 3:

Though Mordecai had saved Ahasuerus’ life, he had received no special recognition from the king. [Herodotus confirmed that official lists generally reflected that Persian king(s) gave immediate rewards to those who had done a great service.] Perhaps, Mordecai was unhappy about the slight, but God had a purpose even for that!

On the other hand, Haman seemed to have been promoted to 2nd in the kingdom although the reason is not disclosed and no one of his lineage would have had such a post in the Persian Empire. Haman was an Amalekite, a descendant of Agag. God ordered Saul to kill all the Amalekites, but Saul spared Agag. That disobedience cost Saul his hereditary kingship. (I Sam.15). [The symbolism is clear. Mordecai and Esther were Benjaminites descendants of Saul. Haman was an Amalekite. They were traditional enemies.]

All high-ranking officials would gather at the king’s gate. They all would kneel to Haman as the king had ordered. But Mordecai would not bow to Haman. The other servants daily questioned Mordecai about his ridiculous refusal to bow to Haman, but Mordecai persisted. They brought this slight to Haman’s attention. Apparently, Haman had been too aloof to notice Mordecai. Once he noticed the affront, he “swelled up” and decided to retaliate. But he did not limit himself to punishing the offender; he went into overkill! Eliminate the whole Jewish race. [Mordecai had counselled Esther not to reveal that she was Jewish, but his ostentatious Judaism threatened the entire race.]

Again, Ahasuerus displayed his lack of leadership and was swayed by an advisor. (Remember: Persian kings were tolerant about religion.) Haman succeeded and obtained a ridiculous, genocidal edict by clever flattery and an outrageous bribe—10,000 talents of silver, which would have weighed many tons. It was a huge gift/bribe, which may have been why the king made him #2. The king might have thought Haman wanted to buy the Jews as slaves; he did not understand mass murder was being proposed. [Herodotus reported the total annual revenue of the Persian Empire was 14,560 talents. Haman’s offer was 2/3rds of the Empire’s annual income.]

But the date for the massacre had to be set. Haman cast lots. According to Babylonian tradition, the gods met in the 1st month of each year to decide men’s fate. That may have been the day he cast the “*pur*” (Persian word for lot- plural = *purim*. *Esther* has many Persian words). It was the 1st month (*Nissan*-April/May) of the king’s 12th year (474 BC). The king had married Esther in the 7th year of his reign; 5 years had passed since Esther had become queen (478 BC).

The king gave Haman his signet ring, the symbol of royal authority, and Haman ordered the massacre. Although Haman offered to give the king the silver, Ahasuerus declined. Haman’s decree was beyond outrageous. He ordered the people to destroy, kill, annihilate all Jews, including women and little children, young and old. Then he added the killers could have the spoils- motivation. [No copy of any such decree has been found though the Persians were great record keepers.] The decree was sent to every province and nationality in the Empire and was circulated in Susa. Then king and Haman feasted. Again, the behavior was totally outrageous and excessive.

Chapter 4:

This is the central chapter of the book. Although it does not specifically mention God, He is very much present.

The Jews were in mourning throughout the Empire. Mordecai having torn his clothes was wearing sackcloth and ashes, not unusual for one experiencing a tragedy in the ancient Near East. It was standard practice when a close relative/ friend or a great person died. The rabbis expected the faithful to do so on hearing blasphemy. The custom of wearing sackcloth for mourning was widely attested in the ancient Near East. Sackcloth was a dark, coarse material woven from goat or camel hair. (John the Baptist). It was cheap and durable. Shepherds sometimes wore it. It was not always used as a whole garment, and it was worn next to the skin without an undergarment. Sometimes, one would wear only a swatch or belt of sackcloth to denominate mourning. Similarly, ashes indicated grief. Mourners covered their face and body with ashes. They even rolled in them.]

Mordecai got as close to Esther as he could because he knew she was the Jews’ only hope. But because of his mourning clothes, Mordecai could not approach the palace. Esther sent him appropriate clothes, but he stubbornly refused to wear them. So, much of the dialogue initially was conducted through intermediaries. Mordecai sent Esther orders and then she sent orders to him. The obedient beautiful girl, who went into the palace, was transitioning into one who would dominate the king and his #2, Haman. Though Mordecai was largely responsible for the problem, he could not fix it. He realized that Esther could and hinted at the possibility of a divine hand in her becoming queen.

