

## Chapter Nine

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What do you suppose brought the people to the humility and confession described in this chapter?
2. Who is the more prominent in this chapter, Ezra or Nehemiah? How do you explain this?
3. What were the major points in the Levites' prayer?
4. Why do you suppose so much time was taken up tracing the history of Israel?

### OUTLINE

#### B. The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.

1. Introduction: The occasion on which the prayer was offered is described (vss. 1-5a).
2. God is praised for his power in creation (vss. 5b-6).
3. His goodness to Abraham (vss. 7-8).
4. His hand in the Exodus (vss. 9-15).
5. Israel's rebellion in the Wilderness (vss. 16-21).
6. God's compassion takes them into Canaan (vss. 22-25).
7. Disobedience, punishment, and repentance characterize the period of judges and kings (vss. 26-31).
8. Prayer for present mercy (vss. 32-38).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

#### B. The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.

1. Introduction: The occasion on which the prayer was offered is described.

#### TEXT, 9:1-5a

- 1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them.
- 2 And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities

of their fathers.

- 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.
- 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, and cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God.
- 5a Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!

### COMMENT

A quick look through this chapter will reveal the startling fact that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah is mentioned in it. This is another evidence that the real stars of this performance, the heroes on this occasion, were the people. They had initiated it in 8:1 by their request to hear the reading of God's Law. Throughout the events of the seventh month they have been the center of attention. Now, without mention of a great name who ordered their response they came together once more.

*Verse 1* reinforces this impression in another way. Their assembly was on a day which fits no requirement of the Law at all; that is, they met because they wanted to, not because of any command or obligation. They had already had nine or ten days of Scripture reading and worship, and they still would not go home. The twenty-fourth day does allow for one day's rest since the close of the previous chapter. Fasting, being clothed in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them would be progressively more intense signs of grief and repentance.

In *verse 2* the separation from foreigners was a ritual symbol of their purification. It portrayed in action what their shunning marriage to foreigners was designed to accomplish. Their standing and confessing may be a summary of the rest of the chapter.

In *verse 3* the day is divided into fourths and the reading continues for one fourth of the day, with confession filling another;

that also is probably a summary of the next verses. We have here a slight problem is arithmetic: how long is a quarter of a day? If we think of the day as opposed to the night, it would be three hours; but if we think of a calendar day, it is six. Since only two quarters are accounted for, we assume that they were sleeping the other half. Also, in 8:3 the action had begun at daybreak and continued to noon, with a new set of activities apparently taking up the rest of the day. We would assume, then, that reading filled six hours, and confession and worship occupied substantially the rest of the daylight hours.

*Verse 4* returns to the scene in 8:2, with the platform above the people occupied by Levites; we assume that all the names in this list are Levites, as they are in the next verse. A prayer follows, but is not preserved for us; evidently it was a spontaneous one.

*Verse 5a* gives a second list, with some duplications. Perhaps those in *verse 4* presided in the morning, and those in *verse 5* in the afternoon or second session. The people were then called on to stand in preparation for the prayer that follows. The Levites who were presiding may have read it in unison, or one may have voiced it as the representative of the group.

## 2. God is praised for His power in creation.

### TEXT, 9:5b-6

- 5b O may Thy glorious name be blessed  
And exalted above all blessing and praise!
- 6 "Thou alone art the LORD.  
Thou has made the heavens,  
The heaven of heavens with all their host,  
The earth and all that is on it,  
The seas and all that is in them.  
Thou dost give life to all of them  
And the heavenly host bows down before Thee.

## COMMENT

Here begins the longest prayer recorded in the Bible: longer than either Jesus' prayer in John 17 or Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in I Ki. 8. Its author is not named, but Ezra is most commonly thought to have composed it. The *Anchor Bible*<sup>1</sup> has an extensive chart of verbal and thought parallels in the O.T. to this prayer verse by verse. The author was obviously immersed in the Biblical tradition; the things he mentions are exactly the historical events recorded in the O.T. We may conclude that the Book which he had was essentially the same as the one which we have, up to that point.

The prayer begins (*verse 5b*) with praise to God. There is a difference between thanksgiving to God for what he has done and praise to Him for who He is: for His majesty and power and glory, and His mighty acts. This along with *verse 6*, is praise. The reference to God's name is to His character and person: "name" in the O.T. means "personality," or "person": see the Word Studies that follow.

In *verse 6*, the first reference to the heavenly host is to the stars, all in their orderly ranks; the second reference is to His angels, all the heavenly beings.

## 3. God is exalted for His goodness to Abraham.

## TEXT, 9:7-8

- 7 "Thou art the LORD God,  
 Who chose Abram  
 And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,  
 And gave him the name Abraham.  
 8 "And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee,  
 And didst make a covenant with him  
 To give him the land of the Canaanite,

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1. *Anchor Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 167ff.

Of the Hittite and the Amorite,  
 Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Gergashite —  
 To give it to his descendants.  
 And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise,  
 For Thou art righteous.

## COMMENT

History was of great significance to Israel's religion. The people believed, on good authority, that they could see evidence of God's taking action in their affairs in actual observed events. Faith, in Scripture terms, is always rooted in history. Judaism and Christianity alone are regarded as historical religions, whose truth can be measured by verification of the events which gave them their character. Therefore this psalm moves into a recital of that history.

Without a Divinely inspired interpretation and record of our nation's history, we may still be profited by recalling and recounting His favors to us.

*Verse 7:* The history of the people of Israel starts with Abraham. There might also be an implied parallel between God's bringing Abraham out of the land of the Chaldeans and His recent delivery of Israel, Abraham's descendants, from the same land.

*Verse 8* records God's generosity and faithfulness to Abraham and to his descendants. Of course He would keep His promise, because He is righteous: this is the keynote of the prayer.<sup>2</sup>

### 4. God's hand is seen in the Exodus.

#### TEXT, 9:9-15

9 "Thou didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,  
 And didst hear their cry by the Red Sea.

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2. Adenay, *Expositor's Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

- 10 "Then Thou didst perform signs and wonders against Pharaoh,  
Against all his servants and all the people of his land;  
For Thou didst know that they acted arrogantly toward them,  
And didst make a name for Thyself as it is this day.
- 11 "And Thou didst divide the sea before them,  
So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground;  
And their pursuers Thou didst hurl into the depths,  
Like a stone into raging waters.
- 12 "And with a pillar of cloud Thou didst lead them by day,  
And with a pillar of fire by night  
To light for them the way  
In which they were to go.
- 13 "Then Thou didst come down on Mount Sinai,  
And didst speak with them from heaven;  
Thou didst give to them just ordinances and true laws,  
Good statutes and commandments.
- 14 "So Thou didst make known to them Thy holy sabbath,  
And didst lay down for them commandments, statutes, and  
law,  
Through Thy servant Moses.
- 15 "Thou didst provide bread from heaven for them for their  
hunger,  
Thou didst bring forth water from a rock for them for their  
thirst,  
And Thou didst tell them to enter in order to possess  
The land which Thou didst swear to give them.

### COMMENT

As the Cross and Resurrection are the focal points of the N.T., so the Exodus, the giving of the Law, and the entrance into Canaan constitute the central event of the O.T. Whenever Israel praised God for His acts in history, in the Psalms or elsewhere, this would have to be mentioned. So it is the largest topic of this prayer.

The deliverance from Egypt occupies *verses 9-12*.

*Verse 9* recalls the words of Ex. 3:7, with other acts following.

In *verse 10*, Pharaoh's arrogance is paralleled by Ex. 15:7. God's making a name for Himself illustrates an idea in the Word Studies under NAME, at the end of this chapter.

In *verse 11*, even the imagery of the stone is taken from Moses' victory song, Ex. 15:5, 10.

*Verses 13, 14* rehearse the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai.

The statement in *verse 14* that God revealed His Holy Sabbath at that time is informative. It reinforces Dt. 5:15, which says that the purpose of the Sabbath was to commemorate their release from slavery in Egypt; their enjoying rest was an appropriate symbol. There is no mention of Sabbath keeping in the O.T. before that event. It is true that God Himself rested on the seventh creative day, and He blessed and sanctified it; but there is no suggestion that He required its observance by man until Moses' time, as *verse 14* says.

The bearing that this has on Seventh Dayism is clear. The Sabbath was not an eternal, unchanging law, but a national celebration of Independence. The Lord's Day celebrates another event, in another manner.

*Verse 15* bespeaks the provision which God made for His people in that circumstance: the manna, the water from the rock, and the instruction for possession of the land. We think of our bread from heaven (Jn. 6:48-51), and of our rock, which is Christ (I Cor. 10:4).

## 5. God blesses Israel even during her rebellion in the Wilderness.

### TEXT, 9:16-21

- 16 "But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;  
They became stubborn and would not listen to Thy command-  
ments.
- 17 "And they refused to listen,  
And did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which

- Thou hadst performed among them;  
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return  
to their slavery in Egypt.  
But Thou art a God of forgiveness,  
Gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness;  
And Thou didst not forsake them.
- 18 "Even when they made for themselves  
A calf of molten metal  
And said, 'This is your God  
Who brought you up from Egypt,'  
And committed great blasphemies,
- 19 Thou, in Thy great compassion,  
Didst not forsake them in the wilderness;  
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,  
To guide them on their way,  
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in  
which they were to go.
- 20 "And Thou didst give Thy good Spirit to instruct them,  
Thy manna Thou didst not withhold from their mouth,  
And Thou didst give them water for their thirst.
- 21 "Indeed, forty years Thou didst provide for them in the  
wilderness and they were not in want,  
Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

### COMMENT

Twice in these verses the pattern of Israel's rebellion and God's graciousness are repeated.

In *verses 16, 17* their stubbornness and short memory caused them to appoint a leader to replace Moses, God's man, in order to lead them back to Egypt. Num. 14:4 records their threat to do this; the information given here, that they had actually appointed someone is a supplement to it. Their arrogance made them guilty of the same sin as the Egyptians. Yet God's graciousness and forgiveness prevented His forsaking them.



Then again in *verses 18-21* they rebelled but God was compassionate.

*Verse 18* portrays the epitome of the rebelliousness. Not only did they make a forbidden idol and worship it, but they credited it instead of God for their deliverance from Egypt! That is incomprehensible.

*Verses 19-21* list God's favors to them despite their sins; His presence vouched for by the pillar and the cloud, guiding and lighting their way; His Spirit of instruction; the manna and the water; protection from wear for their clothing and their feet.

## 6. God's compassion takes them to Canaan.

### TEXT, 9:22-25

- 22 "Thou didst also give them kingdoms and peoples,  
And Thou didst allot them to them as a boundary.  
And they took possession of the land of Sihon the king of  
Heshbon,  
And the land of Og the king of Bashan.
- 23 "And Thou didst make their sons numerous as the stars of  
heaven,  
And Thou didst bring them into the land  
Which Thou hadst told their fathers to enter and possess.
- 24 "So their sons entered and possessed the land.  
And Thou didst subdue before them the inhabitants of the  
land, the Canaanites,  
And Thou didst give them into their hand, with their kings,  
and the peoples of the land,  
To do with them as they desired.
- 25 "And they captured fortified cities and a fertile land.  
They took possession of houses full of every good thing,  
Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves,  
Fruit trees in abundance.  
So they ate, were filled, and grew fat,  
And reveled in Thy great goodness.

## COMMENT

Israel's entrance into the Promised Land came in two stages.

*Verse 22* describes the conquest of the East Bank. Sihon and the Amorites inhabited the land by the Dead Sea; Heshbon was one of their cities. Og and the people of Bashan were closer to the Sea of Galilee. Psalm 135:11 is another example of how this event was impressed on their minds in relation to their entry into the land.

In *verse 24* they go on to the West Bank,

*Verses 23, 25* fit both situations. Their growing fat, in *verse 25*, speaks of their prosperity; in a culture where hunger was the rule, fat was beautiful (Prov. 13:4). The word "revel" in Hebrew has the name, Eden, in it; it speaks of delight and pleasantness. Under God, their Eden was being restored.

We realize that the two words, "fat" and "reveled," are taken by many as evidence of apostasy; but the phrase, "in Thy great goodness," suggests a more positive interpretation. Even good things can be used in excess; here we see them as goods; in other contexts the first term especially can be associated with excess. The transition to evil comes more naturally with the "But" of the next verse.

## 7. Disobedience, punishment, and repentance characterize the period of judges and kings.

TEXT, 9:26-31

- 26 "But they became disobedient and rebelled against Thee,  
And cast Thy law behind their backs  
And killed Thy prophets who had admonished them  
So that they might return to Thee,  
And they committed great blasphemies.
- 27 "Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their  
oppressors who oppressed them,  
But when they cried to Thee in the time of their distress,  
Thou didst hear from heaven, and according to Thy great  
compassion

- Thou didst give them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.
- 28 "But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before Thee; Therefore Thou didst abandon them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them.  
When they cried again to Thee, Thou didst hear from heaven, And many times Thou didst rescue them according to Thy compassion,
- 29 And admonished them in order to turn them back to Thy law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Thy commandments but sinned against Thy ordinances,  
By which if a man observes them he shall live.  
And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen.
- 30 "However, Thou didst bear with them for many years, And admonished them by Thy Spirit through Thy prophets, Yet they would not give ear.  
Therefore Thou didst give them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.
- 31 "Nevertheless, in Thy great compassion Thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them,  
For Thou art a gracious and compassionate God.

## COMMENT

*Verses 26-29* relate particularly to the rule by judges, though the pattern is the same when the kings ruled. The cycle of disobedience, suffering oppression, and God's hearing and delivering occurs frequently in the book of Judges. The killing of the prophets (*vs. 26*) may raise eyebrows, but there were prophets in that period (*Jgs. 6:8*; in *I Sam. 3:20*, Samuel is called a prophet; *I Sam. 9:9* indicates they had existed before under the title of "seers"). If they existed, it is a natural assumption that some of them would have been killed.

The "many times" of *verse 28* is an obvious reference to events during Judges. Even without the repetition indicated by that

phrase, there are three cycles of evil (vs. 26, "But they became disobedient"; vs. 28, "they did evil again"; vs. 29, "yet they acted arrogantly") each followed immediately by God's gracious deliverance, if we look ahead to *verse 30*.

The reference to the ordinances in *verse 29* is revealing; "By which if a man observes them he shall live." This does not refer directly to life hereafter, but to survival in this world. The keeping of the laws really did add to their longevity as compared to their contemporaries.

*Verses 30, 31* relate more fully to the Kingdom Period: God's long forbearance, His urgings through the prophets, their deafness, the inevitable Captivity, and God's compassionate preservation and deliverance of His people are all here.

## 8. Prayer for present mercy.

### TEXT, 9:32-38

- 32 "Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who dost keep covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before Thee, Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and on all Thy people, From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.
- 33 "However, Thou art just in all that hast come upon us; For Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.
- 34 "For our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Thy law Or paid attention to Thy commandments and Thy admonitions with which Thou has admonished them.
- 35 "But they, in their own kingdom, With Thy great goodness which Thou didst give them, With the broad and rich land which Thou didst set before them, Did not serve Thee or turn from their evil deeds.
- 36 "Behold, we are slaves today,

And as to the land which Thou didst give to our fathers to eat  
of its fruit and its bounty,  
Behold, we are slaves on it.

- 37 "And its abundant produce is for the kings  
Whom Thou hast set over us because of our sins;  
They also rule over our bodies  
And over our cattle as they please,  
So we are in great distress.
- 38 "Now because of all this  
We are making an agreement in writing;  
And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders,  
our Levites and our priests."

### COMMENT

The "Now" of *verse 32* brought them up to the present. Three attributes of God are given: majesty (great, mighty, awesome); faithfulness (who dost keep covenant); mercy (and loving kindness).<sup>3</sup> The reference to the kings of Assyria (there were at least six) reverently omits accusing God for this, though He had said (Isa. 10:5) that He was using them as the rod of His anger against His people. *Verses 33-35* use this information in justifying God for His hand in these acts of punishment and correction.

*Verses 36, 37* describe their condition as of that day. Note the contrast between the "they" of *verse 35* and the "we" of *verse 36*.

*Verse 36* pungently reminds us that they were not entirely free. The Persians were still their overlords, though they had been permitted to return to their homeland.

*Verse 37* speaks of the nature of that burden. A certain part of their crops went to the Persian rulers; a certain number of their offspring were taken into Persian taskwork and military service; and everyone in fact was physically subject to the rule of these foreigners. They felt the burden of God's judgment.

*Verse 38* gives the outcome of their prayer: they have determined

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3. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

to place their names on a document pledging their loyalty to God, as will be further described in the next chapter. A conclusion which spells out and calls for immediate action is always effective.

## WORD STUDIES

**NAME** (vs. 5, *Shem*): basically it means a sign, monument, or memorial of a person, thing, or event. This word is translated "memorial" in Isa. 55:13. But the emphasis is on the person or event of which it is only the sign. To do something in someone's name is to act by his authority (Ex. 5:23). To know someone by name suggests acquaintance with him personally (Ex. 33:12). To make oneself a name indicates fame and renown (II Sam. 7:9); conversely, to have no name is to be a nobody (Job 30:8); a good name signified a good reputation or character (Prov. 22:1); the destruction of one's name meant that his person and the memory of him would be no more (Dt. 9:14).

God's name, then, is His person, His authority, the knowledge of Him, His fame or glory, His character, the memory of all that He has done.

**WORSHIP** (vs. 3); **BOW DOWN** (vs. 6): these are the same word. It contains three ideas; (1) sink down, bow down, fall prostrate, do honor or reverence to someone whether to an equal or to a superior; (2) hence, to worship or adore; (3) therefore, to do homage or yield allegiance to someone.

Worship is incomplete without commitment.

## SUMMARY

After a day's break the people assembled once more with the marks of humility and purity. The Law was again read, and the Levites led them in a prayer of confession.

The prayer began with praise to the incomparable God of creation who had chosen Abraham and had covenanted to give him and his descendants the land on which the people were standing.

They reviewed God's hand in the Exodus events: miraculous deliverance from Egypt, giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, directions to enter Canaan. When the Israelites were stubborn and disobedient, God forgave. When they made a golden calf to be their god, He was compassionate and continued to guide and provide for them. Eventually God enabled them to defeat Sihon and Og and take their territory on the east of the Jordan; then to go into the land of the Canaanites. They took over cities already built and farmlands already under cultivation. Then followed alternating periods of rebellion, oppression, repentance, and God's gracious deliverance, through the time of judges, kings, and even captivity. Now they recognized the justness of what God had done; they saw the bonds which still tied them to Persia; and their leaders signed their names on behalf of all the people to a document to be described following.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who led the people in their prayer?
2. What is the character which Israel consistently demonstrated?
3. What character traits did God show?
4. What was the immediate result of the prayer?

## Chapter Ten

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What was included in the oath which the people took?
2. How were they to observe every seventh year?
3. What provisions were made for the support of the Levites?
4. Why was so much emphasis placed on getting firewood?

### OUTLINE

- C. The people make vows of faithfulness.
1. A list is given of the signatures on the document (vss. 1-27).
  2. The content of the document is a vow of purity from the heathen (vss. 28-31).
  3. The people pledge additionally to support the Temple (vss. 32, 33).
  4. They also arrange support for the Levites, who in turn would support the priests (vss. 34-39).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

#### C. The people make vows of faithfulness.

1. A list is given of the signatures on the document.

#### TEXT, 10:1-27

- 1 Now on the sealed document were the names of: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,
- 2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,
- 3 Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah,
- 4 Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
- 5 Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,
- 6 Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,
- 7 Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,
- 8 Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These were the priests.
- 9 And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel;



- 10 also their brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah,  
Hanan,  
11 Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah,  
12 Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,  
13 Hodiah, Bani, Beninu.  
14 The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam,  
Zattu, Bani,  
15 Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,  
16 Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,  
17 Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur,  
18 Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai,  
19 Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,  
20 Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,  
21 Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua,  
22 Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah,  
23 Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub,  
24 Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,  
25 Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,  
26 Ahiah, Hanan, Anan,  
27 Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

## COMMENT

*Verse 1* begins the document. Two methods of sealing official papers are known from this period: (1) the imprint of the thumbnail,<sup>1</sup> or (2) the impression of the person's private seal on a ball of moist clay, which is then attached by a string to the document.<sup>2</sup> The signatures in the case before us were voluntary. The first and most prominent name on the list was that of Nehemiah. His title, governor, used here and in 8:9, is in the official Persian form; one translation of it is "His Severity." The title used in 5:14 and 12:26 differs from this, being Hebrew in form. Nehemiah apparently used the Persian title only for more official or solemn occasions.

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1. *Cambridge Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

2. *Ellicott*, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

Zedekiah may be another spelling of Zadok (shortened by dropping the name of Jehovah at the end: cf. Nehemiah and Nahum), who may have been Nehemiah's secretary (scribe, 13:13). Thus we would have the heads of state making the document official.

*Verses 2-8* are the names of the priests who signed, being next in status to Nehemiah, Persia's representative. If Ezra is in the list at all, the most likely place is under Seraiah: that is, the names appear to be names of families instead of individuals; several are repeated in this way in 12:12-15, and Ezra was a descendant of Seraiah (Ezra 7:1).

By giving only their family names they may be saying that the priest's office and ancestry is more important than his individual identity: compare this with the present usage of the title "Archbishop of Canterbury."

Levites are named in *verses 9-13*; six of the seventeen names we remember from those who manned the speaker's platform in 9:4, 5; three others may have been there if we allow for variations in spelling. These also may have been names of families, though this is not certain. Part of the problem is that more than one generation used the same names.

*Verses 14-27*, the remainder of the list, contain the names of the leaders of the people; we have gotten used to this classification of priests, Levites, and leaders of the people by now. Sixteen of these names are also in Ezra 2; it is supposed, then, that some are names of ancient families and others of individuals of newer families.

## 2. The content of the document is a vow of purity from the heathen.

### TEXT, 10:28-31

- 28 Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gate-keepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all

those who had knowledge and understanding.

- 29 are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our LORD, and His ordinances and His statutes:
- 30 and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.
- 31 As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

## COMMENT

*Verse 28* takes note of the categories of persons who did not sign, but (see vs. 29) were represented by those who did. The "all those who had separated themselves" we would understand to be a comprehensive term for the individual groups previously mentioned. Note that men and women, young and old (reasonably young: having knowledge and understanding; it takes a little longer to acquire understanding than it does knowledge), were included. This was exceptional; note its parallel in 8:2.

*Verse 29* shows their solidarity with the kinsmen and nobles whose signatures presumably are above. The curse and oath express the solemnity of the occasion, and their awareness of its possible consequences. Next we have the vow's contents. Point number one is their obligation to God's Word: that must always be kept foremost. We have noticed before (8:1) their certainty that this was God's law which came through Moses.

There are actually three kinds of material in the full agreement. (1) Reference was made to particular laws handed down from Moses, called to their attention because these were the ones they were neglecting. They were not innovators; they were seeking to live by the ancient traditions. (2) Detail was added to spell out the methods by which these laws would be put into operation: a priest

was to be present when the Levites received tithes for example. (3) They were accepting new obligations (gathering firewood for example) in order to share with one another more equitably, probably because the proportion of their population who were priests or Levites was higher than ever before, and they did not want to neglect the support of these people. This was a personal agreement, with personal names attached, and this was their personal pledge. If it were not for this, they could simply have vowed to keep the Law in general.

*Verse 30* deals again with the nagging problem of intermarriage which always threatened to wipe out the distinctive character of their religion and even their national identity. It will be mentioned yet again.

*Verse 31* enforces the strictness of their observance of the Sabbath day and holy days; they would not buy or sell with foreigners; of course it goes without saying that there would be no commercial dealings with each other on those days. The Sabbatical year would be observed with equal strictness; two of its features were that crops were not to be planted (the land was to be given a rest; there are certain ecological considerations which a man owes to the soil, as well as concerns for the poor: Lev. 25:3f; Ex. 23:10f), and no one was to be pressured for payment on his debts.

### 3. The people pledged additionally to support the Temple.

#### TEXT, 10:32, 33

- 32 We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:  
33 for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

## COMMENT

The one-third shekel in *verse 32* appears superficially to be at variance with the requirement of Ex. 30:13, specifying a half-shekel. The amount is also known to us from Matt. 17:27. The simplest explanation is that different standards of weight had been introduced by the Persians so that what had been a half-shekel before was now only a third of a shekel.<sup>3</sup> This was to be used for the public services of the Temple.

*Verse 33* probably is in addition to this, and they pledged to take care of these expenses also. It is not likely that the fraction of a shekel yearly from each male over twenty would be sufficient for all these supplies, including repairs to the building.

4. The people also arranged support for the Levites, who in turn would support the priests.

## TEXT, 10:34-39

- 34 Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites, and the people in order that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the law;
- 35 and in order that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually,
- 36 and bring to the house of our God the first-born of our sons and of our cattle, and the first-born of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God.
- 37 We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our

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3. *Interpreter's Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 764.

ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.

- 38 And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse.
- 39 For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil, to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers, and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

## COMMENT

*Verse 34* makes provision for a supply of wood. A fire was to be kept constantly burning on the altar (Lev. 6:12f). There is no previous mention of where this wood came from; what has been everybody's business may have become nobody's business; so now they made a personal pledge outside the framework of the Law, and arrived at a fair means for replenishing the supply periodically through the year. Wood was always in short supply in Israel; houses of stone were much less expensive than those made of wood; so this was no small item. All the clans (fathers' households) would draw straws or use some other random method merely to determine the part of the year in which they would fulfill this obligation.

In *verse 35* they accepted a similar obligation to supply food. A part of each field crop, and one year's crop from each new tree, had been specified by the Law as the Lord's portions (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 19:24; 23:14). They recognized this as a necessity for the support of the Levites.

*Verse 36* reflects their knowledge of the law that all firstborn belonged to the priests; for sons, a redemption price of five shekels was substituted (Num. 18:15f).

*Verse 37* indicates that certain rooms of the Temple were used for the storage of these crops. A distinction is made between the

first fruits, which went to the priests, and the tithes, the tenth portion of all their yearly increase, which were designated for the Levites. It was the responsibility of the Levites to teach religion throughout the land and not in Jerusalem only.

*Verse 38* adds a new detail to facilitate these collections. A priest would be on hand so that the Levites could quickly take a tenth of the tithe which they received and pass it along to the priests (Num. 18:26). Thus those who received tithes would in turn give tithes.

In *verse 39* the people pledged to relieve the priests of the responsibility of collecting or transporting the contributions; they would bring them to the storage chambers of the Temple where all the utensils used in the service of worship (see Ezra 1:9, 10) were kept. Priests, gate keepers, and singers would be available to add in handling the produce.

The pledge is closed with the people's promise not to neglect any of these things, which would be tantamount to neglecting the house of God.

## WORD STUDIES

**DOCUMENT:** see AMEN, in the Word Studies for chapter 8. **SABBATH** (vs. 31): the basic idea is to cease, interrupt, stop; thus the manna ceased (the verb form of this word): Josh. 5:12. If work stops, there is rest (Ex. 23:12).

The word applied to the seventh day (Ex. 20:11); to the seventh years, when no crops were to be sown (Lev. 25:2); to the first and last day of the festivals that lasted for a week, regardless of the day of the week (Lev. 23:39); to the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:32) or Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24); or in the plural as a synonym for weeks (Lev. 23:15) or for seven-year periods (Lev. 25:8).

## SUMMARY

A document was drawn up and sealed with the names of Nehemiah, the heads of priestly families, Levites, and leaders

of the people, in behalf of all the adult religious community, male and female. This pledged them to walk in God's Law, specifically to keep all His commandments and not to intermarry with foreigners nor to violate the Sabbath or holy days by trading with them on those days. They would also keep the Sabbatical year.

They pledged also to support the Temple with money and materials, to provide wood for the continual fire on the altar, to bring the firstfruits of their crops and herds to the priests, to offer their tithes to the Levites who in turn would give a tenth to the priests, and to see that the needs of the house of their God were not neglected.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What part did Nehemiah take in these proceedings?
2. How much was each man to give for the service of the Temple each year?
3. How did they decide who was to supply wood for each portion of the year?
4. Were the Levites, who received tithes, also to tithe?



## Chapter Eleven

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose new residents were wanted in Jerusalem?
2. What was the method used to get them?

### OUTLINE

- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
- A. The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
1. An effort is made to increase Jerusalem's population (vss. 1-2).
  2. People of Israel (vss. 3-9).
  3. Priestly leaders (vss. 10-14).
  4. Levites (vss. 15-19).
  5. Other groups (vss. 20-24).
  6. Towns occupied in Judah and Benjamin (vss. 25-36).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
- A. The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
1. An effort is made to increase Jerusalem's population.

#### TEXT, 11:1-2

- 1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities.
- 2 And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

### COMMENT

The story is resumed from chapter seven after the interruption of the great revival. Nehemiah had gotten the genealogical list to

help trace the people's present whereabouts; now an effort was about to be made to coax some of them to Jerusalem. With the city's walls repaired there was more protection for them. A strong Jerusalem would be a refuge in time of danger for all the surrounding townspeople and would help build a stable economy for the entire area. But people were needed to man the fortifications.

From *verse 1* we judge that government officials were the largest part of its residents; the location of government buildings and agencies there would be responsible for that. Evidently it had been an almost empty city before the walls had been constructed. None really wanted to move there; it was the post in greatest danger; so the expedient of casting lots was resorted to. Families or clans would be the units involved; to select individuals would fragment families.

The volunteers of *verse 2* then present a puzzle. Were they people who chose to move there, and thus reduced the number who must be chosen by lot?<sup>1</sup> Or were they the ones who allowed their names to be included in the drawing,<sup>2</sup> or were good sports about moving there when they lost? The lot is cast in *verse 1*; the volunteers are applauded in *verse 2*; we would have expected to hear mention of those chosen by lot, if they were a different group. At any rate, something of the desperate conditions of the city may be guessed from the applause they received for moving there.

## 2. People of Israel.

TEXT, 11:3-9

- 3 Now these are the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but in the cities of Judah each lived on his own property in their cities—the Israelites, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants.
- 4 And some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin lived in Jerusalem. From the sons of Judah: Athaiah

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 771.

2. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez;

- 5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite.
- 6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 able men.
- 7 Now these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah;
- 8 and after him Gabbai and Gallai, 928.
- 9 And Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second in command of the city.

## COMMENT

In *verse 3*, the heads of the provinces are not the same as the leaders of the people in *verse one*, but are the persons who moved to Jerusalem (*vss. 4-19*) or lived in the cities of Judah and Benjamin (*vss. 20-36*). Next we have the classifications of the names which will follow, except that no names of descendants of Solomon's servants will appear. It may be that they are synonymous with the gatekeepers in *verse 19*. All these groups are named in *Ezra 2*, in the same order, where also the gatekeepers are associated with the sons of Solomon's servants, and with the temple servants (*Ezra 2:42, 55, 58*).

