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Esther: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The Book of Esther narrates the history that lies behind a feast, and it is a book that is full of feasts. The first chapter, the prologue to Esther's story, opens with a remarkable feast, and the final chapters of the book end with the institution of another, the Feast of Purim. As Adele Berlin notes, Chapter 1 introduces us to several of the themes that will dominate the rest of the book.

Feasts, insubordination, the king's search for a bride, rash edicts, intrigue in the court, and other such themes. The chapter opens by locating the story in the time of Ahasuerus, a Persian king, who ruled a vast empire stretching from India, or what would be modern day Pakistan, to Ethiopia at its extremities. The Persian period began with the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

It ended with Alexander the Great in 333 BC. The precise identity of this figure is debated. He is not the only Ahasuerus in our Bibles.

There is an Ahasuerus who was the father of Darius the Mede in Daniel Chapter 9 verse 1. Another Ahasuerus is mentioned in Ezra Chapter 4 verse 6. James Jordan has argued that Darius the Persian king, who reigned from 522 to 486 BC, a different figure from Darius the Mede in Daniel, is the same figure as Ahasuerus in Esther and Artaxerxes in Ezra and Nehemiah. More commonly, however, scholars identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes. He reigned from 486 to 465 BC.

The Septuagint and Josephus identify this figure as Artaxerxes, who reigned from 465 to 424 BC. The identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes rests in large measure upon the strong evidence that Ahasuerus is the Hebrew version of the same Persian term that has rendered Xerxes in Greek, not dissimilar to the Babylonian version of the name. Had the figure been named Artaxerxes, we would have expected a T in Ahasuerus, as Anthony Tomasino points out.

Jordan's position depends upon the argument, for which by his own admission little supportive evidence exists, that Persian monarchs used multiple throne names such as Darius Xerxes and Artaxerxes. Further biblical data to fit into the picture can be found in Ezra 4, which mentions various Persian kings in succession. Cyrus, possibly Darius again, Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius.

In Ezra, Nehemiah and also in Esther 2, verses 5-6, we have references to exiles and their descendants. This genealogical data may place chronological constraints upon the text. Jordan's position is strongest in this inner biblical evidence.

However, there remain difficulties. For instance, if, as Jordan argues, Mordecai was personally taken into exile from Judah, his advanced age at this point would raise problems for an assumption of Esther's youth. As some commentators have noted, the more general identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes would fit neatly with what we know of the chronology of his reign.

In 483 BC, the third year of his reign that is mentioned in this chapter, Xerxes was assembling his war council to prepare to attack the Greeks. Scholars have long challenged the historicity of the Book of Esther. The identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes is not without its problems, for instance.

Herodotus writes about the brutal queen of Xerxes, Amestris. This vengeful and cruel queen seems to have been active long after Vashti was deposed, and her character seems to be the polar opposite of the biblical heroine who was the subject of this book. Scholars have raised further questions of historical accuracy concerning this book.

The reference to 127 provinces, for instance, would, some claim, be as jarring as reading about 400 different US states. Persia was divided into about 20 different satrapies, not over 120 provinces. Besides this, there are details such as the irrevocability of the law of the Medes and the Persians, the height of Haman's gallows, the suggestion that Xerxes would elevate two non-Persians to the status of prime minister within his regime, the choice of a queen of Persia through a beauty contest instead of marrying a daughter of one of the leading families.

Those who argue for the historicity of the Book of Esther have ready answers for many of these objections. The Book of Esther clearly distinguishes between satraps and governors. The provinces that it describes are clearly under the rule of governors, not under the rule of satraps as the satrapies are.

Many details of the book clearly ring historically true and fit in with what we know of the period. Despite himself questioning the historicity of the book, David Klines lists a number of the historical details that ring true within it. The use of impalement as a form of capital punishment.

The practice of obeisance to kings and nobles. Belief in lucky days. Setting crowns on the heads of royal horses.

Reclining on couches at meals. To these, Tomasino adds the names that we have within the book, which clearly are appropriate to the time and the place. Recognising the accuracy of these incidental and scene-setting details, the case for trusting the book on some of the more controversial and less substantiated details might be stronger.

The great feast of Ahasuerus with which the book begins should not be regarded merely as a matter of decadent self-indulgence. As Rabbi David Foreman has argued, within a great kingdom, order needs to be kept and one of the ways that this can be established is through grand spectacle and great feasts. Within this great feast and the celebrations surrounding it, Ahasuerus could wow the governors of the various provinces with his wealth and splendour.

His bountiful generosity as a host and benefactor would also win their support and

loyalty. The reference to the 127 provinces here, the first of three times within the book, gives a sense of the great extent of the kingdom of Ahasuerus. However, some Jewish commentators have seen something more going on here.

Could the number have a symbolic significance? Some have noted that the number is 12×10 plus 7, all numbers associated in some way with completion and perfection. More interesting, however, is the fact that the number 127 is only found on one other occasion in scripture in reference to the age of Sarah. In Genesis chapter 23 verse 10 we are told that Sarah died at the age of 127.

Could there be some connection between the story of Sarah and the story of Esther? Some Jewish commentators, including Foreman, have suggested that there might be. While I have not seen anyone mention this, such a connection could be strengthened by the number 180 which appears shortly afterwards. There is only one other occurrence of the number 180 in scripture.

In Genesis chapter 35 verse 28 it is the age of Isaac when he dies. 127 the age of Sarah and 180 the age of Isaac, her son. Sarah, like Esther, was taken on account of her beauty by a pagan king and had to hide her identity to save her people.

Isaac is the great promised seed. Perhaps what we have here is an indication of some of the themes of the book by a subtle allusion to some figures that share a typological resemblance. The great feast with which this time of feasting concludes, in verse 5 and following, is a feast to which all are invited.

It lasts for seven days and the festivities and the furnishings are described for us at some length. This is rather atypical for the biblical text which seldom gives much attention to visual details and scene setting. Rabbi Foreman suggests that these details may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle, in Leviticus chapter 8 verse 23 for instance.

And you shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you. Seven days for a great inauguration or sanctification event, lengthy descriptions of glorious materials, and the summoning of particular persons to enter into the presence of the great king. Might all evoke the story of the consecration of the tabernacle.

The drinking of great quantities of wine are highlighted here. In the story of Leviticus, after the death of Nadab and Abihu, the drinking of wine is expressly forbidden, which has led many to suppose that the deaths of Nadab and Abihu followed after their rash actions following the drinking of wine. So while the story of Esther chapter 1 may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle, it might do so in order to stand in some sort of contrast to it.

As the law's burning anger came out and burnt up Nadab and Abihu, Ahasuerus' anger is caused to burn against his Queen Vashti. What exactly happens in verses 10 and following is much debated by commentators. Many commentators see here the lecherous and dishonorable actions of a drunken king.

Indeed, traditionally many Jewish commentators argued that Queen Vashti was summoned into the king's presence naked, wearing nothing but the royal crown. Rabbi Thorman raises a different possibility. The beautiful queen, he argues, is not just an attractive woman to be lusted after.

There are numerous such women among the dancing girls or the concubines. Rather, Queen Vashti in her royal crown represents the glory of Persia itself. Wearing the royal crown, she is a symbol of the kingdom.

The king is summoning her at the height of the feast, at the culmination of the celebration on the great final day, when he is happy and everything seems to be right, but her refusal to come at this point invites a great crisis. This great spectacle of Ahasuerus' pomp and power and the glories of his kingdom, which was supposed to be crowned with the presentation of the glory of his queen, is spoiled by her non-appearance. Whereas all of his guests were supposed to be impressed by his might, generosity and benefaction, now all of this will be overshadowed by his queen's dishonoring of him.

Other commentators read this situation differently. Many feminist commentators, for instance, have seen this as the queen's assertion of her dignity, her refusal to be dishonored or to be reduced to the status of a common concubine. The concubines were the ones that should come out at this point, not the queen.

Vashti, however, is not a hero in the biblical text. Esther chapter 1 does not seem to be written to invite us to respond either very positively or negatively to any of these figures. That said, as she is a foil for the character of Esther, if anything Vashti is presented in a more negative light.

Esther will be what Vashti failed to be. When the king goes to his advisers for counsel, Mammucan gives him advice that may seem rather hyperbolic, presenting the actions of Queen Vashti as a societal crisis. While this is almost certainly greatly overstated, we should not miss the possible element of truth to his claims.

Ahasuerus is trying to rule the kingdom through spectacle, and a bad spectacle, such as that created by Queen Vashti, may cause problems throughout his realm. As a consequence of her actions, Mammucan advises that Queen Vashti be banished from the king's presence. She would lose much of her power and influence as a result.

This decree concerning Queen Vashti was then to be proclaimed throughout all of the

kingdom of King Ahasuerus, in order that as the people saw the consequences of Vashti's actions, wives would be deterred from dishonouring their husbands as Vashti had done. A question to consider. In his treatment of the book of Esther, Yoram Hazoni presents the character of Ahasuerus as dominated by an appetite for rule and desire for control.

Vashti exists not as a companion for Ahasuerus, but more as a symbol of his greatness and glory. She is seldom by his side, but must come when summoned. When she dishonours the proud king, the king, to save face, blows up the issue into a matter of state, and the flattering counsellors that he has gathered around him merely protect him from the truth about himself.

How do you assess the characters of Ahasuerus and Vashti? Does the biblical text itself give us any clues as to its perspective upon them? In Esther Chapter 2, after the removal of Queen Vashti in Chapter 1, we are finally introduced to the main characters of the book, Esther and Mordecai. The events of Chapter 2 likely open two or three years after the events of Chapter 1. Vashti, who was demoted from her queenly status in Chapter 1, now needs to be replaced, and King Ahasuerus seems to be prepared to look for her replacement in a rather unorthodox way. It is the king's young male attendants who first give him the suggestion.

They propose a kingdom-wide beauty contest to select the new queen. Perhaps this proposal has the added advantage for King Ahasuerus of putting the powerful families in Persia in their place, of discouraging his new queen from getting ideas above her station, as Vashti had done, and also of presenting the queen as a woman of the people. The beautiful Vashti had failed to stand as a symbol of his power and might and glory in the previous chapter.

Perhaps now Ahasuerus hopes that a woman chosen from the commoners would be able to do the job instead. Suitable candidates would be chosen for their beauty, youth and virginity. While the text does not belabor the fact, the selection of the replacement for Vashti also seems to have involved an evening of sexual relations with the king.