Although he had not previously flaunted his Jewish identity, he now attracted as much attention to it as he could sitting at the city gate (where all the civic and judicial business occurred) and loudly mourning. [No Persian edict has been located which indicated a person in mourning could not before the king, but it is plausible. Nehemiah expressed fear when the Persian king (Artaxerxes) noticed his sad face. (Neh.2:2). An ancient story spoke of the wife of a condemned noble who stood outside the palace gate weeping and wailing for so long that King Darius spared her husband.]

At first, Esther did not understand Mordecai’s behavior. So, she sent one of her servants (again the author names the eunuch, *Hatach*) to find out what was wrong. Mordecai told the servant the whole story, including about the edict and the amount Haman had offered to pay the king. He gave *Hatach* a copy of the edict and *Hatach* read it to Esther. Mordecai told her to go to the king and beg for mercy for herself and her people. (This was contrary to his earlier instructions not to tell anyone she was a Jew.)

Esther knew what had happened to Vashti. She also knew anyone who went into the palace throne room uninvited was subject to the death penalty. Esther responded by reminding Mordecai of the penalty for approaching the king’s throne uninvited was death. [Although little or no evidence exists of such a rule, Herodotus said access to the king was limited to the 7 nobles, though it was possible to send a note requesting an audience. Others indicated no one could access the king without authorization from the “*chiliarch*” (gate keeper-personal secretary).] Good reason existed for such a law. Persian kings had been murdered; indeed, 10 years after these events, 2 eunuchs killed Xerxes himself while he was in his bed (465 BC).

This all built up to the great moment in the drama. Both Vashti and Mordecai had been headstrong and had brought disaster, of impending disaster, on themselves. Esther was more deliberate. She considered what she should do, especially since it had been 30 days since the king had called for her.

Esther noted an exception to the rule. An uninvited person would not be killed if the king extended his golden scepter to her. Everything hinged on that scepter. When Esther told her concerns to Mordecai, his response was direct and tough. “Die now or die later.” She should not assume she would survive the mass murder of all Jews. She would die whether she went to the king or not.

Then, Mordecai tried another approach. Perhaps deliverance would come from elsewhere. [This is as close as the book comes to referring to God.] God does not depend on any individual. He is in control! He uttered the words for which the book is best known: “who knows, perhaps you have come to the kingdom *for such a time as this*?” [Think of Joseph and his brothers.] That was Mordecai’s most personal and powerful argument; Esther decided to go forward.

Esther had been passive. She was a Jew, but the king thought she was a

pagan. She was known for her beauty and submissiveness, but now, Esther

must take charge. She assumed the role of queen and general for this campaign.

Esther ordered Mordecai to have all Jews in Susa fast (no food or drink)

for 3 days—an exceptionally long time. (Like the 3 days between crucifixion and resurrection, these were not 3 full days. She went to the king on the 3rd day.) She and her maids (probably not Jews) would do likewise. (The fasting may have occurred through Passover when Jews celebrate their deliverance from Egypt.) [Fasting was observed throughout the ancient world; Babylonians, Greeks, Egyptians fasted. The only required Jewish fast was the 1-day fast of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), but Jews also fasted when they were in mourning. Also generally, fasting was accompanied by prayer, but prayer is not mentioned in *Esther* Zoroastrians (Persia’s official religion) discouraged fasting because it meant despising the gods’ good gifts. Fasting clearly contrasted with the king’s feasting.]

During the days of fasting, Esther prepared the banquet. To please Xerxes, it had to be very impressive and ostentatious. Waiting increased Esther’s self-control and kept her from being either too assertive or too emotional. Also, during those days, God was preparing Ahasuerus’ heart.

Philosophically, Esther concluded, “If I perish, I perish.” She knew the fate of the Jews had been entrusted to her. She displayed great bravery, humility, and piety. She did not assume she would succeed- as opposed to Haman, who was so confident he set the date to exterminate the Jews before he went to the king.

Chapter 5:

2 separate scenes now contrasted Esther’s wisdom and Haman’s folly. Scene 1: vs.1-4 took place in the palace’s inner court= Esther’s 1st audience, and vs.5-8 refer to Esther’s 1st banquet. In both, Ahasuerus offered Esther whatever she wanted, but she did not “bite” either time. Esther now took the initiative and acted as a queen. Indeed in vs.2, for the first time, she is called the Queen.

