

ESTHER

Week 10, Chapters 9 and 10 END

We'll conclude our study of Esther today. For me, Esther has been an excellent example of what happens when serious students of the Scriptures (you) take the time to examine God's Word and accept it for what it says within the context and setting of the times. Suddenly the characterizations of it that we have heard in the past don't match with what we read. Esther, it seems, is not a victim of abuse by a barbarian Persian king; and Mordechai is not an underprivileged and powerless Jewish father who had his adopted daughter ripped from his arms by fiendish Persian soldiers. Rather Esther took to her role as Queen of Persia like a duck to water, and her husband, the king, treated her with tenderness and respect. Mordechai, as it turns out, was Jewish royalty who held an important (though unnamed) position within the Persian government, and rose to become the 2nd most powerful man in the land, and was immensely popular throughout the Persian Empire.

Before we delve into chapter 9, let's take some time to remember and summarize what we learned last week about Judaism and Jewishness, because it plays a significant role in our story and in all that will happen in the Bible from here forward since it is after all a collection of Hebrew documents written in various Hebrew cultural contexts.

First, it is critical to understand that a term can mean quite different things at different points in history. As an example: today "meal" means breakfast, lunch or dinner. But only 250 years ago it did NOT mean to sit down and eat: it meant crushed grain. In fact the Christian tradition of saying "grace" prior to eating has come primarily from a misinterpretation of the word "meal". Thus a "meal offering" is not a sacrifice or ritual prayer that occurs when one sits down to eat; rather it means a sacrificial offering to God of ground grain. It is the same with the terms Judaism and Jew. Judaism is a religion, while being a Jew is a personal identity; but it wasn't always so. What makes a person a Jew has changed over time and its current meaning is not agreed to by lawmakers, Rabbis, or scholars. For them, in our era, it could be race or family history, for others it means practicing Judaism in some form, for others it means not being a gentile. A Jew doesn't have to accept or practice any religion at all to be considered a Jew in some cases. So in Esther chapter 8 we read that many Persians (meaning gentiles, non-Jews) became Jews when Mordechai was elevated to 2nd in command. Why? Fear of the Jews, we're told. Many Persians commoners felt that with the revelation that the Queen (Esther) and the new Chancellor of Persia (Mordechai) were Jews, and upon the decree that permitted the Jews of the Empire to vigorously and without mercy attack those who might follow Haman's decree to kill all Jews, it meant that they needed to switch rather than fight. These Persian gentiles wanted to go-along to get-along.

There is a huge rise in Europe in our day of natural-born Europeans, most with a long time European heritage, converting to Islam and at the bottom of their decision to do so lies a fear and (for those converts) a certainty that Muslims will soon be their new masters. And so they want to get on the winning side as soon as possible for their own protection and well being. That is more or less what these Persians who became Jews did.

So the question we explored was: by why definition did Mordechai and Esther see themselves as Jews in the first place? And what actions or behaviors made a new Jewish convert (a former ethnic Persian) a Jew? The answer? It's complicated and not entirely clear. First, the term Jew was actually born after the exile and refers to the Roman Province of Judea (which didn't come about until at least a century before the birth of Christ). So the term Jew is what is called an anachronism; that is, Jew is term from a later era that was applied to an earlier era even though that term in reality wasn't used then.

It is like referring to the Chumash Indians who were early inhabitants of the Southern California area as early inhabitants of Los Angeles. There was no such place name as Los Angeles when they lived and thrived. However we say Los Angeles, even in textbooks, because it is the contemporary name for the same place, and makes it easy to communicate exactly where it is we are talking about. So even though our English Bibles will use the term "Jew" prior to exile, that's a misnomer because that term wasn't in use at that time. The more accurate English word that better gets at its meaning is Judahite. Judahite at first denoted a person who was a member of the tribe of Judah. Later when Judah became the name of a kingdom (an identifiable land mass and not just a tribe), we find that the term Judahite evolved to indicate citizens of the Kingdom of Judah more than only members of the tribe of Judah. Therefore a person from some other Israelite tribe (Benjamin for instance, which was Esther's and Mordechai's tribal heritage), might migrate into the Kingdom of Judah and declare their allegiance to the king of Judah, thus becoming citizens of Judah; now they are called Judahites.