The purpose of all of this was probably not merely the king's immediate sexual pleasure. The women in question were not sexually experienced. However, it would be a symbol of his dominance that he would be the one to deflower the most beautiful women of the land.

Ahasuerus' seeming sense of entitlement to the bodies of his subjects would not have been considered completely out of the ordinary for a Persian king. Persian kings were known for taking large numbers of young men and making them eunuchs, or women and making them concubines. We should also consider that in a society of arranged marriages, the prospect of one's daughter entering the royal harem, and perhaps even marrying the great king Ahasuerus himself and becoming his queen, would likely have been regarded very positively by many.

The physical woman being brought to Ahasuerus was likely not brought to him by force. The text does not airbrush the character of Ahasuerus. We see enough to know that he was not a particularly righteous man.

But on the other hand, it does not present him as a real monster. He is a Persian king of his time, with all that goes with that, much of it bad, but not egregiously so. In verse 5, we are introduced to one of the main characters of the book.

Indeed, David Dauber has made the provocative suggestion that Mordecai has a reasonable claim to be the main character of the book rather than Esther. He is the first to be introduced, and it is with Mordecai that the book also ends. He is introduced to us as a Jew, one of the Judahite exiles.

But his name, which is similar to other names recorded from the period, is one that probably is of a pagan origin, perhaps derived from the god Marjuk. Elements of his genealogy are filled out for us. He is the son of Jeah, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite.

Those names evoke a history that is important background for this book. Shimei was the name of a man in 2 Samuel who was of the household of Saul, and Kish was Saul's father. And the tribe of Benjamin was the tribe of Saul, the first king of Israel.

Verse 6 raises some difficult chronological questions. The most natural reading of the text is that Mordecai himself was carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who were Jechoniah. Jechoniah being another version of the name Jehoikim.

If Mordecai was brought away with the captives, he would be at least 80 at this point, and that is if we are presuming a very early dating of the book. It may start to stretch credulity that he would have a cousin at least 60 years his junior. Recognizing this, some have argued that the person who was carried away into captivity was not Mordecai but was rather Kish.

This may not be the most likely reading of the text in the abstract, but it is a possible one and may be contextually determined. The fact that either Mordecai or his ancestor had been carried away with Jehoikim in 597 BC suggests that the family was of noble stock. Commoners were not taken away until about 10 years later.

Mordecai is bringing up his first cousin Esther. Esther has two names, Hadassah meaning myrtle, or Esther which might come from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar or might relate to the word for star. Jewish commentators have also seen hints in the way that her name in Hebrew could be understood as let me hide.

The story of Esther is in many ways a story about hiding, a story about Esther's hidden identity and of God's hidden presence and activity in the book. Historically a number of Jewish commentators have also seen here a possibility that Mordecai is married to

Esther, or perhaps that he has adopted her with the intention of marrying her when she comes of full age. Such readings are speculative, but they have likely drawn some of their strength from the parallels between Esther and the character of Sarah, whom Abraham instructs to hide her identity when she is taken by pagan kings on account of her beauty.

There are definite similarities to be seen between Abraham and Sarah and Mordecai and Esther. Sarah, whose name means princess, anticipates and prefigures in certain ways the character and the actions of this long distant descendant. The story of Abraham and Sarah is just one of many that can be heard in the background of this book.

We don't hear Esther's name Hadassah again in this book, but as in the case of Daniel and his three friends, the fact that we know that she has another Hebrew name alerts us to her two-fold identity and her need to navigate between two worlds. Hidden behind the Persian queen is the daughter of Sarah, Hadassah. As in the case of Sarah who was taken into the house of Pharaoh and Bimelech, Esther seems to be rather passive as she is taken into the king's palace.

While this probably would not have been seen as a particularly bad fate for many of the women selected, they would likely have little choice in the matter. In the book of Esther, the character of Joseph is most commonly seen behind the figure of Mordecai, but in these verses we might see the figure of Joseph behind the character of Esther as she progresses and finds favour in the sight of all of those around her. Esther brought into the king's palace is like Joseph in the house of Potiphar or in the prison.

Like Joseph, she will later be raised up to one of the highest positions in the land. Esther is given favourable treatment over the other women in the harem and advanced ahead of them. That she is given the best position in the harem singles her out for likely further advancement in the future.

Like Abraham commanded Sarah, Mordecai strictly charged Esther not to reveal her identity. We are not told exactly why Mordecai did this. Perhaps he was aware of and concerned about anti-Jewish sentiment in the court.

It is also possible that her chances of advancement would have been increased if her people of origin were not known. Mordecai keeps up communication with Esther during the time that she is in the harem. We can presume that he uses discreet intermediaries that bring messages back and forth.

When Esther is taken to King Ahasuerus, she wins great favour in his sight, much as she has with everyone else. Preferring her over all of the other virgins, Ahasuerus makes her his queen. Another great feast is thrown as Ahasuerus takes Esther as his wife and queen.

Verse 19 is difficult to understand. The ESV translates the verse, now when the virgins were gathered together the second time. Michael Fox lists some of the possibilities.

Perhaps the king is looking for a new concubine. Perhaps some of the courtiers are jealous of Esther and want the king to appoint a new favourite in her stead. Perhaps it refers to a time before Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus.

Or perhaps, and this is his preferred understanding, second refers to the second harem to which the women are being taken. Even after being chosen by Ahasuerus, Esther continues to keep the word of Mordecai. She is the bearer of a potentially dangerous secret.

In different ways, both Rabbi David Foreman and James Jordan hear subtle allusions to the story of Genesis, Eden and the Fall. Chapter 1 involves something going wrong on the seventh day when all was supposed to be at rest. In chapter 2, the king is going to enter into rest with his new queen in the seventh year of his reign.

Both of them argue that we can recall the story of the creation of Eve in the beauty contest of this chapter. The women are all brought one by one to King Ahasuerus and he inspects them. And the one who is selected he will call by name.

Esther is Ahasuerus' Eve. Rabbi Foreman suggests that there may be further subtle verbal allusions back to the story of Eden and the Fall. The description of Mordecai walking in front of the court of the harem is much the same as the description of the Lord walking in the garden in Genesis 3. In verse 10 of our chapter, Mordecai commands upon Esther.

This is a stranger way of speaking that we also encounter in Genesis 2. As God commanded upon Adam. The case for a connection between the story of Esther and the story of Eden and the Fall is a cumulative one. It doesn't depend entirely upon any single strand of argumentation but rather upon the gathered weight of many such arguments.

These connections will be greatly filled out as we work through the book. The chapter ends with an important episode that sets up further events in the book. Mordecai becomes privy to information concerning a plot against the king's life.

Two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, previously mentioned in chapter 1, conspire against the king. And Mordecai gets wind of this. He is presumably told by a third party and does not merely overhear a conversation.

He relays the information to Esther and Esther informs Ahasuerus, mentioning the name of Mordecai. The plot is foiled and the event is recorded in the book of the Chronicles of the King. Mordecai is not rewarded in any way at this point, however.

A question to consider. When reading a text like this, it's important to consider some of

the texts that lie in the background. These can be like the countermelodies that go with the melody of the text to produce harmony.

I have mentioned already the story of Joseph, the story of Eden and the Fall, the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of the establishment of the tabernacle. I have also mentioned the character of Saul. Do you find these connections persuasive or unpersuasive? How would you rank these connections from the weakest to the strongest? Do you hear any connections that I have not mentioned? In Esther chapter 1 we were introduced to King Ahasuerus.

In chapter 2 we are introduced to the chief protagonists of the book. Esther and Mordecai. Now in chapter 3 we meet the chief antagonist.

Haman the Agagite. A number of Jewish commentators have identified Haman with Mimucan in chapter 1, the man who advises King Ahasuerus concerning Vashti. The description of Haman as an Agagite is significant.

King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected from the throne because of his failure to kill Agag the Amalekite. There was an enduring antagonism between the Amalekites and the Israelites. The Amalekites had attacked Israel as they left Egypt.

On other occasions they sought to attack Israel when Israel was at its weakest. Amalek was a descendant of Esau and in Amalek the rivalry between Esau and Jacob was continued and intensified. The Lord declared concerning Amalek in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17-19.

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven, you shall not forget. King Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected for his failure to keep this commandment by the Lord.

He was a Benjaminite and a son of Kish and here in this book we meet another son of Kish and Benjaminite. Mordecai, this Benjaminite reminiscent of Saul, will face one of Agag's descendants, Haman. The old conflict will be revived again.

Haman is advanced by King Ahasuerus, placed over all of the other officials. All of the officials are made to bow down before Haman at the gate. However Mordecai does not do so and the king's servants at the king's gate interrogate him as to why.

When he continues not to bow and does not listen to them, they go and tell Haman. We immediately have a question here. Is Mordecai wrong not to bow to Haman? What are his reasons not to bow? Some have suggested that this is a resistance of idolatry, that to

bow to a human being in such a manner is a denial of the fact that the Lord alone is due such worship.

Others have seen Mordecai's refusal to bow as grounded in the fact that Haman was an Agagite. Mordecai as a Jew will not bow to this historic adversary of his people. Neither of these reasons seem to work and the text does not really give us a direct answer to our question.

James Jordan suggests that Mordecai's refusal to bow is a rebellious action, that he really should have bowed and that his failure to bow is a sin that precipitates much of the crisis that follows. The fact that the text does not neatly address the question that we might have about why Mordecai does not bow and whether he is justified or not in this, raises the possibility for me that the text wants us to puzzle over this question. The text may not immediately answer this question but it wants us to think through the question, to have it in the back of our minds as we go through the book.

When we have such questions it's usually best to consider what would help us to give an answer. And I can think of a few different lines of investigation. Biblical text can give us a sense of how we are to view the actions of particular characters by framing those actors as good guys or bad guys.

One of the ways that it can do this is by associating figures with other figures. Mordecai is a Joseph-like character. He prospers and he is vindicated and elevated.

On the surface of the story he is a good guy and a hero throughout. Meanwhile Haman, the man to whom Mordecai will not bow, ends up hanging on his own gallows. He is presented as a bad guy throughout.

On the surface of things this makes it more likely that Mordecai has a good reason for not bowing. People may struggle to identify this reason but they are justified in looking. Another way that a text can tip us off as to the character of a person's action is by significant parallels with other narratives.