This is a story of contrasts. Esther wore her royal robes (literally “put on royalty”), which contrasted dramatically Mordecai’s sackcloth. She knew the king loved extravagance and she played to it. [A hierarchy of clothes with certain colors and styles seemed to exist for the king and his courtiers. Women wore long dresses with broad sleeves that hung in multiple folds. They had a belt at their waist and frequently wore long veils not covering their faces.] “Dressing up to visit the king uninvited was a bit like venturing into a snake pit doing one’s best imitation of a snake.”

The throne room opened to an inner courtyard. Esther positioned herself to catch the king’s eye without entering the throne room. The scene was:

* Esther on the outside quite alone, looking like a queen, not just one of the harem, yet powerless.
* Ahasuerus on the inside (royal throne) with everything, palace, throne, scepter and the power of life and death.

Only when/if he held out the scepter could Esther come forward. If he did not extend the scepter, she would be killed.

When Esther arrived, Ahasuerus already was on the throne. (If he had not been there, she would have been arrested at once.) Cleverly, she had dressed to catch his eye and succeeded. She did not barge into the throne room; rather, she stayed in the courtyard. Even that was forbidden, but at least, it gave Ahasuerus a chance to invite her in—again clever. The tension rose, but it was quickly dissipated. When Ahasuerus saw exquisite Esther in all her splendor, he was pleased with her. He reached out his hand and extended the golden scepter to her. She touched it as a sign of gratitude and respect. Esther’s careful planning achieved immediate success, but she had to take a huge risk.

The king who once had banished a queen for refusing to come at his request, looked fondly on this one who came uninvited and asked him to dinner. Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted and offered to give her whatever she wanted, up to half of his kingdom. The king was not really offering half his kingdom, but he knew Esther must have wanted something or she would not have taken the risk of coming before him uninvited. [Herodotus said Xerxes could not resist the women in his life. He had an affair with his niece and offered her whatever she wanted. She asked for a robe handmade by Amestris, the queen. Then, she foolishly wore it in public. Amestris saw it and knew Xerxes had been unfaithful. Instead of punishing the mistress, Amestris made Xerxes give her the girl’s mother whom she brutally mutilated.]

In Esther’s position most people would have immediately blurted out what they wanted while the king was in a favorable mood. Instead, Esther said: “If it pleases the king…” and invited him and Haman, who seemed like an afterthought, to a feast she was preparing for him. (Note the singular, him, and remember how much the king liked banquets). It seemed she was wasting a golden chance, but Esther was being wise and patient. This was typical Middle East protocol; ask for something small first.

Why 3 at dinner? Perhaps it was to avoid the appearance of a seduction, or to make the king a little jealous, or to assure she caught Haman off guard with her accusation. Perhaps Esther wanted to assure the king would not change his mind if he later had to confront Haman, who would try to wriggle out. What was clear was Esther was becoming a careful, brilliant strategist.

The king was delighted with the idea of a feast, the details of which were not described. Ahasuerus apparently ate his fill and drank plenty of wine. When he was mellow, he repeated his question and again offered Esther up to half his kingdom. She responded even more respectfully: “if I have won the king’s favor and if it pleases the king…” Then, she invited him (and Haman) to return the next night for another feast she would prepare for him. [This seemed strange, but without these delays the story would not have had time to evolve. This narrative is the center of the book. Hints emerge about how the story would resolve itself, and coincidences multiply dramatically. The scene now is set, and God begins to work, in small but significant, acts-- in a pagan palace, outside the Promised Land-- to disclose His sovereignty over the entire world and to prove He will fulfill His promises, even in the most unlikely, unimaginable ways.]

Meanwhile, Haman left the banquet happy (merry of heart). But as he was going home, he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate, and as usual, he would not bow, or even rise, or tremble. Haman’s reaction again was disproportionate. His focus was only on himself, and he could not be thankful for all he had. He focused on Mordecai, the 1 person who would not venerate him. He went home unhappy.

He expounded to his wife Zerish (Persian= “golden” or “one with disheveled hair”) and friends about how great and important he was and all he had achieved, including 10 sons. [Among Persians, the one thing more prized than many sons was valor in battle.] He was listing his honors for people who already know them. Then he said, it was worthless if Mordecai still lived. Jewish Mordecai created a huge problem that must be eliminated if Haman was to enjoy the 2nd banquet. [He did not know Esther is a Jew.]