What complicated matters further was that a new and different religious expression sprang up; it was different than the religion that the people of Judah originally practiced back in the days when there was a sovereign Kingdom of Judah, ruled by David and his descendants. And this new religious expression came about during their exile to Babylon and then Persia, and that religion eventually became known as Judaism (you won't find the term Judaism in the Bible). Notice the term Judah-ism; it is an "ism" that relates to Judah, and it was Judah that was in exile. This new religion of Judaism occurred because it became impossible to practice very many elements of their former religion as it existed prior to the exile, because the central icons and symbols of their former religion (that I labeled Hebrew-ism just to give it a name) were the Torah and the Laws of Moses, the Temple and the Priesthood. But because the Temple and the Priesthood were no more, the exiles found themselves in a foreign land with no means to ritually cleanse themselves and no means to atone for their sins according to the Laws of Moses. The teachers and enforcers of the Law, the Priesthood, was also defunct.

Out of this circumstance arose Jewish leaders to fill the void. They somehow decided that prayer could achieve atonement, and that a new group of self-appointed religious leaders could teach the people the best ways to follow God. But where would they assemble to

worship and be led in these foreign lands that had temples to all kinds of different gods, but none to Yehoveh God of Israel? At first the Jewish congregations were small ad hoc groups, probably meeting in people's homes, in open fields, etc. But in time something more formal was sought and as the religion of Judaism gained steam came the birth of the synagogue as its center; as a place to practice and observe its doctrines and customs. So Judaism and its foremost expression, the synagogue, were manmade institutions created during the exile of the Jews to Babylon, then as a dispersed people who willingly lived in the Persian, then Greek, and then Roman Empires. But recall that when the Jews were freed under King Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon and took their empire from them, the Jews were released to go home to Judah and to rebuild Jerusalem and their Temple. However without any biblical explanation we hear of only a small fraction of the couple of million or more Jews in the Persian Empire who went back to Judah. Why? Because Persia was their home; they were born in exile, and this was the only country and only life they knew. They identified with it. And by all accounts the life they had was generally a pleasant one and they were well accepted by the other ethnic groups of the empire. But second, because of the creation of Judaism and the synagogue system, they felt they had solved their religious problems of ritual purity and atoning for sin, and so for them a Temple and Priesthood in Jerusalem were more or less redundant. They even had houses of worship conveniently located in their local communities, synagogues, and they were becoming more and more well organized and vibrant and the Temple was a distant memory.

So when some Jews finally did venture home, Judaism and the synagogue concept followed them back. And as we open the New Testament we find that the synagogue was part of everyday Jewish life in the Holy Lands; its existence wasn't questioned. Yeshua went to synagogues and he taught there. Paul went to synagogues, and the first organized groups who followed Christ were attached to synagogues. We hear nothing negative in the Bible against synagogues.

And as proof that the synagogue was an invention that occurred not in the Holy Land but rather in foreign places during the exile, all of the oldest synagogues ever found have been discovered outside of Israel. The most ancient synagogue ever uncovered is in the city of Stobi in the Republic of Macedonia, the home of Alexander the Great. It is dated to about the time of Alexander's conquering of Persia (the mid 300's B.C.). The next oldest synagogue (only fragments of it have been unearthed) was found in Egypt and that from about 300 B.C. The next oldest after that has been found in Delos, Greece, and it is dated to about 150 B.C. The oldest synagogue found thus far in the Holy Lands is about a mile southwest of Jericho and it dates to around 70 B.C.

So what we learn is that synagogues as the places where Judaism was practiced were first established in foreign lands where large populations of Jews lived (what we today call Diaspora Jews); and only later do we find the existence of synagogues in Israel. Even so, they were present and established in the Holy Lands well before the birth of Christ. The thing is, we need to understand that Judaism and the synagogue were manmade responses and solutions to circumstances of the times; it seemed right to the people who created and led them, and yet when compared to the Biblical commandments, there is a wide gap and there is conflict. The same thing happened with Christianity. At first there was simply the Way that Yeshua taught

His disciples to follow (and it involved the instructions of the Hebrew Bible). But in time this was co-opted by gentiles who took this new Way to foreign lands, reshaped it and remolded it, until it was taken over completely by the Roman Emperor Constantine and the Church of Rome, and then it became an entire new religion that (like Judaism) began with a goal of solving a problem; and for the leaders of Christianity the problem was how to exclude Jews and the Jewish ways and therefore Jewish leadership so that Christianity could become a gentiles-only religion much the same way that Judaism was a Jewish-only religion. But by now neither Judaism nor Christianity much resembled the God-ordained religion of the Bible.