The term "Israelites" (or "Israel") corresponds with "people of Israel" in *Ezra 2:2*, where also it is placed first after the rulers.

In *verse 4* they are subdivided into "sons of Judah" and "sons of Benjamin." Leaders from Judah are listed in *verses 4-6*, and those from Benjamin in *verses 7-9*.

### 3. Priestly leaders.

#### TEXT, 11:10-14

- 10 From the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin,
- 11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of

- Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God,
- 12 and their kinsmen who performed the work of the temple, 822; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah,
- 13 and his kinsmen, heads of fathers' households, 242; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer,
- 14 and their brothers, valiant warriors, 128. And their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Hagedolim.

## COMMENT

*Verse 10* is almost identical with I Chr. 9:10.

*Verse 11* we recognize from the genealogy of Ezra (Ezra 7:1, 2). This list is very condensed; if you are interested in the way genealogies are used in the Scriptures, you might compare these two in Nehemiah and Ezra with I Chr. 6:8-14 and 9:11; no two are alike, and no one is complete.

Note the similar length of the genealogies of the other two priestly lines in *verses 12, 13*. For the importance of these lengthy lists, see comments on Ezra 2:59-62.

In *verse 14* the mention of valiant warriors is a surprise. Priests were excluded from military service. Since the entire passage, *verses 10-14*, is paralleled by I Chr. 9:10-13, we can supplement this description from that, where they are called "very able men for the work of the service of the house of God." Of course, the Lord's work is a warfare too, but this phrase need not be translated this way; in Ruth 2:1 the same words are translated, "a man of great wealth." We could even say, "manly man of holiness" — see Word Studies on WEALTHY, Neh. 4.

## 4. Levites.

### TEXT, 11:15-19

- 15 Now from the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni;

- 16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, from the leaders of the Levites, who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God;  
17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun.  
18 All the Levites in the holy city were 284.  
19 Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren, who kept watch at the gates, were 172.

### COMMENT

These verses likewise are paralleled in I Chr. 9:14-16. Only two phrases will be picked out for comment.

In *verse 16*, the outside work was probably the various kinds of responsibilities which the Levites had as distinguished from the service of the house of God (see *verse 22*): teaching, acting as officers or as judges (I Chr. 23:4) for example.

In *verse 19*, the gatekeepers (presumably of the Temple) are evidently synonymous with the descendants of Solomon's servants, as noted in our comments on *verse three*, thus completing the categories named there.

### 5. Other groups.

#### TEXT, 11:20-24

- 20 And the rest of Israel, of the priests, and of the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each on his own inheritance.  
21 But the temple servants were living in Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the temple servants.  
22 Now the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, from the sons of Asaph, who were the singers

for the service of the house of God.

- 23 For there was a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day.  
 24 And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was the king's representative in all matters concerning the people.

## COMMENT

*Verse 20* describes the situation in the rest of Judah, which will be developed beginning with *verse 25*. But first, other incidental matters are dealt with.

In *verse 21* the location of the residences of the Temple servants (cf. *Ezra 2:43*; *Neh. 3:26*) is described as being outside the city walls. Ophel was at other times within the city boundaries (*II Chr. 33:14*); it is normal that the size of a city would fluctuate, and we would expect that at this time the shortest possible distance would be walled.

*Verse 22* speaks of Uzzi as being in charge of Levite affairs in the city. Singers are also listed in *Ezra 2:41*.

*Verse 23* explains this a little further by saying the king (Artaxerxes probably, though some see a reference here to regulations affecting the Levites made by King David) had issued a commandment regarding them. The firm regulation may have been a daily allowance, putting them under royal patronage.<sup>3</sup>

In *verse 24*, at the other end of the flow of finances was Pethahiah, possibly stationed in the Persian court as the people of Israel's representative there.

## 6. Towns occupied in Judah and Benjamin.

### TEXT, 11:25-36

- 25 Now as for the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its towns, in Dibon and its

3. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

- towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages,  
 26 and in Jeshua, in Moladah and Beth-pelet,  
 27 and in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns,  
 28 and in Ziklag, in Meconah and in its towns,  
 29 and in En-rimmon, in Zorah and in Jarmuth,  
 30 Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields,  
 Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba  
 as far as the valley of Hinnom.  
 31 The sons of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Mich-  
 mash and Aija, at Bethel and its towns,  
 32 at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah,  
 33 Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim,  
 34 Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat,  
 35 Lod and Ono, the valley of craftsmen.  
 36 And from the Levites, some divisions in Judah belonged to  
 Benjamin.

## COMMENT

*Verses 25-30* list the populated towns of Judah, south of Jerusalem. Kiriath-arba is the ancient name for Hebron. Many of these towns are also named in Joshua 15, when Israel was entering the land. The distance from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom at the edge of Jerusalem, from one extreme to the other, is 50 miles: a little farther than they had occupied previously, in Ezra.

*Verses 31-35* list the settlements in Benjamin, north of Jerusalem (cf. Joshua 18:21-28).

*Verse 36* speaks of the necessity of transferring Levites occasionally to serve both areas.

## WORD STUDY

**LOT** (vs. 1, Goral; sound like "gravel"?): a small stone. Sometimes a number of stones, including one or more of an odd color, were shaken in a container and thrown onto the ground, thus

deciding matters by chance; or they were shaken together and thrown into a vase, and each person drew one out, seeking for the odd-colored one. Eventually they were made into cubes and the faces numbered to form dice.

## SUMMARY

In order to increase the population and strengthen the situation of Jerusalem (where no one seemed to want to live), lots were cast and one tenth of the people were chosen as residents; the others remained in the villages. Names are given of families of the people of Israel, priests, Levites, and gatekeepers of the Temple. Temple servants lived just outside the wall. The Persian king furnished aid for the Levites, and the people had a representative at the Persian court.

A list of settlements, both in Judah and Benjamin, follows; Levites were stationed in both areas.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What proportion of the people were asked to move to Jerusalem?
2. Who were already living there?



## Chapter Twelve

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Are all these lists of names from the same time?
2. Why do you suppose the dedication service did not follow the completion of the walls, in 6:15?
3. Do you see any reason for the choral procession around the entire length of the walls?
4. What would be the value of a dedication service, anyway?

### OUTLINE

There are two topics in this chapter: priestly and Levitical lines (vss. 1-26), and the dedication of the wall (vss. 27-47).

- B. The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.
1. Priests and Levites who came up with Zerubbabel (vss. 1-9).
  2. Names of high priests, from the Return from Captivity to the end of Nehemiah's time (vss. 10, 11).
  3. Priests' families at the time of Joiakim (vss. 12-21).
  4. Levites, in the time of Joiakim (vss. 22-26).
  5. Levites assembled for dedication of the wall (vss. 27-30).
  6. Processional and dedication ceremonies (vss. 31-43).
  7. Concern about support of the Levites (vss. 44-47).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

Having given an honor roll of those who accepted the discomforts of living in Jerusalem in order to assure a strong and healthy state, the book next gives an honor roll of the religious leaders who contributed equally to the survival and well-being of the state. The text itself will indicate the varying periods in which this data was assembled.

The fact that in many cases the names are of families and not individuals does not lessen the honor; the oriental would find it even more gratifying to bring honor to the family name than to his own.

**B. The genealogies of priests and Levites are given,  
and the wall is dedicated.**

- 1. A list is given of the priests and the Levites who  
came up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua.**

TEXT, 12:1-9

- 1 Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,
- 2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush,
- 3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth,
- 4 Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah,
- 5 Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah,
- 6 Shemaiah and Joiarib, Jedaiah,
- 7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua.
- 8 And the Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving, he and his brothers.
- 9 Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, stood opposite them in their service divisions.

COMMENT

Neh. 7:39-42 has already told us there were over 4,000 priests who returned to Jerusalem at the one time. Here in vss. 1-7 a longer list of heads of families is given (the clans are evidently broken down into smaller units), but it is still from Jeshua's and Zerubbabel's time. Eight, perhaps eleven, of the twenty-two names are also affixed to the document in chapter 10.

*Verses 8, 9* add the names of Levites from Zerubbabel's day. Of the eight, four names are on the document in chapter 10. Of course, in neither this nor the case above can we assume that the others were opposed: see Neh. 10:28f. The reference in *verse 8* to being in charge of song, and in *verse 9* to standing opposite them, appears to refer to antiphonal arrangement of choirs: see 11:17. The occasion being referred to could be that in Ezra 3:10.

2. The high priests descended from Jeshua are traced, possibly to the end of Nehemiah's life.

TEXT, 12:10, 11

- 10 And Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada,  
11 and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua.

### COMMENT

The odd thing about this list is that it traces the office down to Jaddua; a man by that name was high priest at the time of Alexander the Great, a hundred years after Nehemiah returned the second time to Jerusalem. Even Dr. Ironside, a thorough conservative, believes this to be an addition by a later hand, though still inspired.<sup>1</sup> It is not an impossibility however that Nehemiah may have lived long enough to see the birth of Jaddua, who could have been a very old man in Alexander's day.

There is also an Eliashib in this list, which recalls the Eliashib whose son Ezra mentions (Ezra 10:6). There may be no connection, but this creates the possibility that Ezra's friend may have been a son of the high priest, though not his successor.

3. The priests' families are listed at the time of Joiakim.

TEXT, 12:12-21

- 12 Now in the days of Joiakim the priests, the heads of fathers' households were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah;  
13 of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan;

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1. Ironside, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

- 14 of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph;
- 15 of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai;
- 16 of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam;
- 17 of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai;
- 18 of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan;
- 19 of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi;
- 20 of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber;
- 21 of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel.

## COMMENT

Only two comments come to mind here.

Joiakim, in *verse 12*, succeeded Jeshua (*verse 10*); therefore this entire list is from the next generation after the list in verses 1-7.

This means that the Ezra in *verse 13* (and obviously the Ezra in *verse one*) is not the Ezra of the previous book, and the associate of Nehemiah; the date is a little too early.

### 4. Levites are listed from the time of Joiakim.

#### TEXT, 12:22-26

- 22 As for the Levites, the heads of fathers' households were registered in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua; so were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian.
- 23 The sons of Levi, the heads of fathers' households, were registered in the Book of the Chronicles up to the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib.
- 24 And the heads of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers opposite them, to praise and give thanks, as prescribed by David the man of God, division corresponding to division.
- 25 Mattaniah, and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping watch at the storehouses of the gates.

- 26 These served in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest and scribe.

### COMMENT

According to *verse 22*, records were kept of the Levites from the time of the second high priest after the Return from Captivity until into the fourth century B.C. (cf. vss. 10, 11); Jaddua may have lived to the time of Alexander the Great. Similar records for the priests covered a like time span, according to many who identify Darius the Persian as Darius III, Codomannus, 336-331 B.C. Because of the late date, Dr. Ironside also calls this a later insertion: cf. comments on vss. 10, 11. The later hand is only verifying that the records were still being kept in his day.

*Verse 23* says these records were in the Book of the Chronicles: not the Bible book, but apparently a register kept in the Temple. Johanan may be another spelling for Jonathan, who was a (grand-) son of Eliashib.

*Verse 24* again describes antiphonal arrangement of choirs.

In *verse 25*, the gatekeepers would be on duty at the Temple storehouses, not the gates of the city.

*Verse 26* dates the above list of Levites to the time of Joiakim, a generation later than the previous list of Levites (vss. 8, 9), and contemporaneous with Nehemiah and Ezra.

### 5. The Levites were assembled for the dedication of the wall.

#### TEXT, 12:27-30

- 27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres.

- 28 So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites,  
 29 from Beth-gilgal, and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem.  
 30 And the priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

### COMMENT

The rest of the chapter, clearly from Nehemiah's hand (vs. 31), describes the service of dedication for the wall, completed in Neh. 6:15. How much time has elapsed in between is hard to say. The delay may have been caused by the concentration on the reading of the Law in the intervening chapters. Or it may have been necessitated by the logistics of preparing a sufficiently grand and impressive program. Or they may have wished to wait till the city was sufficiently occupied (chapter 11) and the walls were adequately manned. It is people who are being dedicated more than things, for flesh and blood is as necessary to walls as are stones, and the act of dedication was more spiritual and psychological than physical. The greatest value of the wall also was psychological, as it furnished success and encouragement to a dispirited people. In Adenay's words, "This act, although it was immediately directed to the walls, was, as a matter of fact, the reconsecration of the city . . ."<sup>2</sup>

*Verse 27* is a reminder that many of the Levites lived in surrounding towns, where they either occupied themselves with teaching the Law or with making a living in the light of the reality of inadequate support.

*Verses 28, 29* equate the singers with the Levites: they were a subclass of them in Ezra 2:41.

In *verse 30*, before dedication there is a need for purification from defilement. Even the Tabernacle, and now the Temple, had

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2. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

their laver for cleansing the priests and the offering before sacrifices were made. As an illustration of the point previously made, note that the people are cleansed along with the wall.

## 6. The processional and dedication ceremonies are described.

### TEXT, 12:31-43

- 31 Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs, the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate.
- 32 Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them,  
33 with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam,  
34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah,  
35 and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; and Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph,  
36 and his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them.
- 37 And at the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.
- 38 The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the broad wall,  
39 and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate, and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.
- 40 Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me;  
41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah,

- Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with the trumpets;  
 42 and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan. Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader,  
 43 and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.

## COMMENT

*Verse 31* begins the descriptive of a processional of dignitaries and choirs in two columns almost the entire length of the wall, around the city.

*Verses 32-36* give the personnel included in one column.

In *verse 36*, the kind of instruments associated with David are used, with the explanation that he was the man of God; so we see their effort to conform even in small details to the tried and proven paths to evoke God's pleasure. At the front of that procession, right behind the choir, was Ezra.

In *verse 37* their route is traced from a point south of the city to another on the east.

Meanwhile, *verses 38, 39*, a second column began at the same southern point and followed along the west wall and apparently circled more than half of the city. Following the choir and leading the rest of this procession was Nehemiah.

In *verse 40*, both columns arrived at the Temple where the choirs and some of the dignitaries stationed themselves for the ceremonies to follow.

*Verses 41, 42* list the priestly participants and the choir leader, and mention the singers and the instrumental accompaniment.

In *verse 43* there is one more word for joy in the Hebrew text than in English: five times there is rejoicing or joy! Amid it all was the offering of innumerable sacrifices, and thrilled by it all were men, women, and this time without question, children.

The impression made by the pageantry, the dignitaries (Ezra



and Nehemiah both may have been recalled from Babylon and Persia for the occasion), the music, and the smell and sight of sacrifices, must have been awe-inspiring.

7. Concern is expressed over the support of the Levites.

TEXT, 12:44-47

- 44 On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served.
- 45 For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon.
- 46 For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God.
- 47 And so all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.

COMMENT

There was a very practical outcome to all of this, as there should be to great spiritual feasts. Perhaps the ceremonies themselves had pinpointed the inadequate support which the priests and Levites had been receiving though this is not mentioned. Perhaps their soul-stirring contribution of their talents had moved the great audience to gratitude; *verse 44* implies as much, for it speaks of the people's joy at their service. At any rate, arrangements

were made to obtain a great offering for them. How that reminds us of dedication services today!

*Verses 45, 46* speak further of the action of these servants of God, reminding us of the hand which David and Solomon had taken in organizing and directing these orders (I Chr. 25:1; II Chr. 8:14).

In *verse 47* the names of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are linked together, perhaps to stress the continuity as the two fulfilled the same office and conducted the Lord's work well.

## WORD STUDIES

**PURIFY (vs. 27):** the basic idea of the Hebrew word is brightness or splendor; i.e. it causes something to shine or be bright. It signifies to be or become clean or pure: to cleanse or purify. It can be done for three reasons. (1) Of physical purity: Ezek. 39:12 describes the cleansing of the land from corpses. Num. 8:6, 7 speaks of washing and completely shaving the Levites to prepare them for God's service. (2) Of ceremonial purity: Ezek. 43:26 speaks of cleansing the altar for the new Temple of which Ezekiel had a vision. A leper who had been healed would be purified in a ceremony administered by a priest: Lev. 14:11. (3) Of moral purity: Mal. 3:3 uses the figure of purifying metal from dross as a parallel of a person's moral cleansing. Jer. 33:8 speaks of cleansing through God's forgiveness.

**DEDICATION (vs. 30: Hanukkah):** Sometimes a study of word derivations leads one down some strange and unexpected paths. There are three words formed from the same base, all of which have one common meaning: to choke. Apparently from this come the ideas of being narrow or of closing. A *collar* is placed around the *neck* of an animal and it is *strangled* down so that it can be *initiated* into man's service and *trained* for usefulness: thus it becomes *dedicated*, or *consecrated* to certain purposes. Each of the italicized words is a translation of one of the forms of this word. Our English word, "neck," is derived from this same base (note the N and K, also in Hanukkah). So a wall was "collared" for man's service.

## SUMMARY

This chapter records the names of families of priests and Levites who returned from captivity with Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest; then the names of successive high priests covering about two centuries; then a list of Levite families, about a generation after the return.

Then follows a description of the service of dedication for the rebuilt wall surrounding Jerusalem: the assembling of Levites from many communities; the purification of the priests, people, gates, and wall; the two columns of Levite choirs, dignitaries, priests, trumpeters, and more singers; with Ezra and Nehemiah serving as parade marshals for the two columns; the covering at the Temple for numerous sacrifices and a service rendered by the priests and Levites. Everything was done according to patterns established long ago by David and Solomon. The people continued to give the prescribed portions to the Levites on the specified days, and the Levites gave their portion to the priests when Nehemiah was governor, as they had when Zerubbabel had been their governor.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the leaders of the two processions that circled the city?
2. Where did the parade end?
3. What sacrifices were made?
4. How did the people show gratitude to the Levites for this impressive service?

## Chapter Thirteen

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where have we gotten acquainted with Tobiah before?
2. How many prayers of Nehemiah can you count in this chapter?
3. How did Nehemiah handle the problem of mixed marriages? Is this how Ezra would have handled it?
4. What was Sanballat's last method of attack on Israel, in the book of Nehemiah?

### OUTLINE

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
  1. Foreigners are expelled (vss. 1-3).
  2. Tobiah is driven out (vss. 4-9).
  3. Support for the Levites is renewed (vss. 10-14).
  4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath (vss. 15-22).
  5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages (vss. 23-29).
  6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms (vss. 30, 31).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
  1. Foreigners are expelled.

#### TEXT, 13:1-3

- 1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God,
- 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.
- 3 So it came about, that when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

COMMENT<sup>a</sup>

The events in *verses 1-3*, like those in the previous chapter, apparently happened on the occasion of Nehemiah's second visit (13:6f), when the wall was dedicated.<sup>1</sup> The occasion on which the Law of Moses was being read is not identified, but this was a regular part of Israel's community life following the exile. The particular passage which they read was Dt. 23:3-6. The exclusion in *verse 3* refers to foreigners, and not to those of foreign descent.<sup>2</sup> That is, those who retained their citizenship in and loyalty to other nations (not just Moab and Ammon), which would include worship of their gods, were not permitted to share in Israel's Temple ceremonies.

## 2. Tobiah is driven out.

## TEXT, 13:4-9

- 4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah,
- 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils, and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.
- 6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king,
- 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.
- 8 And it was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room.

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1. John E. Eggleton, *Discovering The Old Testament*, p. 237.

2. *Anchor Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

- 9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

## COMMENT

In *verse 4*, the “prior to this” would refer to the time when Nehemiah was in Persia, following his first visit to Jerusalem. The extent to which intermarriage had gone is evident in that it had affected even the household of Eliashib the priest. The chambers of the Temple (I Ki. 6:5-8) were in three stories along the full length of both sides.

In *verse 5* the purpose of the chambers is given: they were for the supplies essential to the priests and Levites (including singers and gatekeepers), and for utensils (Neh. 7:70; Ezra 1:9-11; 8:26, 27) necessary for the Temple ceremonies. Now the priests prepared them arbitrarily for the personal use of Tobiah, who had given Israel trouble in the past (Neh. 2:19; 4:3, 7; 6:12). According to *verse 9* it was not unneeded extra space.

*Verse 6* sets the limit of twelve years on Nehemiah’s first term as governor. How long a term intervened before he returned to Jerusalem is not known, but it is thought to have been relatively short. We have seen the Persian kings’ use of the title, “king of Babylon,” before: Ezra 5:13.

*Verse 7* shows that it was on Nehemiah’s return from Persia that he heard of this impropriety involving Tobiah.

In *verse 8* we see his anger. Nehemiah was justified in the action he took; the Temple had been dedicated exclusively for the use of priests and Levites in their service for God: certainly not for foreigners, even heads of state. Nehemiah was responsible for all affairs within his realm, even over the priests, and he must defend the interests of the weak and abused or they would not be defended. We cannot say with certainty that Tobiah lived in the rooms; he may have used them only for storage; but the household goods would suggest at least preparation for occupancy.

Now, in *verse 9*, the rooms were cleansed from contamination (see PURIFY, Word Studies, chapter 12), and returned to their proper use.

## 3. Support for the Levites is renewed.

## TEXT, 13:10-14

- 10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field.
- 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts.
- 12 All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.
- 13 And in charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen.
- 14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

## COMMENT

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah's discovery of the Levites' predicament may have stemmed from the events of the previous paragraph, from seeing the shortage of supplies in the storage rooms. The service of the Levites and singers may have involved more than that at the dedication of the wall. Now they had been driven by financial necessity to agricultural pursuits, to the detriment of the Temple services. It was a waste to fail to employ such talents in praising and serving God. This was evidently a chronic problem throughout Israel's history.

*Verses 11-13* show Nehemiah's effectiveness in dealing with the problem: first a reprimand, pointing subtly to their obligation before God; then a searching out and restoration of the abused; then the contributions from the community of Judah followed; and then an organization of reliable, faithful people was set up

to get all the contributions into the right hands.

*Verse 14* is another of Nehemiah's trademark prayers.

#### 4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath.

##### TEXT, 13:15-22

- 15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food.
- 16 Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem.
- 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?"
- 18 "Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."
- 19 And it came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load should enter on the sabbath day.
- 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem.
- 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath.
- 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness.



## COMMENT

Note that what is described here is in direct violation of the vow which the people had signed in Neh. 10:31. Also, when the day of rest is violated, it is the poor and the laborer who suffer the most (Amos 8:4-6).

In *verse 15*, emphasis is put on Judah's Sabbath violations: treading out grapes, loading and transporting sacks of produce, bringing them into the holy city, and selling them: the full route, from producer to consumer. The products were not all in season at the same time, so Nehemiah may have observed over a period of time until his patience was broken. His one corrective measure was "jaw-boning."

*Verse 16* emphasizes similar activities of Tyrian merchants. Tyre was renowned in the ancient world for its commerce (Ezek. 27:3ff), and its position on the seacoast made it a source of fish. This illustrates another problem arising from intermarriage and other forms of involvement with foreigners. By their standards they were doing nothing wrong, though the Jews were buying from them. Israel's law, on the other hand, required that it be a day of rest for the stranger or foreigner, and even for the animals (Ex. 20:10).

In *verse 17*, Nehemiah first approached his own countrymen to correct this evil; the word translated "reprimand" usually indicates quarreling and contention, but does not rule out physical violence.

*Verse 18* recalls the connection between Israel's violation of the Sabbath and their suffering captivity and humiliation (Lev. 26:35; II Chr. 36:21). It was possible that God's wrath might be increased or repeated because of their actions.

Next, in *verse 19*, Nehemiah took more direct action. At sundown, when the Sabbath began, he ordered that not only the huge gates that barred the entrance of carts, but the doors in the gates that prevented entrance of individuals, be closed and left closed for at least twenty-four hours. The social and business activity of the community took place at the gates. If the foreigners would do business in Israel, they must live by Israel's laws.

Then some of Nehemiah's own bodyguards, loyal personally to him, were stationed at the gates to prevent entry.

*Verse 20* indicates that he did not retract these policies under pressure. Though commerce meant prosperity and profits and taxes, still he risked offending the tradesmen.

In *verse 21* he threatened the use of force. Until then the tradesmen were not convinced.

In *verse 22* Nehemiah made this not only a religious issue but an act of service and worship to God. The Levites, who alone were allowed to labor on the Sabbath in the performance of sacred duties, were recruited as keepers of the gates. Then we have Nehemiah's second prayer in this chapter.

## 5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages.

### TEXT, 13:23-29

- 23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.
- 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.
- 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.
- 26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin.
- 27 "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"
- 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son Eliashib the high priest,

was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me.

- 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

## COMMENT

In *verse 23*, Ashdod was a city in the old Philistine area, in the present day Gaza strip. With the change of one letter Ammon becomes Amman, and we have its approximate present-day location. The people of Moab lived at the southeastern end of the Dead Sea.

The language of Ashdod, *verse 24*, is now known to have been quite similar to Hebrew, as Aramaic was (and so were the Moabite and Ammonite languages), but still a separate language<sup>3</sup> (as Dutch and German, or French and Spanish, or Spanish and Portuguese). The children were closer to their mothers through most of the day, so they spoke their language more than Hebrew.

In *verse 25*, "contended" is the same as "reprimanded" in *verse 17*. "Curse" may be a little too strong. The *Anchor Bible* gives its literal translation as "to be light," and gives the possible translation, "treat with contempt." This would seem to be more in keeping with Nehemiah's character. But he also struck some of them and pulled out their hair. We recall that when Ezra was faced with the same kind of a situation, the hair that was pulled was his own! Perhaps there is an illustration here of the nature of the offices of the two men: the one, God's priest and man's intercessor; the other, God's chosen vessel still, but man's ruler. We gather that there are times for both kinds of action. What he achieved by this method was an oath that they would no longer participate in or allow mixed marriages. There is no mention of divorce, as there was in Ezra (10:11).

*Verses 26, 27* give the argument which Nehemiah used. If the great King Solomon, powerful among the nations, loved by God

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3. *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

(that is the meaning of his personal name, Jedediah, II Sam. 12:24f), and able to rule over all Israel, could not take foreign wives without being led to forsake God and sin, how did they think they could do this without sinning, weak as they were?

A little curiosity, going back to *verse 26*, is the KJV reference to "outlandish" women, reminding us that the derivation and original English meaning of the word had reference to women from outside the land of Solomon.

The information in *verse 28* has not been given us previously; it is given here for the first time.

Now Nehemiah's prayer, in *verse 29*, is not for himself directly but against those of the Levitical line, priests and Levites alike, who had violated the covenant (Num. 25:12) which God had made originally with their forefathers because they had stood more firmly against intermarriage and defilement with foreigners than any of the other tribes.

## 6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms.

### TEXT, 13:30, 31

- 30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task,  
31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

### COMMENT

These two verses are Nehemiah's summary of his work: note his attention to detail, which is one of the characteristics of the man. How else could he end it but with a prayer? He asks not to be remembered by man, but by God. This is a fitting close for the record of a great man.

## WORD STUDIES

**EVER** (vs. 1: Olam): for ever, everlasting. Basically it means "hidden" (as in the "secret" sins of Psalms 90:8): where the beginning or end is obscure or uncertain or indefinite. It is applied to (1) the past, or antiquity, time long past or even only a lifetime, the days of old, Micah 7:14; or of a long time, Isaiah 42:14; (2) the future, i.e., of the end of one's life, Deuteronomy 15:17; (3) end of an age or race or dynasty, limited by the length of their obedience, I Samuel 2:30. (4) The laws are for ever (Passover, Exodus 12:14), yet they are superseded now. (5) The earth and universe are forever (Psalms 104:5), though we know they will pass away. (6) Only when the term is used of God does it have the idea of absolute eternity (Psalms 90:2).

The people of the O.T. did not have an everlasting promise; they found no need to coin a word for an idea which they didn't have, or barely had, in their mind. Only Jesus could complete that picture for them (II Timothy 1:10).

**LOVED** (vs. 26: Aheb): to breathe after, long for, desire; the meaning is akin to Agapé in the N.T. Israel loved Joseph, Genesis 37:3f; Jacob loved Rachel, Genesis 29:18; Hosea was told to love his wife in spite of her unworthiness, Hosea 3:1; God loved His people, Deuteronomy 23:5; and we must love God, Deuteronomy 6:5.

## SUMMARY

The public reading of the Law revealed that God had forbidden the entrance of Moabites or Ammonites into their religious assemblies, so the people barred all foreigners.

Nehemiah discovered on his return from Persia that space had been given to Tobiah, governor of Ammon, in some of the Temple rooms. He threw Tobiah's belongings out and restored the rooms to the Levites for their intended uses for storage of supplies.

He also observed that people were not supporting the Levites with their tithes, and he corrected that, appointing reliable people

to make distributions of these goods to the Levites.

Sabbath observance had become neglected, so he complained to the public officials and offending tradespeople from Tyre doing business at the gate on the Sabbath, eventually barring the gates and threatening to use force to prevent their entrance on the Sabbath.

He observed that children were losing the ability to speak Hebrew because many of them were the products of marriages with foreigners and he got the people to agree to stop that practice.

The high priest had a grandson who had married the daughter of Sanballat the Samaritan; Nehemiah drove him away.

He summarized his achievements in purifying the people of foreign influences, restoring priests and Levites to their duties, seeing that wood was provided for their offerings, and restoring the offering of first fruits to them.

In all these things he prayed for God's approval on his work.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What objection did Moses have against Ammonites and Moabites?
2. Who were especially involved in the desecration of the Sabbath?
3. What did Nehemiah do to prevent continued desecration of the Sabbath?
4. With what nations in particular were the Jews intermarrying?

## REFLECTIONS ON NEHEMIAH

Before we bid farewell to Nehemiah, let's take a look back at the man.

One of his most noticeable characteristics is his use of the short and frequent prayers, "instant prayers," perhaps. Prayer is not as large a feature of the O.T. as of the N.T., but here is a person who had become a master of the art. His one lengthy prayer (1:5-11) is a model of intercession.

He saw the value of the community, the fellowship, the close contact with others for mutual protection. Much of his effort went to bringing people together within the walls of Jerusalem.

He recognized the value of the services of the people, and made frequent appeals to them for co-operation and commitments. He was able to organize them to accomplish in a few days what they hadn't been able to do in a century.

He was practical enough to foresee dangers and to prepare to meet them, thus perhaps averting them. He saw the value in getting people to pledge together to reform their ways of living. He shared in the great and thrilling moment of the wall's dedication which must have lifted the spirits of the people for some period of time.

We may learn much from this one of God's heroes, and we can praise God for supplying leaders of this calibre for those times when His people are faced with great burdens.

## PROJECT

Remember the way we reviewed the book of Ezra? Let's try the same thing with Nehemiah. There are thirteen chapters; chapter seven divides the book in half; it is a repeat from Ezra 2 of the names of the first captives of Israel to return from Babylon.