Haman’s wife, Zerish (and friends), proposed a grizzly solution. Haman should erect 75-foot-high gallows on which to hang Mordecai. [Probably a huge pole or stake for impalement. Persians disposed of their enemies by executing them and then publicly impaling them to add disgrace to death.] Apparently,

Haman did not think about the fact that Mordecai, a Jew, would be exterminated in a few months with the rest of his people. Haman needed this immediately. Unlike Esther, patience was not one of Haman’s virtues.

Zerish’s advice to Haman was like Jezebel’s to Ahab (1 Kings 21:1-16). Arrange a legal murder on trumped up charges to eliminate a bothersome person who was in the way. [Note: The advice was to build the gallows…not to ask the king’s permission - just as Haman had done with the edict.] Haman loved this advice and began to implement it immediately. He would attend the next banquet in good spirits.

Mordecai knew his time was limited., That night he saw his gallows, and all looked hopeless. The scene was set. God seemed anonymous, but He was very active. Frederick Buechner: A coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.

Chapter 6:

This delay was very important in God’s scheme. Ahasuerus could not sleep (maybe wondering about Esther’s question or maybe he overate, and his stomach was rumbling). So, he did what many people do when they cannot sleep; he had his servant bring him a book to read…probably one guaranteed to make him go to sleep-- old records of the kingdom (minutes).

Was the book that was selected a “coincidences?” Ahasuerus had been ruling for 12 years. What were the chances he would read this particular record about Mordecai having saved his life 5 years earlier? [Extra-biblical authorities, like Herodotus, confirm Persian kings kept very clear records of those who served them well. Indeed, Persian kings were said to give quick, abundant rewards to those who provided them distinguished service. Xenophon admired Persian kings as being generous to their benefactors. For example, Xenagoras, who rescued Xerxes’ brother from death, was rewarded by being made governor of Cilicia.] Usually, the records spoke of both the good deed and the reward given. Here, there was no mention of a reward for Mordecai.

So, here was the scene- a split vision:

* Haman was erecting a ridiculously high stake (75’ high) on which to impale Mordecai.
* The king had insomnia and read the public records.
* Both men were up all night.
* Both men were focused on Mordecai.

Now the king was wide awake. He asked a servant what had been done to honor Mordecai’s service and learned nothing had been done for him. This troubled the king, and of course, he looked for advice. When he looked up, who was there but Haman, who had come to the palace early for the king’s authorization to kill Mordecai.

The king was so preoccupied he did not ask Haman what he wanted; instead, he told Haman that a person who had served the king very well had received no reward for his service, and he asked Haman what should be done. The king did not say who the honoree was, and Haman did not ask. He assumed it must be him. Haman’s vanity became his trap; he could not imagine anyone more deserving of honor than himself. He was so excited about being honored that, for a moment, he put aside thoughts of killing Mordecai.

This type of situation reveals what controls a person, e.g., power, money, fame. Haman was motivated by a lust for power and recognition. He had lots of money and more respect than anyone except the king, but that was not enough. At this point, the audience knew the whole story, but none of the characters did.

Haman suggested honors so quickly it seemed he had thought about them before. All the awards were superficial and ostentatious. They were:

* Royal robes the king had worn. [In ancient times, great significance attached to the king’s garments. Robes were one of the most frequently mentioned gifts of Persian kings and wearing them was a sign of royal favor. Cyrus had robes distributed to all his nobles and their friends. The people of Susa easily recognized the king’s unique robes and inferred the special status of the wearer.]
* A horse the king had ridden. [Riding the king’s horse also was a sign of royal favor. 1 Kings 1:33- Solomon was led to Gihon on the king’s mule to indicate he was David’s successor] and

- The royal crown (Was it on the horse or the honoree? Both Persians and

Assyrians had headdresses like crowns for the king’s horse. An ancient

relief has a horse with a crown on its head- he was the king’s horse.)

So, although Esther had tried and failed to get Mordecai to change clothes from sackcloth to royal robes, Haman succeeded.

If Haman had received all these honors, he would have had all the symbols of royalty, except the queen. But Haman continued, saying one of the king’s highest officials should escort the honoree through the public square proclaiming the king was honoring him. Haman was on a roll.

