

ESTHER

Week 8, chapters 7 and 8

We cannot get away from the reality of the Spirit of Amalek playing a significant role in our story of Esther and the intended annihilation of the Jews by Haman. I coupled this biblical incident with the modern day conundrum that dominates so much international diplomatic mental time and energy: how to attain peace in the Middle East? And first and foremost that solution (it is believed) revolves around finding a way to deal with the Israel problem.

However as we discussed last week, national leaders see the Israel problem as a political one that can be solved with land swaps, education, peace treaties, and good will, while in reality it is a spiritual issue of a blatant attempt to thwart the Lord's plan of redemption, and so essentially every effort made to treat the problem diplomatically is like trying to put out a fire by dousing it with gasoline.

When we left off we were concluding chapter 6, with the king's officials coming to fetch Haman to take him to Queen Esther's palace quarters for the 2nd banquet that she had planned. The purpose of the banquet was to gain the king's ear in private, and make him more disposed to hear Esther's plea for the lives of her people. But it was also to expose and entrap Haman that he might be permanently removed from the scene. And to set the tone we saw that Haman was currently in a terribly agitated and despondent state because after having spent a portion of the day in a private gathering with the King and Queen of Persia, which pleased him to no end, on his way home he encountered Mordechai who refused to acknowledge his presence, let alone his high status as 2nd in command of Persia.

And just as it is with the Arab world today in that hatred towards the Jewish people and an inability to accept the existence of Israel controls their national policies and their countenance, so it was with Haman. Fabulously wealthy, a man with 10 sons, holding power and position 2nd only to King Xerxes found himself unhappy and discontent, virtually incapable of enjoying his nearly unapproachable station in life. And this is all because he hated one man: Mordechai the Jew. And because he hated one Jew he wanted them all wiped out. It is this underlying scenario of the Book of Esther that has much to do with many scholars refusing to accept Esther as anything but Jewish fiction. For them, the idea of a man wanting to wipe out a race of people for almost no discernable or rational reason makes no sense and thus must be a folk tale. And yet, when it comes to the Jewish people, this scenario has played out time and again in history since their exile to Babylon. And it will play out in to its most violent conclusion in the End Times.

Let's read Esther chapter 7. We'll only be reading the Hebrew version as there are no Greek

additions to this chapter.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 7 all

Haman no doubt did not arrive at Esther's 2nd banquet with the euphoric sense of self-satisfaction and assurance as he had only 24 hours earlier at the 1st banquet. Haman's wife and family had just told him that he was in serious trouble because of Mordechai and that his downfall was etched in stone.

The first verse of chapter 7 speaks of Haman going to the banquet but an interesting Hebrew word is used to describe it: **shathah**. **Shathah** means to drink, usually meaning to drink wine. The 2nd verse then says that the king again came to the banquet of wine. The Hebrew word use here for banquet is **mishteh**, and it means feasting or celebrating. So the idea is that the main feature of these Persian royal banquets, including Esther's, is drinking alcohol. It was cultural and expected that people who went to banquets and social gatherings got drunk.

This is as opposed to the 7 Biblical (or Levitical) feasts, which employ the Hebrew word **chag**. **Chag** is used to describe a feast or observance that is holy in nature; divinely ordained. **Mishteh** indicates a feast that is essentially a party and has no religious connection. And **shathah** describes the drinking of wine and other intoxicating beverages that often accompanies a **mishteh**; a party. Thus the observance of Purim that we celebrated only a few days ago is characterized in Esther as a **mishteh** (a secular party) as opposed to a **chag**, a pious God ordained holy feast. The word **chag** is nowhere found in the Book of Esther.

So this confirms that Esther intentionally used a traditional Persian party gathering to get her husband, King Xerxes, tipsy and in a happy mood, and at the same time getting Haman drunk so that he'd let his guard down and do and say things that he might not otherwise.