Now, the first half of the book can be divided in half again. In the first three chapters, (1) Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness; (2) he gets permission from King Ahasuerus of Persia and comes to Jerusalem; (3) the rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described. Chapters 4-6 enlarge on problems involved in the wall's reconstruction. (4) Their enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction; (5) internal difficulties (indebtedness, mortgage foreclosures, enslavement) arise and are overcome; (6) the enemies resort to tactics of diversion (rumors, lies, a plot to discredit or destroy Nehemiah), but the wall is completed in 52 days. Then they needed residents, which is the reason for (7) republishing the list of first returnees as prospects for new settlers in the city, as already noted.

Chapters 8-13 also may be divided in half. First there is the great revival: (8) affecting the intellect, the Law is read one day, then through the Feast of Booths; (9) affecting the emotions, there is a psalm or prayer of confession; (10) affecting the will or actions, the people sign vows of faithfulness. Then in the last three chapters, (11) the residents of Jerusalem and the names of surrounding settlements are listed; (12) genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is at last dedicated, which is the climax of the book; (13) foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Now get out thirteen cards or slips of paper and write a title of a chapter on each, leaving off the number; then mix them up (the following list is already mixed), and practice arranging them in order.

The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.

The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.

Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.

The rebuilding of the wall, section by section is described.

The people make vows of faithfulness.

Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.

The Law is read and the Feast of Booths is kept.

The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.

The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.

Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.

The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem, and names of other cities, are listed.



## Word Study Index

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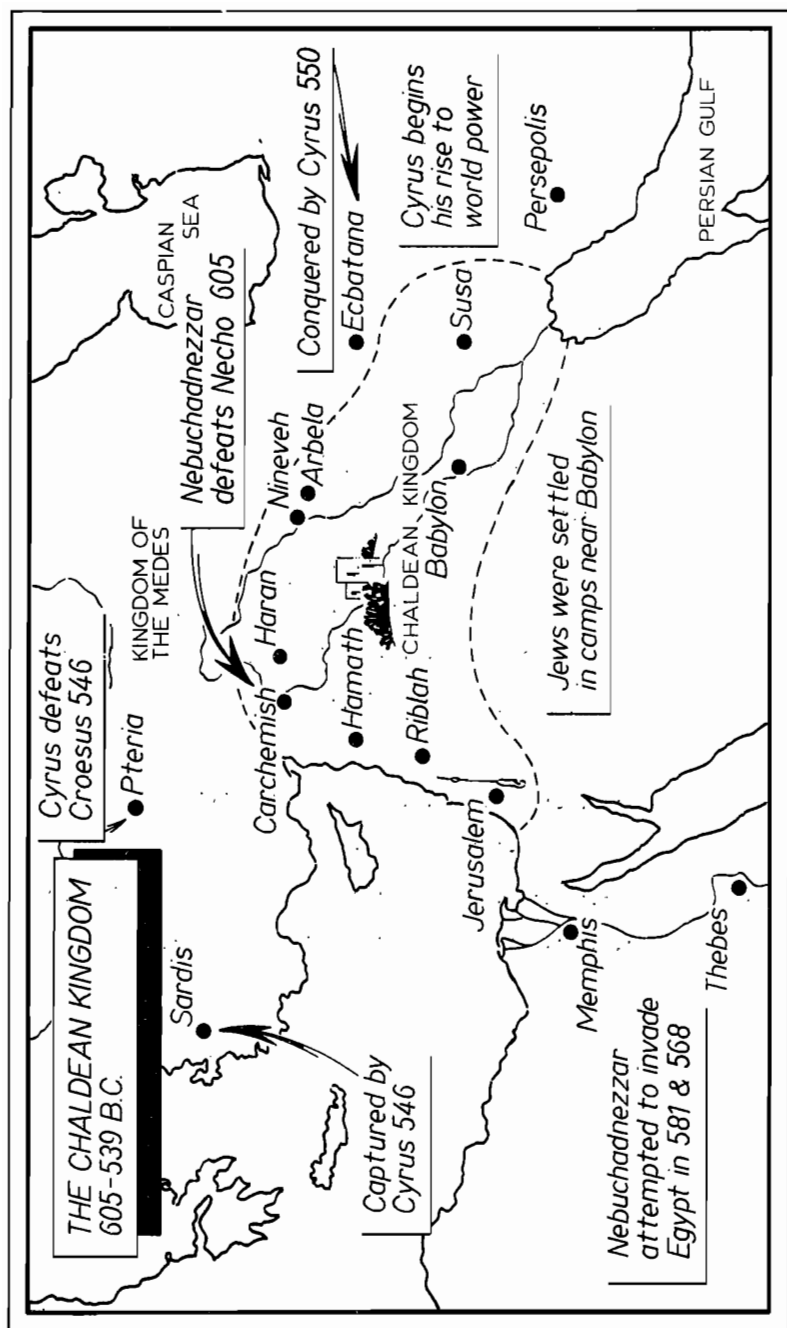
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# ESTHER



THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO

*Don and Elsie DeWelt*

*who not only encouraged me to write  
but have had the courage to publish what*

*I have written . . .*

*and whose lives display the same daring*

*and determination to save*

*God's people as Esther's . . .*

*with special thanks to my secretary,*

*Mrs. Penny Skaggs*

*whose help with my administrative and instructional tasks  
was invaluable in completing this work.*



# Esther

## INTRODUCTION

*Author:* Quite simply, we do not know who the author was. The name *Esther* is probably from *Ishtar*, a Persian or Akkadian word meaning, *star* (Venus). Jewish rabbinical tradition (Bava Betra—a part of the Talmud) says: “. . . the man of the Great Synagogue wrote . . . the roll of Esther.” Others (including Josephus and Ibn Ezra) attribute the authorship of the book to Mordecai, Esther’s uncle. We just do not know with any certainty who wrote this book. The author was probably a Persian Jew. Familiarity with Persian life and customs forces that conclusion. The author of this book made use of some of Mordecai’s writings (9:20), the official records of the kings of Media and Persia (2:23; 10:2), and probably the eyewitness accounts preserved through oral tradition.

*Date:* The book was evidently written after the death of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). We set this date because 10:2 implies that the official state history of the reign of Ahasureus had already been written when the book of Esther was composed. Ahasureus died by assassination in 465 B.C. Scholars have pointed to the absence of any traces of Greek influence either in language or thought as evidence that the book of Esther may *not* be dated any *later* than 330 B.C. While on the other hand, the intimate and exact knowledge of Persian culture of the fifth century B.C. indicates the most likely date to be somewhere between 460-450 B.C.

*Canonicity:* The unique nature of the book of Esther has caused problems concerning its canonicity. The problems will be dealt with later. Esther has been accepted as an authoritative part of the revelation of God from a very early date. Its canonicity may be traced as follows:

- a. The Council of Jamnia, held by Jewish scholars and rabbis in 90 A.D., was to discuss the canon of the Old Testament. The very fact that the canonicity of a few books (one of which was Esther) was challenged proves these books had *earlier* been considered canonical.
- b. Josephus (cir. 90 A.D.) indicates that the same books we



have in our present Old Testament (including Esther) are the same ones considered canonical by Jewish leaders of his day.

- c. Melito of Sardis (170 A.D.) went to Palestine himself and confirmed the canonicity of the O.T. as we have it today.
- d. Origen, Christian scholar of about 250 A.D. confirms the canon of the O.T. as it is today.
- e. The Jewish Talmud of about 400 A.D. confirms the canonicity of Esther.
- f. The scientific scholarship of 20 centuries (manuscript discoveries, archaeological discoveries) has amassed an accumulation of evidence to convince any honest student that Esther is truly a part of God's revelation to man.

One of the most significant arguments for the canonicity of the book of Esther is that there is no reasonable explanation for the historic fact of the Feast of Purim as observed by succeeding generations of Jews except that such remarkable events as recorded in this book actually took place there and then.

*Persian Culture:* Where did the Persians come from? In the hills of what is today known as Iran lived a rugged, dynamic man called Cyrus. Isaiah predicted his rise to fame over 100 years before he was born! (See *Isaiah, Vol. III*, by Butler, pg. 108-112; College Press.) He began his rise to world conquest among the shepherds of this land of majestic mountains and ferocious deserts. Under the leadership of Cyrus, this army of former shepherds overthrew the Median government and by 550 B.C. Cyrus had united the Medes and Persians into an unbeatable fighting force. By 547 B.C. Cyrus had defeated Croesus, king of Lydia (Asia Minor, known today as Turkey). Then he conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and continued expanding his territorial rule until he was slain in battle near the southern shore of the Caspian Sea.

Persian government was unique to a Mesopotamian world that had formerly been divided into many different warring clans and tribes. It was the first time people of many different races and

## INTRODUCTION

cultures were controlled under one ruler and government. Cyrus and his immediate successors were very wise in administering their rule. All citizens (regardless of race) were given equal rights and the same demands of citizenship were made of all citizens. As long as there was no political rebellion, most people were allowed to worship according to their ethnic religions and maintain their cultural distinctions. In some instances they were even permitted to keep their own rulers (subordinate to the emperor of Persia, of course).

There were three capital cities in Persia. This made it possible for the emperors to travel throughout their empire and keep "in touch" with their subjects. The cities were: *Susa* or *Shushan*, in the delightfully temperate and fertile valley of the Choaspes River (river Ulai, Dan. 8:2) and many Jews lived here later in the days of Esther and Nehemiah—Persian emperors "wintered" here; *Persepolis*, down in the deserts east of the Persian Gulf about 200 miles, whose ruins are visible today, was the royal seat of the Achaemenid kings of Persia. It was a city of grandeur and strong defenses, but burned and looted by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., and; *Ecbatana*, the capital of Media, located in the cool mountainous region just south of the Caspian Sea, the summer residence of the emperors of Persia.

Persian emperors administered their rule through "The Law of the Medes and The Persians." Once a law was passed, it could never be changed. Not even a king could change it (cf. Dan. 6:12ff.). This was actually beneficial to the citizens in two ways: (a) It meant that the laws necessary to maintaining the structures of society were above the individual's whims, even those of capricious emperors! Not even the emperor was as powerful as the law. (b) Those who had the responsibility of making laws and enforcing them were very careful to make sure the law was a good and just law before it was passed. If even those who make the laws could not change them to suit their own fancies, it tended to make for laws that were more just for everyone.

The empire was divided into twenty-one provinces called *satrapies*. Each province was ruled by a *satrap* who might be a local ruler or a Persian noble. The emperor appointed his own

elite inspectors to check up on the *satraps* and these inspectors were called "the eyes and ears of the emperor," (cf. Dan. 6:1-5), and if the emperor received an unfavorable report about one of his satraps, he usually executed the culprit.

In order to create a good economic base for the empire, Persian rulers instituted a standardized currency, built an empire-wide road system and policed it with soldiers so that it was said a woman could travel across the country in safety. They set up a type of "pony express" whereby the emperor could be in touch with information from any part of his empire within almost one week. Every 14 miles along the main roads was an express station where messengers would change horses so they could travel the 1600 miles between Sardis (in Asia Minor or Lydia) and Susa in one week.

The Persians were not exactly monotheists, but neither were they polytheists. They thought it was foolish to worship many gods, but they did not mind other peoples being polythesists. Their god was Ahura Mazda, "the Wise Lord." Zoroaster, a philosopher who lived about 600 B.C., taught that Mazda created the earth and that Mazda's holy spirit wars against an evil spirit, Ahriman. Human beings are involved in a warfare between these good and evil spirits. There was an element of Messianism in Zoroastrianism for it taught that after the earthly life of a future Savior, God would finally triumph over evil, and all souls on the side of good would pass over the "bridge of decision" and enjoy eternal bliss while all on the side of evil would be tortured forever. Zoroaster stressed truth and mercy. Some think that Isaiah 45:7 (contextually predicting the reign of Cyrus about 180 years later) is a prophetic rebuttal of Zoroastrianism. The teachings of Zoroaster were written in twenty-one volumes and are known as *Zend Avesta*.

*Persian Imperialism:* When Cyrus defeated Croesus (king of Lydia), all the cities Greece had colonized in Ionia (Asia Minor) came under Persian rule. In 500 B.C. these cities rebelled against Persian rule, but Darius I suppressed the rebellion even though the Ionians had help from the mainland Greeks. Interference from the Greek mainlanders angered Darius so he decided to invade the mainland and bring all Greece under Persian control.

## INTRODUCTION

In 490 B.C. the Persian army sailed across the Aegean Sea and landed on the plains of Marathon, just north of Athens. The Athenians, greatly outnumbered sent a runner to Sparta for help. The runner made the 150 miles over hilly, rocky territory in two days, but the Spartans were having a festival and refused to send help until after the celebration. The Athenians attacked, scattered the Persian forces, killing 6400 Persians while losing only about 200 men. It was a great victory for the Greeks. The Battle of Marathon was significant for if Persia had conquered Greece and destroyed her culture (her ideas on democratic and republican forms of government, her art and philosophies) the history of western civilization might be far different than it is today.

Darius' son, Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was determined to complete what his father could not. Xerxes took the throne in 486 B.C. In 483 B.C. Xerxes (Ahasuerus) gave his great banquet (Esther 1:3) probably to display his pompsity and power in preparation for the invasion of Greece. This was the banquet where he was humiliated by his wife Vashti. Three years later, 480 B.C., Xerxes had a pontoon bridge stretched across the Dardanelles Strait using 674 small boats as pontoons. When a storm temporarily destroyed part of the bridge, Xerxes took his rage out by trying to "scourge" the sea and by executing the engineers who built the bridge. Finally Xerxes and his massive force walked across the bridge and invaded Greece. For three days a small force of Spartans held up the massive Persian army at Thermopylae (a narrow mountain pass). The Persians found a way around this pass through a Greek deserter, destroyed the Spartan army and marched down to Athens. There they burned the city to the ground. The Athenians, however, escaped to their fleet of small boats and tricked the Persian navy (350 large, cumbersome ships) into the small Bay of Salamis where 200 of the Persian ships were destroyed. Xerxes made a hasty retreat to Persia, leaving a large army still in Greece. This force was totally defeated at the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. The battle of Plataea became the watershed of Persian imperialism. Persia remained a powerful empire for another 150 years, but she began to deteriorate culturally and

morally from the days of Xerxes until Alexander the Great finally conquered her in 330 B.C.

*Xerxes:* Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486-465 B.C.) was the son of Darius by Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus. For twelve years he served under his father as viceroy of Babylon before succeeding to the throne at the death of Darius. The Persian form of the name Xerxes is Khshayarsha, which, in Hebrew is rendered Ahasuerus (cf. Ezra 4:6 and the Book of Esther). Xerxes lived 14 years after the loss of Greece, but little is known about him in that time. He was murdered by a usurper, Artabanus, who is said to have reigned seven months before being killed by Artaxerxes, the third son and legitimate heir to Xerxes. Xerxes was about 55 years old when he was assassinated. He was reportedly very rich and indulgent and habitually acted like an impudent, petulant brat. The episode with the pontoon bridge, the Vashti incident, and the hasty accession to the spiteful hate of Haman all agree well with this description. He was given to ostentation and loved display and appears to have been susceptible to the flattery and intrigue of fawning courtiers. Xerxes is probably the "fourth" Persian ruler mentioned in Daniel 11:2. For thorough treatment of Persian historical background see *Daniel*, by Paul T. Butler, College Press, chapters six, eight and eleven.

### *Some Historical Difficulties in Esther:*

1. Herodotus, Greek historian of the 5th century B.C., says that a woman named Amestris, daughter of a Persian named Otanes, was Xerxes' queen in the seventh year of his reign. The book of Esther says Esther was. Amestris and Esther cannot be the same person since Amestris was cruel, even to the point of sadistic brutality. Amestris was a Persian. There are those who might think there is a historical contradiction between the biblical record and Herodotus. However, Herodotus does *not* say Esther was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes; neither does the Bible say Amestris was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes. Therefore, there is no contradiction. It is altogether possible that Xerxes, having given his banquet in the third year of his reign (483 B.C.) (Esther 1:3) and deposed Vashti,

then made Amestris queen. After this, Xerxes entered into his first campaign against Greece (480 B.C.) and was defeated. He returned, deposed Amestris and elevated Esther to queenship in the seventh year (479-478 B.C.) (Esther 2:16) of his reign. Omission by Herodotus of Esther and Vashti does not mean he *contradicts* the Bible. Omission in the book of Esther of Amestris does not mean that the Bible contradicts Herodotus. It might be of interest to remember that on the basis of an omission of the name of Belshazzar by Herodotus, many critics of the Bible denied the historicity of Daniel's book—that is, until archaeological discoveries verified the existence of King Belshazzar and the historicity of Daniel's account concerning him!

2. The statement in Esther 2:5-6 has been offered by some as evidence of the historical inaccuracy of the book of Esther. Critics insisted this passage was an historical *faux pas* because it implies that Mordecai was taken captive from Palestine in the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. Mordecai was, of course, a contemporary of Xerxes. That would have made Xerxes and Nebuchadnezzar contemporaries—an historical impossibility! However, the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *'esher* ("who") in verse six is not Mordecai but Kish, his great grandfather. Actually, the time between the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. and the time of Mordecai (483 B.C.) is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai!

3. A third objection to the accuracy of the text of Esther is in connection with the statement (9:16) that the Jews killed 75,000 enemies throughout the empire in one day. First, it was by command of the emperor that the Jews "in every city" carry out this execution. Second, there were 500 executed in Susa, the capital, in one day (9:6). It would only require that 500 be executed in 150 cities each to total 75,000. When the vastness of the Persian empire is considered (Asia Minor and parts of Greece on the west, to India on the east; Armenia on the north, to Palestine and Egypt on the south) it is not in the least incredible that it actually happened. Josephus mentions that a small detachment of the Roman army killed more than 15,000 Jews in one day who were

fleeing from Gadara during the Jewish revolt (64-70 A.D.). The Septuagint gives the number slain in Esther 9:16 as 15,000, but the Hebrew text probably gives the accurate number. We will deal with the ethics of the situation in our comments on the text.

4. Fourth, the book's historicity was impugned because no trace of the name Mordecai was to be found in secular history. Critical opinions have been changed since archaeological inscriptions were found mentioning a certain Marduk-ai-a (Mordecai??) as an official in Susa during the reign of Xerxes (See *A Survey of O. T. Introduction*, Gleason Archer, Moody Press, pg. 405.).

5. The science of archaeology has provided undeniable evidence of the historical accuracy of the book of Esther. An inscription of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.) states that the palace of Xerxes (Esther's husband 486-465 B.C.) was destroyed by fire in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.). The ruins were located in Susa and very definite portions of the palace were identified: e.g., the "king's gate" (4:2); the "inner court" (5:1); the "outer court" (6:4); the "palace garden" (7:7); and even one of the dice or lots (called "Pur" in Persian) were found (3:7)! Now if this palace was destroyed in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.), it was destroyed within 30 years of the time of Esther's living in the palace (486-424 B.C.). Yet the critics who attack the historicity of the book would have us believe that an unknown author 200 years after this palace was destroyed could describe its ground plans in intimate and perfect detail! The reader may find more information of Esther's palace in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, art. 1009a.

6. The most important criticism of the book of Esther, however, is not aimed toward its historicity, but toward its theology. The total absence of the name of God is the chief difficulty for many critics. The Talmud gives Deut. 31:18 as a reason why God's name is not mentioned. Because of the sin of idolatry, God had cast them into captivity and "veiled His face" from the Jews. The promise of this judgment is intensified in the Prophets. Edward J. Young (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pub. Eerdmans, pg. 378) theorizes, "These Jews in Persia . . . showed no desire to return to Palestine . . . Their theocratic spirit . . .

## INTRODUCTION

was weak . . . despite that fact, God had not rejected them . . . He would still watch over them. . . . But, since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the *Name* of the covenant God (Yahweh) is not associated with them . . . since they are in this distant, far country, and not in the land of promise, His name is not mentioned. . . . By causing us to behold the workings of providence, the book does, after all, turn our eyes to God who determines the destinies of men and nations.” Perhaps more significant is the indication from the book of Esther itself that it is, after all, primarily an extract from the official documents of the Persian Court and this would account for both its minute secular details and the omission of the name of God (e.g. 2:23; 3:14; 6:2; 8:9-14; 9:14, 20; 9:29-32; 10:1-3). Matthew Henry said, “If the name of God is not here, His finger is.” No other book in the Bible teaches the providence of God as forcibly as the book of Esther. The providence of God preserving the Jews through Esther is no more astonishing than that predicted (Dan. 2:20-23) and recorded in the life of Daniel. God’s providence is over all things. Nothing “just happens,” even in a pagan empire. One commentator says, “It is almost universally agreed that this omission (of the name of God) must have been intentional. He offers the theory that since Esther was to be read at the annual Feast of Purim and it was such a time of merry-making, the author feared that the Divine Name might be profaned, or that the book might be profanely treated by Gentiles because of its story of the triumph of the Jews over their enemies.

### *Outline: The Providence of God Preserving His People*

- I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22
- II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23
- III. Perverseness of Haman, 3:1-15
- IV. Pluck of Esther, 4:1-17
- V. Plan of Esther, 5:1-8
- VI. Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14
- VII. Pride of Haman, 6:1-14
- VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10

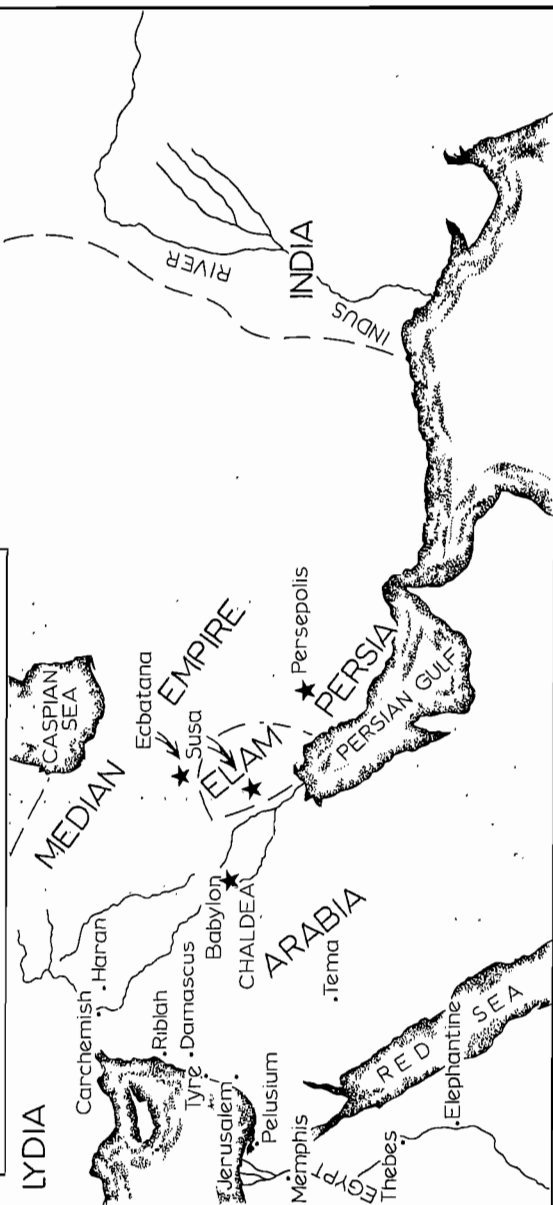


- IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17
- X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19
- XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32
- XII. Postscript, 10:1-3

*Value:* The Book of Esther, in the Hebrew Bible, is the last of the five *Megilloth*. The *Megilloth* (literally, the word means, *rolls* or *scrolls*) is a group of writings (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther) which are used in the Jewish liturgical year. Song of Solomon is read at Passover (first month); Ruth is read at Pentecost (third month); Lamentations is read in the fifth month (Ab); Ecclesiastes is read at the Feast of Tabernacles (seventh month); and Esther is read at the Feast of Purim (twelfth month). At one time it was normal for every Jewish household to possess a scroll or book of Esther for such liturgical purposes. Among the Jews Esther is the best known of all the books of the Bible. The impetus for a patriotic Jewish nationalism provided by the book would make it very popular among Jewish people. The book is of the calibre of literary excellence. It is recognized to be a valuable source of information filling many gaps in the accounts of classical historians. It is thus an invaluable research source for biblical historians. It has all the merits of great literature: distinct characterization; graphic, vivid descriptions; clear and concise language; action; plot; resolution; drama. A vast body of Jewish apocryphal literature has grown up around the book of Esther which is of no value whatever because of its unhistorical nature. Its greatest value is the lesson that God is able to providentially preserve those who trust Him in the face of overwhelming opposition.



PLACES IN THE  
BABYLONIAN (625 - 539)  
AND PERSIAN (539 - 325)  
EMPIRES



## I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22

### A. Display

TEXT: 1:1-8

- 1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces,)
- 2 that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,
- 3 in the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him;
- 4 when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even a hundred and fourscore days.
- 5 And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.
- 6 There were hangings of white cloth, of green, and of blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and white, and yellow, and black marble.
- 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another), and royal wine in abundance, according to the bounty of the king.
- 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none could compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

### Today's English Version, 1:1-8

From his royal throne in Persia's capital city of Susa, King Xerxes ruled 127 provinces, all the way from India to Sudan.

In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his officials and administrators. The armies of Persia and Media were present,

as well as the governors and noblemen of the provinces. For six whole months he made a show of the riches of the imperial court with all its splendor and majesty.

After that, the king gave a banquet for all the men in the capital city of Susa, rich and poor alike. It lasted a whole week and was held in the gardens of the royal palace. The courtyard there was decorated with blue and white cotton curtains, tied by cords of fine purple linen to silver rings on marble columns. Couches made of gold and silver had been placed in the courtyard, which was paved with white marble, red feldspar, shining mother-of-pearl, and blue turquoise. Drinks were served in gold cups, no two of them alike, and the king was generous with the royal wine. There were no limits on the drinks; the king had given orders to the palace servants that everyone could have as much as he wanted.

## COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Potentate*: 'Ahashewerosh is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khshayarsha* (which is *Xerxes* in Greek). Ahasuerus is generally recognized by historians as Xerxes I (486-465). It is not the same Ahasuerus as named in Ezra 4 and Daniel 9 (who was probably Cambyses, the immediate successor of Cyrus the Great). The author of Esther distinguishes this Ahasuerus by describing his reign from "India to Ethiopa." The Hebrew word for "India" is *hoddu* an old Persian word meaning *Hindu* or Sanskrit meaning, *great river*; hence, Indus River. The empire of Xerxes extended from the Indus River on the east to Ethiopia (*Cush*, in Hebrew) in the south, and to Lydia (Asia Minor) on the east (see map on page 271). At one time, the Persian empire even extended east into the Greek mainland. Some have been skeptical about the statement that Xerxes ruled over 127 "provinces," because Herodotus wrote that the empire was divided into 20 satrapies. The Hebrew word translated *provinces* is *medinah* and it is not certain at all that *medinah* represents the same as the word *satrapy*. *Medinah* may very well represent a subdivision of the Persian *satrapy*. According to Herodotus there were about 60

nations under the Persian rule so it is altogether possible that the 20 satrapies or 60 nations were subdivided into smaller "provinces" (127 of them). Xerxes assumed the throne in 486 B.C. Shushan (Susa) was the city from which he was ruling in the third year of his reign. The Hebrew word *birah* is translated *palace* but is, more accurately, *fortress*. This was the whole palatial section of the city of Susa which was much more strongly fortified than the city surrounding it. The *birah* included the courts, gardens, out-buildings and the royal palace itself. Furthermore, the same word *birah* is used in 2:5 to indicate that Mordecai lived within the fortress and in 9:12 showing that as many as 500 other common citizens lived within the fortress of Susa. The main city had a circumference of six to seven miles, and the *birah* (fortress) was enclosed with a massive wall about two and one half miles square. As late as 1100-1200 A.D. there were 7000 Jews living in Susa. By 1500 A.D. the city became uninhabited and fell into ruins.

v. 3-5 *People*: In the third year of his reign (483 B.C.), Xerxes was making plans, according to Herodotus, to invade the Greek mainland. He planned to attack within two years. This "feast" was, in Hebrew, a *mishetteh*. *Mishetteh* is from a root word meaning, *to drink wine*; hence it is a banquet whose main feature is a drinking bout (cf. 1:7-8). The Hebrew word *sarav* would be better translated *officials* or *rulers* than *princes*. It is from the root *sar* meaning to rule, while the word *nagid* (used of the Messiah in Dan. 9:24-27) has more the connotation of royalty. The word *paretemim* is translated *nobles* and is probably derived from a Babylonian word meaning *first* or *chief*. The word *chel* is translated in the ASV, *power*; it means literally, *army* (cf. Isa. 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17). We are not told exactly how many guests there were. But the number would certainly run into the hundreds. And it is probable that the guest list changed regularly because he would not want to invite the whole army and all its chiefs at once and leave the empire defenseless. Besides, the feast lasted six months so the guests could come in relays.

Verse 4 specifically states the purpose of this feast was that Xerxes might "show" the riches of his kingdom and his own

majesty for half a year. If Xerxes lived today, psychiatrists would say he had "an identity problem." The emperor's main reason for this great feast seems to have been to create an image for himself. He wished to impress his government officials with his greatness. According to Herodotus it was at this feast Xerxes announced: "As Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, have enlarged the empire, I wish to do the same. I propose to bridge the Hellespont, march through Europe, and fire Athens for burning Sardis and opposing Datis and Artaphernes. By reducing Attica and Greece, the sky will be the only boundary of Persia." The emperor's "image building" had also the pragmatic motive of "psyching" his fighting force up for the coming invasion of Greece. Not only were the government officials and the army and its chiefs feasted, the emperor made a week-long feast for all the other citizens then residing in the fortress of Susa, both rich and poor, great and small. These drinking bouts seem to have been for men only. The women apparently had a feast of their own (1:9).

v. 6 *Palace*: The description of the palace is in no way an exaggeration. Tapestries and awnings of expensive, imported linens in pure white, deep green and royal blue were fastened with soft white linen cords to solid silver rings and tall pillars of marble. Some of these columns of marble were 67 feet high. In 1884-86 a Frenchman named Dieulafoy excavated the ruins of this great palace. One writer has said, "There is no event described in the Old Testament whose structural surroundings can be so vividly and accurately restored from actual excavations as 'Shushan the palace.'" Couches (used to recline upon when eating, probably much like the later Roman *triclinium*) were either overlaid heavily with gold and silver or made of pure gold and silver. The floors of the palace were made of beautifully patterned and variable-colored marbles red, white, mother-of-pearl yellow, and black.

v. 7-8 *Party*: The feasting passion of the Persians was insatiable. Some of these feasts had as many as 15,000 guests at one time, and cost nearly \$100,000 for each banquet session. As noted before (1:3) *mishetteh* means a *drinking bout*. Wine flowed freely, according to the "bounty" of the king. The Hebrew word translated "bounty" is *yod* and is literally, *hand*. In other words,

the good, choice wine of the imperial wine-cellars was distributed according to the king's boundless means. Ordinarily, everyone present drank only upon command or invitation according to the "law" of ritual and the whim of the emperor or toastmaster. At these feasts, however, that law had been suspended and everyone was allowed to drink as they pleased. The Persians were noted for their drinking. Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), Greek historian and soldier, knew this and wrote, "They drink so much that they cannot stand upright on their feet, and must be carried out." This was the setting and these were the circumstances surrounding critical decisions made by the emperor Xerxes. The results or consequences of his decisions were used by the Lord God Jehovah to save the Jews of the dispersion from extinction and thus provide a witness to the revealed Word of God through the centuries awaiting the Messiah's coming. No matter how depraved or stupid the behavior of man, all will ultimately redound to the goal and glory of God.