The dream became Haman’s worst nightmare. He was caught in his own trap. To add to the delicious irony, the king waited to disclose the honoree was Mordecai. Finally, the king interrupted Haman’s litany of honors and said “quickly” do all this for Mordecai, *the Jew*.

Did the king realize Mordecai was one of the condemned? When Haman asked the king for authority, he had said he wanted to exterminate a certain people. The edict Haman signed with the king’s signet ring specified the Jews were to be killed. Maybe the king never bothered to read it. Apparently, the king was unaware of Mordecai’s service, then he was unaware of Haman’s plans.

This was Haman’s greatest insult/humiliation. He had to praise Mordecai publicly while leading him around the public square on the king’s horse and in the king’s robes. Xerxes wanted Mordecai to be seen by as many people as possible to inspire them to distinguish themselves similarly in public service to the king. Of course, this also publicly revealed Haman’s subservience. Haman immediately had gone from the 2nd most powerful man in the land into a lackey! But Haman did what he is told. Mordecai seemed passive throughout the honoring ceremonies; then he returned to the city gate.

Haman rushed home in mourning (covering his head as a general sign of shame) —as opposed to the high spirits he had been in the night before. Now, the roles were reversed. Haman was in mourning. Probably looking for solace, he went to his wife and friends who, to make things worse, distanced themselves from him. They saw nothing but trouble ahead because Mordecai was Jewish. This must have been a bad omen for Haman. They now considered Jews a threat, not victims. [The Persian religion made much of fate.]

Just as he was at the emotional bottom, royal eunuchs come to hurry Haman to Esther’s banquet (guests usually were escorted to feasts). But he was fearing what might come next. Shadows were beginning to fall over Haman.

Chapter 7:

The eunuchs arrived just as Haman’s wife and friends told him fate had turned against him, and Haman was hurried off before he fully prepared for the banquet. [Remember the last time eunuchs tried to hurry a person off to a banquet, it was Vashti and that didn’t work out well for her.]

Haman was losing control. In one day, he had been forced to publicly honor Mordecai; then at home, he was told this was a bad omen; and immediately thereafter, he was whisked off to the banquet before he had time to wash up, compose himself, and put on party clothes. But the king could not be kept waiting. This had not been a good morning for Haman, and it looked as if things only would get worse.

In the Middle East and in Rome, the day began at sunrise. The Temple opened for morning prayers and sacrifices; schools and courts began. Haman had gone to the king before sunrise so he could be first in line to petition the king for Mordecai’s hanging. His morning fell apart quickly!

On Esther’s side, the 2nd banquet meant the 1st day had gone well. [The word was more like “feasting” than “banquet” and it implied heavy drinking. For example, the word translated “to dine” here meant “drink,” and the word for the 2nd banquet meant “banquet of wine.”]

Again, the king asked what Esther wanted. Apparently, this occurred after dinner while drinking wine. The king probably knew Esther did not want half of his kingdom, but her reticence to ask him at once probably indicated she wanted something important/big. The king asked 2 questions:

What is your petition?

What is your request?

This time (and when he first held out the scepter), the king called her “Queen Esther.” In fact, throughout this chapter, she generally was referred to as Queen Esther or queen. In earlier chapters, she rarely is referred to a queen.

Now, she did not hold back. She began deferentially, “if I have found favor…” and “may it please the king…” She chose her words well and carefully. She did not start with the whole story, but she got right to the point- after all, her life is in danger. She directly answered each of the king’s questions:

Give me my life; that is my petition.

Give me the lives of my people; that is my request.

The parallelism was almost poetic.

Once she had the king’s attention, she provided more details. But she wisely used passive voice, so she did not directly accuse the king of ordering the Jews’ annihilation or of having been duped into it. Even in the stress, Esther had control over herself and her words. Perhaps the most difficult part of her speech was explaining this was a matter of life and death, not just slavery. Originally, Haman had used for “destruction” (of the Jews), which was almost the same as the Aramaic word for enslavement, and he offered so much money that the king might have thought Haman wanted to buy the Jews as slaves?

Esther had been talking about Haman, but he could not get in a word in his defense. He was relegated to being an observer, who was becoming the victim. Now she accused him directly. She quoted directly from Haman’s edict using the exact 3 words Haman chose to apply to the Jews, “destroyed, killed, annihilated.” Even if the king did not realize these words were from the edict; Haman did. [In fact, the king’s question indicated he still did not know about the edict.]