In verse 2 we have the king bringing up the matter of Esther's mysterious and (to this point) unknown request. In fact, the king even calls Esther "Queen", which emphasizes that he continues to view her with respect and as having royal authority. But in a subtle and probably not intended way, calling her Queen makes it clear that of the 3 people present at this intimate gathering, Haman holds last place. Esther is cleverly manipulating the circumstances. She has, in risking her life, come to the king with a matter of life and death; but has thus far held it back. The king has become so curious as to what this important request might be that he can't get it off his mind. So rather than Esther having to push her delicate and dangerous request onto the king, he inquires of her yet again. Using her charm and wisdom Esther has reversed the circumstances; she is no longer pursuing the king, the king is pursuing her. And knowing that the time is ripe, Esther tells him the urgent matter.

Using very flowery and formal language Esther draws out her answer, which also heightens the tension and piques the king's interest. Since it is now obvious to Esther that the king has the greatest affection for her, and whatever the reason was for the king not calling for her for 30 days, it must have been nothing personal but rather some matter of state that occupied him

totally. So she is not only relieved but seeing that he has acquiesced to her every request thus far, while showing her the greatest patience, she begins building her case based on her intimate relationship with the king and his desire for her. "If I have found favor with the king" she begins, and then immediately identifies herself with her people. It must have startled the king who is positively gushing with tenderness and admiration for Esther when she asks for her **life** and that of her race. This terse statement must have had the king's mind reeling and thinking, 'what in the world are you talking about?' "We have been sold", she goes on to explain, and this of course is referring back to chapter 3 when Haman goes to Xerxes with his diabolical plan.

Esther 3:8-9 CJB

⁸ Then Haman said to Achashverosh, "There is a particular people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people; moreover, they don't observe the king's laws. It doesn't befit the king to tolerate them.

⁹ If it please the king, have a decree written for their destruction; and I will hand over 330 tons of silver to the officials in charge of the king's affairs to deposit in the royal treasury."

Since this meeting had happened no more than 3 months earlier, the king would have remembered that private session with Haman and now realizes he had been misled. Thinking that Haman was a dedicated and loyal servant of the empire and the king, and that Haman wanted only the best for Persia and was willing to turn over a fortune to the state treasury if it was needed, it turns out that his offer was insincere and was only to get royal permission to settle a personal vendetta so that Haman could reclaim his honor. Esther underscores the connection between Haman's offer to Xerxes of massive amounts of silver and the formal decree ordering all Persians to join in killing the Jews 11 months later. She does so by using the exact words used in that decree: to destroy, kill, and exterminate. And to further emphasize the heinous nature of this proposed genocide she goes on to say that if this wicked person's intent was to merely make the Jewish men and women of Persia into bondservants and slaves, she would have kept her peace and wouldn't have even bothered the king with the matter.

However there is a more subtle message involved here than modern Westerners would pick up on (and I'm going to explain this because it also has NT implications). Because slavery is seen as a disgraceful and repugnant part of the history of the USA and Europe in our not so distant past, the subject brings up great emotions especially within Christians, and so it can cause misconceptions when the term is used in the Bible. In the world of the Middle East, and especially so in the biblical era, to say that you are someone's slave doesn't necessarily mean that you have been sold into slavery (purchased for money) as we picture it. It was often used as a figure of speech that indicated a voluntary and happy loyalty to someone; a gracious exaggeration. It was also a common expression to say, "I am your servant". Again, this doesn't necessarily mean it in the sense that one has actually been purchased for labor; rather

it is meant to convey a sense of informal commitment to someone usually resulting from gratitude; rather like our saying, "I'm at your service".

Later in history we'll also hear of students of Rabbis speaking of themselves as slaves and bondservants to those same Rabbis. It just means that they recognize their Rabbi's superiority and authority and their willingness to follow their teachings and instructions, not that the Rabbi in some way owns them or can control them against their will. Thus in the same vein we'll read this in the Book of Romans:

CJB Romans 1:1 *From: Sha'ul, a slave of the Messiah Yeshua, an emissary because I was called and set apart for the Good News of God.*

Paul was not literally enslaved to Christ; he has voluntarily submitted to Christ's superiority and authority, willing and ready to follow his teachings and instructions because he finds them superior. Paul used to be a "slave" to Gamaliel, his Rabbi from many years earlier. But he has switched his allegiance and now calls Yeshua his master. And so we also read this in 1st Corinthians:

1Co 7:21-23 CJB

21 *Were you a slave when you were called? Well, don't let it bother you; although if you can gain your freedom, take advantage of the opportunity.*

22 *For a person who was a slave when he was called is the Lord's freedman; likewise, someone who was a free man when he was called is a slave of the Messiah.*

23 *You were bought at a price, so do not become slaves of other human beings.*

In this passage there is a mixture of referring to actual slavery with the Middle Eastern expression of servitude as a form of voluntary commitment to a teacher or leader. It is meant to compare and contrast the two conditions. Further, since people of that era understood that calling oneself a slave was a common expression and not a statement of literal fact, so is it meant as a metaphor that "you were bought at a price" (the price being Messiah's blood). And the intent of that is to draw a parallel between being an actual earthly slave who was purchased (against his will) with money, and a slave in the spiritual sense whereby he was purchased (figuratively and willingly) with Christ's atoning sacrifice. And then we have this familiar passage in Romans 6:

Romans 6:16-19 CJB

16 Don't you know that if you present yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, then, of the one whom you are obeying, you are slaves- whether of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to being made righteous?

17 By God's grace, you, who were once slaves to sin, obeyed from your heart the pattern of teaching to which you were exposed;

18 and after you had been set free from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness.

19 (I am using popular language because your human nature is so weak.)

We see it now more clearly that “slaves to sin” is a cultural expression that doesn’t have any sense of a financial transaction and actual ownership, but rather that you have chosen to submit yourself to sin thereby making sin your master over you. But now by renouncing your allegiance to the master of sin, you have switched your loyalty and given authority of yourself over to the master of righteousness. Notice that, thankfully, Paul even explains that he is using “popular language” in his illustration of slaves and servants to make his point. So we see how we can easily misunderstand a common “popular” expression of the ancient times and think that real slavery in all of its ugly aspects are being discussed as opposed to merely indicating a willful submission of ourselves to some situation or person; not that we have been technically bought and sold and are real and actual possessions of the buyer.

On the other hand, because this expression was common and its implications well understood in the Middle East, Esther is essentially accusing Haman of intending to purchase the Jews (to misappropriate them) out from under King Xerxes and make this segment of Persian society his own. That essentially Haman would become a king in his own right: the king of the Jews. While that is not precisely what she said, she well knew that as royalty Xerxes would interpret it exactly that way and become incensed at the notion that someone may have tried to trick him and thus set up his own kingdom by stealing Xerxes’ people out of from underneath him. Therefore people who were slaves for Xerxes (the Jews, but in a figurative not a literal sense) become purchased slaves for Haman and thus are no longer under Xerxes authority.

So there is a great deal more at stake and in play in Esther’s explanation of her request to her husband than only her life; and it was presented in a way that would be a surefire hot button to a king. The matter was now elevated to treason and treachery at the highest level and it represented a threat to his kingship.....at least that was the spin that Esther put on it.

Having the king’s full focus and attention at this point, Esther is immediately asked the \$64,000 question: who is he? Most English translations have Esther say that this person is a ruthless enemy or an adversary and an enemy. Either way the point is that this man is not just an enemy of the king, he is an enemy of Esther and her race of people, the Jews. Immediately she fingers Haman who is standing there flabbergasted. Esther has maneuvered things such

that now the king, the queen and the Jews are united as the enemy of Haman.

It seems that the king had not known Esther's nationality until now. His was a diverse multi-cultural empire, and years earlier when he opened up the opportunity to all virgin girls of his empire who were beautiful enough to vie to be his Queen, which was proof in itself that he saw the beauty present in each and every race. Ethnicity simply didn't seem to matter to him. And, as we've discussed earlier, there is no hint that there was any kind of discrimination or oppression against the Jews of Persia or Babylon; in fact the bible tells us of Jews who made their way to the elite echelon of government in those 2 empires. The Jewess Esther is the Queen of the unequalled Media-Persian Empire, and Mordechai is about to become a very powerful man in the Persian government.