I believe that we have one of these with the story of Joseph. Rabbi David Foreman notes the parallels between verse 4 of this chapter and Genesis chapter 39 verse 10. In verse 4 of this chapter.

And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them. And then in Genesis chapter 39 verse 10. And as she, Potiphar's wife, spoke to Joseph day after day he would not listen to her.

Rabbi Foreman observes that these are the only two places in scripture where we see these sorts of phrases. Elsewhere in the book of Esther Mordecai is associated with the character of Joseph. So it is not surprising that we might see a connection between Joseph and Mordecai here.

The question we must now ask is does this parallel give us any clue as to Mordecai's motives in his refusal to bow to Haman? I think it does. In the story of Joseph and Potiphar's house he refuses to sleep with Potiphar's wife, the second in charge of the household, because he knows that such an act would be disloyal to his master Potiphar. Or it would be a sin against God.

The result of his refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife is that he is thrown out of the household and into the prison as one who is seen as disloyal. However in truth he is the loyal one. Mordecai has already been presented in a very positive light.

He has foiled a plot against the king's life. This does not seem to be a man who would resist the king's command merely for the sake of it. There must be a reason.

Perhaps as Joseph was loyal to his master and therefore refused day after day to lie with his master's wife, so Mordecai is faithful to his master the king and therefore refuses to bow to a man who he sees as a usurper, a man who he believes is trying to take over the rule of the king and undermine his authority. Just as Mordecai discovered the plot of Bigthan and Teresh, perhaps he knows something about Haman's motives too. I believe that the rest of the Book of Esther strengthens this reading.

In addition to the way that characters are framed as good guys or bad guys, significant parallels with other narratives, we should also think about the way that as narratives progress, actions are followed by consequences and further actions. As for Mordecai, he never repents for his failure to bow to Haman. The impression is thereby given that his refusal to bow to Haman is not in fact a sin.

Indeed, Haman gets his comeuppance and Mordecai is elevated and people bow to him. Finally, the way that the themes of an episode reappear and are developed elsewhere helps us to determine the character of actions. Bowing and playing the part of a king appears later, but it decisively favours Mordecai and Haman's overstepping of his bounds also develops as a theme.

It would seem then that Mordecai is justified in not bowing to Haman and events that follow will reveal why this is the case. Haman's response to the news of Mordecai's insubordination is profound anger and a desire for vengeance. He doesn't want to lay hands on Mordecai alone, however.

That would appear petty. Far better to kill all of Mordecai's people, the entire Jewish community. As in chapter 1, this is a way of responding to a personal slight that elevates it to the level of a great law.

As we saw, some commentators identify Mimucan with Haman. Mimucan's advice in response to Vashti's non-appearance is similar to Haman's approach here. Mimucan blew up Vashti's non-appearance into a great issue of state to be responded to by a great

edict.

Once again, in this chapter, law is a way of settling personal scores, presenting matters that in many respects are largely petty and personal, as if they were great matters of civil order. To determine the day for this empire-wide pogrom against the Jews, Haman casts lots over a period of time, seeking to determine the one portentous day upon which all of these events would occur. This casting of Pur, also described as lots, is a surprisingly important theme of the book.

Indeed, it plays some part in the naming of the feast of the Jews' victory over their opponents at this time. In chapter 9, verse 24, we read, For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, cast lots, to crush and to destroy them. The Book of Esther, as Rabbi Foreman has observed, is a book that deals extensively with themes of chance, fate, providence, and law.

Haman, Rabbi Foreman observes, is the sort of man who will blow up a personal vendetta into a great law of the kingdom on the one hand, and on the other, he will leave the decision of the day on which to slaughter tens or even hundreds of thousands of people to the casting of lots. He argues that the purpose of the casting of lots is in part to find a propitious day for the act, and also to cast terror into the Jews. His actions suggest that chance and fate are at the helm of the universe, rather than a creator god who providentially rules over all.

Haman, however, has to find a reason that would justify such extreme measures. Why single out this particular people? Haman makes the case for genocide without mentioning the name of the Jews. Rather, he describes the Jews, mixing together elements of truth and falsehood.

The Jews are an exiled people, a people scattered abroad, dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of his kingdom. They no longer have a distinct land of their own, and yet they remain a distinct people. They observe their own customs and laws, and Haman claims, the falsehood that accompanies the truth, that they don't keep the king's laws.

The existence of such a people in his realm is more of an inconvenience for Ahasuerus than a blessing. Here is an exiled people that has not yet realised that it has ceased to exist. They are like the cartoon character that has run off the edge of the cliff, and is still running and not falling in mid-air.

They really should disappear and be assimilated into the nations and peoples around them. One of the things to note here is the way that the people are maintained in their distinctiveness in exile, by their keeping of the laws of God, without faithfulness and commitment to the laws of God, the Jews would have swiftly disappeared into the nations that surrounded them. They would have worshipped the same pagan gods, and

they would have engaged in the same sort of idolatrous practices.

They would have intermarried with and taken on the practices of their neighbours. Haman, tipping his hand at this point and revealing how much he has personally invested, offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of the king, if only he will be allowed to wipe out this people. Many commentators argue that there is some sort of hyperbole being used here on the part of the author of Esther.

10,000 talents of silver was not that far removed from the annual sum of tribute received by Persia. Other commentators have argued that Haman was claiming that he would pay this sum of money in the plunder taken from the Jews. Such a vast quantity of plunder, and the removal of this inconvenient people, would easily compensate for the loss of tax revenue.

The king very readily acquiesces though. He takes his signet ring and gives it to Haman. The language here is very similar to that of Genesis chapter 41 verse 42, where Pharaoh gives his signet ring to Joseph.

If Mordecai is like Joseph, Haman is like the anti-Joseph. King Ahasuerus unreservedly authorises Haman. The language of verse 11 is not clear, but one possible meaning of it is that Ahasuerus refuses to take any money from Haman.

In verse 10, Haman is described as Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews. Frederick Bush observes that there is a chiasmic pattern in the way that Haman is identified within the book. He is identified on six different occasions.

On the first and the last, he is identified as the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. On the second and the fifth, the enemy of the Jews. And on the third and the fourth, the Agagite.

The king's scribes are summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, most significantly the day before the Passover. The decree was to be carried out eleven months later. Letters were sent to every single part of the kingdom promulgating this edict.

As Adele Boleyn notes, Herodotus claims that it would have taken three months for a message to travel to all parts of the kingdom. The decree is a terrible one indeed. They are to annihilate all of the Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, and plunder all of their goods.

The chapter ends with contrasting responses to this. The king and Haman give no thought to what they have just instigated. They merely return to their partying, much as the brothers of Joseph had left their brother in the pit in Genesis chapter 37 and turned to their eating, unmindful of his fate.

The lower city of Susa however responds with dismay. This response is presumably not

merely from the Jews. The rest of the population will be understandably unsettled by the seemingly erratic decrees of this new prime minister.

And even if they had no thought for the Jews, they would be understandably uneasy about the prospect of a great genocide happening in their midst. Theirs is ceasing to be a society of predictable and knowable law and order and is descending into a sort of chaos. A question to consider, what can we learn from the similarities between the advice given by Mimucan concerning Vashti and the plan of Haman in this chapter? Esther chapter 4 opens with Mordecai's anguished response to the news of Haman's decree.

He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes, goes out into the midst of the city and cries with a loud and bitter cry. Rabbi David Foreman notes that this reference to the loud and bitter cry recalls Esau's cry in Genesis chapter 27 verse 34. As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father! We have already observed allusions to the rivalry between Esau and Jacob in the character of Haman the Agagite.

Haman the Agagite is the descendant of Agag the Amalekite. King Saul, Israel's first Benjamite king, had failed to wipe out the Amalekites as he was instructed to do and was rejected from the throne as a result. The rivalry with the Amalekites went long back in Israel's history all the way back to the story of Esau and Jacob.

Esau's response to having lost both the birthright and the body of his first blessing was this great and bitter cry. We also see parallels between Esau's response when he later lifts up his voice and weeps and King Saul's response in 1 Samuel chapter 24 verse 16 when he lifts up his voice and weeps as he acknowledges that David is the true heir of the kingdom and that the Lord will bless him and deliver the kingdom into his hand. This great history, the history of the rivalry between Esau and Jacob and the tragic history of the tribe of Benjamin can be heard in the background of this episode and in much of the rest of the book.

Indeed it can shed some light upon what has happened to this point. In Genesis chapter 27 verse 29 we can see the blessing that was given to Jacob over his brother Esau. Let people serve you and nations bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you. Haman's fury against Mordecai was provoked by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him.

The very blessing that Jacob had taken from Esau. Esau's response to the loss of the blessing to Jacob was a murderous anger. We read of this in verses 41 to 42 of that chapter.

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him and Esau said to himself, the days of mourning for my father are approaching then I will kill my brother Jacob. But the words of Esau, her oldest son, were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her youngest son and said to him, behold your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you.

In Haman the Agagite, his descendant, Esau's murderous rage against Jacob his brother has blown up into a genocidal rage against an entire people provoked by the failure of one man to bow. As we hear this story in the background perhaps we can also recognise connections between different details. We might think about the relationship between Rebekah and Jacob and the relationship between Esther and Mordecai.

The two competing brothers, Esau and Jacob, are here, Haman and Mordecai. Perhaps we might also see ways in which King Ahasuerus is like Isaac. Mordecai is not alone in this mourning.

There is a more general despair among the Jews in every province. Separated from the commoners and the regular life of the city and the palace Esther does not seem to be aware of Haman's decree. Her impression at this point might simply be that Mordecai is destitute.

He has fallen into extreme poverty and so she will send out clothes to assist him. Perhaps in this gift of clothes from Esther to Mordecai we might hear some element of an echo of the story of Genesis chapter 27 where Rebekah gave clothes to Jacob so that he might go before his father in disguise as Esau. When Esther inquires further, Mordecai informs her about the decree and asks her to plead with the king on behalf of the people.

We must remember that to this point Esther had not disclosed her identity or her people of origin to the king. She was the radiant, beautiful queen chosen from the common people. As Rabbi Foreman notes, this would enable her to stand for the whole nation of Persia as a common person of the realm.