Then Esther brilliantly characterized this as a threat to the king himself. This was Esther’s longest speech so far and it got the king’s attention. In this speech, Esther completed her identification with her people. It was the first time she revealed her ethnicity and again she placed her life at risk. She mentioned herself first, to get the king’s attention, but it was clear, she now saw her safety as linked to that of the Jews, whom she now called “my people.”

The king did not seem to care who her people were. He still did not seem to understand the edict either. Instead, the king seized on Esther’s reference to an “enemy” and asked who that was. Esther did not hesitate. She pointed to Haman, calling him a foe, an enemy, and wicked. This justifiably terrified Haman.

The king was so angry, he stepped outside the room to cool down. Perhaps he was trying to figure out how to punish Haman without implicating himself, because the edict had his signet ring on it. [Maybe he was trying to decide which to choose---his queen or his 2nd in command. He had no one to advise him and it was not like him to have to think about things on his own.]

In any event, the irony was Haman now was begging for mercy from the person he intended to kill. [The word used for beg is the same as the one the king used for “request” in his questions to Esther.]

Haman gave the king an easy decision. Persian etiquette dictated Haman should have stepped outside when the king did. No man was allowed to remain in the harem (or with any of the king’s women) by himself (eunuchs didn’t count). [Similarly, Assyrian law prohibited a man from coming within 7 paces of any woman in the king’s harem.] Haman had been so terrified that he stayed after he should have left the room so he could beg Esther for mercy. He threw himself on the couch where she was reclining for the banquet. [The LXX version says an angel pushed Haman on the couch.]

Just then, the king returned and accused Haman of rape (even though that did not happen), which was punishable by death. If he did not have an excuse for action against Haman before (without implicating himself in the edict issue); he had one now. Even the king now knew how to punish Haman without it reflecting on himself. In short, Esther successfully begged for her life, but Haman failed in his attempt to beg for his. He would be executed.

Once again, a servant carried a key message. The servant, *Harbonah*, told the king that Haman already had built gallows, 50 cubits tall, on which to hang Mordecai, the Jew who had saved Ahasuerus’ life. [The gallows probably could have been seen from the palace courtyard.] The king, who always was looking for advice, seized on *Harbona’s* implied suggestion and gave his first direct order in the book. Haman was to be hung on those gallows. The servants covered Haman’s face, reflecting the death sentence, and he was executed. In a final irony, Haman suffered the fate he had meant for Mordecai.

Of course, that did nothing to stop the extermination ordered by the edict (though Esther may be safe.) Remember, the edict could not be rescinded. How could this dilemma be resolved?

Chapter 8:

To this point, 5 banquets/feasts have occurred in Esther:

* 2 by the king- one lasted 180 days and the other 7 days,
* 1 by Vashti, and
* 2 by Esther.

At the end of the last banquet, Haman was executed on charges of rape, which he did not do. On the other hand, the evil Haman sought to do to the Jewish people, still was alive and in play. So, the focus was on the immutable decree and on saving the Jewish community.

At this point, Ahasuerus had had a full day- beginning with insomnia in the wee hours; then, discovering Mordecai’s unrewarded loyalty; then, Haman’s misconstrued consultation; then, the banquet with its emotion-packed conclusion, but the day was not over yet. Now, the story moved beyond a personal agenda to the national problem. Esther was committed to her people, not just to her own survival.

That day, Ahasuerus gave Haman’s entire estate to Esther. In turn, she gave it to Mordecai to manage for her. [Both Herodotus and Josephus confirm the property of a traitor reverted to the crown.] Haman’s execution also gave Esther the chance to introduce Mordecai as her relative. He already had shown himself to be a trustworthy servant of the king.

Now there was an open position in the king’s service. So, Esther opened

the door for Mordecai to access the king. Mordecai assumed Haman’s position and the king gave Mordecai his signet ring, which he took from Haman. [One would think the king would not have been so quick to give the signet ring away again, but Mordecai was trustworthy.] Yet Mordecai needed the king’s permission to undo the edict.

Time passed. Esther again appeared before the king. This time she became emotional, falling at the king’s feet to plead for her people. Her identity with the Jews was complete. She saw herself as the bridge between the king and the Jews, her kindred. Esther did not speak until the king extended the scepter as a sign of encouragement, but no longer was her life in danger by coming into his presence.