## B. Defiance

TEXT: 1:9-12

- 9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.
- 10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,
- 11 to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on.
- 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

## Today's English Version, 1:9-12

Meanwhile, inside the royal palace Queen Vashti was giving a banquet for the women.

On the seventh day of his banquet the king was drinking and feeling happy, so he called in the seven eunuchs who were his personal servants, Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas. He ordered them to bring in Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. The queen was a beautiful woman, and the king wanted to show off her beauty to the officials and all his guests. But when the servants told Queen Vashti of the king's command, she refused to come. This made the king furious.

## COMMENTS

v. 9-11 *Demand*: Three different lexicons give three different meanings to the name *Vashti*; one lexicon says it means, *beauty* (a word of Persian origin); another says *Vashti* means, *best*; while still another says the meaning is *while drinking* (from the Hebrew root *shatha*). It is more likely to be of Persian origin. Some have suggested that *Vashti* was not the actual name of the queen but a word of endearment such as, "sweetheart" or "darling." There is no evidence that Persian custom demanded women feast separately from men. Esther invited Haman and the emperor to a feast (5:3ff). *Vashti* made her feast in the *beth-hammalekuth*, or, house of the king (palace). On the last day of the drinking bout, when the heart of the king was *detov* (lit. *at good*) or *merry* with wine, he ordered seven of his most trusted servants to bring the beautiful queen into the huge hall where all the inebriated men were carousing. The Jewish Talmud and other Jewish commentators think the command to be that *Vashti* should be brought in with *only* the royal crown, that is, naked. The custom of women appearing publicly only when veiled was doubtless as serious then in Persia as it is now in Iran. It would have been threatening enough to her modesty to appear fully dressed but without her



veil before hundreds of drunken men. She would have been ridiculed ever after as a common trollop. Of course, the king's demand might have actually required her to appear completely naked. That is more in character with the behavior of an intemperate man like Xerxes after drinking too much wine. The word translated *fair* is the Hebrew word *tov* which means literally, *good, pleasing, delightful* or *very excellent*.

v. 12 *Denial*: Vashti refused. That was all there was to it. She presumptuously and deliberately disobeyed the emperor's demand and sent the servants back empty-handed. Why did Vashti refuse? We must speculate. Perhaps her moral standards were high enough that she refused to do what was wrong. It would not be impossible that Vashti had adopted the higher moral standards of the Hebrew people around her. Some would question Vashti's morals because the *feast* she made for the women (1:9) was also a *mishetteh* (drinking bout). Most likely, Vashti's refusal was motivated by her desire to retain her social and political status. Any queen who would allow herself to be exploited and degraded like a common prostitute could never command respect for her person or position again. Vashti, too, may have become inebriated and with the false courage that comes with drunkenness, dared to defy the emperor's command. Whatever Vashti's reason, the emperor was enraged. A literal rendering would be, "And was angry the king, very (exceedingly), and his anger blazed within him." The word translated *very* is 'ud and means, *steaming, powerful, excessively, fiery*. Xerxes, who just moments ago was feeling good all over and merry in his heart, is now steaming and burning with red-hot anger. "What-fools we are to put into our mouths that which would take away our brains!" (Shakespeare). How devastating drunkenness is to cause a monarch to lose all sense of propriety toward one who occupies the position of queen of the realm!

### C. Decree

TEXT: 1:13-22

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

- 14 and the next unto him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom,)
- 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not done the bidding of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?
- 16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the peoples that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.
- 17 For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.
- 18 And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like unto all the king's princes. So will there arise much contempt and wrath.
- 19 If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before the king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.
- 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his kingdom, (for it is great,) all the wives will give to their husbands honor, both to great and small.
- 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:
- 22 for he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and should speak according to the language of his people.

### Today's English Version, 1:13-22

Now it was the king's custom to ask for expert opinion on questions of law and order, so he called for his advisers, who

would know what should be done. Those he most often turned to for advice were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan—seven officials of Persia and Media who held the highest offices in the kingdom. He said to these men, “I, King Xerxes, sent my servants to Queen Vashti with a command, and she refused to obey it! What does the law say that we should do with her?”

Then Memucan declared to the king and his officials; “Queen Vashti has insulted not only the king but also his officials—in fact, every man in the empire! Every woman in the empire will start looking down on her husband as soon as she hears what the queen has done. They’ll say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to come to him, and she refused.’ When the wives of the royal officials of Persia and Media hear about the queen’s behavior, they will be telling their husbands about it before the day is out. Wives everywhere will have no respect for their husbands, and husbands will be angry with their wives. If it please Your Majesty, issue a royal proclamation that Vashti may never again appear before the king. Have it written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it can never be changed. Then give her place as queen to some better woman. When your proclamation is made known all over this huge empire, every woman will treat her husband with proper respect, whether he’s rich or poor.”

The king and his officials liked this idea, and the king did what Memucan suggested. To each of the royal provinces he sent a message in the language and the system of writing of that province, saying that every husband should be the master of his home and speak with final authority.

## COMMENTS

v. 13-15 *Panic*: When Vashti disobeyed the emperor’s order, panic ensued. The image he had built for himself by this grandiose feast was destroyed in one stroke. It was such an unprecedented response, the emperor did not know how he should act. He knew the queen’s actions would be known sooner or later throughout

the empire. Along with the gossip must go a story of the emperor handling the situation. But how shall it be handled? He hastily convened a meeting with his "wise" men. These are well-known men who are "next unto him" and probably would be likened to our President's "cabinet members." They were not astrologers or magi as the Talmud thinks. They are men learned in the laws and customs of Persian government—familiar with all precedents set in the past and presently having the power of law. The Hebrew word used here for *law* is *dath* and not the usual *torah* (Mosaic law). *Dath* is a word used in the O.T. only during the Persian period and is used of the emperor's laws 3:8; Haman used the word to refer to the "laws of the Jews" 3:8; it is used for the rules of drinking at a feast 1:8; for purifying of women 2:12. The Hebrew word translated *the times* is *ha'itim* and most often means *past times*. Some commentators have theorized that "the times" refers to the winds of a social upheaval (an ancient "equal rights movement") then beginning to blow in Persia. Since the word *ha'itim* almost always means *times of the past* it is doubtful that such a movement was then in progress. Most assuredly, if Vashti's impertinence is not squelched, a feminist movement would soon be started! That was the definite conclusion of the emperor's advisory council. There were seven families of the first rank (Ezra 7:14) in Persia, from which the king was supposed to take his wives. The chiefs of each of these seven families had access to the king at all times, except when he was in the company of one of his wives.

v. 16-20 *Prompting*: Why did Xerxes wish to punish Vashti "according to law"? Apparently there was no law at that time to cover such behavior. The emperor eventually made one, but it was after the fact. Perhaps Xerxes did not have the courage or the ability to handle Vashti's insolence as a husband should. Perhaps the deflation of his ego prompted him to seek a severe punishment to recover his damaged image. Memucan recognized that the politically expedient thing to do was suggest some punishment which would make it appear Vashti's behavior was a serious matter of public policy and concerned the welfare of the whole empire. It would not do, of course, to allow the citizens to think

Vashti's punishment was merely the gratification of the emperor's personal rage.

Memucan, a true male-chauvinist, believed that a woman's respect and surrender is insured through male despotism. Some men believe the only way to assert masculinity is to exploit and tyrannize the opposite sex. The only real and lasting way a man may command the respect and devotion of a woman is to love her with all his heart and actions. Memucan may have known deep in his heart the truth of that last statement, but practically, feared such an answer would not satisfy the emperor's impetuous rage. There is no reason to suppose that Vashti's behavior would cause such catastrophic rebellion as depicted by Memucan. The probable cause of Vashti's rebellion in the first place was the domineering attempt of Xerxes to profane her womanhood before a whole host of male-chauvinists. Memucan's advice to reinforce male domination and exploitation by royal decree would hardly remedy the situation created by Vashti's refusal to obey her husband. It is true that women of that culture were, in some instances, treated as chattel by men. Vashti's defiance caused more of a stir in the hearts of men of the empire than in the women. The contempt and wrath Memucan feared was that of the men of the empire.

There may have been political intrigue involved in Memucan's advice. It appears he expected the emperor to dispose of Vashti's royalty to another "better than she." Did Memucan have someone specifically in mind? If he expected the emperor to choose the next queen from one of the families of the first-ranked seven, perhaps Memucan had a maiden from his own family in mind. Whatever the case, Memucan's advice is very specific that the emperor make it a public decree ("written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes") so that it could not be changed. Vashti's deposition and banishment must be irrevocable. If the way were left open for her to regain Xerxes' favor and restoration to the throne, she would surely execute her vengeance on Memucan.

v. 21-22 *Precedent*: We tend to agree with the Jewish rabbis in the Midrash that Xerxes "was utterly devoid of sense in so

decreeing," and, "Nay more, he made himself a laughing-stock." There was no need for such a decree. The women of Persia would not be able to overthrow the government or revolutionize the cultural status-quo because of Vashti's disobedience. This royal law protected the myth of male superiority about as much as the attempt to legislate female equality by an "equal rights amendment" in the United States! It is apparent from certain incidents in the book of Esther that wives were held in considerable esteem by their husbands (cf. 5:10; 5:13; 7:1-2, etc.). Xerxes certainly could neither insure his own male superiority nor that of the men of his empire by passing a law. He already had at his disposal enough force to depose or slay a queen who disobeyed him if he wished. But Vashti had already proved that in spite of all his power and laws he could not force her to prostitute her womanhood if she did not wish to do so! But Memucan's advice pleased the intemperate king and his princes.

The precedent-setting decree was sent out to the whole empire. Since there were people of different languages (and probably different dialects), the decree was written in as many different languages as were necessary. The practice of the Persians to address proclamations in different languages is illustrated by the bilingual and trilingual inscriptions from Cyrus to Artaxerxes, and especially by that one of Darius preserved on the Behistun Rock (see map, page 271). The decree of Xerxes was, "Let every man bear rule in his own house," and, "speak according to the language of his people." The latter part of that decree seems superfluous. Jewish commentators take the phrase to mean that if a husband and wife were of different race and language, the husband was not to allow the wife's language to prevail in the home. He was to compel his wife to learn and speak his language.

What happened to Vashti? There is no record. So far as we know, Vashti was never given an opportunity to speak in her own defense. Nor do we find anyone else speaking out on her behalf. Her fate was decided according to the whim of an egotistical and intemperate tyrant. Jewish tradition believes she was executed. The history of deposed kings and queens of the East would substantiate that tradition. Disgraced potentates were usually put to the sword.

Led into rashness by his own intemperance and given foolish counsel by his advisors, Xerxes is trapped. His hand is forced, he banishes the one closest to him and now he is alone with himself. He is in desperate need of a wise consort.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. Pride and arrogance feeds on the exploitation of others.
2. Intemperance, especially in alcohol, causes people to disregard decency and sacrifice personal integrity.
3. No woman, not even a pagan one, likes to be treated as a mere object or “thing” to satisfy male gratification.
4. The proper functioning of members of a household cannot be sustained through civil legislation—it must be established through love.
5. Almighty God uses the consequences of men’s evil deeds to carry out His plan of redemption for the world.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Ahasureus’ Greek name?
2. How large was his Persian empire?
3. What kind of feast was being held by the Persian emperor?
4. What was his purpose in holding the feast?
5. How would you characterize Ahasuerus?
6. Why do you think Vashti refused the emperor’s demand?
7. Why did the emperor panic when Vashti refused him?
8. Memucan’s advice was born of what shrewdness?
9. Do you believe the emperor’s decree was as necessary as Memucan advised?
10. What lessons are to be learned here?

## II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23

### A. Search for a Queen

TEXT: 2:1-4

- 1 After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was pacified, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.
- 2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:
- 3 and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women; unto the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them;
- 4 and let the maiden that pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

### Today's English Version, 2:1-4

Later, even after the king's anger had cooled down, he kept thinking about what Vashti had done and about his proclamation against her. So some of the king's advisers who were close to him suggested, "Why don't you make a search to find some beautiful young virgins? You can appoint officials in every province of the empire and have them bring all these beautiful young girls to your harem here in Susa, the capital city. Put them in the care of Hegai, the eunuch who is in charge of your women, and let them be given a beauty treatment. Then take the girl you like best and make her queen in Vashti's place."

The king thought this was good advice, so he followed it.

## COMMENTS

v. 1 *Remorse*: Late in 480 B.C., Xerxes (Ahasuerus) returned from a disastrous military expedition to the Greek mainland (see Introduction, pg. 265). It had been three long years since he had,



in a drunken rage, humiliated his beautiful queen, Vashti (she was probably executed finally). The word *pacified* is *keosek* in Hebrew and means "a sinking down." Finally, after three years, his wrath settled down enough for him to remember with remorse, his beautiful Vashti, and what he had done to her. The Hebrew word *zakar* is the verb translated *remembered*. He remembered "what she had done, and what was decreed against her." He had gone to Greece filled with male egotism, for a while venting his arrogance upon the Greeks, but then, suffering a humiliating defeat, he returned to Persia slightly less arrogant perhaps, than when he left. Whether Xerxes remembered Vashti before this or not, the Hebrew language does not indicate. The Hebrew verb system has no tense, at least in the sense in which past, present, and future are understood in English. Hebrew verbs have two "kinds" of action; complete and incomplete. It does have seven verb stems each expressing a particular voice or degree of action. The word *zakar* is the Qal stem of the verb and means completed action in the active voice; "he remembered." Perhaps it was not until Xerxes had suffered an ego-deflation and returned to the familiar surroundings of the palace that the impact of the Vashti incident was able to sink into his heart. In the *Haggadah* (meaning, "relate") portion of the *Midrash* (meaning, "explanation") which is more homiletical than historical, it is conjectured that before Esther was made queen, Xerxes would compare women who entered with a statue of Vashti that stood near his bed. After his marriage the statue was replaced by one of Esther (Midrash Abba Guryon, Parashah 2). As legendary as that may be, the biblical text seems to infer that Xerxes realized that Vashti had acted with wisdom when she refused to allow her royal highness to be profaned, and that his reaction was, at best, hasty, and worse than that, despicable!

v. 2-4 *Recommendations*: The Hebrew noun *ne'aroth* is feminine plural of *na'ar*. It is translated *servants*; these *servants* were probably young maidens. Those now advising the emperor were not the seven princes of chapter one. These young maidens might well be visualizing the atmosphere in the palace should the emperor continue to brood on about his beautiful Vashti's fate

and his own guilt. Quickly, with the shrewdness of feminine intuition, they suggest something that is certain to divert the attention of the male of the species — a beauty contest to choose a new royal consort. Note that nothing is said about the social or political qualifications of the prospective queen. According to protocol, the emperor was supposed to take his wives from the seven chief families of the realm (see comments 1:13-15). These young female servants knew how to change the mood of the emperor. Their suggestion was that the search for a new queen be concentrated on the physical features of womanhood. She must be fair to look upon and she must be a virgin. The word for virgin is *bethulah* and connotes “young” virgin. For a discussion of the difference between the words *bethulah* and *‘almah*, both of which mean *virgin*, see *Isaiah, Vol. I*, by Butler, pub. College Press, pg. 152-153.

These women servants of the emperor suggested that elaborate procedures be instituted to find the “fairest of the fair,” the one young maiden in the whole Persian empire that would most please him. No possible candidate should be overlooked. All the maidens who might please the emperor were to be transported to the capital city, Susa, and housed in the “house of the women.” The “house of the women” was the emperor’s *harem*. Ancient kings and emperors had many wives and concubines. King Solomon had a house like this to accommodate his many wives and concubines (cf. I Kings 7:8). In the Persian palaces the “house of the women” was quite large and spacious because the emperors were known to have housed as many as 300 or 400 concubines as well as their “wives.” Hegai was probably one of the emperor’s most trusted *eunuchs*. The Hebrew word is *saris* and is translated in the RSV as *eunuch*. He was probably some repulsive old man, on whom the court ladies were very dependent, and whose favor they constantly courted. Some of the Hebrew kings evidently had such eunuchs (II Kings 9:32; Jer. 41:16). The Hebrew word *tameruqeyhen* is translated *things for purification* in the ASV but *their ointments* in the RSV. It is from the root word *maraq* which means *to make clean, bright by rubbing, to polish*. It is *not* the Hebrew word used to legislate religious or

ceremonial purification, therefore it probably had to do with some form of beauty treatment such as diet, training in royal behavior, anointment of the body with perfume, and facial make-up. It may also have been a sort of quarantine that would allow time for any latent disease or blemish to show up before the emperor made his selection.

The emperor considered this good (*tov*) advice. He was pleased at the prospect of looking over all the beautiful women of Persia and choosing one for a queen. It would be a welcome diversion from the tedious affairs of state.

### B. Solicitude of Mordecai

#### TEXT: 2:5-11

- 5 There was a certain Jew in Shushan the palace, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite,
- 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives that had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.
- 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.
- 8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.
- 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with her portions, and the seven maidens who were meet to be given her out of the king's house: and he removed her and her maidens to the best place of the house of the women.

- 10 Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not make it known.  
11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what would become of her.

### Today's English Version, 2:5-11

There in Susa lived a Jew named Mordecai son of Jair; he was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jehoiachin of Judah into exile from Jerusalem, along with a group of captives, Mordecai was among them. He had a cousin, Esther, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah; she was a beautiful girl, and had a good figure. At the death of her parents, Mordecai had adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.

When the king had issued his new proclamation and many girls were being brought to Susa, Esther was among them. She too was put in the royal palace in the care of Hegai, who had charge of the harem. Hegai liked Esther, and she won his favor. He lost no time in beginning her beauty treatment of massage and special diet. He gave her the best place in the harem and assigned seven girls specially chosen from the royal palace to serve her.

Now on the advice of Mordecai, Esther had kept it secret that she was Jewish. Every day Mordecai would walk back and forth in front of the courtyard of the harem, in order to find out how she was getting along and what was going to happen to her.

### COMMENTS

v. 5-7 *Orphanhood*: Enter Mordecai! This book might well have been called, *The Book of Mordecai*. All the way through the book Mordecai is as much a star as Esther and the book ends with an account of the fame and dignity of Mordecai. The Feast or Purim is called "the day of Mordecai" in II Maccabees 15:36. He

is a favorite character in the Rabbinical literature. The name Mordecai is derived from Marduk, chief deity of Babylon and Persia. Marduk means "be bold and audacious in acts of rebellion; run strenuously, attack." Some suggest that Nimrod is a Hebrew transmutation of Marduk which in turn has some relationship to the constellation Orion. "He who was to the Babylonians a deified hero, was to the Hebrews a rebel Titan, bound in chains among the stars that all might behold his punishment." The fact that the name Mordecai is derived from Marduk substantiates assumption that this famous man was born in captivity. It would seem physically impossible for Mordecai to have been born before the captivity and still be a contemporary of Xerxes. If Mordecai had been carried into captivity (even as an infant) with Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) in 596 B.C., he would be 122 years of age when he became prime minister in the 12th year of Xerxes' reign (474 B.C.); and Mordecai was in office for a long time after 474 B.C. (cf. 10:2ff). In the long standing argument about the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *who* (2:6) we have taken the position that it refers to Kish—great grandfather of Mordecai. The time between the exile of Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) and the time of Mordecai is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai. We have already indicated that *birah* ("palace") means more specifically, *fortress* (cf. 1:1-2). Mordecai did not at this time live within the royal palace itself, but inside the walled fortress known as Susa.

Mordecai was an especially compassionate man toward his own kinsmen. When his uncle and aunt died, they left a beautiful young daughter completely orphaned. Mordecai was a man who went beyond the letter of the law (Ex. 22:22) which forbade exploitation of the widow and the fatherless; he kept the spirit of the law as proclaimed by the prophets (Isa. 1:17) and defended the fatherless. Mordecai had no way of knowing when he first took Esther into his home as his own daughter that someday his association with Esther would promote him to high office and fame. But Jehovah who rewards the righteous knew! Yes, even Mordecai had come to Persia for such a time as this!

The orphaned girl had been named *Hadassah* by her parents

which means *myrtle* in Hebrew. The myrtle is a large evergreen shrub with fragrant flowers and spicy-sweet scented leaves. All parts of the plant are somewhat perfumed. The word *hadassah* in Hebrew came to mean *sweetness*. It has been used as a symbol of beauty and sweetness (Isa. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:7-10). It was one of the trees used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:15). In ancient times it was sacred to Astarte. The name Esther is probably derived from the Persian *stara*, i.e. *star*, or from the goddess Ishtar (also known as Ashtoreth and Astarte). Esther was well named! The Hebrew words *yephath*—*to'ar vetovath mare eh* describe Esther's unusual beauty. *Yephath* means *beautiful*; *to'ar* means the beauty of her *form*; *vetovath* means *pleasant, desirable*; and *mare'eh* has as its root in Hebrew that from which we get the word *vision, spectacle, appearance, form*. Esther must have been strikingly beautiful. Her facial features, her feminine figure, and her personality all combined to make her as beautiful, comely, shapely and desirable as the "beloved" young bride in Song of Solomon (cf. S.S. 1:8; 1:15-17; 2:14; 4:1-8, etc.). Mordecai, her cousin, took her into his home and into his heart and she became his adopted daughter.

v. 8-11 *Opportunity*: There must have been hundreds of young women gathered to the emperor's palace. The word *ravvoth* means *large number, great number, myriads*. They were all given to the custody (Heb. "into the hand of") Hegai, the emperor's eunuch (cf. 2:3) who was in charge of the emperor's harem. It seems clear from these verses that this was no ordinary beauty contest. These contestants had not entered by their own choice. The fact that the many were "gathered" and Esther was "taken" indicates they were compelled to be made part of the emperor's harem. In the Jewish Targums there is a story that Mordecai tried to hide Esther from the emperor's servants when they came in search of beautiful maidens. Not only were these maidens forced to compete for the emperor's favor, the losers were probably not allowed to return to their homes but retained in his harem. Polygamy can be traced back to the pre-Noachian times. Lamech is the first recorded polygamist (Gen. 4:19, 23). Some think polygamy was the outcome of tribal wars. When men had separated into

clans and had taken up different places of abode, collisions soon occurred between them. In such wars the great majority of men would be massacred; the women and children, driven to the abode of the conquerors, there to become concubines and slaves. Of course the strongest man or the chief of the clan would assert his right to the choice of captives. Thus down through the centuries of time it became a status symbol. So we have even in Solomon's temple a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. Emperors and kings, with all of a nation's wealth at their command, could afford to support such harems. There were other facts involved in polygamy. First, there is the natural sex-drive in man, which, *not* under the control of the express will of God which commands one woman for one man, leads man to sexual promiscuity. The natural sex-drive *under control* is good, because it is created by God. Second, in an agricultural society which did not have the benefits of technological work-savers, a man would desire to produce as many offspring as possible to become a work-force and produce the highest standard of living possible. Women and children were usually considered "property" in such cultures. Of course, the principle "a man's life does not consist of the things which he possesses" was as true then as it is now. Polygamy and harems have always brought jealousy, intrigue, ruination, financial disaster, slavery and moral guilt. Solomon's polygamy bankrupted Israel and brought about a divided kingdom saturated with idolatry. It is doubtful that Esther would have chosen to become a member of Xerxes' harem. But she had no choice, except death to herself and probably to her family.

Esther pleased (*tov*) Hegai, supervisor of the emperor's harem. Just how she pleased him we are not told; most probably by her sweetness of disposition and determination to "make the most" of an unwanted circumstance without complaining or rebelling she was shown kindness (*chesed* in Hebrew). No doubt, her radiant beauty also prompted him to put her in a position to catch the emperor's eye sooner than the rest of the maidens. First, Hegai quickly gave Esther the ointments (*tameruqeyha* in Heb.) and cosmetics with which to adorn herself before being taken to the emperor's presence. Second, he gave her the customary portions

of food (*manotheyha* in Heb.; the word used of the special food in Dan. 1:5; see also Esther 9:19, 22). Third, Esther was given seven women attendants, probably the loveliest and most efficient of all the servant girls, suitable to the exceptional charm of Esther herself. Fourth, Hegai "removed" (*yeshanneha* in Heb., meaning, *altered, changed, transfered*) Esther and her maidens to the best place of the harem. Apparently she had been given quarters in a less desirable part of the harem when she was first brought to the palace.

Esther had not revealed her ethnic background. We assume she looked enough like a Persian that her Jewishness was not discernible. Since both Persians and Jews were of Semitic origin their physical features were enough alike to present no problem for Esther. Why did Esther not reveal that she was a Jew? And why did Mordecai advise her that she should not do so? Many answers have been given. One says, "Mordecai reasoned something like this: If Esther is chosen queen, it can only be because God desires to make her the instrument of His purpose. If she reveals that she is a Jewess, she will prejudice her choice . . ." Another suggests that she did *not* reveal she was from *royal* origin (descended from Kish and thus King Saul) hoping the emperor might think she was of humble origin and send her away. There is no evidence Esther was of royal lineage. Ibn Ezra says, "So that she might observe her religious obligations secretly. If she revealed her Jewish faith she would be forced to transgress" (cf. Dan. 1 and 6). Another Jewish tradition says Mordecai's modesty dictated that Esther's racial ties not be known; he modestly wanted to forego the advancement and publicity which would come to him if his relationship to Esther (when she became queen) were known. We would question whether Mordecai could have been that accurate with his premonitions. Could he know with certainty that Esther would become queen? The most natural reason, it would seem, for Esther to conceal her racial roots was the anti-Jewish feeling there (cf. 3:5-6; 5:13; 6:13; 8:11). The Jews suffered this anti-Jewish prejudice in Egypt under the Pharaohs, by their pagan neighbors while they were in the Promised Land, when they were taken captive to Babylon and Persia, from the



Samaritans after their return from captivity, from the Seleucids (Dan. 11), from the Romans, and from certain people of every nation with which they have been associated since. We think Mordecai's purpose was to protect his beautiful cousin from any violence should her ancestry be made known immediately. That Mordecai was very much concerned for her safety and well-being is evidenced by the fact that *every* single day he went to the court of the harem to inquire about her present circumstances and what the future might hold for her. It is apparent that Mordecai has some official duty or standing within the palace itself that would allow him easy and continuous access to the harem courts. Perhaps he was one of the porters who watched the many gates of the palace or had the responsibility of storing supplies within the palace.

Some question the ethics of Mordecai and Esther in keeping her racial ties silent. It needs to be understood that it is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would serve no good purpose. The fact that they did not reveal she was a Jewess certainly did not cause others any suffering or loss. When Rahab did not betray the Hebrew spies there was nothing unethical in her action, (Josh. 2:1ff). Samuel withheld information from Saul at the direction of the Lord (I Sam. 16:1ff). Elisha withheld information from enemies (II Kings 6:19ff). The Lord Himself was party to military deception in the assault against Ai by Joshua (Josh. 8:3-29, esp. v. 18). Jesus advised concealment of truth from those who have no claim upon it (Mt. 7:6); Jesus himself would not so much as speak to Herod when questioned. Mordecai knew that the truth about Esther's ethnic background would only bring suffering (perhaps even death) to her and the Jewish people if such information should be divulged at an inopportune time.

### C. Season of Preparation

TEXT: 2:12-14

- 12 Now when the turn of every maiden was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that it had been done to her according to

the law for the women twelve months, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odors and with the things for the purifying of the women,)

- 13 then in this wise came the maiden unto the king: whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.
- 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, who kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and she were called by name.

### Today's English Version, 2:12-14

The regular beauty treatment for the women lasted a year—massages with oil of myrrh for six months and with oil of balsam for six more. After that, each girl would be taken in turn to King Xerxes. When she went from the harem to the palace, she could wear whatever she wanted. She would go there in the evening, and the next morning she would be taken to another harem and put in the care of Shaashgaz, the eunuch in charge of the king's concubines. She would not go to the king again unless he liked her enough to ask for her by name.

### COMMENTS

v. 12 *Purification*: We have already discussed the reasons for the purification process (cf. 2:3). Some presume another reason for such rites stems from the idea that Persian emperors considered themselves divine. They believed that such deity was resident in them that even pure maidens had to be purified ceremonially before approaching their emperor. We do not think it had anything to do with religion at all. It probably had to do with training in Persian customs. Daniel spent his quarantine in Babylon

becoming learned in all the wisdom and laws of Babylon. This may have been one of the purposes of the "purifications" for these maidens. The "law" for the women is the word *dath* already discussed (1:13-15).

*Myrrh* is from the Hebrew word *mor*. It is from a small tree growing in Arabia; the gum resin exudes in small tear-like drops which dry to a rich brown or reddish-yellow, brittle substance, with a faint though agreeable smell and a warm, bitter taste. The Hebrew word *mor* means "a bitter weeping, or drops of bitterness." Oil of myrrh was probably used as a cosmetic in this Persian "law" for purification. It may have even been used medicinally, for it was used that way at other times (it was offered to Jesus at His crucifixion as an anesthesia). It is quite likely that some of the "fair young maidens" there at that time had come from homes that were none too clean or sanitary. The time period for the purifications consisted first of six months application of oil of myrrh plus six months application of sweet odors. The Hebrew text has two interesting words here; the first is *basam* which refers to the balsam-tree or is translated *spice* in Song of Solomon 5:1; the second word comes from the Hebrew root *maraq* and means, cleansing or rubbing with *precious perfumes*. For one whole year there was a process of cosmetic, medicinal and dietary preparation of every young girl brought into the emperor's harem.

v. 13-14 *Presentation*: After a full year of preparation, each maiden was granted the opportunity to make her own presentation before the emperor as favorable as she was able. "Whatsoever she desired was given her" probably means she could wear any dress in the harem wardrobes, and adorn herself with any of the jewelry available there. The emperor wished each maiden to appear as alluring and as desirable as possible.