If she were to out herself as belonging to this hated national group her symbolic role as the queen of all Persia would be thrown into jeopardy. Besides, she informs Mordecai, one cannot simply enter into the king's presence. He has to summon you and if you enter his presence when not summoned you do so in jeopardy of your life.

Esther had not been summoned at any point in the last month. The question of approach to King Ahasuerus has been one throughout the book to this point. Vashti had failed to approach the king when she had been summoned.

Bigthen and Teresh, two guardians of the king's threshold had sought to transgress the threshold and lay hands upon the king. The king's presence and approach to the king, as James Jordan has observed is similar to approach to the throne of God. Those who enter

unsummoned can be destroyed.

Bigthen and Teresh could be compared to Nadab and Abihu. A similar thing is going on in Genesis chapter 27 with the blessing of Isaac. In verses 11 and 12 of that chapter, Jacob expresses a similar hesitancy to Esther.

But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself, and not a blessing. Jacob had ended up approaching his father with food and wine, but in a disguise as his brother.

Esther's approach to the king will have to be one in which she removes the disguise, in which she unveils herself as a member of the Jewish people. Mordecai responds by warning Esther, but his warning is a surprising one. The concern that he expresses is not for the Jewish people, but for Esther and her father's house.

If she fails to act, it will be her that loses out. Deliverance will arise from another quarter. Esther's name, if we were to render it in Hebrew, suggests the sense of hiding.

The story of Esther is in many respects a story of hiding. We might initially think of Esther hiding her identity when she goes into the king's house. However, the greater act of hiding can be seen in the Lord's hand.

The Lord is never mentioned by name in the book of Esther, yet his presence and action is everywhere. The book of Esther is a book in which we see the work of the Lord in acts of seeming chance. God's providence rules throughout.

The book is packed full of seeming coincidences that advance the Lord's purpose and deliver his people. Mordecai here expresses his confidence that the Lord's providence will achieve his purposes for his people. The Lord's promises concerning the Jews are an assurance that they will not finally be wiped out.

Whatever Haman's decree, deliverance will arise for them from some quarter. And Esther at this point seems to be the best situated. The big picture is certain.

The Lord will deliver his people. How Esther and her family will stand relative to this is what is really in the balance at this point. If she fails to act, she will bring disaster upon herself and her kindred, but the Jews will be saved.

Mordecai invites her to look at her situation differently. Knowing that the Lord is in control of history and that the Jews will be delivered, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether she has been put in the position that she has, as a divinely appointed means to deliver them. By pursuing the Lord's purposes where she is placed, she might prove to be a decisive instrument of the Lord's providence.

Rabbi Thormann suggests that we ought to read these verses against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 30, which concerns the making of vows and also their annulment. In verses 10-16 it speaks of the situation of a young woman who marries a husband. And if she vowed in her husband's house or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard of it, and said nothing to her and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand.

But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows or concerning her pledge of herself shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the Lord will forgive her. Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself her husband may establish, or her husband may make void.

But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them. But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity.

These are the statutes that the Lord commanded Moses about a man and his wife, and about a father and his daughter, while she is in her youth within her father's house. As Rabbi Foreman recognises, several of the details of this passage in Numbers chapter 30 are mentioned in Esther chapter 4. There's the young woman who marries, there are instructions concerning the relationship with the spouse and their word, there's the reference to the father's house, silence is presented as assent and affirmation, and there's the urgency of speech. If she does not speak, she will be seen to affirm.

Foreman notes that the vowelisation of her husband in verse 14 is not original. Vowels are not found in the original unpointed Hebrew text, and there is a different way of vowelising the text, which, while clearly not the original meaning, is a play and mirror image of it. The word rendered her husband could be rendered a woman.

This would yield something like the meaning, Now this is clearly not the original meaning of the text, but Mordecai seems to be playing upon it. He is inviting Esther to see herself as the person that stands in the place of being able to annul the word of her spouse. If she speaks up at this time, she will be able to negate his word, but if she does not, her silence will count as assent, and she will be judged.

Esther responds positively to Mordecai's charge. She will undertake this great and dangerous act of disclosing herself. However, before she does so, she asks for Mordecai to gather all the Jews together in Susa, and to carry out a fast for her, and she will do the same with her young women.

This fast for three days and three nights from the time of the Passover should make us think of the story of Christ. Esther's life will hang in the balance for this period of time,

and when the king raises her scepter, she will be, as it were, raised up. Her words at the end of her response, If I perish, I perish, should also remind us of the words of Jacob, as Judah pledged that he would bring Benjamin back safely from Egypt, as Joseph in disguise had instructed Jacob's sons to bring back their youngest brother with them.

In Genesis chapter 43 verses 13-14, Take also your brother, and rise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.

When we hear such linguistic parallels in scripture, our concern should be to discover whether they belong to a greater cluster of parallels that connect stories and their themes, not merely turns of phrase. In the story of Joseph, it is Judah who intercedes for Benjamin. In the story of Esther, however, it is Benjaminites, Mordecai and Esther, who intercede on behalf of the Jews, the Judahites.

The troubled story of Benjamin is woven throughout the background of the story of Esther. Mordecai and Esther remind us of Joseph, the older brother of Benjamin. Mordecai and Esther seemingly arise from the line of King Saul.

Like Saul, they are facing the threat of an Agagite. Formerly Judah had interceded for Benjamin, and now the Benjaminites will intercede for the Judahites. In the story of Esther, troubled legacies are being laid to rest, good deeds once received are being repaid, and tragically unfinished tasks are being completed.

A question to consider, how many unlikely or coincidental events in the book of Esther can you think of in which we can see the hand of God's providence in action? Having been charged by Mordecai to speak to the king concerning the plan of Haman to destroy her people, in chapter 5 Esther faces a very difficult situation. She and her women, along with the Jews and Mordecai, had fasted for three days and nights in preparation for this. We can presume that she also gave a lot of time to planning and to prayer.

When reading familiar biblical narratives like that of Esther, our ability to interpret the text well is often compromised by the fact that we know how the story goes. As we know that everything worked out well in the end, we don't give enough thought to the cards that Esther held at this point in the story and the way that she would have had to plan accordingly. In our reading of the text, our focus is on the question of whether King Ahasuerus will accept her coming near.

As a result, we probably don't give enough consideration to the question of what she will say when she is invited to approach. Esther's power is not directly a political power. It is a power that lies largely in her beauty.

While such a power could be used for political ends, it would take considerable skill to

convert the power that she has into a political power. She has not been summoned by the king for over a month, and now she has to go toe-to-toe against the king's most trusted advisor and right-hand man. Yoram Hazoni speculates about the sort of deliberations Esther would have had.

He writes, From the information she has, it is apparent that the scheme is the Vizier's and that Ahasuerus' acquiescence comes of his desire to promote Haman and permit him to consolidate his control over the empire, and if the king considers it crucial at this stage to rely on Haman's judgment, then there will be no point in arguing with him about a policy whose actual content probably matters little to him. What is needed is to damage Haman's favour with the king, so that Ahasuerus feels he has something to lose in so quickly accepting Haman's goals as his own. Only then will it be possible for another voice to be heard.

Why then did Esther invite the king to the feast? He writes, The reason is that she does not believe he will grant the request. Esther is well liked by the king, and he may be willing to hear her out, but a direct assault on the decree means pitting her own untried credibility in matters of policy against the settled opinion of the Vizier, whom the king has appointed, after all, to conduct policy. Moreover, such an attack would force Ahasuerus to choose between Haman's policy and a different one proposed by Esther.

Precisely the kind of politics of conflicting interests he has sought to avoid. Having staked his kingdom on the belief that Haman's advice is preferable to hearing out such competing claims, the chances are excellent that the criticism of a young queen, whom he calls to visit him only sporadically, will just anger the king, and result in her being discredited in his eyes. King Ahasuerus can presumably see that Esther is deeply distressed, and his favour towards her can be seen in his extravagant offer of up to half his kingdom at her request.

Queen Esther, who is presumably showing the signs of having fasted for three days and three nights, and not slept very well, makes a strange request. She invites the king and Haman to a feast that she has prepared for him. While this is not clear in every translation, as many of them have the king, Esther's question in verse 4 ends with, For him.

Who is him? Is it Haman, or is it the king? One can imagine King Ahasuerus being puzzled at this point, and wondering what is going on. As Hezoni writes, Is Queen Esther, King Ahasuerus might wonder, preparing this great banquet for Haman? Why would she single him out for such attention? Likely puzzling in this way about what is going on, the king summons Haman to bring him to the feast. The king recognises that Esther's request is not just to have this banquet.

There is something more bothering her, and she still hasn't told him. During the celebration of this intimate banquet, he turns to Esther and asks what her request is.

Once again, however, he does not get the true answer.

He is invited once more, again with Haman, to a feast the next day that Esther will prepare for them. For the king and Haman together. If the former invitation had raised the question of the person for whom the feast was prepared, a question which the king, presumably after a period of puzzling about it, settled in his own favour, in this invitation the king and Haman seem to be treated as guests of equal honour.

Besides, it's one thing to invite a person for an intimate banquet one night. This is a sign of great honour. But to do it two nights in a row raises all sorts of questions.

Something strange is going on here. It is important to notice what Esther is doing. She is sowing seeds of distrust and doubt in the mind of the king concerning Haman.

She is also tempting Haman to overplay his hand of ambition, to reveal what is really driving him. By puffing him up with such favours and honours, and giving him lots of wine, Esther is getting Haman to drop his defences, tempting him into some sort of unguarded action. She recognises that Haman is a shrewd political operator.

Indeed, if he is the same person as Mimucan in chapter 1, the identification that several Jewish commentators have made, then he has already proved successful in dismissing one queen before her. However, she also knows, likely from Mordecai, that Haman is a proud and vain man. He is easily flattered, and he also has ambitions far above his present station, even as the second most powerful man in the land.

If Rabbi David Forman is correct in his speculations concerning the reasons for which Mordecai did not bow to Haman, then Mordecai knows that Haman is not in fact a faithful servant of the king. He is someone who has ambitions on the throne. He has removed obstacles, potentially including Queen Bashti, and he has also advanced himself over others, so that rather than the king relying upon a number of different officials, he relies upon Haman alone.

Esther has to be very shrewd in the way that she plays her cards. Giving enough time for the seeds of doubt and distrust to germinate in the mind of the king is important, and she likely also hopes that Haman will make a misstep very soon. Indeed, she doesn't have to wait for long.