Esther had confidence; she knew Xerxes cared for her. This gave Esther the chance to speak, but she was even more polite than before. She reverted to the more formal, courtly “if” language.

- If Esther had found favor with the king:

- If the king deemed the matter appropriate; and

- If it pleased the king.

Esther was careful not to implicate the king in the annihilation edict. But she employed several savvy rhetorical devices to persuade the king. She used the passive voice to avoid directly telling the king what to do. She knew she could not appeal to the king’s charity, so she presented the issue as one of property. The king’s loss of the Jews would mean a loss of revenue (taxes, GDP). Finally, she reminded the king of Haman’s deceitfulness.

But the king seemed weary of it all. He said he had given her everything he could. As usual, Ahasuerus did not know how to solve the edict problem. He denied responsibility and said he has done all he could, implying Haman was executed for the edict (though he was not). This may be the first indication the king knew about the edict. Then, the king told Esther and Mordecai to fix the problem if they could. He gave Mordecai the signet ring and allowed them to do whatever they deemed necessary. They needed no further approval.

Vs.9 is the longest single verse in the Bible. Mordecai took control. It was 70 days after Haman’s edict [the 23rd day of the 3rd month, *Sivan* (June/July)]. So, there still was time to prepare. Mordecai summoned the royal secretary to write a decree patterned on Haman’s. In Achaemenid Persia few people could read and write, either with a quill on parchment or papyrus or in cuneiform on clay tablets. Mordecai and Esther would have preferred to revoke the earlier decree, but that was not possible, so they did the next best thing.

The new edict gave the Jews the right to assemble and defend themselves against attackers, including women and children, and to plunder their opponent’s property, the same language as Haman’s decree, which had not even allowed Jews to defend themselves. By tracking Haman’s language, i.e., to destroy, kill, annihilate, Mordecai’s intent was to nullify the prior edict.

Some differences existed. Mordecai’s edict was couched in language of defense more than aggression. Mordecai’s edict was carried by mounted couriers on fast horses from the royal herd throughout the Empire advising all Jews they could avenge themselves. This time, it was sent directly to the Jews, in their language, whereas Jews were not mentioned as recipients of Haman’s decree. Mordecai wanted Jews to know their rights.

After the 1st edict, Haman and the king sat down to drink. After the 2nd the Jews had a celebratory drink. Both edicts elicited pandemonium; 1st = grief; 2nd = joy. After the 1st, Mordecai and the Jews wore sackcloth and ashes; after the 2nd, he wore royal robes. Both decrees allowed were operative on 1 day only, the 3rd day of the 12th month (*Adar=*March 473); the day Haman set to kill all Jews.

Mordecai was given royal clothes, which he now accepted. (Blue and white= Persia’s royal colors and Israel’s. Blue and white linen drapes with gold fasteners and purple cords were at the king’s banquet. Mordecai received blue and white clothes with a gold crown and a purple robe.)

The people in Susa rejoiced, a very different response than to Haman’s edict. Until this point, there were Jewish fasts and Persian feasts. Now there were Jewish feasts. Many now identified themselves as Jews perhaps because they were afraid of what might happen under the 2nd edict if they were not Jews. Mordecai had risen to 2nd in the kingdom from virtual anonymity as an exile in a Gentile kingdom, subject to a death warrant- another unexpected person from humble beginnings, like Joseph and David, God used to fulfill His purposes.

Chapter 9:

Almost 9 months passed without comment after Mordecai/Esther issued the 2nd edict. During that time, Esther and Mordecai could not be certain how successful their counter-edict would be. God’s hand still was needed if the Jews, a minority in the Empire with many who hated them, and many others who were greedy to plunder their assets, were to survive. The new decree did not change things for those who were willing to attack the Jews and rely on clear, unchangeable royal authority to do so.

13 Adar, the day the Jews were to be slaughtered, came. Jews gathered and prepared to defend themselves against anyone who sought to kill them. But something had changed. Jews now had the right to fight back, and the balance of power seemed had shifted at court. Many people became afraid to fight the Jews. Mordecai was famous and nobles and political leaders had begun to support and help Jews because they feared Mordecai and his influence with the king.