Thus it was just a small, dedicated, spirit-filled remnant of Jews who returned to Judah during Esther's day. It was their fervent hope to rebuild and re-establish the Priesthood and the Temple with its services, and to do their best to re-establish the true Hebrew-ism, based on the Torah and the Law of Moses: the Bible. But the vast majority of Diaspora Jews preferred the new Judaism and weren't interested in making the Temple their center of worship (because the many synagogues had replaced it), and the many synagogue leaders weren't keen on giving up their authority and their flocks to a re-established and re-authorized Priesthood in Jerusalem. So a constant battle for power and preeminence began that remained in full swing for a few hundred years and through the days of Yeshua and also of Paul and John. Who would have authority? Who would represent the truest expression of the religion of the God of Israel? Now that the Temple was back, should there be synagogues at all? At times compromises were worked out, and at other times there was open warfare among the various Jewish factions (recall the Zealots who even had assassins among them to kill those they didn't agree with). And this was the societal and historical backdrop under which the New Testament was written. But the beginnings of it can be seen in the Book of Daniel and even more so here in Esther as we encounter many gentile Persians switching loyalties to the Jews (becoming Jews) so as to avoid trouble and to get on what they saw as the winning side. What did being Jewish mean to them? Hard to tell. But it certainly didn't mean following the Laws of Moses, or moving to Judah, or longing for a Temple in Jerusalem. It likely didn't involve circumcision. And that is because it also didn't mean any of that to most of the Jews of the exile by this time.

Let's read Esther chapter 9. And by the way, there are no Greek additions to this chapter.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 9 all

There are 2 ways to view the events of this chapter, some of which are horrific. Either they are true or they are greatly exaggerated and actually meant to be a farce and a comedy. This 2nd option has become a popular opinion in recent times. I personally find that viewpoint appalling as there is nothing funny about the deaths of 75,000 people and I don't think the people of that era would have thought so either. But it is a way to try to once again discredit the Bible by people who have an agenda to do so.

The first two verses explain how the tables were turned and it was the Jews who triumphed when only weeks earlier it looked like the end of them as a race of people. From a distant viewpoint, we need to notice that many Persians ignored that 2nd edict that was obvious in its intent to nullify the 1st edict that ordered the deaths of all Jews. The only reason this can be is

because deep with the souls of many of the Persians burned the spirit of Amalek typified by an irrational hatred of the Jews. This hatred so blinded some people that they were willing to put their lives on the line to act it out, and so we find in our story that thousands of Persians were killed in the process. In fact note the words of verse 1 saying that the Jews were attacked by “those who hated them”. The Hebrew word that is translated into hated in most English Bibles is **saneh** and it indeed means an intense or great hatred of the same kind we saw from the Nazis towards the Jews in WWII.

As both edicts commanded, the Jews (on the one side) assembled with their weapons, ready for battle; and some Persians (on the other side) readied to attack and kill the Jews and take their possessions. The date was Adar 13th and throughout the 127 districts of the Persian Empire there were isolated skirmishes. Not surprisingly verse 3 tells us that the Persian army commanders and the government leaders of the provinces and districts came down on the side of the Jews. They weren’t stupid; they fully understood that they were, as of now, subservient to Mordechai the Jew and that the King had a Jewish Queen. So even if some of them carried the spirit of Amalek in their souls and would have otherwise happily participated in the Jewish genocide, their political survival instincts kicked in and they did the pragmatic thing.

Verse 6 speaks of what happened in Shushan (Susa) the “capital city”. And it says that 500 Persians were killed. Yet in verse 13 we find the Jews attacking Persians in Susa the next day, again, and another 300 were killed. This is considered an error, or an exaggeration, and just a fanciful story by many Bible commentators; however they have missed the point. Shushan was divided into two parts, as was typical of capital cities in that era. There was the royal part of the city, and there was the rest of the city. Sometimes scholars call the royal part the Acropolis. We find this same set-up with the city of Jerusalem; it has a royal part (called the City of David) separated from the rest of the city (just called Jerusalem). So in verse 6 when it speaks of Shushan as the capital it is speaking of the royal Acropolis. So in the royal area of Shushan 500 people took up arms against the Jews (no doubt political opponents), and were killed. But the next day the Jews were allowed to resume fighting, but this time it was in the non-capital portion of Shushan where everyone else lived. And there 300 people took up arms against the Jews and were killed.

We also see another matter arise that is usually called an error or an exaggeration for the sake of telling a fictional story. We read in verse 7 of the execution of Haman’s family during this uprising. It says there that all 10 sons of Haman were killed. But then later on in verse 14 it says that the King ordered Haman’s 10 sons to be hanged. This is not two separate accounts of the execution of Haman’s sons. The first mention of it in verse 7 explains that they were executed. The second mention of it in verse 14 is to explain that King Xerxes ordered their already dead corpses to be impaled on poles for public display (we’ve already discussed this as a common practice and the reasons for doing it).