Each maiden, in the turn appointed her, presented herself before the emperor in the evening, stayed with the emperor that night, and returned on the next day to the "second house of the women." The Persian emperor's harem was apparently divided into three "houses": (1) a royal residence for the queen; (2) a house for the "women" (secondary wives or concubines); and (3) a

house for the virgins. On returning from her first visit to the emperor's chambers, a girl ordinarily returned to the "second house" because she was no longer a virgin. It must be assumed that the emperor's purpose in keeping these virgins over night in his chambers was sexual intercourse. The "second house" was under the supervision of Shaashgaz, another of the emperor's eunuchs. Once a maiden had been granted her night with the emperor, she was never permitted to be in his royal chambers again unless the emperor called for her by name. If a young virgin was not chosen as queen, she returned to the harem of concubines for the rest of her life. They were virtual prisoners. They would never be allowed to return to the world outside the palace and marry after consorting with the emperor for that would be degrading to the sovereignty and glory of the emperor.

#### D. Selection of Esther

TEXT: 2:15-18

- 15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.
- 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.
- 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.
- 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.

## Today's English Version, 2:15-18

The time came for Esther to go to the king. Esther — the daughter of Abihail and the cousin of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his daughter; Esther — admired by everyone who saw her. When her turn came, she wore just what Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem, advised her to wear. So in Xerxes' seventh year as king, in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, Esther was brought to King Xerxes in the royal palace. The king liked her more than any of the other girls, and more than any of the others she won his favor and affection. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet in Esther's honor and invited all his officials and administrators. He proclaimed a holiday for the whole empire and distributed gifts worthy of a king.

## COMMENTS

v. 15-16 *Countenance*: We do not know how the "turns" of the maidens to appear before Xerxes were determined. Perhaps by casting lots, perhaps by the arbitrary decision of the eunuch in charge of that portion of the harem. Shimei (2:5) must have had at least two sons; Jair the father of Mordecai and Abihail, Mordecai's uncle and Esther's father. The Hebrew word *dod* is translated *uncle* and means literally, "father's brother." Thus we are to understand Esther's father to be Mordecai's paternal uncle. When Esther's turn came she did not seek any of the extras offered to the maidens (2:12-14) for their appearance before the emperor. Perhaps she refused extra adornment in an attempt to persuade the emperor to reject her from being queen. Or her modesty may have caused her to refuse the cosmetics and alluring clothes available. Whatever the reason, her natural beauty was so radiant and her personality so pleasant she was admired by all that looked at her. It is unusual that there was no jealousy and murmuring among the women against Esther. This verifies that her bearing and demeanor toward her contemporaries was such

as to obtain only graciousness, even from those competing for the crown!

When one considers the circumstances under which Esther was probably taken from her uncle's home to the emperor's harem and the cultural mores Esther had to sacrifice, it is nothing short of amazing that she could endure this experience without the exhibition of some animosity on her part. She certainly would seem to have justifiable cause for resentment toward these Persians. Yet she was held in favor by all who looked upon her. No little Jewish girl could be blasé about facing what Esther faced. She was about to sacrifice her virginity to a Persian monarch. There was the chance that she might become queen. But there was also the distinct possibility that she might become merely one of his concubines for the rest of her life. Not even the fact that she had been born in Persia and reared in Persian culture could soften the trauma of this experience. Her composure in the face of this moment is marvelous, to say the least.

She was presented to the emperor, in his palace, in the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. From Passover month (March-April) one counts ten months to Tebeth (December-January), because Passover month is the first month of the religious year. This is the only time in the Bible that the month Tebeth is mentioned. One scholar thinks the name *Tebet* (Heb. for Tebeth) may be related to the word *tava* which means in Hebrew "to dip or sink" and Tevet is thus the "month of sinking in" or the "muddy month" because of the abundant rainfall during that season. There were Jewish fasts observed on the 5th and 10th days of this month commemorating the fall and siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It is not certain whether these fasts were being observed in Esther's day or not. Her presentation to Xerxes was dated also in the seventh year of his reign. This was shortly after (less than a year) his ignominious defeat at Salamis and Plataea in about 480 B.C. He returned home in 479 B.C. and selected Esther as his queen. If Xerxes was about 55 when he was assassinated (see Introduction, page 265) in 465 B.C., then he was about 40 years old when Esther appeared before him. We have no way of knowing Esther's age.

v. 17-18 *Coronation*: There are five or six Hebrew words that may be translated love, but the most common one is *'ahav*, and that is the word used of the Persian emperor's love for the Jewish maiden. He loved her more than all the other *women*. The Hebrew word translated women is the generic word for "mankind" *nashim*. It is difficult to tell from the word *nashim* whether the writer meant all the women in the emperor's harem or just those virgins who had appeared before him prior to Esther's appearance. The next phrase, ". . . more than all the virgins . . ." seems to limit *nashim* to those virgins appearing just before Esther. The word for *virgins* is the definitive word *bethuloth*.

Xerxes set the *kether*—*malekuth*, *crown*—*royal*, upon Esther's head and made her queen in the place of Vashti. *Kether* means "encircle, circlet, diadem," and was probably a heavily bejeweled turban. The word *nezer* is the word describing the only crown used in crowning Hebrew kings, so the *kether* describes the crown of a foreign monarch. To further honor his beautiful new queen, Xerxes decreed a new *mishetteh* ("feast") and named it Esther's Feast. *Mishetteh* is the word used to describe the "drinking-bout" in 1:9-11. The word the Hebrews used to describe their religious feasts was *chaggim*. The feast decreed by Xerxes was strictly a Persian festival and we do not find the Jews observing it. The Jews did later establish the Fast of Esther and observe it on the 13th of Adar (February-March) and followed it with the Feast of Purim on the 14th and 15th of Adar. But none of these holy days had any relationship to the Feast of Esther proclaimed by Xerxes. In addition to the inauguration of a Feast, Xerxes "made a release." The word *hanachah* has been explained by various commentators as; (a) release from paying taxes; (b) release from forced labor; (c) release of some prisoners; (d) release from military service. The root word in Hebrew is *nucha* and means simply, *rest*. It may mean what we think of today as simply, "a holiday," without any form of amnesty being involved. On this day when the emperor was enjoying the great pleasure of having acquired the most beautiful and personable woman in the empire for his queen, he felt especially generous and gave gifts. He gave

them "according to the bounty of the king," which means either in quantity or quality or both. It was a common practice for eastern potentates to give gifts at times like this. Herod Antipas offered Salome half of his kingdom when she danced for him. The Magi brought gifts to the "king of the Jews." Merodach-baladan sent a present to Hezekiah. It was a custom that served both egomania and politics. It gave kings an opportunity to build their own images as well as to cement national and international political relationships. It still goes on today. Potentates and politicians still curry the favor of constituents with "gifts." International relationships are still built, not on truth and honesty, but on "loans" and "gifts." Perhaps we are judging Xerxes' "holiday" too harshly. But in view of the customs then and continued practice today it would seem his motive was political or personal and not philanthropic.

### E. Sedition Revealed

TEXT: 2:19-23

- 19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate.
- 20 Esther had not yet made known her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.
- 21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those that kept the threshold, were wroth, and sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus.
- 22 And the thing became known to Mordecai, who showed it unto Esther the queen; and Esther told the king thereof in Mordecai's name.
- 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, and it was found to be so, they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.



## Today's English Version, 2:19-23

Meanwhile Mordecai had been appointed by the king to an administrative position. As for Esther, she had still not let it be known that she was Jewish. Mordecai had told her not to tell anyone, and she obeyed him in this, just as she had obeyed him when she was a little girl under his care.

During the time that Mordecai held office in the palace, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the palace eunuchs who guarded the entrance to the king's rooms, became hostile to King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai learned about it and told Queen Esther, who then told the king what Mordecai had found out. There was an investigation, and it was discovered that the report was true, so both men were hanged on the gallows. The king ordered an account of this to be written down in the official records of the empire.

## COMMENTS

v. 19-20 *Plot*: Why were the virgins gathered a "second time"? According to Jewish tradition, when Esther became queen she refused to disclose her lineage to Xerxes, although she did tell him she was of royal lineage. She rebuked him for following the evil advice of his nobles and having Vashti slain. Esther reminded Xerxes that Babylonian emperors (Nebuchadnezzar et al.) had been wise in following the advice of Hebrew prophets like Daniel. Esther sent Xerxes to Mordecai for counsel. Xerxes asked Mordecai's counsel on how to get Esther to reveal her ancestry. Mordecai suggested that the virgins be assembled again as if the emperor was planning to change queens again. This would move Esther to jealousy and she would then be glad to tell the emperor her lineage rather than be deposed. But, so the tradition goes, this scheme was in vain. Esther did not reveal her ancestry. Others have suggested that this second increment of virgins was gathered as late arrivals from the far reaches of the empire and missed the first series of individual over-night presentations to the emperor. Still others

think this is simply an historical aside noting the customary sexual promiscuity of Persian emperors. Although Xerxes loved Esther above all the women, he retained his polygamous desires for adding concubines to his harem. Whatever the case, the point of the account is the discovery of the plot against Xerxes' life.

Esther did not let her advancement to queen of the empire rob her of respect for the man who had rescued her from an orphan's fate. She kept the word of her uncle, Mordecai, just like when she was a little Hebrew orphan-girl. The word *ma'amar* is translated *commandment*. *Ma'amar* is a word borrowed from Chaldean language; the usual word for commandment in Hebrew is *mitzvah*. No doubt there were pressures on this young Hebrew woman to reveal her lineage, if for nothing else, for the sake of ethnic pride; connected to this might be the temptation to shame Xerxes publicly for having a Jewess as queen of Persia and retaliate for having been wrested from her home and culture and deflowered by a pagan emperor. Furthermore, it was customary in the ancient eastern empires that a person's kinsmen usually rose in political status right along with him. One would expect that when Esther became queen, Mordecai would have been appointed to some official position that would have secured his status before the emperor. Esther would then not need to be silent about her ancestry. The very fact that Esther remains silent indicates that Mordecai had no secure official position in the emperor's palace.

v. 21-23 *Punishment*: Hebrew tradition has it that Mordecai was appointed to "the king's gate." His task was to inform the emperor of any conspiracy against him. Bigthan and Teresh, who had previously kept the gate, became incensed, saying, "The king has removed two officials and replaced them by this single barbarian." They devised a plan to prove that the emperor should not have given their job to a Jew—they planned to kill the emperor. By this rather drastic scheme, they intended to prove that the Jew, Mordecai, was an unfit keeper of the gate. These two gate-keepers did not realize that Mordecai was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and knew 70 different languages. So when

they plotted together in their native tongue about killing the emperor, Mordecai understood, informed Esther, and Esther informed the emperor who had the two executed. So goes the rabbinic tradition. However, as stated earlier, our biblical text seems to imply that Mordecai had no official capacity. He was probably sitting in the "gate," as before (2:11), to learn news of Esther's fate. The "gate" was the usual large, fortified entrance to the palace enclosure. Gates to the royal residence have always been used in the East as courts of justice, public forums and places to learn daily news. To be placed in command or guardianship of these gates was a signal of high honor and showed that the occupant of the palace (the emperor) placed explicit trust in those so appointed. For some reason these two well-trusted officials were "wroth" with the emperor and were deciding to kill him. Bigthan may very well be the same person as the Bigtha of the group listed earlier (1:10). Both these men were eunuchs (*sariymey* in Hebrew). Conspiracies within the structure of Persian politics were common occurrences. Xerxes was ultimately assassinated by Artabanus, the captain of the guard, and Aspamitras, a chamberlain and eunuch. Just how this conspiracy became known to Mordecai we are not told. Whether Mordecai knew 70 different languages or not, it is almost certain he knew the language spoken by these Persian eunuchs. Mordecai had been born and reared in Persia. It was his home almost as much as theirs. Josephus says that a Jewish slave of the palace came to Mordecai with a report of the conspiracy. Whatever the source, Mordecai revealed it to Esther and Esther told the emperor. What was Mordecai's motive for trying to avert the assassination of the emperor? Perhaps it was his humane concern for the emperor's life. More likely, Mordecai had Esther's interest and the interest of the whole Jewish community as his first priority. If Xerxes should be assassinated, Esther would probably be deposed by the perpetrators of the coup — perhaps even murdered by them. If not by them, she would surely be deposed by the next emperor. Thus the Jewish people would be deprived of one of their own on the throne. If this seems harsh judgment of Mordecai's motives, one must remember that he dares risk Esther's life for the sake of the whole Jewish community later (4:10-17).

When the plot was revealed to the emperor and the matter thoroughly investigated and guilt established, Xerxes ordered the two conspirators executed. The Hebrew word *talah* is rendered "hang" but it probably does not mean to execute by hanging as Western cultures know it. The Jews executed usually by stoning the convicted culprit to death. There are only two clear instances of Jews dying by hanging and those were suicides (Ahitophel and Judas). Occasionally the Jews would "hang" a corpse on a "tree" (or stake) after execution or death (cf. II Sam. 4:12; Gen. 40:19; Dt. 21:22; Josh. 8:29; 10:26-27). The Philistines did this to Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 21:12). The "tree" was a pole or stake that could be lowered to receive its victim and then raised and fixed into the ground so the public could view it. The Persians, according to Herodotus (III; 125 and IX; 78) and Plutarch, *impaled* the dead bodies of criminals and others executed on sharpened poles. This is apparently what is meant by the word *gallows* in 6:4; 7:10; 8:7; 9:13, 25. The word in Hebrew there is *ha'etz* and means literally, "the wood," or "the tree." Archaeological inscriptions have been found of the Mesopotamian civilizations which confirm that impaling victims on stakes was a method of execution.

All affairs of state were entered into the king's personal chronicles (somewhat like our Presidential Papers) and whenever the king wanted to be reminded of past events they would be read out to him. The information given by Mordecai about the assassination plot was very important information! Xerxes intended that this event be permanently recorded for future reference and use. Xerxes probably did not record it for Mordecai's benefit, but this event later played a crucial part in the survival of Mordecai, Esther and the whole Jewish community (6:1ff).

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. The male ego is insatiable and feeds on sexual promiscuity.
2. God blesses those who care for orphans.

3. It is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would benefit no one.
4. Some people (Esther) are willing to make almost unbelievable personal sacrifices for what they think may benefit others.
5. Plotting violence on another's person usually returns in violence to the plotter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Xerxes remembered Vashti?
2. Why would his servants suggest that he select a new queen from young virgins not presently in his harem?
3. What constituted the "purification" process to which these virgins were subjected? Why?
4. What was Mordecai's relationship to Esther?
5. Why did Mordecai instruct Esther not to reveal her ethnic background?
6. Why do you think Xerxes had each maiden come to him individually and not allow them to return to the harem until the next morning?
7. According to the modern calendar when did Esther's turn for appearing before Xerxes come about?
8. About how old was Xerxes when Esther appeared before him as a young maiden?
9. Why didn't Esther prepare herself for her presentation before the emperor with all the accouterments of the harem?
10. Why do you think Mordecai reported the plot to assassinate the emperor?

### III. Perverseness of Haman, Chapter 3

#### A. Scorn of Mordecai

TEXT: 3:1-6

- 1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.
- 2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed down, and did reverence to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence.
- 3 Then the king's servants, that were in the king's gate said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?
- 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.
- 5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.
- 6 But he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasureus, even the people of Mordecai.

#### Today's English Version, 3:1-6

Some time later King Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the position of prime minister. Haman was the son of Hammedatha, a descendant of Agag. The king ordered all the officials in his service to show their respect for Haman by kneeling and bowing to him. They all did so, except for Mordecai, who refused to do it. The other officials in the royal service asked him why he was disobeying the king's command; day after day they urged him

to give in, but he would not listen to them. "I am a Jew," he explained, "and I cannot bow to Haman." So they told Haman about this, wondering if he would tolerate Mordecai's conduct. Haman was furious when he realized that Mordecai was not going to kneel and bow to him, and when he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to do more than punish Mordecai alone. He made plans to kill every Jew in the whole Persian Empire.

## COMMENTS

v. 1-4 *Insubordination of Mordecai*: Xerxes decided to promote a man named Haman. The name *Haman* in Hebrew means *violent one*, or, *riotous one*. Some think the name is strictly Persian and is an exact equivalent of the Greek "Eumenes," which means "well disposed." The Hebrew text has Haman's father, Hammedatha, as an Agagite. Some Jewish tradition would have Haman descended from the Amalekites (of king Saul's day) whose king was Agag. But the scriptures indicate that when Agag fell, he was the last of his house (I Sam. 15:33). The Assyrian King Sargon, father of Sennacherib, left an inscription (at Khorsabad) indicating that Agag was a territory adjacent to that of Media. The Septuagint (Old Testament in Greek language, written about 300 B.C.) calls Hammedatha, "the Bugaeon." The Bug River flows into the northern edge of the Black Sea. This could be the territory from which Haman's ancestors came. It is conjectured by some scholars that Hammedatha may be the same as the old Persian *Mahadata* which means "given by the moon." Others have thought the term *Agagite* was a title such as *Pharaoh*. In light of all the foregoing information it would seem more accurate to assume that Haman was truly Persian and definitely not related to any Canaanites such as the Amalekites. Haman certainly gave his sons Persian names (cf. Esth. 9:7-9).

Haman was promoted above all *hassarim* (Hebrew for *princes*). In the language of ancient Turkey he would be called a *grand vizier* (prime minister), a prince of princes. Haman actually became second *ruler* in the kingdom of Persia.

It has been suggested that Haman was of lowly origin and not from one of the "first" families of Persia. This may account for the emphasis placed on an apparent need of Haman to have everyone do obeisance toward him. In ancient times emperors and noblemen ruled as absolute despots and common men were so servile that a man appointed second ruler in an empire would receive the profoundest homage and reverence from all. The very fact that the "king" (emperor) had *commanded* all who were in the palace gates to do obeisance to Haman indicates that some might deliberately refuse to do so. Indeed, there was one who did not bow down and pay reverence to Haman—Mordecai.

Why did Mordecai disobey the orders of the emperor to do honor to Haman? We are not told, unless Mordecai's bold revelation that he was a Jew had something to do with his reason for disobedience. There is a Jewish tradition (Midrash) that Haman wore an image of an idol on his clothing, and Mordecai disobeyed considering such obeisance tantamount to idolatry. It is possible that promotion to second in the kingdom would bring with it the office of high-priest to the pagan religion of Persia. It has also been suggested that advancement to the second highest position in the empire may have caused Haman to claim divine honors for himself. We know that men in high positions of other empires did claim deity and demand worship from their subjects. Daniel's three Hebrew companions were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace for refusing to worship the emperor's image.

All the other gate-keepers of the king's palace were obeying the king's commandment. The word for *commandment* is *mitzevath* in Hebrew and not the word *dath* (law) which we had in chapter one. Mordecai's contemporaries seem very anxious to protect Haman's honor. Their concern was very plainly prompted by jealousy. At first they probably said to themselves, "How does Mordecai get by without humbling himself before Haman, the low-born upstart, when we have to bow down and demonstrate servility every time Haman passes by this gate?" They thought Mordecai esteemed himself better than they. These gate-keepers kept badgering Mordecai for some explanation as to why he did



not show reverence to Haman until Mordecai told them he was a Jew. That was his excuse. Perhaps Mordecai added more than is recorded; perhaps he told them of his religious scruples. Whatever the case, the gate-keepers made it a point to inform Haman of Mordecai's disobedience to the royal edict. The text says they wanted to see whether Mordecai's "matters" would stand. The word translated "matters" is *davar* in Hebrew and means fundamentally, *speech, word*. *Davar* may also mean *business, occupation, reason or cause*. Apparently, these contemporaries were anxious to see if Mordecai's reason (Jewishness) was sufficient to keep Haman from taking his position of gate-keeper away from him.

v. 5-6 *Indignation of Haman*: Apparently Haman was not aware of Mordecai's irreverence until told by the other gate-keepers. When Haman saw it for himself he was infuriated. The Hebrew word *chemah* is translated *wrath* and means literally, *on fire, inflamed, burning with anger*. It is the same word used to describe Nebuchadnezzar's anger (Dan. 3:13, 19) when the Hebrews would not bow down and worship his image. The LXX (Septuagint) describes Haman's wrath with the Greek word *sphodra* which means *vehement, exceedingly*. Haman dismissed the idea of taking out his rage on just one Jew. He wanted every Jew in the empire of Persia to die because Mordecai refused to show him honor.

Mordecai's insult was based on his ethnic origin—he would not do obeisance *because* he was a Jew. Perhaps if Mordecai had offered some other excuse Haman might have demanded only the life of Mordecai. Jewish commentators see anti-Semitism as Haman's basic motive rather than wounded pride. It is very evident that Haman's first reaction was from wounded pride. And if one Jew refused to honor Haman's position, they all would, reasoned Haman, therefore they shall all be slain.

## B. Subterfuge of Haman

TEXT: 3:7-11

7 In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before

Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

- 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.
- 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.
- 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.
- 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

### Today's English Version, 3:7-11

In the twelfth year of King Xerxes' rule in the first month, the month of Nisan, Haman ordered the lots to be cast ("purim" they were called) to find out the right day and month to carry out his plot. The thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, was decided on.

So Haman told the king, "There is a certain race of people scattered all over your empire and found in every province. They observe customs that are not like those of any other people. Moreover, they do not obey the laws of the empire, so it is not in your best interests to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, issue a decree that they are to be put to death. If you do, I guarantee that I will be able to put 375 tons of silver into the royal treasury for the administration of the empire."

The king took off his ring, which was used to stamp proclamations and make them official, and gave it to the enemy of the Jewish people, Haman son of Hammedatha, the descendant of Agag. The king told him, "The people and their money are yours; do as you like with them."

## COMMENTS

v. 7-8 *Perjury*: In the first month which is called Nisan, Haman made his genocidal plans for the Jewish people. Nisan was the first month of the Jewish religious calendar. The word *Nisan* (meaning, "the month of flowers") was the word the Jews of the Babylonian exile substituted for the old Mosaic name of the first month, *Abib*. Nisan is comparable to March-April of the Gregorian calendar. The twelfth year of Xerxes is 474 B.C. The word *Pur* in Hebrew is probably a word borrowed from the Assyrian word *puru* which means *stone*. It came to mean a *lot* for casting to determine an issue. The casting of lots was a familiar practice of ancient Eastern civilizations, even of the Hebrews (cf. Prov. 16:33; Num. 26:55; Ezek. 48:29; Prov. 18:18; Jonah 1:7; Acts 1:26, etc.). Lots were drawn or thrown in various ways; sometimes by means of stone or ivory dice; sometimes by sets of intricately carved wooden sticks; by strips of parchment and other means. Haman's lots were probably some type of numbered or figured stones.

Haman cast lots to decide the day of the month and the month of the year. The lots fell upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (according to the Jewish calendar) Adar. *Adar* is the same as February-March (3:13). It appears that Haman tried the lot over and over until it finally signaled the above date. We are not to suppose that Haman took a whole year to cast the lots. In approximately 365 throws of the lots a decision would have to be reached. That would take no more than an hour or two. Casting the lots was, according to pagan superstition, leaving the decisive choice up to the gods of Fortune or Fate. This was to give divine sanction to the choice. Little did Haman know that the God of Mordecai and the Jews and of all men—the only real and true God—was taking a divine hand in the affairs of the Persian-Jewish confrontation. Having "religiously" decided which day he should kill the Jews, Haman proceeds with the next phase of his planned mass murder. He will go to the emperor with his lies about the Jewish people.

Haman's casual statement, "There is a certain people scattered

abroad . . .” does not immediately impress us with the enormity of what he is about to propose. He is about to call for the extermination of the whole world-wide Jewish community. “All the provinces of thy kingdom” would include the vast territory from India in the east, to Asia Minor in the west, Ethiopia in the south and the Caucasus Mountains (of southern Russia) in the north. It would include the Jews who had returned to Palestine a hundred years earlier. How many Jews would this include? We can only conjecture—perhaps two or three million. The first captivity of the Jewish nation took place in 721 B.C. (at the hands of the Assyrians); the second captivity took place in 606-586 B.C. (at the hands of the Babylonians.) Esther, Mordecai, and Haman are one hundred years and perhaps three generations later. This allows plenty of time for wide dispersion and extensive multiplication of the Jewish people. Josephus records that a million Jews were slain in the siege of Jerusalem alone in 66-70 A.D. There may have been even more than 3,000,000 Jews dispersed throughout the Persian empire in Esther’s day. The Sibylline Oracles (250 B.C.) said, “Every land and every sea is full of thee.” (see *ISBE*, art., “Dispersion,” Vol. II, pg. 855-859 for detailed information on world-wide Judaism). The magnitude of the atrocity is almost incredible when it is realized that Haman is planning to eradicate a whole race of people—all because his pride has been wounded by one man! Haman’s first assault upon the Jewish people is that they “are all over the place.”

Next, he brings up their cultural peculiarities. “Their laws are diverse from those of every people.” That is a true statement but it should be qualified. Of course, the Jews had religious doctrines and practices quite different from the heathen peoples among whom they lived. Because the Jews worshipped the One, True God, and had His Divine revelation in human language, their ethics were much higher and their human relationships much more benevolent than that of the heathen. Their laws of diet and dress were directly connected to their religion. Sometimes the religious scruples of the Jews were in conflict with the political ideologies of pagan nations because pagan emperors claimed divinity and required worship from all subjects. When Jews were

left free to worship according to the dictates of their *torah*, they were otherwise good and loyal citizens of any land in which they might dwell (e.g. Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, etc.). The Jewish Talmud represents Haman as saying, "They do not eat with us, nor drink with us, nor intermarry with us." Since the Persians allowed all conquered nations to retain their own religious and cultural practices so long as they did not constitute sedition, Haman's information poses no real threat to the security of Xerxes' empire. Haman's next accusation, "They do not keep the king's laws" is, *if true*, a serious threat to Xerxes and Persia. This was not true (except for cases mentioned earlier having to do with Jewish scruples against any form of idolatry). The Jews were law abiding citizens. Many Jews made great contributions in politics, science, the arts and finance in every country where they dwelt. Jeremiah the prophet instructed his countrymen who were about to be exiled into the Mesopotamian area, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5-7). Rabbinic principle was established from Jeremiah's instructions, "The law of the country in which you live is binding." The Jews were faithful and loyal subjects of the Persian emperors from Cyrus the Great to Darius Codomannus.

v. 9-11 *Payoff*: Haman's rage is so consuming he is willing to pay a tremendous bribe to the emperor. Haman's offer is ten thousand talents of silver. This is a sum equivalent to approximately \$10,000,000 U.S. currency. Herodotus estimated the sum equal to the annual revenue in silver of the whole Persian empire. Haman's offer was probably tempting since Xerxes' recent military fiasco in Greece had drained the Persian royal treasury. When Xerxes gave his signet ring to Haman he was allowing Haman to do what he asked with full sanction and authority of the imperial crown. The immediate response of Xerxes to the request of Haman, without any royal questions or investigations into the ethics or practicality of such genocide, reinforces the

characterization of Xerxes as an immature, quick-tempered, vacillating despot.

Xerxes' reply, "The silver is given to thee . . .," makes it appear that he refused the offer of Haman's ten thousand talents. But Mordecai's report of the incident to Hathach, Esther's attendant, implies that Xerxes did, after all, accept the money (cf. 4:7). What is apparently meant by Xerxes' reply is that Haman is authorized to destroy the Jews and plunder their possessions. The "silver" of v. 11 is the silver of the Jews that shall belong to Haman. Haman's bribe of ten thousand talents may be nearly recouped in his royal mandate to pillage the property of the whole Jewish citizenry of Persia.

Massacre of an entire race shocks the modern western mind. However, the Persian emperor just before Xerxes, Darius Hystaspis, ordered the extermination of the Magi (a whole race of Medes who had rebelled under Cambyses). This great massacre was commemorated annually in Persia. About 100 years before that a massacre of the Scythians had occurred. Recent modern totalitarian tyrants have also attempted genocide on various races and cultures.

### C. Sentence of Xerxes

TEXT: 3:12-15

- 12 Then were the king's scribes called in the first month, on the thirteenth day thereof; and there was written according to all that Haman commanded unto the king's satraps, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the princes of every people, to every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written and it was sealed with the king's ring.
- 13 And letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon

the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

- 14 A copy of the writing, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published unto all the peoples, that they should be ready against that day.
- 15 The posts went forth in haste by the king's commandment, and the decree was given out in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was perplexed.

### Today's English Version, 3:12-15

So on the thirteenth day of the first month Haman called the king's secretaries and dictated a proclamation to be translated into every language and system of writing used in the empire and to be sent to all the rulers, governors, and officials. It was issued in the name of King Xerxes and stamped with his ring. Runners took this proclamation to every province of the empire. It contained the instructions that on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, all Jews— young and old, women and children— were to be killed. They were to be slaughtered without mercy and their belongings were to be taken. The contents of the proclamation were to be made public in every province, so that everyone would be prepared when that day came.

At the king's command the decree was made public in the capital city of Susa, and runners carried the news to the provinces. The king and Haman sat down and had a drink while the city of Susa was being thrown into confusion.

### COMMENTS

*v. 12 Penned:* Scribes were specially trained men who were held in great esteem by most ancient civilizations. They not only wrote the decrees of kings but also recorded histories and were often called upon to interpret past precedents and offer advice to kings

in making immediate decisions inasmuch as their whole lives were devoted to recording and studying royal chronicles. Xerxes called for the royal scribes and on the thirteenth day of Nisan (first month, cf. 3:7) and ordered that all Haman had suggested should be written in all the languages currently used by conquered peoples throughout the whole Persian empire. To each copy of the decree that was to be sent to governors and princes of provinces, the emperor affixed an impression of his signet ring in wax (sealed). Thus it became an official policy of the Persian empire that all Jews were to be slain.

v. 13-15 *Posted*: The Hebrew word *haratzim* means literally, *the runners*. The documents were sent out into the provinces of the empire through the Persian postal system. This was one of the outstanding contributions of the Persian culture to the civilizations following theirs—a fast and proficient postal system. The Persian emperor could expect to be in touch with the farthest reaches of his vast empire within one week's time (see Introduction, page 264). Persian mail-carriers were mounted on fast horses and had relay stations every 14 miles, much like the Pony Express in 19th century America.

What utter chaos and consternation such a decree would have. There is an ancient decree of Mithridates king of Pontus in Asia Minor (died 63 B.C.) sometimes cited as a parallel to this shocking decree of Xerxes: "He sent secret order to all the satraps and the mayors of cities that they should within the space of thirty days fall upon the resident Romans and Italians, upon their wives and children and upon all the freemen of Italian origin, and kill them and take their goods as possessions. When the appointed day came, there was wailing and lamentation in the whole of Asia."