Now the matter turns ironic and, I think, comical again. The king needs a moment to think and gather himself. A delightful and relaxing 48 hours with Esther has just turned into an anxiety driven nightmare. He rushes outside into the palace garden apparently to mull things over. But the stunned Haman just stands there frozen as he realizes that not just his position but his survival is suddenly in doubt. He began pleading with Esther to spare his life, no doubt having no earthly idea that she was a Jew. The passage says that Haman fell onto Esther's couch; what this means is that he assumed the position of submission and prostrated himself before her as he begged forgiveness. However in the so doing he leaned on the couch very near to where Esther was sitting. The king returns at the very moment that he has flung himself on the couch next to Esther and this compromising position further outrages the king as he accuses him of essentially accosting the Queen in his momentary absence. The CJB and some others say the king thought he was trying to rape Esther but that is not what the verse says. It's just an interpreter's attempt to draw a mental picture of what he or she thought was going on in the king's mind.

But what we've encountered is yet another Middle Eastern cultural taboo that Westerners usually know nothing about. Esther, even as Queen, is part of the king's harem. And a harem is a sacred and important possession to a king; it is a symbol of his power and his dynasty. Despite the rather typical view presented in modern times of a harem being essentially a private pleasure palace for the king, in fact it has more to do with diplomatic arrangements than anything else. Royal wives and concubines were the surety and visible proof of peace agreements and political alliances. But these women were also the king's private property and the rules for how anyone could associate with the king's harem were very strict and steeped in centuries of cultural morays and norms. Note how eunuchs (castrated males usually) were the supervisors and protectors of the harems' females, and also how the girls of the harem were never allowed to be seen in public except in rare instances. This was not slavery and deprivation, this was Middle Eastern modesty.

For Haman to fling himself next to Esther, on her private couch, was the worst possible breach of harem etiquette. Haman fully understood these rules, but his panic and terror and no doubt his assumption of privilege beyond any other person caused him to act in a knee-jerk reaction. All he could think of was to get Esther to change her story sufficiently to save his life. But what he did in approaching her in such an aggressive way was considered an affront to the king's exclusive sexual access to his wife. Thus what the king accused him of was not "rape" per se,

but rather an unforgiveable breach of harem protocol and violating Esther's modesty. In Middle Eastern thinking when another man partook of the king's harem or even trespassed against their modesty, it was a declaration of overthrowing the king. We saw the same thing happen when King David's son Absalom had sex with the 10 concubines that David had left behind to care for the palace. His act staked his claim to the harem. Recall that this occurred literally on the roof of David's palace as a public announcement that Absalom has declared himself the new King of Israel. King Xerxes has accused Haman of virtually the same offense. His fate was sealed at that moment.

Then there is this statement that has caused translators a lot of heartburn. At the end of verse 8 it says: ***"The moment these words left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face."*** The king's words covered Haman's face? What does that mean? The best explanation my research could uncover is this: it was customary in Persia to cover the face of a condemned person who was being executed (kind of like the way a person being hanged has a hood placed over his head). Thus the thought is that the moment the king accused Haman of this inexcusable breach of harem protocol (the words came out of his mouth), Haman was condemned, his face covered for execution; he became a dead man walking.

One of the king's attendants name Harvona draws the king's attention to the fact that a suitable impalement pole was already built and ready for use; the one in front of Haman's house that he had intended to use on Mordechai. We again see the English word gallows employed, but that is a mistake. The wooden structure was not used to kill the person by hanging by the neck; it was a pole where the dead or dying body was impaled and displayed as a public humiliation.

The king ordered that Haman be impaled on it. If ever the saying "he was hoisted on his own petard" was appropriate, it well describes Haman and his evil plan. Let's move on to chapter 8.

READ CHAPTER 8 all

This chapter has a long Greek addition that we'll read and examine next time. For now the Hebrew version has enough to deal with.

This chapter addresses a very real problem facing Esther. Haman was dead, but the edict to wipe out the Jews that he had tricked the king into agreeing to was still in force. And the early part of our Esther story (the part that opened the door for Esther to become the Queen of Persia) demonstrated that regardless of how silly and vein it might sound to us; it was reality that a law signed by the king could not be overturned, not even by the king. Since revocation is not a possibility then some way must be found to neutralize the death edict.