Verse 12 is, in my opinion, an expression of astonishment by the King over the great amount of deaths in his capital city and his concern over how many must have died out in the provinces. He would know the death toll immediately in the capital city, because he was there. But it would take months for the news to flow in from the 127 districts as to the number killed there. So upon hearing the death toll in the Acropolis, Esther asks permission to allow the bloodshed

to continue one more day so that ONLY in the city of Shushan could those who lived in the non-royal section the city be dealt with. Exactly why it needed to be this way is not explained and it can only be by speculation that we could venture a guess, and so I'm not going to do that. We'll just have to accept that this is what happened and the reasons for it are unknown. But then as an obvious explanation of why Purim was, at least at first, celebrated as it was, it would be a two day holiday; the 14th and 15th of Adar, the 12th month. That is: in the capital city, there were two days of battles, the 13th and 14th and so the battling ceased on the 15th. But everywhere else in the Persian Empire there was battling ONLY on the 13th, so the battling cease on the 14th.

And, as part of the commemoration of this event, portions of food were given. Let me take a moment to explain the intent of this giving of portions. The Hebrew word for portions is **manah** (not manna as fell from the sky in the exodus). It means portions or parts; and the idea is in the sense that you were given something valuable or important, and you have saved a piece of it to give to someone who didn't get any. It is also meant in the same sense that Paul used in his famous dissertation in Romans 11:

Romans 11:16 CJB ¹⁶ *Now if the hallah offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf. And if the root is holy, so are the branches.*

That is, if a portion of the bread dough is holy, and then so is the rest of it. Or, because the entire loaf is holy, so is each of its portions. Thus the portions in this verse in Esther are love gifts given to people from what others were given. It is a joyous spirit of sharing and being sure that all have a chance to benefit and to join in the celebration. Thus it has become customary at Purim to give gifts of food to one another, often to people you don't know but you might think need a cheering up or who might be needy.

Verse 15 explains that Mordechai recorded all these events of the slaughter, and because of what happened instructed the Jews of Persia to honor the days of the 14th and 15th of Adar when they turned sorrow into gladness. Let me pause to make a point, because I cannot tell you the number of Christian articles that condemn the holiday Purim and what it stands for, because of all the people (around 75,000) that the Jews killed on that day. Even though it has for a very long time been an expression of Christianity to be passive in the face of aggression and violence, the Lord has not eliminated the right of His people to self defense. The edict to the Jews of Persia was that they may attack those who first attacked them, and then only for 1 day. This was about preserving life and limb, not vengeance for an insult to capture someone else's belongings and wealth. That is, this was not about shame and honor, the underlying social principle in Middle Eastern culture. And when Our Lord Yeshua spoke to us about how if we are slapped on one cheek, we should turn the other, this was an issue of shame and honor, not life and limb. There was, and is, hardly a greater insult than for a Middle Eastern man to be slapped on his face. This was an invitation to a blood feud because, culturally, if he didn't do something about it he lived in shame indefinitely. And Christ said that we should not react to a personal offense or insult by returning the favor and seeking vengeance; rather we should be willing to even be slapped on both cheeks and accept an even greater insult and shame. Honor is not worth regaining or defending with violence; that was His message. Again; this is anything but an abrogation of God's permission to His people of the right to self-defense up to

and include killing the perpetrator. We have the right to fight to save the lives of our family or friends, or ourselves from an unjust attack. And the Jews in Persia exercised that God-given (and orchestrated) right and were victorious. They did nothing wrong, and Yeshua Himself would not have chastised them for it.

The remainder of this chapter goes on to explain how this infamous matter of Haman, and the intended genocide of the Jews, and the Persian King along with Esther and Mordechai found a way to allow the Jews to survive. And this shall be remembered by the holiday of Purim. But note something: God didn't send fire or pestilence down upon those who planned to harm His people. Rather, He equipped His people to battle to save themselves (so to speak). Our God is not a God who tells His people (including Christians) to stand idly by waiting for Him to act. We are given instructions on how to proceed and if we have studied His Torah and all His Word, we'll know generally what to do and what our boundaries are. But more often than not, we'll have to get our hands dirty and do things with effort and the sweat of our brow. Risky things and sometimes dangerous things. Things that aren't necessarily designed to benefit us the most, or things that make us feel good, or to make friends and influence people.