So, Haman, puffed up by the great favour that he has been shown by the queen, leaves the feast, and as he goes out, at the king's gate, he sees Mordecai, and yet Mordecai shows him no honour. Haman's pride having been puffed up and then wounded, he goes home to his wife and his family, and puts on a pitiful display. Late in the evening, after the banquet is over, he gathers his friends and his wife and family together, and tells them of all the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the ways that the king has honoured him, how he has been advanced before everyone else, and how Queen

Esther herself has shown great honour to him in inviting him to an intimate banquet with the king.

His pride is reducing him to a self-caricature, when he has to boast about the number of his sons to his wife. His friends, his wife and his family know of all his riches and all of his advancement, yet Haman's exalted ego would make a fool of him. Haman reveals a sort of pathology of desire here.

He has everything that he wants, he's been granted all of these favours, but there is one thing that he can't have, so rankles that, as long as he can't have it, nothing else is worth anything to him. Rabbi Foreman has noted a connection between Haman and Adam in this respect. Haman's relationship with the one thing that he cannot have is like Adam's relationship with the forbidden fruit.

It should not surprise us that it is the wife of Haman that gives the advice that Mordecai's body should be hung upon a tree. Mordecai is like the forbidden fruit upon the tree being offered by the woman to her husband. Within the story we should also notice the way that the character of Zeresh plays off against Esther.

Zeresh merely affirms and gives in to her husband's desire, whereas Esther has to win her husband's heart away from the evil plan of Haman and win it over to that which is good and true. She will have to play the part of a faithful Eve, while Zeresh plays the part of a wicked one. Most translations render the word for tree here as gallows, as this is clearly what is being prepared.

Zeresh's suggestion, however, is surprisingly specific. The gallows is to be 50 cubits high. Why that specific height? Such a gallows would tower over almost every building.

50 cubits is around 75 feet high. It is also unclear whether Mordecai was intended to be hanged upon the tree or whether he would have been impaled. Perhaps this is a specific tree of that height that is being prepared for the purpose.

It is also important to notice the way in which Haman at this point is starting to reveal his cards, cards that he had tried to hide earlier. Lest we forget, the purpose of the decree was so as not to disclose that he had a particular quarrel with Mordecai himself. However, at this point he can't tolerate waiting for even 11 further months.

Haman feels that he must act against Mordecai now, without waiting. Perhaps he is concerned that if he does not deal with Mordecai's insubordination at this point, Mordecai might embolden others to act against him. He wants to make a public spectacle of Mordecai to warn all who would stand against him, and to do so as soon as possible.

Zeresh and his friends advise that he goes immediately in the morning to the king to speak to him concerning this matter. He should not wait before taking his action. A

question to consider, at this point in the story, what do you think is going through the minds of King Ahasuerus, of Haman and of Esther? How can we see the effect in this of Esther's plan as it has been outworking so far? Esther chapter 6 is the turning point within the story.

Esther is up against a stronger opponent in Haman. While Esther has certain advantages, Haman has several advantages over her. She needs to fight a political battle against the most powerful political operator in the land.

While the king is well disposed towards her, she wasn't invited into the king's presence for over a month. Haman, on the other hand, is so in favour with the king that he has been exalted over all of the other officials. He is the one elevated official that has taken the place of a number of high officials of equal status.

This was likely provoked by the rebellion of Bithan and Teresh, after which the king has started to distrust his closest and highest officials and to single out this one man Haman as the one man that he could trust over everyone else. Esther, however, has the advantage of the fact that Haman does not know that she is a Jew. Nor does he know that she is seeking to undermine his genocidal plan.

To make her appeal to the king, she first has to sow some doubt and distrust in the mind of Ahasuerus concerning his closest and highest advisor, his very right-hand man. She also likely hopes to tempt Haman into imprudent action by aiming for his weakest spot, his exalted ego. The king starts this chapter with an unsettled mind, struggling to sleep.

One can imagine why. He doesn't yet know what is troubling Esther and he is likely ruminating over why the queen would specifically single out Haman as an invitation to join them in an intimate banquet two evenings in succession. Even if no suspicion has yet grown towards Haman, one can imagine at least some measure of irritation in Ahasuerus' mind.

If even his own queen regards Haman as so elevated as to deserve such special treatment, perhaps Haman needs to be taken down a peg or two, to be reminded that, although he is the second most powerful man in the land, Ahasuerus is still the king. As Joram Hazoni observes, one can well imagine the king starting to become troubled about the scale of the authority that he had handed over into the hands of Haman, recognising that by granting Haman authority over all of the other officials and by unreservedly authorising him to act according to his wishes in all sorts of matters, he was greatly weakening his own position and putting Haman in a position to usurp his own power as the king. Haman has also just been scheming with his family and friends concerning the destruction of Mordecai, planning to hang or impale him upon his tree the next day.

Both Esther and Haman are on the brink of making their decisive moves, moves for which they have been preparing. Everything hangs upon how these moves play out, and

then there comes an unforeseen twist, which neither side had anticipated. As the troubled mind of the king prevents him from sleeping, he gives orders for the Book of Memorable Deeds, the Chronicles, to be read to him.

Perhaps he regards it as a sort of boring book that could cure insomnia. There is however the possibility that his mind is weighed down with thoughts concerning the failed coup that had led to the rise of Haman in the first place. Perhaps he wants to revisit and reconsider the events surrounding Big Than and Teresh's coup, perhaps intending to focus especially upon Haman's manoeuvring at the time.

Whatever the king's motives, as the Chronicles are read, he hears of the actions of Mordecai in foiling the coup and cannot recall whether Mordecai was rewarded for his actions. When he discovers that he was not rewarded, he asks who was in the court. Haman, so eager to get to the king to get him to sign off on his plan to hang Mordecai on his great gallows, was already in the court, earlier than anyone else.

Ahasuerus likely was not the only sleepless man that night. Informed that Haman was already there, the king summoned him. The king takes this opportunity to ask Haman a question that might tempt him out into the open, that might reveal some of his ambitions.

The king is starting to get something of the measure of Haman, and we can already imagine that he intends to knock Haman down a few notches at this point. He recognises Haman's pride and ambition, and he asks him a question calculated to catch him in it. What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour? Whether the narrator is all-seeing, or whether Haman's internal thinking is patently obvious upon his countenance, we are told that Haman said to himself, whom would the king delight to honour more than me? Given the suspicions and concerns that have been developing in his mind, suspicions and concerns sown by Esther, Ahasuerus, as Rabbi David Foreman suggests, is probably registering with mounting concern the repeated references to king in Haman's response.

Haman says, For the man whom the king delights to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, on whose head a royal crown is set, and let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Haman is essentially suggesting that the man the king delights to honour play dress-up as the king. And as we, and presumably Ahasuerus also at this point know, Haman thought this man was him.

Unbeknownst to him, Haman had fallen into a trap. He had outed himself to the suspicious king Ahasuerus, revealing himself as one who fancied himself as a king. Haman does not seem to realise the danger that he is putting himself in.

While the king might earlier have wanted to take Haman down a notch or two, now he

really wants to humiliate him. Mordecai's reasons for not bowing to Haman, mysterious earlier, might become a little clearer at this point. Mordecai, as we saw, was in a position to discover and disclose the plots of the highest officials, Big Than and Teresh, a fact we are reminded of at the beginning of this chapter, as the story of the coup is retold.

The advancement of Haman had probably resulted from the king's suspicions concerning the other high officials. In treating the question of why Mordecai didn't bow, we observe the parallel between the way that Mordecai's refusal to bow is described and the way that Joseph's refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife is described, in Genesis chapter 39. In the case of Potiphar's wife, she was the second in command in the household and was acting unfaithfully towards her husband.

Haman might be acting in a similarly unfaithful manner towards Ahasuerus. The honour suggested here is similar to the honour that Pharaoh gives to Joseph in Genesis chapter 41 verses 41-43. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck and he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Haman and Mordecai are rivals.

We earlier saw that Mordecai refused to bow to Haman when he was receiving the honoured treatment of the second in the realm. Now the tables are going to be radically turned. Haman now has to lead in honour the man who refused to bow to him and Mordecai is being elevated in a manner that is reminiscent of Joseph by Pharaoh.

Furthermore, there is a pointedness in the king's statement in verse 10. This statement probably has a chilling effect upon Haman. He has been conspiring against the Jews, specifically provoked by his anger towards Mordecai and now the king is very pointedly singling out a Jew for honour, identifying him as a Jew.

And what's more, he is dishonouring Haman by making him perform this act. Even before the second feast and Esther's decisive action against him, Haman's fortunes have dramatically turned. As the identified Jew at the king's gate, Mordecai probably stands already for much of the Jewish community.

This honouring of Mordecai is not just the honouring of an individual person, it's the honouring of a representative figure, someone who stands for a wider people. We can see the reversals taking place at this point. The rivalry between Haman and Mordecai began with Haman enjoying great honours at the king's command and with Mordecai's mourning as a result of Haman's plot.

Now Mordecai is the one who is being honoured at the king's command and Haman is

the one who is mourning. Haman's faction, his wise men and his wife, see what is happening. For them the triumph of Mordecai at this point is very ominous for what's going to happen in the future.

If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him. They see all of this as an unsettling foreshadowing of what is to come. Haman is then hastened away to the second and decisive feast.

Perhaps in the statement of Haman's faction we can perceive some indication of their knowledge of divine sovereignty working in these events. There have been several coincidences. The king not sleeping, that specific passage of the Chronicles being read at that precise time, the fact that Mordecai was not earlier rewarded, Haman turning up at just that moment.

While Esther had been using great prudence in making her moves, by themselves her moves may not have been sufficient to displace Haman. It is the hand of divine providence that decisively turns things. Man proposes, but the Lord disposes.

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. The Lord is never mentioned in this book of Esther, yet he is clearly the principal actor. Behind all of the human agencies, it is the Lord who is working out his purposes and his promises.

A question to consider. The story of the book of Esther is a story of reversals. This is perhaps one of the greatest points of reversal in the book.

Can you think of some others? In Esther chapter 7, Haman has his downfall. The story of Esther is a story in many respects of feasts. There are six great feasts within the book.

There are the two feasts at the beginning of the book. There are the two feasts in the middle. And then there are the two feasts at the end.