The Jews did not kill everyone who disliked them; just those who attacked them. The Jews showed no mercy on those who attacked them. The king had imposed no restraints on the Jews. Their fury may have been an indication of prolonged persecution. The book said nothing about how many, if any, Jews were killed during the day of fighting. Outside Susa, 75,000 were killed in 1 day, 13 Adar (Feb/March), but no plunder was taken. [In the LXX, the number of dead was 15,000; in the Greek Alpha Test it was 10,107.] The Persian Empire was said to have 50,000,000 people. As with other things in the book, these numbers may be an exaggeration.

Jews killed 500 in Susa, plus Haman’s 10 sons, who were killed in the melee, not executed afterward. So, they must have participated in the attacks. Each of Haman’s sons’ names was listed. [When the names are read in the synagogue, it is done in one breath because they all were killed at once.] Their names were Persian, and they cannot be found in the OT. They seemed to be names of minor Persian spirits or deities (*daiva)*.

Three times *Esther* emphasized the Jews took no plunder although the edict allowed them to. The failure to take plunder may have meant the Jews were not greedy, or it may refer to 1 Sam. 15:3, where God forbade Israel from taking plunder from Amalek. (Saul also did not follow that command.) It also may have reflected an ancient rule of Jewish holy war. [Gen.14: Abram refused to take plunder from Sodom, not wanting the wicked city to be the source of his prosperity.]

The king told Esther of the slaughter in Susa + Haman’s 10 sons and asked what else she wanted. He still wanted to please her, but this time he did not offer half his kingdom. The king’s report of the massacre provided a final picture of his total lack of concern for his dead subjects. Esther, who given the quickness of her response, seemed to have been thinking of this ahead, asked for one more day of killing enemies in Susa, and she wanted Haman’s sons hanged on gallows—a further degradation of Haman’s house/name. Hanging on a tree brought a curse against them. (Deut.21: 22, 23). It also may have been a deterrent against further anti-Semitism. Display of their bodies was uncommon in the ancient world. The same thing happened to Saul and his sons. (1 Sam. 31: 8-10). Without objection, the king granted Esther’s request. On the 2nd day, 300 men were killed in Susa. Again, however, no plunder was taken.

After the day of killing, the Jews rested, feasted, and celebrated. They had lived in mortal fear for 11 months. God now had saved them. In Susa, the Jews also fought on 14 Adar and rested on 15 Adar. [Jews in Jerusalem now celebrate on 15 Adar (late February/early March) resting and feasting/drinking; all others on 14 Adar.] Coincidentally, *Purim* often falls close in time to *Mardi Gras*.

Mordecai recorded what had happened and sent letters to all the provinces authorizing 14 and 15 Adar as celebration days where feasting and gifts of food were observed but also where gifts were to be given to the poor. Remembrance of God’s goodness should lead to action. True celebration of God’s goodness always should be accompanied by giving to those less fortunate.

Esther also wrote to the Jews in the 127 provinces to confirm Mordecai’s letter. This was a royal missive, not just a friendly note. Here Esther’s Persian title (Queen) and her Jewish lineage were combined. The letters from both Mordecai and Esther comport with the Jewish principle that facts must be established on the testimony of 2-3 witnesses.

Mordecai, not Moses, created the feast of Purim. It is a time of celebration remembering God’s goodness to His people. How he turned sorrow to joy and mourning into celebration. It includes all who joined with the Jews in their defense. By the 9th C AD, the Jews also observed 13 Adar as a fast day to remember Esther’s fast before going to the king.

*Purim* is the last festival in the Jewish year. It was the first extra-biblical/rabbinic festival. The scroll of *Esther* is read in the synagogue in its entirety, accompanied by noisemakers and costumes. The celebration in the home features drinking; indeed, at least some rabbis said one should drink so much they can’t distinguish between shouts of “Blessed be Mordecai” and “Cursed be Haman.” [The other non-Torah/rabbinic Jewish celebration is *Hanukah,* which commemorates the Hasmonean/Maccabean- victory over Antiochus Epiphanes in 164 BC.]

Chapter 10:

Life returned to normal. The king levied a tax on the whole kingdom. It may have been a corvé, a draft of laborers. Ahasuerus had not accepted Haman’s bribe and the Empire has just gone through a great turmoil. The king needed money. Just as it started, the book ended with a statement about the king’s power. Xerxes died in 465 BC (8 years later); he was assassinated by his eunuchs.

Mordecai was raised to great heights and focused on good for his people and the Empire. The book reflected the struggle to be faithful in an increasingly unfaithful culture.