One of the highlights of this 9th chapter is the half-dozen words that precede verse 11. There it says: "But they did not touch the spoil". That is: while the Jews killed scores of thousands in battle, they didn't take the possessions of their opponents as the royal edict suggested and allowed them to do. They didn't take the spoils of war that by custom they had every right to take. And I maintain that this is yet another hidden-in-plain-sight principle embedded in this story to demonstrate God and His will being carried out despite His name never once being mentioned (at least in the Hebrew version). The Jews, rightly, saw what they did as self-defense and the subsequent victory as Holy War. They were fighting against the spirit of Amalek; and the Lord long ago ordered the Hebrews to fight and to kill and to eradicate those who harbored this spirit until there were none left.

The God-ordained Law of Herem is that in a Holy War God is the true victor, so to God goes the customary spoils of war. These Jews of Persia knew in their spirits that this was a God-ordained war and that it would be most inappropriate to take the spoils because it would be as stealing holy property. Wisely, and to their merit, they did not take the spoils. And I suspect that this also had the unintended consequence of amazing the Persians who witnessed the slaughter, who fully expected the Jews to become richer when this was over. But the Jews disdained taking other people's property (the property of the dead), and then we read of many Persians becoming Jews; some, no doubt, highly impressed by such a display of good character. What a great God they have, they must have thought! And how right they were to think it.

Let's move on to chapter 10.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 10 INCLUDING THE GREEK ADDITIONS FROM THE JERUSALEM BIBLE

As has become typical we see that the purpose of the Greek addition is to add the mention of God because the author felt it was needed. There is nothing here to debate, as nothing of importance to the story of Esther is added or changed. The Hebrew version is essentially a ribbon that ties the entire package of Esther together; and it provides what most people prefer at the conclusion of a good story: a happy ending.

Normal life in the empire has been restored. The blood letting and the danger of a Jewish genocide is over. However the harsh reality of living under a monarchy is that the king can unilaterally decide to tax his subjects for grand building projects, upgrading the military and paying for wars, as well as for the everyday supplies of food and luxury items at the palace.

So when we're told that the King laid tribute on the land, the coasts, and the islands, it means every part of the Empire was affected. We should assume from this that no particular ethnic group was singled out for oppression or treated differently than the others. And tribute, which in Hebrew is **mas**, means forced labor as much as it means taxation so both occurred under King Xerxes.

Verse 2 tells us something more about the advancing of culture and societal attitudes than anything else. Back in Moses's day and earlier, it was rare that things were written down. The Egyptians were great records keepers, but it was mostly accounting records and sometimes laws. History, and events, and genealogies were usually handed down by word of mouth, generation to generation. Up in Babylon, and now especially so in Persia, the craft of writing and keeping records had greatly advanced. Writing was not universal and generally employed mostly by aristocrats, merchants and royalty. So something that was written down was considered more valuable and authoritative, if not immortalized. Thus when it is said that the acts of King Xerxes and of his honoring of Mordechai were written in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia, it lends much importance (from the Jewish point of view) to Mordechai and to his elevated position. It was now a permanent part of Persian history.

Mordechai's Jewishness is emphasized, as is his popularity among the people of the empire. He was of course very popular among the Jews but also well liked by all of his countrymen, and his countrymen were the Persians. This leads us right back to the question of what is a Jew, and what it might have been that people who claimed to be Jews in Esther's day (and in other times as well) did to express their Jewishness. Notice here that the writer of the Book of Esther concludes that Mordechai's countrymen are NOT the people of Judah but rather the general population of Persia. Mordechai has identified himself with Persia, not Judah. In modern lingo Mordechai no doubt would say he's a Persian Jew. So, here we see that in this era identity with the Kingdom of Judah is no longer needed to consider oneself, or be seen as, a Jew; it is two separate issues. You can be a Jew and see yourself as entirely Persian and the two are not in conflict. This would not have been the case less than a century earlier. At that time being a Jew directly connected you to the Kingdom of Judah.

Further, nowhere in the Book of Esther, and not even at the ending when it might have been expected, is there mention of a longing of either Mordechai or Esther to "return home" to

Judah, or to regain the true religion. Why? They **are** home; for them Persia is home and has always been. Judah belongs to their ancestors a couple of generations ago. However not all Jews in the Persian Empire felt that way. And when we open the Book of Ezra, we'll meet several thousand Jews who never felt at home in Babylon or Persia and longed to go back to Judah and to re-establish the Torah based life of their grandparents.

This ends our study of the Book of Esther.