The two feasts at the beginning are the feasts of King Ahasuerus. The feasts in the middle are the banquets that Queen Esther gives for King Ahasuerus and Haman. And the feasts at the end are the two feasts of the Jews.

In the progression of these feasts, the whole movement of the book can be traced. Esther chapter 7 tells the story of Esther's second feast. The feast at which she will finally reveal her identity and make her great move.

Haman was already thrown off his balance at the end of chapter 6. He was snatched away from the conversation with his faction by the king's eunuchs, bringing him to this feast. Matters have already been slipping out of his control. This shrewd political operator, once the one who dominated the entire court of Ahasuerus, no longer feels as though he has the mastery of the situation.

King Ahasuerus, at the second feast, makes his third request of Esther. On two previous occasions, he asked her what she wanted. And on both occasions, he was invited to a feast.

Now finally, she is going to give him the answer. To this point, she has been biding her time. She needed to sow seeds of doubt and suspicion in the mind of King Ahasuerus concerning Haman.

In the previous chapter, we saw that these seeds were already starting to germinate. The king had just purposefully humiliated Haman. And to rub as much salt as possible into his wounded ego, had used him to elevate his great rival, Mordecai the Jew.

By identifying Mordecai as the Jew in his instruction to Haman, the king may also have raised doubts in Haman's mind concerning his standing relative to the decree. Perhaps Haman wonders whether the king thinks that he is motivated by self-advancement in the decree, whether he is driven by the desire to remove rival factions. Esther's plan to sow distrust is clearly having its effect.

Esther's response to the king could not be more shocking. What is her request? Her own life, and the life of her people. One can imagine the shock of Haman as he hears the words of his own decree being quoted back to him.

Let it have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Back in chapter 3 verse 13, when the decree was first promulgated, it was described as follows. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

We should note how carefully Esther frames the news that she is a Jew. She begins not by saying that she is a Jew, but by saying that her own life is being threatened. She concludes her statement by suggesting that if it were merely a matter of the Jews being sold into slavery, she would not make that much of an issue of it.

She is a Persian queen, after all. She is standing by his side as the representative of all Persia, not the representative of a particular ethnic group. As Rabbi Dave Foreman has argued, one of the failures of Queen Bashti was to stand for the whole nation, to represent the glory of Persia when she was called in before the king.

For a king who is deeply wary of factional interests, one of the things that is desired of Queen Esther, as Queen Bashti's replacement, is that she can stand for the whole people. Instead of marrying another member of the aristocracy, King Ahasuerus married the beautiful woman next door. The moment, however, that Esther identifies with a particular ethnic group, rather than the general Persian people, she puts her position in

jeopardy.

Consequently, she approaches matters very carefully. She leads with the fact that her life is threatened, and then concludes by suggesting that the king is being swindled by Haman. Beyond her entirely natural concern for her own life, she would not be making such a deal about the threat to the Jews, were it not for the fact that in this matter the interests of Haman were so clearly contrary to the interests of the king and the Persian nation.

Anthony Tomasino writes, If there were a million Jews in the Persian Empire, or if the narrator thought there were, their value on the slave market would have far exceeded Haman's bribe. Haman offered the king 36 million shekels of silver for the destruction of the Jews. Slaves in the Persian era sold for about 60 to 90 shekels, so the Jews' market value would have far exceeded the value of the bribe.

As Esther presents the issue, Haman appeared to be swindling King Xerxes out of a huge sum of money. Tomasino writes further, Another cunning aspect of Esther's plea is that it invites the king to consider the question of whether the Jews really deserve to be enslaved. According to Herodotus, rebellious vassals could indeed be sold as slaves.

But how could Xerxes brand the Jews as rebels on the very day when he had ordered Mordecai to be honoured for saving the king's life? If the Jews could not reasonably be painted as insurrectionists and sold as slaves, then they would surely not be deserving of the much harsher penalty. By framing matters in terms of a threat upon her life, Queen Esther is also very mindful of the way that King Ahasuerus sees things. She tries to get into his shoes and speak to him from his perspective, a perspective that seems to be fairly insensitive to the charges of conscience, the genocide of the Jews being described as if it were merely economically imprudent rather than morally abhorrent.

If her plan has been successful, Queen Esther also knows that King Ahasuerus has been pondering and worrying about the Jews over his relationship with Haman over the last few days. The pressing ethical question of how he is to treat the Jews weighs far less heavily upon his mind at this time than the more personal and immediate questions of how he stands relative to his wife the Queen and to his vizier Haman, to whom Esther has seemingly shown particular favour. Shocked and angered at the revelation, Ahasuerus asks Queen Esther who this person might be.

What man would have the audacity to attack his queen? And now Esther springs her trap. She identifies Haman as the man. Haman, cornered, is terrified.

However, the king's immediate response is not quite what Esther might have hoped. The king responds by leaving the room and going into the palace garden. Queen Esther does not really want the king to reflect upon matters too closely.

As Rabbi Foreman notes, if the king started to reflect too closely upon Esther's statements, he might start to see some of the cracks in her argument. Was the queen's life really threatened in such a way? Had Haman known that she was a Jew? Or, for that matter, why had she not revealed to him that she was a Jew earlier? She had framed her appeal to him in a way that might distract him from these facts. But if he thought too carefully about it, he might start to have some troubling questions for her.

He might even start to recognise that she has purposefully been sowing distrust in his mind concerning his closest and highest subordinate. However, once again, we can see the lord's hand in the way that things work out. The king, returning from his walk in the palace garden, sees Haman falling on the couch where Esther was.

The words come out of his mouth, Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? The king may have wondered to this point about the loyalties of Esther, whether she was aligned with Haman in some way, especially after she had twice invited Haman to an intimate banquet. More recently, he had started to distrust Haman and to wonder about his motives and ambitions. And now, after he had heard that the life of his queen was threatened, he sees Haman seemingly lunging at her.

While he mistakes what's occurring, some pieces seem to fall into place in his mind. Perhaps we can recognise here some reference back to the story of the fall. Ahasuerus was just walking in the garden, and now he sees the serpent figure attacking the woman.

At this point, everyone around recognises that the tide has turned, that Haman is a dead man walking. The attendants immediately cover Haman's face, and one of the chief eunuchs now sees his opportunity to speak out. Harbona, mentioned back in chapter 1, has been silent to this point, but he knows what has been taking place and has presumably been following the actions of Haman.

Recognising that Haman is now completely out of favour, he informs the king that Haman has prepared gallows for Mordecai. In an act of poetic justice, Haman's violence comes back upon his own head. He is hanged upon his own gallows.

However, the chapter ends on a troubling note. The wrath of the king abated. Again, this might not be what Esther wants.

With Haman out of the way, her life has been spared. But perhaps her bluff has been called, as it is by no means clear that the king will act against the decree, which is still on the books. A question to consider.

Anthony Tomasino writes of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 of Acts. Several elements of the story parallel that of Haman. The elements of ambition gone awry.

Haman was attempting to exalt himself in Persia. Ananias and Sapphira were attempting

to look good before the church. A couple, Haman and Zeresh, versus Ananias and Sapphira, linked in conspiracy.

Both conspiracies involve selling, an attempt to financially cheat those in power, a heart filled with an evil plan. The crooks fall down before their accuser. The conspirator is covered.

As he writes, the author of Acts has apparently subtly crafted his account of Ananias and Sapphira with an eye on the story of Haman's downfall. Can you think of another story in the New Testament with parallels with the story of Esther, in which a king offers someone up to half of his kingdom? What might we learn as we compare and contrast that story with the story of Esther? Esther chapter 8 begins at the point where many readers of the book presume that matters must all be over. All that we are left with now is the mopping up operation.

Haman, the enemy of the Jews, has been hung upon his own tree. Esther's plan has been stunningly successful, hasn't it? However, in chapter 8 we see that there is a huge problem. Haman may be dead, but his decree is still very much alive.

What's worse, a law of the Medes and the Persians cannot be revoked. Esther's position was a difficult one. To get the king to respond to Haman's genocidal decree, she had to present the decree to Haman, making it personal for him, a direct threat to him by his disloyal vizier.

This way of framing things depended upon some measure of misapprehension on the king's part. Haman's intent, of course, had never been to attack Queen Esther. He didn't even know that she was a Jew.

Now, with Haman dead and the king's anger abated, the queen is safe. No one would be powerful enough to enact the law against Esther now Haman is removed. There was a danger for Esther in identifying herself too strongly with the Jewish people as the new queen of Persia, the one who was supposed to be the beautiful woman of the people rather than the representative of a particular faction or ethnic group within it.

When she had presented her argument to Ahasuerus earlier, the threat to the people had been framed first as a threat to her as Ahasuerus's beloved queen and second as a swindling of the king and of Persia due to the handsome amount that such a great population would receive on the slave market. This is clearly not much of a moral argument nor does it seem to have weighed very heavily with Ahasuerus. As evidenced by his lavish parties and generous gifts, Ahasuerus never seemed to be that bothered with the state of his treasuries.

Esther still needs to convert the personal favour that she has with the king into meaningful power to act against Haman's decree. A new plan is needed to overthrow

Haman's queen whom King Ahasuerus had protected from a man seemingly threatening her life. Ahasuerus gave Esther the house of Haman, his former vizier, whose property had been confiscated.

The king had made Haman his second in command granting him extreme authorisation by giving him his own signet ring. Esther establishes Mordecai in Haman's former office setting him over Haman's former property and giving him the authorisation of the signet that Haman formerly enjoyed. In chapter 6, Haman performed the peculiar honours for Mordecai that he had once presumed to be his own.

In chapter 7, he was hung upon the tree that he had prepared for Mordecai and now his property and his office are given into Mordecai's hands. This is indeed a remarkable and poetic reversal of fortunes. In scripture, as Yoram Hazoni has argued, one of the ways in which the text's moral judgements on its characters and events are revealed is in the consequences or the aftermath of actions.

It is no wonder that Mordecai was sinful in his refusal to bow to Haman. Indeed, James Jordan and Louis Bales Payton are among those who see Mordecai's action as rebellious and inexcusable. However, the reversal here seems to be a divine vindication of Mordecai apart from any repentance on his part.

This greatly weakens that theory. As Rabbi David Foreman argues, Queen Esther loses her composure at this point because, while many readers might think that she has completely triumphed, in fact, it appears that the most important part of the plan has failed. The king's anger has subsided and, while she is safe, her people very clearly are not.