The Persian empire (including the Jews in all provinces) had from nine to eleven months warning of the massacre that was to come. Haman had decided action was to begin on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar (Feb./Mar.). Modern Jews keep three days (13th, 14th and 15th of Adar) in connection with the feast of Purim; but they make the 13th a fast to commemorate the fast of Esther (4:16) and they keep the feast itself on the 14th and 15th. We shall discuss the feast of Purim in our comments on chapter nine.



Orders had been officially sent throughout the empire to massacre perhaps millions of people and the emperor and his prime minister sit down to feast and drink. How brutally callous! Well did the apostle Paul describe heathen civilizations in Romans, chapter one, who having refused to have God in their knowledge, become "foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." The majority of the Persian populace (especially of the royal city, Susa) was perplexed. It was an ominous decree for any citizen to read. If Haman was capable of such ruthless rage against the Jews, he could vent the same rage on any other segment or people within the vast empire of Persia. Perhaps there were also many non-Jews feeling compassion and sympathy toward their Jewish neighbors.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely!
2. Racial or cultural distinctives are often used as rationalizations for the real motives (pride, greed etc.) behind hatred and persecution.
3. Some people will compromise even the most fundamental standards of humaneness for a bribe.
4. When people refuse to have the One True God in their knowledge and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1), they inevitably harden their own consciences so that they can order millions to be murdered and sit down and celebrate it.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did Haman come from?
2. Why did Mordecai not bow down and pay Haman homage?
3. Were the Jews not observing the king's laws?
4. In what ways are the "laws" of the Jews different from all other people?

5. How much did Haman offer to put in the king's treasury?
6. When is the month Adar?
7. How could the king's edict ever be delivered and understood by so many different races and cultures within the vast Persian empire?
8. How many Jews were to be killed?
9. What effect did this edict have upon the citizens of Susa?

## IV. Pluck of Esther, Chapter 4

### A. Cry

TEXT: 4:1-3

- 1 Now when Mordecai knew all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry;
- 2 and he came even before the king's gate: for none might enter within the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.
- 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Today's English Version, 4:1-3

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes in anguish. Then he dressed in sackcloth, covered his head with ashes, and walked through the city, wailing loudly and bitterly, until he came to the entrance of the palace. He did not go in because no one wearing sackcloth was allowed inside. Throughout all the provinces, wherever the king's proclamation was made known, there was loud mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, wailed, and most of them put on sackcloth and lay in ashes.

### COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Bitter*: The tearing or rending of clothing, putting on sackcloth and throwing of ashes on the head were all actual, though symbolic, rites practiced by Jews (and other Semitic peoples) expressing grief and contrition. The English word is derived from the Hebrew word *saq* which describes a coarse, dark cloth, usually made of goat's hair. It was worn by mourners (II Sam. 3:31; II Kings 19:1-2), often by prophets to symbolize the actions they sought from their audiences (Isa. 20:2; Rev. 11:3), and by exiles (I Kings 20:31). No one seems to know the precise

form of the *saq*. Some think it was much like a loin cloth; others think it was like a burlap sack with openings for the arms and neck. Sometimes the garment was worn next to the skin (Jonah 3:6; I Kings 21:27; II Kings 6:30; Job 16:15; Isa. 32:11) but usually it was worn over another garment. Ashes were sprinkled over a person or he sat among ashes as a sign of mourning (II Sam. 13:19; Job 2:8; Jer. 6:26). Mordecai, having donned the symbolic dress of deep grief, went out into the middle of the imperial capital and began venting his feelings in loud, doleful, wailing which was customary in ancient eastern cultures. The Hebrew word *marah* is translated bitter. It is the same word used by Naomi when she said, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). This is what Mordecai was expressing. The rule that nothing mournful, of evil portent or distressing was to pass through the palace gates and into the presence of the emperor was another of the customs of the ancient east.

v. 3 *Baleful*: The same loud piercing funeral wailings and death cries were heard in every province where Jews lived throughout the vast Persian empire. People fasted and wept and lay in sackcloth and ashes. Literally, the Hebrew phrase is "sackcloth and ashes were spread out as a bed under many." The Hebrew word for *fast* is *tzum* and means *abstain*. Another Hebrew word for *fast* is *'innah* and means "afflict the soul." The word *tzum* is not used in the Old Testament before the book of Judges. Apparently, the original commandment (Lev. 16:29ff) was to "afflict" the soul which *later* came to be practiced by abstinence. It is altogether possible that the original commandment to "afflict the soul" (fast) did not necessarily demand abstinence. Jesus made drastic revisions to traditional practices of fasting (Mt. 6:16-18). Fasting or "afflicting the soul" has always had to do with the human need for mediation and intercession before God in times of stress and sorrow. The fasting of the Hebrew people in Persia at this time should certainly be considered as an act of supplication and intercession toward Jehovah for their rescue from the impending slaughter of Haman.

## B. Crisis

TEXT: 4:4-9

- 4 And Esther's maidens and her chamberlains came and told it her; and the queen was exceedingly grieved: and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take his sackcloth from off him; but he received it not.
- 5 Then called Esther for Hathach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and charged him to go to Mordecai, to know what this was, and why it was.
- 6 So Hathach went forth to Mordecai unto the broad place of the city, which was before the king's gate.
- 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and the exact sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.
- 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him, for her people.
- 9 And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

## Today's English Version, 4:4-9

When Esther's servant girls and eunuchs told her what Mordecai was doing, she was deeply disturbed. She sent Mordecai some clothes to put on instead of the sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then she called Hathach, one of the palace eunuchs appointed as her servant by the king, and told him to go to Mordecai and find out what was happening and why. Hathach went to Mordecai in the city square at the entrance of the palace. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him and just how much money Haman had promised to put into the royal treasury if all the Jews were killed. He gave Hathach a copy of the proclamation that had been issued in Susa, ordering the destruction of the Jews,

Mordecai asked him to take it to Esther, explain the situation to her, and have her go and plead with the king and beg him to have mercy on her people. Hathach did this.

## COMMENTS

v. 4-6 *Grief*: When the queen's servants told her of Mordecai's wailing and mourning and that he had dressed himself in the customary dress of bitterness of the soul, Esther was exceedingly grieved. The Hebrew word is *vatihechalechal* from the root word *chul* which means *writhe, twist and tremble in pain*. Esther was more than curious about Mordecai's public display of grief. He was her father and she has the power and the resources to send him immediate relief in a royal way now. Like any loving daughter, Esther hurts when her father hurts. She is determined to help. It may be also that she sent Mordecai clothing to replace his sackcloth so that he might enter through the palace gate and come to her chambers to communicate his plight. But Mordecai sent the servants back empty handed. He kept his sackcloth on and continued his wailing. Esther's agony for Mordecai was even more intensified and she then sent Hathach, a royal servant of high standing. The Hebrew pronouns (demonstrative and interrogative) are idiomatic, *mah—zeh, mah—zeh*; that is, Hathach was to report back to Esther the "why and wherefore" of Mordecai's public display of grief. Haman and Xerxes would not have confided their plot against the Jews to Esther, even though they did not yet know she was a Jewess. Eastern potentates were not accustomed to counsel with their wives about affairs of state.

v. 7-9 *Gory Details*: Now that he was sure Esther would hear the reason behind his mourning and allow it to continue for the needed impact upon the public, Mordecai told the whole story to Hathach so it could be relayed to the queen. Mordecai related how he had refused to bow down in the presence of Haman; how Haman had bribed the emperor for 10,000 talents of silver; how the emperor had issued a decree that all Jews should be slain because of Mordecai's actions. Mordecai apparently thought the

exact sum of the bribe was important information Esther would need for the intercession he was going to insist from her. Perhaps he felt Esther would be thus equipped to better appeal to Xerxes' conscience. Whatever the case, Mordecai had a copy of the whole royal decree made and instructed Hathach to "declare it unto her." Some infer from this that Esther was unable to read the Persian language. Mordecai charged Esther (the Hebrew word is *tzvah* which is usually translated *command, order*) to go before the emperor and intercede on behalf of *her* people. Whereas Mordecai had before commanded Esther not to make known her racial origin, now he apparently feels that the only significant influence that might be brought to bear to save the Jewish people would be the queen's ethnic relationship to them. This action, as we shall see, would be critical to the very life of the queen herself. Not only would the revelation that she was a Jewess put her life in jeopardy, but even the seemingly harmless act of approaching the emperor's presence without being summoned was to incur the death penalty. Esther had to decide between the crises of her personal danger and the danger to the whole race of her people. Would she be willing to lay down her life for others? Would you?

### C. Contingency

TEXT: 4:10-12

- 10 Then Esther spake unto Hathach, and gave him a message unto Mordecai, saying:
- 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.
- 12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

## Today's English Version, 4:10-12

and Esther gave him this message to take back to Mordecai: "If anyone, man or woman, goes to the inner courtyard and sees the king without being summoned, that person must die. That is the law; everyone, from the king's advisers to the people in the provinces, knows that. There is only one way to get around this law: if the king holds out his gold scepter to someone, then that person's life is spared. But it has been a month since the king sent for me."

## COMMENTS

v. 10-12 Esther's first reaction was to remind Mordecai of the widely known law of the Persian monarchs about approaching his presence without being given the emperor's personal permission to do so. It was not only widely known but widely respected! The law was that "whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king . . . who is not called . . . he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre." Herodotus confirmed the existence of such a law but wrote that were six persons to whom the law did not apply (III. 84. 118). In the *bas reliefs* and other inscriptions of the Persian ruins of Persepolis the Persian emperor is always pictured with a scepter (*sharbith* in Hebrew, meaning, *rod, staff* or *club*) in his hand. The purpose for this law was probably to protect the emperor from assassination and from trivial and inane audiences with every Persian who might have "an axe to grind." Whatever the case, the law had its desired effect; it inspired fear of approaching the monarch unless bidden by the monarch himself to do so. Esther's immediate concern was fear for her life. It is not until Mordecai's sharp rebuke that Esther begins to consider the consequences of opting for her own personal safety.



## D. Courage

TEXT: 4:13-17

- 13 Then Mordecai bade them return answer unto Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.
- 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish: and who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?
- 15 Then Esther bade them return answer unto Mordecai,
- 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.
- 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

## Today's English Version, 4:13-17

When Mordecai received Esther's message, he sent her this warning: "Don't imagine that you are safer than any other Jew just because you are in the royal palace. If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved, but you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows—maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen!"

Esther sent Mordecai this reply: "Go and get all the Jews in Susa together; hold a fast and pray for me. Don't eat or drink anything for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will be doing the same. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. If I must die for doing it, I will die."

Mordecai then left and did everything that Esther had told him to do.

## COMMENTS

v. 13-14 *Reality*: Esther is human; Mordecai is human. They are ordinary people caught up in the struggle between good and evil, courage and cowardice. Esther's first reaction to the impending holocaust is self-preservation. Others may have to suffer but she will not risk her life in an action that is sure to bring death. Perhaps she thought the problem would go away in time; perhaps she thought she could be of more help to her Jewish people by staying alive as queen than by being a martyr. Surely Esther was not so hard-hearted as to have no compassion at all for her Jewish brethren, especially her uncle Mordecai and his family! Surely Esther was not so totally self-centered that she gave no thought at all as to how Mordecai, at least, might escape the edict of genocide upon the Jews.

Mordecai immediately sent back a message to Esther that would bring her face to face with reality. He reminded her that since she was a Jew too, and that her ethnic origin was now known (4:8), she need not think she will escape the massacre just because she lives in the palace. In fact, once it is known by the emperor and Haman that she is a Jewess and that she concealed this fact while being chosen as Vashti's successor, Esther might be one of the first to be slain!

Mordecai pleads with Esther that she seize her opportunity to be a heroine. Mordecai believes it is divine providence that has placed his adopted daughter in the position of queen of Persia for just such a time of great need by God's people. It is interesting that the word translated *relief* is the Hebrew word *ruach* (usually translated *spirit*). It probably means that, if Esther does not help save God's people then deliverance (*natzal*, Heb.), and the great sigh of relief (*ruach*, Heb.) that goes with deliverance, will come from some other source. If Esther does not seize her opportunity and exercise her responsibility, her father's house will perish and be disgraced. Where did Mordecai get the idea that Esther was probably chosen queen of Persia through providence in order to help deliver her people from their enemies? From God's word! The Jews in the captivities had some of the scrolls of the Old

Testament (cf. Dan. 9:2). Mordecai, as a child, like Jewish children centuries before him, had studied the Old Testament. He knew the providence of God had put Joseph in Egypt to deliver his people from famine; he knew the providence of God had put Moses in the palace of Pharaoh to deliver his people from bondage; he knew about David and a host of other Jewish heroes (even recent ones like Daniel) who by the providence of Jehovah had been put in circumstances and times of great danger. Mordecai knew that at great personal sacrifice these heroes of God had to willingly choose to be used by Him for delivering His people. Mordecai's challenge to Esther was based on the historical certainties of God's past dealings and His promises to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham through the prophets. Mordecai's evaluation of the situation was not based on human possibilities, but upon the certainties of God. The people of God today (Christians) have not only the historical certainties Mordecai had but a "covenant enacted upon surer promises," the historical certainties of the New Testament — specifically the victory over sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

v. 15-17 *Resolution*: How soon Esther answered, we do not know. We presume she took time to think through Mordecai's great challenge. One does not decide hastily to lay one's life on the line. Esther's reply is not one based on an unreasoned emotionalism, or arrogant self-confidence or fatalistic desperation; it is the result of searching, rational, earnestness based on Mordecai's warnings and challenge. Esther also believed in God! Her reply to Mordecai must be interpreted in the light of her proposal for a three-day fast. Esther's request for fasting is for the very purpose of intercession and supplication to Jehovah — there can be no other objective in mind! It certainly is to Esther's great credit that she looks immediately to God and not man for help. It is interesting to see that some of her "maidens" (attendants) were godfearing and would intercede to Jehovah through fasting also. Perhaps they were Jewish maidens; but they may have been Persian maidens influenced in the Jewish religion by Esther.

The resolution of Esther is that God's will may be done — she is willing to accept it. Jacob uttered a similar resolution when he

sent some of his sons back to Egypt for release of his hostage sons (cf. Gen. 43:14; "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.'). Jesus decided to fulfill God's will with perfect resignation, "... nevertheless, not my will but thine be done..." (Mt. 26:39). We are told that our prayers, if we expect them to be answered, must be with the same resignation to the will of God (I Jn. 5:14-15).

We should like to close this chapter by quoting the conclusion of a masterful sermon, "If I Perish, I Perish," by our good friend, the late Charles A. Willbanks, preached at the Ozark Bible College Preaching Convention, Joplin, Missouri, February 18, 1959:

"Let us never forget that in this great drama of human history, a time element is involved. Mordecai said to Esther, 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Esther needed to do something—now!

"Esther had to act at once to save a people committed to destruction. The same is true for us. Unless there are some drastic changes, statisticians tell us that 14,800,000 persons will go to meet their God unprepared before next year.

"The Persian decree for the destruction of God's people could not be changed. It was a cruel, hideous plot which meant only death; and it could not be changed! But another decree was sent out enabling God's people to arm themselves for the battle. We face a similar situation today.

"The very nature of God, which provides freedom of choice, means that sin is present all about us and the wages of it is death (Romans 6:23). The whole human race is committed to destruction, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). This verdict cannot be changed. But thanks be to God, we can arm ourselves for the battle; we can 'put on Christ'; we can 'put on the whole armour of God, that (we) may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil' (Ephesians 6:11; Galatians 3:27).

"Esther's fears were allayed, her appeal was effective, and her people were saved by her timely intervention. A nation rises up to call her blessed. What, may we ask, will be the cause of gratitude that others may feel for our having lived and faced our own times of decision?"

There is a time element for all of God's dealing with men. Sometimes God reveals the length of that time; sometimes He does not. He gave Hezekiah an additional 15 years of life (cf. Isa. 38:1-8); God gave the false prophet Hananiah two months to live (Jer. 28:1-17). The Lord gave the Jewish nation 490 years from the "going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" until the coming of the Messiah to accomplish God's work and prepare themselves to receive Him (Dan. 9:24-27). The Jews did not receive the Messiah (on the whole) when their time came so God took the kingdom from them and gave it to others (Mt. 21:33-46). We are now living in the "times of the Gentiles" (cf. Lk. 21:24; Rom. 11:11-36). After these times there will be no more time! Generally speaking God has numbered man's life-span upon the earth to be about 70 years (Psa. 90:9-12). Soon they are gone and we fly away. So let us put every day we have, each day at a time, to do what our hands find to do to glorify God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. There are times of rejoicing for those who believe in God (such as at the coronation of Esther); but there may also be times of mourning and supplication (such as at the decree for the slaughter of the Jews).
2. When such times of mourning and intercession are called for, godly people (like Mordecai) will not indulge in selfish release from the need for contrition, even when, in all innocence, suggested by others.
3. Great biblical heroes and heroines were made, not born!
4. Great biblical heroes and heroines were as human as we are.
5. Decisions to choose or refuse great responsibilities in relation to the will of God should not be made without intercession and supplication.
6. If we do not carry out our responsibilities toward the kingdom of God, God can raise up others who will.
7. Resignation to the will of God is not fatalism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does Mordecai's action in putting on sackcloth and ashes and fasting say about the godliness of the book of Esther?
2. What was the original meaning of "fast"?
3. Why did Mordecai feel it necessary to mention the exact sum of money Haman had offered Xerxes?
4. Why did the emperor of Persia forbid people to come in unto him unless he extended the golden scepter toward them?
5. Why would Queen Esther be in danger of losing her life?
6. How could Mordecai believe God had brought Esther to the throne for this time?
7. Why do we conclude that Esther's resolution was not just human fatalism?
8. Is the providence of God involved in the length of our individual lives?

## V. The Plan of Esther, 5:1-8

### A. Coquetry

TEXT: 5:1-4

- 1 Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house.
- 2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.
- 3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be given thee even to the half of the kingdom.
- 4 And Esther said, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

### Today's English Version, 5:1-4

On the third day of her fast Esther put on her royal robes and went and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace, facing the throne room. The king was inside, seated on the royal throne, facing the entrance. When the king saw Queen Esther standing outside, she won his favor, and he held out to her the gold scepter. She then came up and touched the tip of it. "What is it, Queen Esther?" the king asked. "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it—even if it is half my empire."

Esther replied, "If it please Your Majesty, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tonight at a banquet I am preparing for you."

### COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Reception*: On the third day after Esther and Mordecai had communicated, Esther dressed herself in her royal finery and

stood in the inner court of the king's palace. The author of the account has described perfectly the arrangement of the Persian palace. The king's throne is opposite an open doorway leading into the inner court of the palace. Esther was using all her womanly intuition in simply standing so she might be seen by the emperor instead of sending word that she wished an audience with him. Esther was well aware of the fact that no one gained audience with the emperor unless he invited them! Besides, Vashti had recently been deposed because of her precociousness. Oriental men (and especially potentates) did not look favorably upon precocious wives.

But Esther also knew that the emperor had fallen to her beauty before and it had been over thirty days since he had feasted upon her beauty. Knowing male vulnerability as practically all women do, Esther "prettied herself up" and played the coquet. The emperor saw this vision of loveliness. She was irresistible! Immediately he held out the golden sceptre and beckoned her to enter the royal throne room and approach his royal presence and touch the sceptre. Esther has her audience. Now she must tread even more carefully. She must be wise; she must keep her wits; she must not rush or be rash. On the other hand, her task is not one for the weak or the vacillating.

v. 3-4 *Request*: Esther's beauty coupled with the fact that the emperor had not enjoyed her conjugal presence for more than a month, put him in a magnanimous mood. Actually, it was a customary thing with rulers of eastern empires to take pride in their generosity. Many Oriental emperors vied with one another in giving fabulous gifts to those who pleased them. It was a "status symbol." To refuse the generosity of such a potentate was a serious insult not usually forgotten or forgiven. Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, 450 years after Xerxes, made a serious mistake promising the sensuous Salome "half" of his "kingdom," (see Mark 6:21-28). Herod's motivation for magnanimity is plainly indicated to be pride (cf. Mk. 6:26); we suspect that Xerxes' motive was similar. It is interesting to note also that the emperor offered to grant Esther's request before she made it. That, too, was the custom of the Oriental ruler. Herodotus (9:3) indicates there was one day in the year on which the Persian emperor was



bound by custom to grant *any* request made by a guest at his table.

Knowing the extreme crisis facing the Jewish people, one would expect Esther to *immediately* and imploringly present her request that the order put forth to slaughter the Jews be rescinded. But amazingly, Esther simply extends an invitation to the emperor and his chief of state, Haman, to a merry-making feast (a *mishetteh*; see 1:7-8). Esther is keeping her wits. She will wait, gain time, be sure that she has fully won her way into the emperor's affections before she springs her trap. Her invitation was very unusual. Ordinarily the emperor and the queen feasted separately (cf. 1:3, 9) each in their own section of the palace. For the queen to invite not only the emperor but another male guest was also highly irregular. Esther sets out to disarm Haman by her cordiality. It worked! Haman was very pleased (cf. 5:9). The Septuagint version of Esther 5:1-4 differs so widely from the Hebrew text we have chosen to give an unbroken translation of the LXX text rather than include the variations as comments.

"And it came to pass on the third day, when she had ceased praying, that she put off her domestic apparel, and put on the glorious things she had. And being splendidly arrayed, and having called upon God the Observer and Savior of all things, she took her two maidens, and she leaned upon one of them, in all her delicate femininity, while the other maiden followed holding the train of her royal robe. She radiated the perfect beauty of youthfulness and cheerfulness and grace, but her heart shrank with fear. And having passed through all the doors, she stood before the king; and he was sitting upon his royal throne, and he had put on all his glorious apparel, covered all over with gold and precious stones; and was very awesome and frightening. And having raised his face to look at Esther with all his majestic mien, he looked with intense anger: and the queen fell, and grew pale and fainted; and she leaned her head against the head of the maiden that accompanied her. But God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in intense feeling he sprang from off his throne, and took her into his arms; until she recovered: and he comforted her with words of peace, and said to her, What is the matter, Esther? I am your brother; be of good cheer, you shall not die for our command is openly declared to you, Draw near. And having raised the golden

sceptre he laid it upon her neck, and embraced her and said, Speak to me. And she said to him, I saw you, my lord as an angel of God, and my heart was troubled for fear of your glory; for you, my lord, are to be wondered at, and your face is full of grace. And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. Then the king said, What do you wish Esther? and what is your request? ask even to the half of my kingdom, and it shall be yours. And Esther said, Today is my great day: if then it seem good to the king, let both him and Aman come to the feast which I will prepare this day."

A sizeable portion of the Hebrew original of Ecclesiasticus (an apocryphal book) has been discovered. This original Hebrew text, compared with the later Greek version of the LXX, shows that the LXX translator had dealt very freely with his original and had, in the interests of a more Hellenistic viewpoint, taken considerable liberties with the original Hebrew. The Septuagint shows a tendency to be more of a paraphrase of the Hebrew original in many places—especially in the Latter Prophets and Poetic Books. The Jews had an especial charitableness toward the Persians since they freed the Jews, returned them to their homeland and restrained those (Samaritans) who tried to thwart the rebuilding of the Temple. The authors of the LXX would wish to put Xerxes in the best possible light even if they must paraphrase here.

## B. Curiosity

TEXT: 5:5-8

- 5 Then the king said; Cause Haman to make haste, that it may be done as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.
- 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.
- 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is:
- 8 if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to-morrow as the king hath said.

## Today's English Version, 5:5-8

The king then ordered Haman to come quickly, so that they could be Esther's guests. So the king and Haman went to Esther's banquet. Over the wine the king asked her, "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it. I will grant your request, even if you ask for half my empire."

Esther replied, "If your Majesty is kind enough to grant my request, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tomorrow at another banquet that I will prepare for you. At that time I will tell you what I want."

## COMMENTS

v. 5-6 *Piqued*: It is evident from the emperor's immediate reaction that his curiosity is aroused. He knew that Esther had not risked her life just to invite him to a banquet! Xerxes insists that Haman *hurry* to the banquet. Esther has again used her female wiles to good advantage. Xerxes can hardly wait to find out Esther's real reason for approaching him. The Hebrew text uses not only the word *mishetteh* (drinking bout, see 1:8-9) but also uses the word *yayin* (wine) to describe Esther's feast. It was a party! Xerxes repeats his grandiose promise of half his kingdom if Esther shall request it.

v. 7-8 *Postponed*: Dangerous as it must have been to keep this impetuous monarch hanging on the hooks of curiosity, Esther postpones a second time the revelation of her real reason for violating the sacred law of the Persians about approaching the emperor uninvited. Esther begins as if she is about to divulge her secret request and then cleverly holds the king in suspense. Some think Esther hesitated to state her request because she was afraid. However, as Mordecai has already convinced her, she has little to lose by pleading with the king since she will perish with all her kinsmen once it is known that she too is a Jew. Esther seems already to have committed herself to making the pleas. She knows that, if she succeeds, one more postponement of her real request

will only intensify the desire of the king to please his queen by granting what must be a very spectacular request from her. He may even be thinking about the glory that will be his once this magnificent request Esther has is fulfilled in his imperial name.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. God's providential assistance does not preclude Esther's (and our) best use of human capabilities.
2. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
3. Although the urgency of some situations might seem to call for haste, if time permits one's first reaction should be postponed.
4. There is nothing like piqued curiosity as a tool for manipulation.

## CHAPTER 5:1-8

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would Esther know where to position herself to be seen by the king?
2. How might she guess the king would grant her an audience in spite of the Persian law?
3. Why was Xerxes in such a benevolent mood?
4. What kind of banquet did Esther hold for the king?
5. Why didn't Esther state her request immediately?

## VI. The Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14

### A. Depression

TEXT: 5:9-13

- 9 Then went Haman forth that day joyful and glad of heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up nor moved for him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.
- 10 Nevertheless Haman refrained himself, and went home; and he sent and fetched his friends and Zeresh his wife.
- 11 And Haman recounted unto them the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king.
- 12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to-morrow also am I invited by her together with the king.
- 13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

### Today's English Version, 5:9-13

When Haman left the banquet he was happy and in a good mood. But then he saw Mordecai at the entrance of the palace, and when Mordecai did not rise or show any sign of respect as he passed, Haman was furious with him. But he controlled himself and went on home. Then he invited his friends to his house and asked his wife Zeresh to join them. He boasted to them about how rich he was, how many sons he had, how the king had promoted him to high office, and how much more important he was than any of the king's other officials. "What is more," Haman went on, "Queen Esther gave a banquet for no one but the king and me, and we are invited back tomorrow. But none of this means a thing to me as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the entrance of the palace."

v. 9-10 *Disregarded*: The Hebrew text says Haman left Esther's banquet *samecha veytov lev*, i.e., *joyful and good of heart*. He was exhilarated that he had been singled out by the queen for special favor this day and tomorrow also. The Jewish Haggadah also theorizes that Haman thought Esther prepared the banquet in his honor, little realizing that she had set a trap for him. According to the Haggadah, Esther's motive in inviting Haman to the banquet was that he should not discover that she was Jewish, and that the Jews should not say, "We have a sister in the king's palace," and so neglect to pray for God's mercy. Furthermore, says Jewish tradition, Esther thought that by being friendly to Haman she would arouse the king's jealousy to such an extent that he would kill both of them.

But when Haman came out of the queen's chambers he evidently went directly past Mordecai at the "king's gate." Mordecai made no move whatever to acknowledge Haman. Remaining in either a sitting or squatting position, Mordecai ignored the presence of the second most important man in the entire kingdom of Persia. "There is nothing more galling than such utter contempt shown openly in the presence of others" (*Pulpit Commentary*). The Hebrew word translated *wrath* is *chemah* and is more accurately *fury*. Anger raged within Haman's heart. The interesting thing to observe here is Haman's physical restraint. He must have recognized some danger in precipitous and public revenge or he would have seized Mordecai and executed him on the spot. He dared not do anything to jeopardize his new promotion to such high rank. He cunningly held his fury in check until he was on surer grounds. Then he would be prepared to fulfill his hidden wrath on this Jew, Mordecai. Rage, wounded pride and desire for revenge is psychological dynamite. It must explode—either internally or externally. All that is needed is a spark of self-justification and that is often supplied by sympathetic friends or "Yes" men. That is where Haman went. He called in his "friends" and his wife for supportive rationalizations to justify what he had already made up his mind to do.

v. 11-13 *Discontentment*: There is nothing more boring than to have to attend a party given by a man who uses the evening to brag

and boast about all that he has. Of course, if the braggart has the power Haman had, attendance is compulsory.

To be the father of many sons was counted an honor by the Persians (Herodotus 1:136) as with most cultures of the ancient world. We know already that Haman was rich enough to offer to Xerxes an amount of money equal to one year's tax revenue for the whole Persian empire (cf. 3:9). Haman also had been promoted to "chief of all princes." He probably went into great detail as he recounted all these honors. The more he embellished them the more he was sure of his own self-importance. To put the icing on the cake, Haman was even convinced that the queen herself was impressed with his importance. He alone had been invited to accompany the emperor to a place of honor at the queen's banquet. Not once, but twice had the queen invited him.

But Haman was bitter. He could not enjoy any of this. The Hebrew word translated *availeth* is *shoveh* and means *satisfy* or *suffice*. In other words, all the fame and fortune Haman had was not sufficient to satisfy his soul so long as there was one Jewish gate-keeper who ignored his importance! Today we would say Haman had "an identity problem." He suffered from a poor self-image. No matter how much he bragged about his own importance, he really didn't feel important so long as there was one person who did not agree with his own estimate of himself. Haman just could not handle that. It destroyed him. He did not understand that self-respect and respect from others does not accrue from titles but from character! One would come centuries after Haman and teach that the "greatest among men would be the servant of all."

## B. Depravity

TEXT: 5:14

- 14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made fifty cubits high, and in the morning speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then

go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

### Today's English Version, 5:14

So his wife and all his friends suggested, "Why don't you have a gallows built, seventy-five feet tall? Tomorrow morning you can ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, and then you can go to the banquet happy."

Haman thought this was a good idea, so he had the gallows built.

### COMMENTS

v. 14 The name *Zeresh* (Haman's wife) according to *BDB Lexicon* is comparable to the name for an Elamite goddess *Kirisa*. One commentator says the name *Zeresh* is probably connected with the Zend word *zara* which means *gold*. Another Hebrew lexicon indicates *poor* as the meaning of *Zeresh*. The Hebrew phrase *Ya'asu* — 'et<sup>z</sup> means literally, *make a wooden tree*, and is translated, *let a gallows be made*. But the suggestion is not for a gallows upon which a person is hanged by a rope because hanging was not a Persian form of execution. What is meant is either crucifixion or impalement. Fifty cubits high for the impaling stake or cross seems excessive to us. If the cubit is 18 inches, it would make the "tree" 75 feet high; if the cubit is 21 inches it would be 88 feet high. These were not real friends to Haman—they were mere "Yes" people indulging him because of his position. How depraved the heart of those who would suggest taking a life to satisfy the lust for pride and recognition. It is serious enough to consider the taking of human life when a capital crime has been committed, but what reasoning is able to justify Haman's counselors! Lest we think such depravity applies only to those without access to the word of God, let us remember Joseph's brethren, Ahab who allowed Naboth to be slain for a vineyard, David who allowed Uriah to be slain for a woman, and many others who,



even in the name of Christ and His Church, have murdered thousands for pride and pleasure.