The chapter begins with Haman having been executed and publically shamed by being impaled on a stake; but that would not be the end of the consequences of his actions. Verse 1 explains that the "house of Haman" was given to Queen Esther as her personal estate. The

term “the house of Haman” means everything he owned, and that included Esther’s authority to do whatever she wanted to with Haman’s surviving family members.

And the first words of this verse are, “This very day”. So the king wasted no time in taking action against Haman’s family (his impulsiveness that often led him into making big mistakes that are central to this story hasn’t been curbed). This gift from her husband made Esther a fabulously wealthy woman in her own right. We know of examples both in the bible and outside of it of kings confiscating the property of condemned criminals and making it either state property or the king’s personal property. In Herodotus’ work titled “The Histories”, Oreotes the Persian was punished for betraying Polyacrates; he was executed and his estate confiscated and brought to the capital city of the empire, Susa. We see a similar happening in the story of Jezebel in 1Kings 21. So for Queen Esther to receive Haman’s estate upon his demise is par for the course.

We also find Mordechai appearing before the king for the first time. That he was an official for the Persian Empire prior to this moment in no way meant he’d had a personal audience with Xerxes; no doubt Xerxes knew few of the large number of lower level officials. But because the king was now aware of Esther’s close family relationship with Mordechai, and Mordechai having already proven his loyalty when he reported the assassination plot; and because Mordechai had already been presented to the people of Susa as ordered by Xerxes himself (when Mordechai was led around the city wearing royal robes and riding upon the king’s royal steed), it was a short step (logical perhaps) to having Mordechai replace the now deceased Haman as the king’s 2nd in command.

Thus we find the king recovering the signet ring he had given to Haman and turning it over to Mordechai, thereby giving Mordechai the same powers to govern in the king’s name that Haman had possessed for a time. This will be important for the next phase of our story. But it got even better for Mordechai. What more perfect use for Haman’s former estate than to give charge of it over to him? And it was Esther’s privilege to do so. Besides, what was Esther going to do with it? The wealth of the kingdom that was near limitless and the part of the royal palace where the harem resided was hers. It’s not like she could have moved into Haman’s house.

Although it’s not clear whether Mordechai’s appointment and Esther’s continued pleading in verse 3 for the lives of her Jewish race happened at the same time or a bit later, what is clear is that as far as the king was concerned the matter of saving Esther’s life was separate from saving the lives of Esther’s people.

Here’s the thing: we could just ignore the part about Esther’s profuse weeping at the king’s feet as she begged that he would make an edict to rescind the previous one. We could chalk it up to the actions of a supreme drama queen but we’d miss the point. Esther fully understood what a seemingly insolvable dilemma lay before her. Her predecessor Queen Vashti had been removed from her throne and booted from the harem due to the rash actions of a drunken king and the arrogant and self-serving council of one of the king’s advisors; and as much as the king wanted Vashti back, no way could be found. Thus the only solution to his pain was to find a new wife for him; an exceedingly beautiful one that would help him forget about Vashti.

But what can be done for the Jews? It was a settled matter, chiseled in stone, which the citizens of Persia were to kill all the Jews, and loot their belongings. By custom this order could not be overturned. So the bitter tears and extensive weeping represented Esther's best try at convincing her husband to do the unthinkable; to go against Persian law and overturn the royal edict. To this he flatly said no; essentially he has done all he can do for her Jewish people.

But the king did give Esther and Mordechai an alternative; they should create an edict to do whatever they thought best could be done for the Jews. And then it can be sealed in the king's name and authority, because Mordechai possessed the king's signet ring. What might that action be? The king offers no suggestion and as of this moment neither Esther nor Mordechai know how to proceed.

We should recognize that this king was not someone who fixed problems; rather he tended to create them and then turned the mess over to his counselors to solve. But the good news is that just as Haman's edict is permanent and cannot be revoked, whatever it is that Mordechai and Esther can come up with also cannot be revoked.

We'll see what they determine can be done at our next meeting.