The king even seems to be prepared to shrug his shoulders and just count the great economic loss that he would sustain with the destruction of the Jews as a write-off. Much as Haman had fallen down begging for his life in the preceding chapter, now Esther is in anguish, begging for the life of her people. There is no more ace in the hole remaining for Esther to play.

She has made a decisive move and now, with growing horror, she realises that it might not have been enough. Throughout the Book of Esther, the story of Eden and the Fall is playing behind the text in all sorts of ways. We have already seen ways in which Haman was like Adam, desiring the one thing that he had not been granted, the forbidden fruit that spoiled his enjoyment of everything else.

Ahasuerus was in some respects like Adam earlier, choosing Esther as a suitable partner and calling her by name after the parade of different potential queens. Later, after walking in the garden, he delivered his wife from the serpent Haman. Zeresh, the wife of Haman, and Esther are also contrasted as two Eve-like figures.

Eve wielded a powerful influence with her husband Adam so that her husband rejected the word of the Lord at her invitation to eat of the fruit. In the Book of Esther, we see both Zeresh and Esther using the power of their influence with their husbands. Zeresh flatters Haman by pandering to his desires, offering him the body of the insubordinate Mordecai, the forbidden fruit, upon the tree of the gallows.

Esther, however, takes a very different approach. She uses her beauty and attractiveness and seeks to wield it as a force of properly moral persuasion. She seeks to achieve her purpose by giving food to her husband in the two banquets.

She is the Eve to Ahasuerus' Adam, giving him the fruit of the vine. As Rabbi Foreman observes, the language of her appeals gradually moves from what is desirable to the king, the language of what is good to one's appetites and desires, to a focus upon what is morally fitting and right, what is good in a more moral sense. She is training an ethically insensitive man in the true knowledge of good and evil.

We should consider the way that her appeal in this chapter is a progression beyond her earlier ones. Her first appeal was in chapter 5, verse 4, and Esther said, If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king. In verses 7 and 8 of that chapter, then Esther answered, My wish and my request is, If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.

Even in the preceding chapter, as she was disclosing herself to the king, she made the appeal primarily on the grounds of his desires and what was expedient for him. Chapter 7, verses 3 and 4, Then Queen Esther answered, If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish and my people for my request, for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.

Now, however, the grounds of the appeal shift. After chapter 8, verses 5 to 6, the original grounds of the appeals are still there, but crucial elements have been added. And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, to this point everything is familiar from the preceding requests, but she proceeds, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews in the land of Assyria.

For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred? Hazzoni notes that Esther's petition here contains three lines of persuasion, the king's interest in those things that he desires, his presumed interest in the cause of justice, and his fear of losing her. It's the second

category here, the king's presumed interest in the cause of justice, bound up with the questions of what seemed right, and the worthiness of Esther herself, that are the new questions. There are new elements here.

Esther is now, for the first time, appealing to the king on the objective grounds of what is right or wrong, not merely on the basis of his desires or on grounds of expediency. Esther also raises her own personal interest against the king's. If he goes ahead with Haman's decree, she won't be able to bear it.

Ahasuerus has already been resisted and his command rejected by one queen. Esther is taking a potentially risky tack here. She is calling upon Ahasuerus the king to recognise the legitimacy and the importance of another person's desires besides his, even though that person's desires may go against his at points, and fulfilling those desires might not be expedient for him.

Esther then is seeking to wield love as a sort of moral force. By Esther's use of love as a moral force, playing off the archetypal story of the Garden of Eden and Eve and Adam, Esther is demonstrating something about the relationship between a wife and her husband, and the way that that relationship can be used as a power of good. The king's response to Esther's new petition has a degree of ambivalence.

It's as if he begins by saying, What more can I do? I've given you the house of Haman. Haman has been hanged. What more do you want? Verse 8 seems simultaneously both to give and to take away.

Esther and Mordecai are on the one hand being given the right to make whatever decree they want. On the other hand, however, the statement of the king refers not just to any decree that they might write, but also to the original decree of Haman. How are they going to deal with the decree of Haman when it cannot be revoked? They need to devise a plan that overcomes the decree without revoking it.

They come up with an ingenious solution. They summon the king's scribes on the 23rd day of the third month of Sivan, and Mordecai instructs them what to write. This is 70 days after the original decree.

70 days, the 10th Sabbath. The 10th month of the time of exile. 70 years.

The Jews have been under a death sentence for 70 days, and now they are going to enjoy relief. The new decree is almost exactly the same as the original one and allows for a seemingly insane situation. A sort of civil war permitted by the law.

The Jews are permitted to defend themselves and to apply lethal force against their adversaries without any fear of reprisal from the government. While their enemies can act with impunity, they can also do so. There are a few questions here.

Why does it say that the Jews were allowed to kill children and women and to plunder their goods? First of all, it does not seem that they carried these things out when they actually enacted the decree in chapter 9. And for that matter, hadn't King Saul been rejected from the throne for taking plunder from the Amalekites? Surely Mordecai, a descendant of the family of Saul, should have known this. However, this is to fail to realise the true purpose of the decree. The true purpose of the decree is not to kill their enemies.

It's to go toe to toe with the original decree of Haman. To throw the weight of the Persian government visibly behind Mordecai and the Jews over Haman and the Jews' enemies. As officials in the various provinces receive these two decrees, they are going to have to decide how to enact and enforce them.

Is the second decree merely a minor mitigation of the first one? Or is the second decree intended completely to counteract the first? This is why it's important be at least as severe as the decree of Haman if it's to be effective against it. While Mordecai's decree cannot overturn the decree of Haman, it can send out a strong signal that the weight of the government of Persia is completely against any of those who would seek to enact it. To drive this point home, Mordecai and the Jews arrange a great spectacle.

Mordecai plays the sort of royal dress-up that Haman had wanted to play. He is sent out from the presence of the king wearing royal robes and the royal floor is still on the books. Why are they partying? They have not yet been delivered.

They are celebrating because the celebration itself is a signal that's being sent out to all of the provinces that the king's power and force and authorisation now decisively and completely lies with the Jews over against Haman and his faction. Anyone seeking to enact the original decree should recognise that they are in a dangerous position. The decree has not been revoked but it has been successfully counteracted.

It is worth to consider the decrees of Haman and Mordecai are central elements of the story of the Book of Esther. We have already seen the way that the Book of Esther explores themes of chance and providence. In what ways and perhaps in relationship to those two themes of chance and providence is it exploring and developing the theme of law? Chapter 8 of Esther ends with a triumphal march, a feast and a celebration which might all seem rather premature considering the fact that Haman's decree was sent out in about 8 months' time.

However, these were all part of Mordecai's plan. It was a purposeful spectacle designed to show that the strength of the Persian government was behind the Jews. Once the move in the king's support had become apparent, many others started to shift their allegiance.

Harbona already did this at the end of chapter 8 and by chapter 9 the shift in the weight

of power is decisive. As people start to recognise which way the political winds are blowing and Haman's planned pogrom arrives, it's the Jews who achieve a victory of devastating scale. The defeat executed upon the Jews' enemies needs to be crushing.

Only with such a crushing defeat will they ensure that their enemies don't nurse realistic hopes of vengeance and rise again to attack them. The Jews kill 75,000 of their enemies, chief among them the ten sons of Haman. In the process, a great many more potential enemies are deterred.

Yoram Hazoni observes that Mordecai has sent a signal to King Ahasuerus. He wants Ahasuerus to know that the Jews are a strong group and that it is in his interest to tolerate and support them. The king has already shown that he is not overly concerned about matters of justice and that, save for possible reasons of political expediency, he probably would not be particularly troubled by the genocide of the Jews.

The Jews don't take any spoil, even though the decree of Mordecai permits them to do so. is not seen just as an independent thing. The purpose of the decree of Mordecai was to go toe-to-toe with the decree of Haman to demonstrate that a decisive shift in the weight of the government's support had occurred.

This would only be effective if the severity of Mordecai's decree was every bit as severe as Haman's. Anything less, and it would still seem that Haman's decree was the primary one, with the other merely being a slight mitigation of it. was not based on judgment upon the Amalekites.

Haman was the Agagite. As an Agagite, he was a descendant of King Agag. The Benjaminite king Saul was rejected from the throne of Israel for his failure to kill King Agag and for taking plunder from the Amalekites.

Now the Benjaminite Mordecai, another son of Kish, is going to rectify his ancestor's fault. Yoram Hazoni helpfully discusses the importance of power in such a situation. It is important to recognize that the innocent and the vulnerable cannot be defended and the world belongs to powerful aggressors.

While contemporary readers of the Book of Esther, living in peaceful modern societies, can have great difficulties with the description of the judgment on the enemies of the Jews delivered here, it is important to recognize that genocidal enemies cannot be effectively defeated with a mere slap on the wrist. Only, for instance, with the utter defeat of Nazi Germany and Hitler might have licked his wounds and retaliated when he had built up his strength again. After the successful action of the Jews on the day formally planned for Haman's pogrom, King Ahasuerus approaches Esther to ask if there is anything else that she might want.

Hazoni comments upon the shift here. Previously Esther has had to approach the king

with her requests. Now the king is approaching her asking whether she has any request of him and this time he mentions no upper bound up to half the kingdom.

The attempts of the Jews in Susa to attack their enemies also continue for the following day. Perhaps there are reasons to fear reprisals at this point. It is important that the victory, particularly in the capital of Susa, be so decisive as to be uncontested.

The hanging of the ten sons of Haman serves as a further spectacle designed to prove that there is no hope for those who will oppose the Jews. After the victory of the Jews in the provinces they rest on the 14th day and in Susa, after the extra day, Esther is a story of six feasts. There is the initial feast of chapter 1 where Vashti fails to come when summoned.

There is the feast of Esther's installation in chapter 2. In chapters 5 and 7 we have Esther's first and second feasts, the turning points of the book. In chapter 8 there is a feast as the Jews celebrate Mordecai's decree and his elevation. And now in chapter 9 there is a final feast, the feast of Purim, a feast originally celebrated as a rest after the deliverance of the nation of what occurred.

The institution of the feast of Purim is surprising in many respects. This is the first great new annual feast that is instituted after the foundational feasts of the book of Leviticus. It is anomalous in other respects.

The other feasts of the year are very much rooted in the life of Israel. This is a feast that is set in the Diaspora with its focus not being Jerusalem and its temple, but Susa. It is a feast that makes central Jews living outside of the land.