There seems to be no doubt in the minds of Haman's friends and wife that Xerxes will grant the petition for the execution of Mordecai. They may have expected Haman to present the petition on the pretense of some accusation of sedition or political rebellion by Mordecai. He might plead with the emperor that such open contempt for his "prime minister" could only lead to contempt for the emperor himself.

Except for the providential insomnia of Xerxes that night and his attempt to put himself to sleep by reading the dry and dusty official state records (6:1) Mordecai would probably have been executed the next day.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. We should not be impressed when others do us some honor lest we are tempted to believe everyone should do us the same honor.
2. Respect from one's peers is a result of character, not title or position.
3. Human glory is a hunger that can never be satisfied.
4. Real friends will not suggest actions that are unjust or immoral.

## CHAPTER 5:9-14

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Haman leave the queen's banquet with a glad heart?
2. Why do you think Haman refrained from having Mordecai slain or arrested on the spot when Mordecai refused to acknowledge him?
3. What is your opinion of a man who would invite you to his home and then tell you how important he is?
4. If he told you the story Haman told and asked your advice, what would you advise?
5. What was the "gallows" Haman built?

## VII. Panic of Haman, 6:1-14

### A. Appreciation

TEXT: 6:1-5

- 1 On that night could not the king sleep; and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles, and they were read before the king.
- 2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, of those that kept the threshold, who had sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus.
- 3 And the king said, What honor and dignity hath been bestowed on Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.
- 4 And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.
- 5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in.

### Today's English Version, 6:1-5

That same night the king could not get to sleep, so he had the official records of the empire brought and read to him. The part they read included the account of how Mordecai had uncovered a plot to assassinate the king—the plot made by Bigthana and Teresh, the two palace eunuchs who had guarded the king's rooms. The king asked, "How much have we honored and rewarded Mordecai for this?"

His servants answered, "Nothing has been done for him."

"Are any of my officials in the palace?" the king asked.

Now Haman had just entered the courtyard; he had come to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on the gallows that was now ready. So the servants answered, "Haman is here, waiting to see you."

"Show him in," said the king.

## COMMENTS

v. 1-3 *Insomnia*: That particular night (the same night Haman's friends advised him to petition the king) is indicated by the demonstrative pronoun *hahu'* in the Hebrew. The demonstrative pronoun also seems to emphasize that this was not mere chance, but the active providence of God. "It is among the objects of the writer of Esther to show how the smallest circumstances of life, those most generally regarded as left to chance, work together for good to such as deserve well, and for evil to such as deserve evil." (*Pulpit Commentary*). The authors of the Septuagint apparently were persuaded of Divine providence here for they translated, "But the Lord removed sleep from the king that night . . ." A turning-point in the destinies of both Haman and Mordecai pivoted on what might appear to some as a chance circumstance of a king's insomnia. The Hebrew text reads literally, ". . . the king's sleep fled away." The Hebrew verb *nigera'im* is an imperfect participle and should be translated, ". . . they kept on reading them before the king." He probably expected the monotonous intonation of the reader's voices to lull him to sleep. But his insomnia was providential.

And suddenly they read the official notation that Mordecai had been the informer of a plot to assassinate the king. That startled the king and for the moment he forgot his insomnia. Immediately the king asked what was not only a natural question, inasmuch as it had been his life which had been saved, but one that was also predicated upon Persian law. According to Herodotus (8:85) those who had done great deeds of honor and benefit to the king of Persia had their names written on a special roll of honor and they were esteemed as a special class of people. It would be a serious violation of Persian protocol and law and a great dishonor to the emperor should he not honor someone who had saved his life. So the emperor asks what the record shows about the honor done to Mordecai. The readers reply with a surprising, "Nothing!" It is difficult to guess why such a gross error was ever allowed to happen. Perhaps the emperor had given the order for Mordecai's reward when the event took place and fully expected one of his subordinates to take care of it, but due to some administrative mistake (or perhaps some prejudice against Mordecai) it had never been done.

v. 4-5 *Indecision*: Xerxes, unable to decide for himself, seeks counsel from any official who might be standing in the court of the palace. Xerxes certainly knew how to reward faithful service and give gifts (cf. 3:1, 11; 5:3, 6). Why does he now seek counsel on how to reward Mordecai? The only suitable answer is that the circumstances of the night are somehow under the providential guidance of Jehovah. For, who should be standing waiting in the court of the palace but Haman, archenemy of Mordecai. In fact, the very reason for Haman's presence in the court in the wee hours of the morning, before dawn, was to get the emperor's permission to impale Mordecai on the "tree" that he had prepared for the insubordinate Jew. Haman was obsessed with his rage against Mordecai. It drove him to stay awake all night pacing the floor in the court of the palace, hoping he would have the first audience with the king upon his arising. Haman's obsession to destroy Mordecai trapped him in circumstances which led to his own destruction. This is the way God has ordered the moral structure of His creation. Man has the freedom to choose personal salvation or personal damnation (cf. Rom. 1:18-32). Man can give himself to evil, be obsessed with it, and choose to have it eternally; or he may give himself to righteousness and have it eternally (cf. Rom. 6:12-23). Mordecai chose a righteous life and did good in saving the emperor's life; Haman chose evil and attempted to destroy Mordecai's life. Mordecai was protected and exalted by the hand of Providence; Haman was thwarted and destroyed by the same Hand.

## B. Arrogance

TEXT: 6:6-9

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

- 8 let royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon; and on the head of which a crown royal is set:
- 9 and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man therewith whom the king delighteth to honor, and cause him to ride on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor.

### Today's English Version, 6:6-9

So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "There is someone I wish very much to honor. What should I do for this man?"

Haman thought to himself, "Now who could the king want to honor so much? Me, of course."

So he answered the king, "Have royal robes brought for this man—robes that you yourself wear. Have a royal ornament put on your own horse. Then have one of your highest noblemen dress the man in these robes and lead him, mounted on the horse, through the city square. Have the nobleman announce as they go: 'See how the king rewards a man he wishes to honor!'"

### COMMENTS

v. 6 *Immodesty*: Haman was a vain man. He was the kind of man who felt insecure unless he was constantly being honored and flattered. He had to have it. But he could not handle flattery. He no doubt thought his promotion (3:1) and his invitation to the queen's banquet (5:4) were deserved. His pride made him totally unaware of the possibility that anyone else might deserve to be honored by the emperor. The world is still plagued with a few people like Haman. Regretfully, some of them occasionally surface within the Kingdom of God in spite of Paul's admonition, "give preference to one another in honor . . ." (Rom. 12:10). There is a

difference between pride and proper self-worth. It is false humility when we pretend we do not have a capacity that we do have. Proper self-acceptance does not require one to pretend that he has no capabilities; it only requires that he remember that he did not create his capabilities himself. Real humility walks the fine line between self-abnegation and self-acceptance. That is the line Haman could not walk. He could not humble himself and so he could not accept himself unless he was being constantly applauded and honored by others. Immodesty is the result of a twisted vanity. Pride and vanity come from a fundamental insecurity. Immodest behavior and dress are compensations for a vain insecurity.

Haman rationalized that since he had been so deservedly honored in the last day or two, then the emperor must be preparing to honor him further. In Haman's mind there could be no one else whom the emperor would so delight in honoring.

v. 7-9 *Imperiousness*: Haman suggests the highest honors he can imagine; he suggests honors befitting an emperor. Such honors as Haman suggests were rarely given by Persian monarchs. They are not totally without parallel, however, as the writings of Plutarch and Herodotus testify. For anyone to wear royal apparel previously worn by the emperor was, under ordinary circumstances, a violation of Persian law. But Herodotus (7:17) points out that the emperor might, in certain circumstances, allow it. Apparently Haman was audacious enough to suggest that the one to be honored should even ride upon the king's very own, favorite horse. The horse was adorned with some type of royal ornament to signify it was the mount which belonged specifically to the emperor and was ridden by him only. Ancient *bas reliefs* of the Assyrians show king's horses with tall pointed ornaments like royal turbans on their heads. It is doubtful that the "crown royal" is the crown the emperor himself wore since Xerxes would scarcely have allowed such a travesty to be made of the imperial symbol of sovereignty. Actually, the relative pronoun '*asher*' in the Hebrew text indicates that it is the crown of the horse rather than the crown of the emperor.

Haman's final suggestion was that one of the emperor's highest

ranking noblemen should be made valet for the one about to be honored. This nobleman-valet will assist the honored one in properly dressing in the royal robes and he will also go in front of the honored one in a procession through the streets of the great capital city proclaiming that the one sitting on the emperor's horse has been signally honored by the emperor himself. A similar kind of honor was bestowed upon Joseph by the Pharaoh of Egypt (cf. Gen. 41:41-43).

There was probably some expression on the emperor's face indicating that Haman's suggestions were pleasing him. Haman's heart was probably beating rapidly as he anticipated the excitement which would soon be his as he rode through the streets on the emperor's horse.

### C. Abasement

TEXT: 6:10-14

- 10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.
- 11 Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and caused him to ride through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor.
- 12 And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hasted to his house, mourning and having his head covered.
- 13 And Haman recounted unto Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai, before whom thou hast begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.
- 14 While they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.

## Today's English Version, 6:10-14

Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry and get the robes and the horse, and provide these honors for Mordecai the Jew. Do everything for him that you have suggested. You will find him sitting at the entrance of the palace."

So Haman got the robes and the horse, and he put the robes on Mordecai. Mordecai got on the horse, and Haman led him through the city square, announcing to the people as they went: "See how the king rewards a man he wishes to honor!"

Mordecai then went back to the palace entrance while Haman hurried home, covering his face in embarrassment. He told his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then she and those wise friends of his told him, "You are beginning to lose power to Mordecai. He is a Jew, and you cannot overcome him. He will certainly defeat you." While they were still talking, the palace eunuchs arrived in a hurry to take Haman to Esther's banquet.

## COMMENTS

v. 10-11 *Humiliation*: What a shock for Haman to hear the emperor's order that the highest honors imaginable are to be given to Mordecai, the man he most hated. Haman had not only to see that these great honors were done for Mordecai, he must do them himself! How humiliating! Many of the noblemen of the emperor's court no doubt knew of Haman's contempt for the Jew, Mordecai. Now Haman is about to be publicly abased. It was a bitter degradation but inescapable. To disobey the emperor after he has spent a sleepless night worrying about rectifying a serious default of royal Persian protocol would undoubtedly mean immediate death for Haman. He was instructed to make all haste to carry out every detail suggested. Nothing was to be omitted. He must be Mordecai's valet; he must go in front of Mordecai throughout the streets of the great capital city proclaiming the honor of the Jew who rides upon the emperor's own



horse, dressed in the emperor's own robes.

v. 12-14 *Hysteria*: It is worth noticing that Mordecai, after the parade, put off the royal robes and returned to his lowly place of service at the "king's gate." Most men would have been so intoxicated with the excitement they would have sought more recognition or, at least, promotion. It is interesting, in retrospect, that Mordecai, after saving the emperor's life, did not seek reward or recognition. This sharpens even more the contrast in the characters of Haman and Mordecai.

Haman, mortified and ashamed, fled to his own home expecting to find some solace or security there. He was so destroyed that he put a covering over his face so he would not be recognized as he fled to his house. He had no sooner told the sordid details of his humiliation than his counselors and his wife advised him that Mordecai, the Jew, would ultimately cause his complete fall from power. These "wise men" were probably Haman's official advisors. The TEV translation has chosen irony to characterize the "wise" men, as if they were self-professed wise men. We prefer to assume they were more like the Chaldeans of the book of Daniel — official advisors to kings and noblemen.

Why would these Persians conclude that Mordecai's being a Jew would make it impossible for Haman to prevail in his struggle against him? As a matter of fact, Haman had already secured an edict from the emperor that all Jews are to be massacred (cf. 3:10ff). Perhaps these advisors and Haman's wife were wise enough to see that since Mordecai had been singularly honored (given the highest honors) by Xerxes himself, it would be unreasonable to allow the man so gloriously honored to be massacred. The LXX translated the last phrase of verse 13, "... and thou wilt not be able to withstand him, for the living God is with him." Some commentators think the miraculous nature of Mordecai's victorious exaltation over Haman impressed the truth upon Haman's advisors and wife that the Jews must be under special divine protection. Such an impression is not altogether improbable. Pharaoh's magicians were compelled to explain: "This is the finger of God . . ." and the Egyptians cried: "Let us flee before Israel, for the Lord fighteth for them" (Ex. 8:19; 19:25). Jewish

history and scriptures were well known by the "wise men" of the cultures of Mesopotamia and Persia. So the warnings of Haman's wise men and his wife are based on more than a fear of the shrewdness and expertise of the Jews. The very fact that the Jewish people still existed in spite of all the captivities and persecutions which they had endured must have impressed many thinking people with the conviction that there was some higher power providentially caring for them.

These predictions of Haman's "fall" before Mordecai must have pierced Haman's heart with great trepidation. Insecurity breeds paranoia. Insecure people persistently fantasize that others are determinedly "out to get them." Haman was probably near hysteria from his paranoia. His "friends" certainly did not give him any relief.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. The good that we do, though unrewarded at first, will always have its rewards.
2. Evil has a way of obsessing the whole man.
3. Flattery is dangerous; it usually blinds the one being flattered.
4. Inordinate pride is self-destroying.

## CHAPTER SIX

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did the king ask about the honor done for Mordecai?
2. Why was Haman standing in the court of the palace at such an unusual time?
3. Why did the king ask Haman's advise on how to honor the one who saved the king's life?
4. Why did Haman suggest such great honors? How great were the honors he suggested?
5. Why didn't Haman refuse to carry out the order to do these honors for Mordecai?
6. Why did Haman's counselors and wife say he would fall before Mordecai?

## VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10

### A. Massacre Disclosed

TEXT: 7:1-6

- 1 So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen.
- 2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.
- 3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:
- 4 for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace, although the adversary could not have compensated for the king's damage.
- 5 Then spake the king Ahasuerus and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?
- 6 And Esther said, An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and queen.

### Today's English Version, 7:1-6

And so the king and Haman went to eat with Esther for a second time. Over the wine the king asked her again, "Now, Queen Esther, what do you want? Tell me and you shall have it. I'll even give you half the empire."

Queen Esther answered, "If it please Your Majesty to grant my humble request, my wish is that I may live and that my people may live. My people and I have been sold for slaughter. If it were nothing more serious than being sold into slavery, I would have kept quiet and not bothered you about it; but we are about to be destroyed — exterminated!"

Then King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who dares to do such a thing? Where is this man?"

Esther answered, "Our enemy, our persecutor, is this evil man Haman!"

## COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Promise*: The king was anxious to hear Esther's request. She had piqued his curiosity by postponing what was her heart's desire. Now the king repeats his magnanimous promise, "... even to the half of my kingdom it shall be performed ..." for the *third* time (cf. 5:3; 5:8). Note that the king addressed her as "queen" probably tacitly inviting her to make her request great and promising the certain granting of the request.

v. 3-4 *Petition*: In spite of the urgency of the crisis and in spite of every good reason for Esther to be livid with anger at Haman, she controls her emotions and produces the proper protocol in addressing the king. Esther's petition is verbalized in only four Hebrew words, *napheshi bishe'elathi, ve'ammi bebaqqashathi*; translated into English, "my life at my petition, and my people at my request." These are poignant to modern Jews. They have been preserved in Jewish traditional liturgy called the Selichoth. The Selichoth are penitential prayers in the form of liturgical poems recited on all fast days and days of special intercessions and during the "penitential season" which begins before Rosh Ha-Shanah (Jewish New Year) and concludes with the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Esther showed great diplomatic skill in pleading for her own life first. The revelation that the life of his "favorite" was in danger would rouse any protective instinct the king might possess. Who would dare threaten the life of his queen? Then, perhaps for the first time, the king learned that Esther was a Jewess. She must now acknowledge her genetic origin if she is to secure the salvation of her kinsmen.

She does not hesitate; she does not mince words. She tells the king plainly that she and her people have been "sold" to be slaughtered. Is there an inference in her use of the word "sold" that the king himself is implicated in the massacre about to be executed? —perhaps! What she most certainly does is tabulate the great loss in human resources to the king should this genocide be carried out. Apparently the Jews, even though a people in exile, and technically "prisoners of war," were not looked upon as prisoners but were given privileges of freedom practically equal

to Persian citizenship so long as they did not seek to disobey the laws of Persia. Esther indicates that she, at least, might have accepted a change of social status to that of bondage or slavery for her people. However, she is quick to point out, Haman's ten thousand talents of silver (3:9) would not be able to pay for the economic, intellectual, political, ethical loss to the Persian empire should the status of the Jews be changed to slave. The Jews evidently were making great contributions to the Persian society in all the areas mentioned above so long as they were given rights nearly equal to those of native Persians.

The plight of the Jews is not slavery, but imminent annihilation. Now the king realizes he is not only about to lose his queen, his favorite wife, he is also about to suffer irreparable loss of human resources to his empire if he allows this slaughter to take place.

v. 5-6 *Perpetrator*: Xerxes immediately asks, "Who is he . . ." The Hebrew phrase is literally, "... who is filled in his heart to do so?" He knows very well that Haman secured the imperial decree to exterminate the Jews. There may have been a subtle attempt to make himself appear free of any involvement in the matter. Esther could have justifiably said, "Thou art the man!" He was involved. He accepted the money from Haman and put his royal seal to the decree. But Esther was interested more in saving her people than placing blame. Besides, the king had been told a false story by Haman alleging Jewish insurrection.

Esther put the blame where it really should be—Haman. Her accusation was that Haman was a *tzar* (Hebrew for adversary, persecutor, vexer) and an *'ayav* (Hebrew for enemy) and a *ra'a'* (Hebrew for evil-doer, wicked-one). Esther does not have one word to say in favor of Haman. There were no mitigating circumstances to soften the enormity of his evil intention. His motives were completely wicked.

Haman was afraid. Well he might be. Now he was the condemned, and the Jews his condemners. Now it was his life in the balance. Now he knows how the Jews felt when they heard the royal edict for their massacre—terrified! The justice of the One whose very Nature is Absolute Justice is about to be manifested.

Someday, just as surely as that day of Haman, all the injustices and persecutions and slayings of all the faithful believers of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, will be corrected and vindicated. Final, complete eternal, absolute justice will be executed by the Judge of all the earth. The enemies of God and His people will receive what they have imposed upon God's precious saints. The destruction of Haman and the salvation of the Jewish people is simply another historical demonstration of how the Creator intends to consummate all of history — with justice!

### B. Minister Doomed

TEXT: 7:7-10

- 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.
- 8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he even force the queen before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.
- 9 Then said Harbonah, one of the chamberlains that were before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman hath made for Mordecai, who spake good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. And the king said, Hang him thereon.
- 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

### Today's English Version, 7:7-10

The king got up in a fury, left the room, and went outside to the palace gardens. Haman could see that the king was determined to

punish him for this, so he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. He had just thrown himself down on Esther's couch to beg for mercy, when the king came back into the room from the gardens. Seeing this, the king cried out, "Is this man going to rape the queen right here in front of me, in my own palace?"

The king had no sooner said this than the eunuchs covered Haman's head. Then one of them, who was named Harbonah, said, "Haman even went so far as to build a gallows at his house so that he could hang Mordecai, who saved Your Majesty's life. And it's seventy-five feet tall!"

"Hang Haman on it!" the king commanded.

So Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. Then the king's anger cooled down.

## COMMENTS

v. 7-8 *Faux Pas*: The text pictures the king rising with suddenness and anger from the banquet. The banquet is called *mishetteh* of *yayin* or "drinking bout of wine." In the feasts of Mesopotamian aristocracy food was not the main course; the time was mainly spent in drinking and eating desserts (cf. Herodotus 1:133; and Daniel 1:5 — "rich food" RSV; Dan. 5:1-4). The king strode angrily into the palace garden. He had been duped by this Haman who lied to him about the Jews being disobedient to Persian laws (cf. 3:8). He knew his queen was aware he had been duped. Not only so, but he had been tricked into issuing an order to kill his beloved Esther! The king probably felt like killing Haman himself, but he bolted out into the palace garden to cool his anger and consider what he would do about his dilemma. He has issued a Persian law; the law of the Persians cannot be revoked; Haman has tricked him to order the death of his queen along with all the Jews; but Haman is second in the kingdom — his "chief of staff" as it were. What to do?

Meanwhile Haman began discretely at first to request that the queen spare his life. The Hebrew word is *baqesh* and is not quite as intense as the TEV "beg." Since, however, discrete requesting

did not move Esther, Haman proceeds to "fall" upon Esther's couch and implore her to spare his life. Haman knew the king well enough to interpret his actions. When the king rose angrily and strode into the palace garden, Haman knew he was in trouble.

Haman committed a serious *faux pas* (error, blunder, mistake) when he fell upon Esther's feasting couch. Apparently his only intention was to beg Esther to spare his life. He had no sooner fallen down beside her than the king entered the room having returned from the garden. The king's evaluation of what he saw is described by the Hebrew word *likebosh* which means to "subdue by conquest." Actually there is another Hebrew word, *shagal* (cf. Isa. 13:16), which is nearer the English word *rape*. Did the king think Haman was trying to rape her as the TEV translates, or did he think Haman was trying to assault her as if to kill her and thus force her to grant him his life? We think the latter more likely describes Haman's action. Whether the king innocently or deliberately misinterpreted Haman's posture on Esther's couch we may only conjecture. Some think he could plainly see that Haman was not beating or choking the queen and therefore the king deliberately misinterpreted Haman's posture to justify his decision to kill Haman. Whatever the case, the king's mighty eunuchs took it as a signal that Haman was a doomed man and that he should be taken into custody to await execution. According to Roman historians Livy (1:26) and Cicero (4:13) and some of the Greek historians, it was customary to place a hood or covering over the face of a condemned man who was no longer worthy to see the light. The Greeks and Romans must have copied the practice from the Persians.

v. 9-10 *Finished*: Harbonah was one of the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of the king (1:10) and was one of those sent to bring in Vashti. He apparently was well informed of Haman's plot to have Mordecai executed because he knew all about the "tree" 50 cubits high upon which Mordecai was to be impaled. This is the first time we are told that Haman had put the "tree" in the courtyard of his own house. This information adds a touch of sadistic barbarity to the characterization of Haman. He wanted to personally witness the gruesome death of his enemy



Mordecai. Harbonah also knew that Mordecai had “spoken good” toward the king in the past. He knew Mordecai’s persecution by Haman was not justified.

The king cried out immediately, “Hang him thereon!” Haman did not get a trial by a jury of his peers. There were no other witnesses called to confirm his guilt — none were needed. Esther had described him for what he was and the king knew it was true for the king himself had been deceived by the wicked man. Harbonah’s information indicated Haman had a special grudge against Mordecai and had intended to “enjoy” executing Mordecai before the date set by the decree to exterminate the Jews.

But what Haman had planned for an innocent man, turned out to be his own fate—and that justifiably. The writer of Proverbs said, “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him (Prov. 26:27).” How true! Listen also to the words of the Psalmist, “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.” (Psa. 37:35-37).

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. A nation’s best resources are industrious, obedient citizens.
2. Money cannot replace people.
3. Evil and wicked people who would unjustly harm others must be identified.
4. Our actions are not always what they appear to be to those who see them through eyes of anger.
5. The wickedness that men do and the good that men do is often observed by those least expected to have observed it. (e.g. Harbonah)
6. “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein . . .”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many times did the king promise Esther “half the kingdom”?
2. Where, in Jewish traditional literature, is the request of Esther used today?
3. What is Esther admitting when she asks for the lives of “her” people?
4. Why wouldn’t Haman’s ten thousand talents compensate for the king’s damage?
5. If the king knew already who had asked to slaughter the Jews, why did he ask Esther who the culprit was?
6. Why did the king leave the banquet when Esther named Haman?
7. How did the king interpret Haman’s being on Esther’s couch?
8. Why did Haman have the “gallows” erected in his own house?

## IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17

### A. Mordecai's Reward

TEXT: 8:1-2

- 1 On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen. And Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he was unto her.
- 2 And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

### Today's English Version, 8:1-2

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther all the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Esther told the king that Mordecai was related to her, and from then on Mordecai was allowed to enter the king's presence. The king took off his ring with his seal on it (which he had taken back from Haman) and gave it to Mordecai. Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman's property.

## COMMENTS

v. 1 *Endowed*: When a criminal was executed, everything that belonged to him became the property of the royal treasury. His estate was either used by the king for his own personal pleasure or for the programs of his government. Sometimes the king would make such an estate a gift to those who had been wronged by the criminal. In this case the king gave Haman's fortune to Esther. As pointed out in 3:9-11 Haman's fortune probably exceeded ten million dollars. This was an extraordinary thing to happen to a Jewish woman of the exiles. Some of the male exiles among the Jews became rich (e.g. Daniel), but for a woman to reach such heights of power and property was unheard of.

Haman is called "the Jew's enemy." Haman continued to be

regarded as the prototype of the enemy of the Jews throughout the ages. It became customary to make loud noise in the synagogues to drown out his name whenever mentioned in the Purim reading of the book of Esther. A late 19th century Jewish work of art from Poland pictures Haman leading Mordecai through the streets of Susa. Haman's wife Zeresh, mistaking him for Mordecai, dumps slop on her husband from the window of her house.

From this day forward Mordecai became a high official ("came before the king") and attended the king's court.

v. 2 *Empowered*: The king had retrieved the very important signet ring which he had given to Haman (3:10). He took it off his own finger and gave it to Mordecai. Thus the power so greedily coveted and wickedly used by Haman was transferred to the man he had hated so vehemently. Mordecai could act in the king's name with the same power Haman formerly possessed. And Esther, although she would not want to insult the king by giving to Mordecai what had been given to her, did the next best thing and appointed him administrator of Haman's estate. Mordecai moved into the palatial dwellings formerly occupied by Haman and was thus provided a residence befitting his new position. No doubt, Mordecai ordered the removal of that gruesome "gallows" and the body of Haman before he moved in.

## B. Monarch's Reparation

TEXT: 8:3-8

- 3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews.
- 4 Then the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre. So Esther arose, and stood before the king.
- 5 And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised

by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews that are in all the king's provinces:

- 6 for how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?
- 7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews.
- 8 Write ye also to the Jews, as it pleaseth you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring; for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.

### Today's English Version, 8:3-8

Then Esther spoke to the king again, throwing herself at his feet and crying. She begged him to do something to stop the evil plot that Haman, the descendant of Agag, had made against the Jews. The king held out the gold scepter to her, so she stood up and said, "If it please Your Majesty, and if you care about me and if it seems right to you, please issue a proclamation to keep Haman's orders from being carried out — those orders that the son of Hammedatha the descendant of Agag gave for the destruction of all the Jews in the empire. How can I endure it if this disaster comes on my people, and my own relatives are killed?"

King Xerxes then said to Queen Esther and Mordecai, the Jew, "Look, I have hanged Haman for his plot against the Jews, and I have given Esther his property. But a proclamation issued in the king's name and stamped with the royal seal cannot be revoked. You may, however, write to the Jews whatever you like; and you may write it in my name and stamp it with the royal seal."

### COMMENTS

v. 3-6 *Dilemma*: Haman has been properly dispatched. He is no longer a problem to the Jewish people. However, his wicked

machinations still exist in the form of a Persian decree. Persian laws cannot be changed. So Esther falls at the feet of the king begging him with tears to take royal action and reverse the decree Haman tricked the king into publishing throughout the empire. The king indicated his readiness to do what he could to fulfill Esther's plea by holding out to her the royal scepter. He signaled that he would give her the full force of the throne to help her.

Esther may have had some doubts, now that the king knew she was a Jewess that she would be "pleasing" to the king for she said, "If I have found favor . . ." She also appealed to the king's pragmatic instincts when she said, ". . . and the thing seem *right* before the king . . ." The Hebrew word *kasher* does not mean right in the sense of *ethical* right, but in the sense of *advantageousness, successfulness, propriety*. It is the word used by modern Hebrews to designate *kosher* food, etc., meaning ritually clean, legitimate, or that which is sanctioned. She had earlier cautioned the king that Haman's genocide of the Jews would be economic disaster to the Persians.

But she and her people are on the horns of a dilemma. The law of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed. Not even the king can change what has been decreed and sealed with the royal signet ring (cf. Esther 3:7-15 and Daniel 6:14-15).

v. 7-8 *Deliverance*: The king points out to Esther that he has done what he could without violating a fundamental policy necessary to sustaining the very structure of Persian government. The king has executed Haman, the arch enemy of the Jews, and given Haman's position and power over to Esther and Mordecai to wield. The king cannot, without destroying the very fibre of Persian government, rescind his former edict for the massacre of the Jews. But the king has a suggestion that will not only make possible the saving of the Jewish people but will also keep the most fundamental law of all Persia intact. He suggests, or infers: "It is impossible to grant your request to rescind my former edict, because any edict sealed with the signet ring of the king is irrevocable, and the edict Haman made against the Jews was sealed with my signet ring. However, I have given you the power of my signet ring now. Surely you can, with all the royal power at your

disposal, devise some way to save your people.” The king is apparently hinting that Esther and Mordecai compose another decree that will provide some way for the Jews to counteract the decree authorizing the Persians to attack them. The Hebrew word *tov* is translated *pleaseth* in the ASV, but more correctly means, *good*. In other words, the king said, “You write to the Jews what you think would be *good* for them in these circumstances, and seal it with the king’s ring . . .” So the king repaired, in a sense, the disastrous decree made previously by giving both the power and the suggestion as to what to do. This was all Esther and Mordecai needed.

### C. Massacre Resisted

TEXT: 8:9-14

- 9 Then were the king’s scribes called at that time, in the third month, which is the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the satraps, and the governors and princes of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, a hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language.
- 10 And he wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king’s ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, riding on swift steeds that were used in the king’s service, bred of the stud:
- 11 wherein the king granted the Jews that were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey,
- 12 upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

- 13 A copy of the writing, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published unto all the peoples, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.
- 14 So the posts that rode upon swift steeds that were used in the king's service went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment; and the decree was given out in Shushan the palace.