It is a feast that the Jews naturally adopt, not just a feast that is imposed upon them by the Lord's command. In Esther chapter 4, Mordecai's command to Esther plays upon the laws concerning the annulment of vows in chapter 30 of Numbers. If Esther spoke up against the decree to her husband, she might be able to overthrow it using Numbers chapter 30 as a model.

If she did not speak up, she would be complicit. Verses 24 to 26 give the reason for the name of the feast of Purim. This is strange indeed.

As Rabbi Foreman observes, the lots seem to play a fairly minor part within the story, and they are used by the enemy of the Jews, Haman, in setting up his plan. Why do they give their name to the feast itself? Rabbi Foreman argues that we need to see the background of Numbers 30 to understand what is going on here. Pur is the word for lots, but it might also be a word for the annulment, the annulment that Esther brings to Haman's decree.

He writes, The Pur, his lots. But on another plane of meaning, it is called that because of Esther's Pur, her annulment of Haman's decree. If we look at the passage this way,

here's how to read it.

Haman tried to kill us, and to that end he cast lots, the Pur. But, the Megillah suggests, that's not the whole story concerning how the holiday came to bear this name. For afterwards, Esther, with her back to the wall, managed to annul Haman's plotted genocide.

And so the Megillah concludes, that it was Purim, because of the Pur. In other words, the Megillah's explanation for the name Purim is deliciously ironic. In the end, that's why they call these days Purim, not because of Haman's lots, but because of Esther's annulment.

Haman had wanted the day to be known for his Pur, for his instruments of chance. But instead, the fate of the Jews was determined by something else, by another Pur, namely by Esther's act, her annulment of the decree. That's why they call the day Purim, because of her Pur, not his.

The institution of a feast of Purim is an event in the life of the Jewish people that marks an important milestone. With the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they had been scattered by the Assyrians, and they had lost their identity as a people. Huge numbers of the Jewish people had just disappeared and assimilated into other nations.

Earlier in the book of Esther, we see that the Jews of the second exile, the Jews scattered and exiled by Babylon, had not lost their identity in the same way. According to Haman's description, they were scattered among the peoples of the provinces, but they observed their own distinct customs. In continuing to keep the law of the Lord in some way, even as a dispersed people, they retained something of their distinctiveness.

Yet this distinctiveness had marked them out for this great Pogrom. The deliverance from the Pogrom then was a sign that the Lord would preserve them, even as a distinct people, dispersed among the nations. It was a sign, not just for that generation of the Jews, but for all of their generations.

A number of Jewish commentators have recognized a parallel between the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Purim. Leviticus chapter 16, the law concerning the Day of Atonement, begins with recalling the death of the sons of Aaron, an event that occurred in the context of the consecration of the tabernacle, an event that has many similarities with the description of chapter 1 of Esther. Nadab and Abihu had approached the tabernacle in the wrong way.

In the book of Esther, we find the story of the consecration of the tabernacle, where the dangerous approach to the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle is comparable to the dangerous approach to the presence of Ahasuerus, the king. If you come in when you are not called, you do so in peril of death. Leviticus chapter 16, verse 2, And the Lord

said to Moses, Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die, for I will appear in the cloud and will come to you.

There is only one specific day of the year that Aaron can approach, and not at any other time. Rabbi Foreman observes that Mordecai plays off this language in his charge to Esther in chapter 4, verse 14, For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther is called to act at a decisive moment, and this will be possible.

Esther's approach to Ahasuerus is like the one propitious time at which Aaron is permitted to approach the presence of the Lord. Esther's response to the charge is to instruct Mordecai and the Jews to have a fast. The one ordained fast of the festal calendar is that of the Day of Atonement, much as Aaron has to approach the Lord wearing particular garments, so Esther must approach the king wearing royal robes.

Esther makes her dangerous approach when she has to approach the inner court of the Holy of Holies. In Esther chapter 5, verse 2, And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favour in his sight. And he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand.

Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. Esther's touching of the tip of the scepter is in some ways like Aaron's application of blood to key parts of the tabernacle. Aaron the high priest then has to approach in a similar way.

Aaron is the high vigil, as the high priest, but he also has to intercede for the whole people. As Rabbi Foreman observes, Esther has to intercede to the king both for herself and for her people. The Day of Atonement also involves, of all things, a lottery between two paired goats, one of them being used as the sin offering and the other being sent away into the wilderness.

The Book of Esther is a story of divided pairs and divergent fates of Rabbi and Haman. Furthermore, the words Yom Kippurim could be translated as a day like Purim, and some Jewish commentators have long recognised the resonance between these two feasts, between Purim and the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement seems to deal with eschatological themes, with the approach to God's very presence, with definitive acts of atonement, with great events of division, with the one goat being brought near and the other goat being sent far away.

The Lord will provide atonement for His people, the Lord will allow for approach for His people to His very presence, and the Lord will divide His people from those who are not His people. In the Feast of Purim, we see this playing out on a different plane. The Lord will provide access for His people to the very thrones of the nations.

As they fast and turn to Him, they will be delivered from their sins and He will vindicate them in the sphere of history. He will divide them from their enemies by casting their enemies out and raising His people up to positions of power. Stories that begin with mourning and death will end with joy and gladness and rejoicing.

A question to consider, how might we identify themes of exodus in the story of Esther? And how might these themes, along with others that we have identified, point forward to Christ? Besides the fact that it is exceedingly short, the final chapter of the book of Esther seems rather anticlimactic. After all of the personal and political drama of the book, it begins with King Ahasuerus imposing a tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. Why on earth would the drama of the book be arrested for this description of the king's tax policy? Besides being exceedingly boring, it seems rather irrelevant.

David Dalber has written a very perceptive article on this chapter and on this verse in particular. He points out that behind the whole story of the book of Esther, there is this sub-plot of how the king is going to raise revenue. Haman the Agagite, he argues, proposes that the king raise his revenue by plunder.

In chapter 3 verse 9, If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries. The financial character of the transaction is also raised by Esther in her appeal to the king. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated.

If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king. Esther there raises the point that even selling the population of the Jews into slavery would be a better financial transaction than trying to raise money from them through genocide and plunder. In the preceding chapter, even though the Jews had been given the right to plunder from their enemies, they did not avail themselves of it.

Presumably all of that money went to the king. What verse 1 represents then is an alternative way for King Ahasuerus to raise his revenue, not by genocide and plunder, not by selling whole populations into slavery, but by imposing a tax. By imposing a tax upon the Jews living within the land and its various provinces, and by taxing the Jews in the Mediterranean trading cities, he would have a reliable but also a just source of revenue.

In this verse we see how the particular interests of Jews and their gentile rulers can align. They do not have to be at odds with each other. This would not be the last time that Jews appeal to this sort of principle.

It is reasonable to believe that this policy was suggested to King Ahasuerus by Mordecai. Mordecai is like the wise Joseph in Ahasuerus' court, the second in command and the one

who has administration over all of the affairs of the kingdom. With prudent regulation, the chaos of the realm of Ahasuerus under the oversight of his vizier Haman is overcome.

Like the hero Joseph, Mordecai achieves this by prudent tax policy. This all seems very pedestrian and boring, but it brings peace to the people. There is a deep partnership established between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus is praised for his acts of power and might, but also for his elevation of Mordecai which enables him to achieve these things. As gentiles elevate and bless and show hospitality to Jews in their midst, they too will be blessed. Earlier in the book, we noted resemblances between the characters of Mordecai and Esther and the characters of Abraham and Sarah.

The numbers 127 and 180 at the beginning of the book drew our minds back to Sarah, another woman hidden in a pagan king's court, and to Isaac, the threatened seed. In Joseph, a story of the great uncovering of identities as Joseph reveals himself to people he had formerly hidden himself from we find themes from the story of Abraham and Sarah coming to a full expression, whereas the mistreatment of Abraham and Sarah had brought judgement upon gentile rulers and their peoples. Through Joseph and his prudent tax policies, many gentiles were blessed and their lives preserved.

Mordecai is a new Joseph, a man who is joined with a gentile king who elevates the gentile king by his wise counsel and through his elevation blesses his brothers. John Levinson writes, The scene with which the Masoretic Esther closes is one for which Jewish communities in the Diaspora have always longed. Jews living in harmony and mutual goodwill with the gentile majority under Jewish leaders who are respected and admired by the rulers, yet who are openly identified with the Jewish community and unashamed to advance its interests and to speak out in its defence.

Levinson also notes that in contrast to the story of Joseph where a pharaoh could arise that had forgotten Joseph, the figures of Mordecai were not merely commemorated in the Feast of Purim but were also written down so as not to be forgotten in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia. The figure of Mordecai reminds us of Joseph. He is also contrasted with the figure of Haman and his policies.

In this chapter then we can see that the Book of Esther is not merely concerned with recording a special deliverance for both Jews and Gentiles a vision of how both parties can act in their own best interests and also for the interests of the other. The Book of Esther is shot through with themes of wisdom with the wisdom of the plan of Esther and of Mordecai's plan. Those plans were exercised from a position of weakness and vulnerability but now there is a plan exercised from a position of rule and authority and it is no less wise.

As in the story of Joseph one of the greatest gifts is the gift of their wisdom not functioning as opponents but as trustworthy and loyal counsellors. The theme of loyalty pervades the story of Joseph and the theme of loyalty is playing throughout the Book of Esther too. Throughout the book Ahasuerus is troubled with a crisis of loyalty.

Can he trust his closest servants when Bithan and Teresh have risen against him? How can he find a queen to trust when his queen Vashti refuses to obey his command? What are the dangers as in the case of Haman? Like Joseph in Genesis chapter 39 where he seemed to be guilty of adultery with his master's wife Mordecai initially appears to be guilty in his failure to bow to Haman at the king's command. However as the story works out it is proven that he is the true loyal servant. He is the one that the king can depend upon whereas Haman is proven to be untrustworthy largely revealed as such by Esther's scheme.

Along with their wisdom in their unimpeachable loyalty the Jews will build up a city who elevates them. All of this then is a fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that in his seed all of the nations of the earth would be blessed. A question to consider David Dauber has argued that Mordecai is the primary hero of the book of Esther.

Do you believe that he is justified in making this claim? If so how? If we were to read the story of Esther as focused upon the character of Mordecai what elements and themes of the book