### Today's English Version, 8:9-14

This happened on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. Mordecai called the king's secretaries and dictated letters to the Jews and to the governors, administrators, and officials of all the 127 provinces from India to Sudan. The letters were written to each province in its own language and system of writing and to the Jews in their language and system of writing. Mordecai had the letters written in the name of King Xerxes, and he stamped them with the royal seal. They were delivered by riders mounted on fast horses from the royal stables.

These letters explained that the king would allow the Jews in every city to organize for self-defense. If they were attacked by armed men of any nationality in any province, they could fight back and destroy them along with their wives and children; they could slaughter them to the last man and take their possessions. This decree was to take effect throughout the Persian Empire on the day set for the slaughter of the Jews, the thirteenth of Adar, the twelfth month. It was to be proclaimed as law and made known to everyone in every province, so that the Jews would be ready to take revenge on their enemies when that day came. At the king's command the riders mounted royal horses and rode off at top speed. The decree was also made public in Susa, the capital city.

### COMMENTS

*v. 9-10 Letters and Languages:* Verse 9 is one of the longest sentences in the Hebrew Old Testament and is, in fact, the longest



sentence in the Hebrew Hagiographa (O.T. books of poetry and wisdom). Haman's decree had gone out on the 13th of Nisan (Jewish first month corresponding to our March-April). Two months later, on the 23rd of Sivan (Jewish third month corresponding to our May-June), Mordecai issues his decree in the name of the king. The revelation of Haman's plot and his execution would surely have occurred shortly after his decree to massacre the Jews had been published. Why then did Mordecai wait two months to issue his decree for the Jews to defend themselves? Probably for reasons of political protocol and subtlety. It would also allow time for better preparations and decrease the margin for political errors to be made.

Haman's edict was not to go into effect until the 13th of Adar (Jewish twelfth month corresponding to our February-March). Mordecai's edict was issued in the third month. There would be ample time for the Jews (as much as eight months or more) to organize themselves, to collect arms and make all necessary preparations to resist the decreed massacre. For the division of the Persian empire see comments on 1:1-2. The empire was composed of about 60 nations. The Persian rulers probably divided these 60 nations into 127 Persian provinces. The edict of Mordecai was sent throughout the whole Persian empire, from Asia Minor on the west to India on the east and from southern Russia on the north to Ethiopia on the south. There were many languages and dialects into which this edict had to be translated. Persian scribes had to be multi-lingual experts. The Jews had not received copies of the edict of Haman ordering their slaughter and were left to learn their danger indirectly from the people among whom they lived. Mordecai took care that the Jews would not have to learn of their right to fight against their enemies second-handedly from their neighbors. He sent copies of the edict to the Jews in their own language.

The Hebrew phrase describing the way in which these letters were carried throughout the empire is: *"bassusim rokevey harekesh ha'achasheteranim beney harammakim"* and literally translated would be, "on horses, riders on swift steeds, male offspring of

royal mares.” In other words, the Persian postal system and the royal palace spared nothing to get the message out with speed and official sanction. The Persian postal system was unique for that era. The Persian emperor could expect to receive mail through it from the farthest reaches of his empire within one week after its posting.

v. 11-14 *Legislation*: Mordecai’s message to the whole empire was that, in the name of the king, the Jews were permitted to organize, unite and prepare to “stand” for their life. They were given permission to resist any aggression by any people. Their resistance could go so far as to “destroy, slay, and cause to perish,” all the power of any people or province that would assault them. The Hebrew word *hatzarim* is translated *assault* and is from a root word meaning, besiege, show hostility, treat as a foe. The edict of Mordecai specifically allows only defensive action. The Jews were not permitted to attack unless attacked. Of course, once the Jews were attacked they would do their best to survive. They were granted the liberty to slay even women and children just as Haman’s edict permitted their women and children to be slain (3:13). The Jews were also granted permission to seize the property of any people who should assault them. Some writers of the past have accused the Jews of aggressive assault upon the Persians on the 13th of Adar but there is no historical evidence to support such accusations.

So, since the edict they carried was a very unusual commandment of the king of Persia, the government’s “pony express” riders made a point to be swifter than they had ever been to deliver the copies of it to every province in the empire. The reason for more haste than usual may have been to provide an opportunity for further communications between the provinces and the royal court in case there might be questions about the authenticity of the edict. It was an unusual edict! Few kings would ever issue conflicting edicts such as these which would allow actual civil war to take place within his kingdom!

## D. Multitudes Rejoice

TEXT: 8:15-17

- 15 And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan shouted and was glad.
- 16 The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor.
- 17 And in every province, and in every city, withersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a good day. And many from among the peoples of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them.

## Today's English Version, 8:15-17

Mordecai left the palace, wearing royal robes of blue and white, a cloak of fine purple linen, and a magnificent gold crown. Then the streets of Susa rang with cheers and joyful shouts. For the Jews there was joy and relief, happiness and a sense of victory. In every city and province, wherever the king's proclamation was read, the Jews held a joyful holiday with feasting and happiness. In fact, many other people became Jews, because they were afraid of them now.

## COMMENTS

v. 15-16 *Passions*: Mordecai was apparently given royal robes to wear signifying his appointment by the king to the position once held by Haman—prime minister. The king probably gave him robes from his own palace wardrobes. A “great” crown of gold was given Mordecai. The Hebrew word for crown here is *'atereth* and not the word *kether* which is used in 2:17 to designate Esther's royal crown of office. Mordecai's crown was one which

would be plainly inferior to the king's crown, but great enough to symbolize his high office. Whereas the city of Susa had formerly been upset and perplexed at the edict of Haman (3:15) to slaughter the Jews, now the city shouts its gladness that the Jews will be able to defend themselves. The Hebrew word *tzahalah* is translated *shout* and is often translated *to neigh* like a horse. The majority of men are possessed of a fundamental sense of justice and right. Only a very few (like Haman) take pleasure in the sufferings of others and are so perverted they have no sense of justice. Most of the people of Susa, even though Persian, would be glad that the Jews would have, at least, the liberty of self-defense.

As for the Jews, there was great rejoicing. The word *orah* means *light* in the literal sense but can also mean happiness, prosperity, truth or passion in the figurative sense. It probably means happiness in this context (cf. also Isa. 58:8).

v. 17 *Proselytes*: The Hebrew text uses the word *rabbim* (from the root *ravav*) and is translated *many* from among the peoples . . . became Jews. . . . One commentator says, "It can only have been a small minority of the population in each city that took this view (becoming Jewish proselytes)." However, the word *rabbim* means myriads, much, abundance, great, vast, so *many* of the peoples did become Jewish proselytes. Jewish commentators are reluctant to admit that *many* uncircumcised Persian subjects from all over the empire actually became Jewish proselytes. One Jewish commentator writes, "The Hebrew verb is a denominative from *Yehudi*, 'Jew.' Since nowhere else, either in the Bible or in Rabbinic Hebrew, is this verb used to denote proselytization, it may be argued with some reason that a better translation is 'took the part of the Jews.' " However, the Hebrew word *mitheyhedim* is a participle; a participle is a verbal adjective. That is, a participle actively modifies the noun of the sentence. This participle indicates that the "many" were *becoming Jewish*. This being the case, *many* who were proselyted to Judaism in Esther's day may have been the ancestors of many who today call themselves Jews. Ezra (2:59-63) found of the approximately 50,000 Jews who returned to Palestine after the exile at least 652 who could not prove they were Jews. According to the book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, by

Arthur Koestler, pub. Random House, (the author himself a Jew), most East-European "Jews" today are descended from the Khazars. The Khazars were Caucasians of southern Russia who were proselyted to Judaism about 900 A.D. According to Jacob Gertenhaus (in *Christianity Today*, 3-13-70), no Jew today can trace his ancestry beyond 200-300 years backward. Exclusive genetic purity of the Jewish race began to disappear as a result of the Assyrian and Babylonian exile. The many Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes here in the days of Esther is a case in point! Most Jews today are no more genetically pure Israelite than Americans are genetically pure Englishmen!

To be sure, the motive for these myriads of people who became Jewish was not the best. The two edicts from the royal throne made it very apparent that there was about to be a time of struggle and bloodshed. The Jews would have the government's authority on their side (cf. 9:3). Most people would reason that the Jews would probably be victorious and they could be expected to take revenge upon all who had not been sympathetic to them. So many thought the most practical thing to do was to become Jewish.

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. Civil power may be used for good.
2. The Jews would not have been delivered if Esther and Mordecai had not used some ingenuity of their own in composing a counteracting edict.
3. Sometimes those expensive (royal stables) trappings of government, which seem so impractical, may be of very crucial usefulness.
4. The Lord does not always work miracles to protect the oppressed, sometimes he uses letters, languages, couriers, kings and queens and commoners.
5. Even pagan emperors and peoples recognize the need for the sanctity of human life against unwarranted and unjustified homicide.
6. Not all Jews today were born Jews — many may be descendants of proselytes.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did Esther receive when the king gave her “the house of Haman?”
2. Why did she give it to Mordecai?
3. What was the significance of the king giving the ring formerly belonging to Haman to Mordecai?
4. Why couldn't the king revoke the edict of Haman to kill the Jews?
5. What did the king suggest Esther and Mordecai do for the Jews?
6. What did Mordecai's proclamation allow the Jews to do?
7. When the Jews read Mordecai's proclamation what did they do?
8. What did many of the Gentiles in the Persian empire do when they learned of Mordecai's proclamation?

## X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19

### A. Power

TEXT: 9:1-5

- 1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, on the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have rule over them, (whereas it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them,)
- 2 the Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them was fallen upon all the peoples.
- 3 And all the princes of the provinces, and the satraps, and the governors, and they that did the king's business, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai was fallen upon them.
- 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.
- 5 And the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter and destruction, and did what they would unto them that hated them.

### Today's English Version, 9:1-5

The thirteenth day of Adar came, the day on which the royal proclamation was to take effect, the day when the enemies of the Jews were hoping to get them in their power. But instead, the Jews triumphed over them. In the Jewish quarter of every city in the empire the Jews organized to attack anyone who tried to harm them. People everywhere were afraid of them, and no one could stand against them. In fact, all the provincial officials—governors, administrators, and royal representatives—helped the Jews because they were all afraid of Mordecai. It was well known throughout the empire that Mordecai was now a powerful man in the palace and was growing more powerful. So the Jews could do what they wanted with their enemies. They attacked them with swords and slaughtered them.

## COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Reversal of Massacre*: For comments on the date for assault upon the Jews see our comments on 8:9-14. The Jews prepared as their enemies prepared and they were surely aware of one another's preparations for they both had nearly nine months to make preparations for the great struggle. Those who hated the Jews and anticipated slaughtering and plundering their families and goods suffered a calamitous reversal. The Hebrew word *shelot* translated *rule* in verses one and two, means more precisely, *prevail over*.

The Jews gathered in "their" cities through all the provinces. This does not mean there were cities set aside for exclusive habitation by the Jews, but cities where Jews had formed an element in the population. It was not the intention of the Jews to provoke hostility by going where they did not belong. They were not the aggressors. They simply knew that for purposes of defense, there would be strength in numbers, so they grouped together in any city or town where enough Jews lived to organize their resistance. They were so well organized and highly motivated "no man could withstand them." They fought with such ferocity, all the people of the Persian empire stood in awe and fear of them. The Jews were faced with the possibility of total extinction. It was all precipitated by personal prejudice and a personal vendetta. There were no great issues of territorial infringements, rebellions, or national sovereignty involved. The war against them was irrational, unjust and genocidal. They had done nothing whatsoever to deserve such murder. Right was on their side. They fought with abandon to preserve their race and to uphold the justness of the cause.

v. 3-5 *Regency of Mordecai*: In addition to the fervor with which the Jews fought against those who attacked them, they had on their side the Queen (Esther) of the empire and Mordecai, prime-minister to the king. Many ruling and administrative officials of the Persian empire *helped* the Jews. One of the reasons behind the aid of the officials of the provinces is their fear or respect for the position of Mordecai, the Jew. Mordecai's



authority was, of course, equal to that which Haman had possessed — second to the emperor. In addition, Mordecai's greatness was much more enhanced and respected because he cared for others and used his office for their sake and not his own glory as Haman had done (cf. 8:2, 15; 10:3). Verse 4 is somewhat different in the Septuagint, reading thusly: "For the decree of the king was being enforced that he (Mordecai) should be reputed in all the kingdom." And, strangely enough, verse 5 is entirely omitted from the Septuagint. The Hebrew word *ratzah* is translated *what they would* in verse 5, but the Hebrew word has more the connotation, *what was good or acceptable, as they saw fit*. The Hebrew resistance was not unbridled willfulness, but they were able to defend themselves against their enemies to whatever extent they deemed necessary. Their enemies were defeated on every hand, but the Jews did not plunder their enemies property — although the Jews had official sanction to do so!

## B. Progress

### TEXT: 9:6-15

- 6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men.
- 7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha,
- 8 and Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha,
- 9 and Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vaizatha,
- 10 the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy, slew they; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.
- 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.
- 12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done.

- 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews that are in Shushan to do to-morrow also according unto this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows.
- 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and a decree was given out in Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons.
- 15 And the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month of Adar, and slew three hundred men in Shushan; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.

### Today's English Version, 9:6-15

In Susa, the capital city itself, the Jews killed five hundred people. Among them were the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews: Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha. However, there was no looting.

That same day the number of people killed in Susa was reported to the king. He then said to Queen Esther, "In Susa alone the Jews have killed five hundred people, including Haman's ten sons. What must they have done out in the provinces! What do you want now? You shall have it. Tell me what else you want, and you shall have it."

Esther answered, "If it please Your Majesty, let the Jews in Susa do again tomorrow what they were allowed to do today. And have the bodies of Haman's ten sons hung from the gallows." The king ordered this to be done, and the proclamation was issued in Susa. The bodies of Haman's ten sons were publicly displayed. On the fourteenth day of Adar the Jews of Susa got together again and killed three hundred more people in the city. But again, they did no looting.

### COMMENTS

v. 6-10 *Names*: The Masoretic text requires that the names of the ten sons of Haman be written in a perpendicular column on

the right-hand side of the page, with the *vav* ("and"), on the left-hand side. The origin of this may be from the tradition that the ten sons were hanged on a tall stake, one above the other. It is also traditional that when the book of Esther is read at Purim celebration, the names of the ten sons plus the word "ten" are all to be read in one breath, because, as the Talmud states, "they all died together."

All the names except Adalia have Persian meanings: Parshandatha means "given to Persia"; Dalphon means "arrogant"; Aspatha means "horse"; Poratha means "having many chariots"; Aridatha means "liberal"; Parmashta means "greatest"; Arisai means "to conquer"; Aridai means "to give"; and Vaizatha means "strong as the wind." Since much of the book of Esther has as its source the royal chronicles, the author was probably impressed with the importance of these ten sons of the former prime-minister and decided such documentation would be beneficial for all subsequent readers. The listing of the names certainly fits in with the precise and exact character of the whole book of Esther.

In verse 10 we are told that the Jews did not lay their hands on the property of those they killed. The edict given by Haman (3:13) was that the Jewish victims should have their property plundered. When Xerxes allowed Mordecai to give official permission to the Jews to resist the massacre, permission was also given (8:11) to plunder the property of their attackers. The fact that the Jews did *not* seize the property of those they killed in their resistance is mentioned a number of times (9:10, 15, 16) in order to emphasize that they were concerned only with defending themselves. They were not motivated by greed in the grizzly work of lethally defending their lives.

*v. 11-15 Numbers:* The king received an official report of the number slain. It was customary even in ancient days to keep a "body count." In the Babylonian transcript of the Behistun Inscription the numbers of those slain in battle are given with precise exactness (546, 2024, 4203, etc.). The king was careful to keep himself informed on the progress of the resistance. Because of this, the Jews knew they were not left to kill indiscriminately.

The area of the hill where the palace complex stood was more than 100 acres. Archaeologists have found the ruins of many

houses in this area. It was probably densely populated. It is not at all improbable that 500 men (9:6) would be slain in their attempt to attack the Jews within the palace complex itself.

When the king heard the number slain within the walls of the acropolis (hill area), he immediately informed Esther (probably to prove to her that he most certainly had the best interests of his queen and her people at heart). He also knew this initial success of the Jewish resistance would not be all that was needed to wipe out the violence aimed at the Jews. So the king offers further assistance to whatever extent his queen has determined to be needful.

Perhaps Mordecai had information that a second day of purging the city of those plotting violence against the Jews would be necessary, Susa was, after all, the chief capital and would naturally be the center of anti-Jewish violence. Mordecai knew how matters really stood, and as prime-minister advised the queen of Persia, that another day would be necessary to rid the capital city of the avowed murderers. It is really doubtful that Esther would have made this request for another day without the prompting of Mordecai. The request for making the dead bodies of Haman's sons public spectacles was to provide a strong deterrent to any non-Jews who had not participated in the violence but might be contemplating it! Capital punishment of those convicted of capital crimes is both biblical and practical. Capital punishment serves not only as a deterrent but also produces a proper execution of justice (see our Special Study, "The Christian and War," *Isaiah, Vol. II*, pg. 72, College Press).

Ancient cities usually consisted of a walled portion (sometimes with an acropolis or hill where the governmental complex stood) and an unwalled portion. Many people lived in houses outside the city walls and usually fled inside the walls when sufficiently warned in advance of an enemy's approach. The 300 slain (9:14) on the day following the slaying of the initial 500 were probably people residing outside the palace complex, perhaps outside the walls of Susa. The necessity of taking two days in the capital city of Susa to dispatch all those who would attack the Jews apparently resulted in a difference in days of celebrating the victory (cf. 9:19). The Jews of Susa could not "rest" on the 14th of Adar with those in other places of the empire for they had to continue their struggle against their foes on that day.

## C. Peace

TEXT: 9:16-19

- 16 And the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of them that hated them seventy and five thousand; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.
- 17 This was done on the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.
- 18 But the Jews that were in Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.
- 19 Therefore do the Jews of the villages, that dwell in the un-walled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.

## Today's English Version, 9:16-19

The Jews in the provinces also organized and defended themselves. They rid themselves of their enemies by killing seventy-five thousand people who hated them. But they did no looting. This was on the thirteenth day of Adar. On the next day, the fourteenth, there was no more killing, and they made it a joyful day of feasting. The Jews of Susa, however, made the fifteenth a holiday, since they had slaughtered their enemies on the thirteenth and fourteenth and then stopped on the fifteenth. This is why Jews who live in small towns observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a joyous holiday, a time for feasting and giving gifts of food to one another.

## COMMENTS

v. 16-17 *Cessation*: Out in the "provinces" (which included the entire Persian empire—from Asia Minor to India) the Jews

organized and mobilized themselves. With the help of the Persian officials who had Persian and provincial troops at their command, the Jews killed 75,000 people who had attacked them on the 13th day of Adar. The LXX has the number 15,000 here rather than 75,000 and some critics have declared the Hebrew text to be "incredible." Rawlinson says that the number 75,000 is believable. When one considers the vastness of the empire, the wide dispersion of the Jewish communities within that empire, the fact that the Persian officials throughout the empire gave aid to the Jews (probably with their troops), and the fact that the Persian officials were not all that careful to preserve the lives of "provincials;" one must admit that the number 75,000 is more credible than 15,000. The Jews killed 800 in the city of Susa alone. Multiply that number by 94 cities and you have slightly over 75,000. Do not forget there were 127 *provinces* in the empire (8:9). The author repeats the fact that the Jews did not plunder the properties of their dead enemies.

They needed only one day out in the provinces to kill all those who hated them; that was all done on the 13th of Adar (February-March). On the day following (while the Jews in the capital city of Susa were still fighting) these Jews of the provinces "rested" and declared a holiday. The Hebrew word *nucha* is translated *rest*. *Nucha* is more generic than *shavat* (Sabbath). *Nucha* connotes physical repose and tranquility while *shavat* denotes the legislative, ceremonial, spiritual rest.

v. 18-19 *Celebration*: The circumstances of the struggle within the city of Susa (two days duration) resulted in a difference regarding the date of the day of rejoicing between the Jews of the capital city Susa, and the Jews of the provinces. The Jews of Susa could not "rest" until the third day which was the 15th of Adar; the provincial Jews rested on the 14th of Adar. When Esther and Mordecai attempted to set up a national celebration for this great deliverance some difficulty arose as to which day would be set aside for all Jews to commemorate it. It was diplomatically decided that both days would be kept (9:21).

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. When justice and truth is on the side of a people, they command the respect of reasonable men.

2. The forces of human government are ordained of God as tools for preservation of ordered society.
3. The consequences of a man's evil is often suffered by his offspring.
4. While it may be ethical to preserve the sanctity of human life by force, it is not ethical to take by force another's property.
5. Memorializing great victories of justice with holidays has didactic benefit for future generations.

### CHAPTER 9:1-9

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of the Jews "gathering" in their cities?
2. How did the princes and satraps and governors help the Jews?
3. How far did the Jews go in destroying those who hated them?
4. What is peculiar about the Masoretic listing of the ten sons of Haman?
5. Why did Esther ask for a second day for killing those who hated the Jews?
6. What does the exactness of the names and numbers of those slain say about the source of the book of Esther?
7. Why were there two days for the celebration of the feast of Purim?

## XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32

### A. Practiced

TEXT: 9:20-22

- 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far,  
21 to enjoin them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly,  
22 as the days wherein the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

### Today's English Version, 9:20-22

Mordecai had these events written down and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, throughout the Persian Empire, telling them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar as holidays every year. These were the days on which the Jews had rid themselves of their enemies; this was a month that had been turned from a time of grief and despair into a time of joy and happiness. They were told to observe these days with feasts and parties, giving gifts of food to one another and to the poor.

## COMMENTS

v. 20-22: Mordecai's proclamation settled the issue of which Jews would keep which days of the Feast of Purim; all Jews were to keep it both days. At the time of Josephus it appears the Jews were uniformly keeping Purim (Antiq. VI:13). In Hasmonean times the feast was known as the "Day of Mordecai" (II Macc. 15:36). The day is still kept by Jews all over the world. Purim is classified as a "minor" festival and work is permitted on its day.



There is a Yiddish saying that as a high temperature does not denote serious illness neither is Purim a festival.

The main feature of Purim is the unique chanting (different than the Pentateuch or the Haphtarah) of the Megillah (scroll) of Esther both evening and morning, with its accompanying blessings and hymns. The four verses of "redemption" (2:5; 8:15-16; 10:3) are read in louder voice than the other verses. It is customary for the children to hiss and boo and stamp their feet and make noises with specially made rattles every time the name of Haman is mentioned. When the name of Esther or Mordecai is mentioned they cheer. At some celebrations an effigy of Haman is burned. At least two "portions" of food (often confectionery) is sent to a friend, and one must give a present of money to at least two poor men. A special festive meal is eaten on Purim evening of boiled beans and peas (commemorating Daniel's "pulse" diet, Dan. 1:12), and three-cornered pies known as *hamantaschen* ("Haman's ears"). One Jewish-Babylonian teacher named Rava has said that a man is obliged to drink so much wine on Purim that he becomes incapable of knowing whether he is cursing Haman or blessing Mordecai. The more ascetic-minded rabbis tried to explain this away, but liberal imbibing of alcohol is generally encouraged on Purim. Among the masses it became almost a general rule that "on Purim everything is allowed." It became customary to have plays and carnivals on the day and people dressed up in costumes, fancy dress, masquerading and often times men were dressed as women and women dressed as men.

## B. Perpetuated

TEXT: 9:23-28

- 23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them;  
 24 because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy

- them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them;
- 25 but when the matter came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.
- 26 Wherefore they called these days of Purim, after the name of Pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and that which had come unto them,
- 27 the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so that it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to the writing thereof, and according to the appointed time thereof, every year;
- 28 and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the remembrance of them perish from their seed.

### Today's English Version, 9:23-28

So the Jews followed Mordecai's instructions, and the celebration became an annual custom.

Haman son of Hammedatha—the descendant of Agag and the enemy of the Jewish people—had cast lots ("purim," they were called) to determine the day for destroying the Jews; he had planned to wipe them out. But Esther went to the king, and the king issued written orders with the result that Haman suffered the fate he had planned for the Jews—he and his sons were hanged from the gallows. That is why the holidays are called Purim, the word for "lots." Because of Mordecai's letter and because of all that had happened to them, the Jews made it a rule for themselves, their descendants, and anyone who might become a Jew, that at the proper time each year these two days would be regularly

observed according to Mordecai's instructions. It was resolved that every Jewish family of every future generation in every province and every city should remember and observe the days of Purim for all time to come.

## COMMENTS

v. 23-26a *Symbolism*: Among the more esoteric and mystical Jews (known as the *Kabbalists*) and the modern *hassidim*, much is made of Purim as the celebration "of God at work, as it were, behind the scenes," unlike Passover which celebrates God's more direct intervention. The "lots" of Purim are compared with the "lots" cast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:8), so what men call "fate" or "luck" is, in reality, a manifestation of Jehovah's providential care.

It does appear from the text (9:26) that the reason the festival is named *Pur* ("lots") is because Haman's "lots" turned out to be his undoing. On the basis of God's redemptive deliverance documented in the past, it would be logical for any believing Jew to think that the massacre planned through the casting of lots by Haman was reversed by the providence of God as He worked "behind the scenes."

v. 26b-28 *Solemnity*: This feast was not commanded by the Law and was, in fact, legislated by a Jew who had chosen to remain among the Diaspora. It is interesting that the feast was accepted and perpetuated among the more rigidly conservative Jews who returned to Judea after the captivities. But apparently Joiakim, High Priest at that time (Neh. 12:10-12), must have given his approval to the feast and adopted it into the ritual of the nation; or it would not have become so universally accepted and perpetuated.

Mordecai must have taken special care to impress on all Jews through the whole world of that day the solemnity of the reason for the holiday and the imperative need for its perpetuation for all succeeding generations or it would have long since fallen into disuse. It is still observed by most Jews today. The *Adloyada*

carnival in Tel Aviv has been a prominent feature of Purim observance in modern Israel. The words *ad de-lo yada* mean, "Until one no longer knows the difference" between "Blessed be Mordecai" and "Cursed be Haman."

### C. Posted

TEXT: 9:29-32

- 29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority to confirm this second letter of Purim.
- 30 And he sent letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth,
- 31 to confirm these days of Purim in their appointed times, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had ordained for themselves and for their seed, in the matter of the fastings and their cry.
- 32 And the commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

### Today's English Version, 9:29-32

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai, also wrote a letter, putting her full authority behind the letter about Purim, which Mordecai had written earlier. The letter was addressed to all the Jews, and copies were sent to all the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire. It wished the Jews peace and security and directed them and their descendants to observe the days of Purim at the proper time, just as they had adopted rules for observance of fasts and times of mourning. This was commanded by both Mordecai and Queen Esther. Esther's command, confirming the rules for Purim, was written down on a scroll.

## COMMENTS

v. 29-32: Apparently Mordecai's first letter was more in the form of suggestions about commemorating their deliverance with a day of festivities. The suggestions having been approved and adopted by the Jews of the whole Persian empire, both Mordecai and Esther now lead the prestige of their official proclamation to the Feast of Purim.

Included in these official letters from the queen and the prime-minister of all Persia were declarations of peace and pledges of truth. This seems to be a proclamation to the whole Persian empire that the violence is over and there will now be peace (especially for the Jews) based on truth so long as Esther and Mordecai retain their positions of authority and power.

Verse 31 suggests that the Jews of the provinces had added to their form of commemorating Purim certain observances with respect to *fasting* and *wailing* (probably mourning the Jews killed in the struggle). The letters of Mordecai confirmed their practices as *kosher*, (acceptable).

Some commentators think *the book* of verse 32 is the Book of Esther. Others think it means nothing more than "it was committed to writing." We think it probably refers to the documentation of this empire-wide Jewish observance in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia (cf. 2:23; 6:1; 10:2).

*We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:*

1. What may be intended as a very spiritual festivity may be turned into mere festivity.
2. It is probably better not to institute religious observances where the revealed Word of the Lord has not instituted them.
3. One of the best ways to express gratitude for providential deliverance is to give to the poor.
4. There is precedent from past historical deliverances by the providence of God that men may expect His providence to be working in the vindication of truth and justice in events throughout history.

CHAPTER 9:20-32  
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Mordecai settle the issue of which day would be kept as a feast day?
2. What are "Haman's ears"?
3. Why did the Jews name the feast, Purim?
4. Why do you think the Jews of all ages have perpetuated the feast of Purim inasmuch as it is not in the O.T. Law?
5. What was the point of Mordecai and Esther sending a second letter concerning the feast of Purim?

## XII. Postscript, 10:1-3

TEXT: 10:1-3

- 1 And the king Ashasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea.
- 2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?
- 3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.

### Today's English Version, 10:1-3

King Xerxes imposed forced labor on the people of the coastal regions of his empire as well as on those of the interior. All the great and wonderful things he did as well as the whole story of how he promoted Mordecai to high office, are recorded in the official records of the kings of Persia and Media. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank only to King Xerxes himself. He was honored and well-liked by his fellow Jews. He worked for the good of his people and for the security of all their descendants.

### COMMENTS

*10:1-3:* The natural conclusion of the Book of Esther would be the establishment of the Feast of Purim (ch. 9). This chapter is probably added by the author out of gratitude to Mordecai's great courage and beneficence. The postscript emphasizes the power of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in order to reflect on the power and authority of Mordecai since the Jew stood next to the emperor himself in power and authority. If Xerxes could command the service of the continent of Asia and the coast of the Mediterranean, then Mordecai's power and command was that all-encompassing too. The author cannot bring himself to lay down

his pen until he has recorded for all posterity the greatness of Mordecai. And well he should record it!

The full account of the greatness of Xerxes, and the emperor's promotion of Mordecai, was recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. But those chronicles have perished with the dust of ancient empires. The only records we have of Xerxes are those of the Greeks and the Book of Esther. The greatest of men are soon forgotten.

The Hebrew word *mas* is translated *tribute* but means *a body of forced laborers* (cf. I Kings 5:27; Jos. 17:13; II Sam. 20:24; Ex. 1:11). In his expedition into Greece, Xerxes lost the islands of the Aegean, but he still held Asia Minor and some of the islands of the Mediterranean and all its coastland except North Africa. In all these territories he imposed forced labor on his subjects, probably to recoup some of the losses he suffered in his debacle in Greece.

It is certainly not unusual for a Jew to be promoted to a very high position in a Gentile government (cf. Gen. 41:40; Dan. 5:7; 6:3, etc.). This Jew, Mordecai, has won for himself the name of a great and good statesman. So the real measure of Mordecai's greatness after all is not power but the beneficent use of that power for the good of others. That is the measure of every man. In his high position Mordecai did not forget his kinsmen, but constantly labored for their good and their peace (*shalom*—prosperity, well-being, wholeness).

“Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous . . . he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”  
I John 3:7 and 4:20

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant . . .”  
Mt. 20:26



