

## VIII. The Jews' Triumph Over Their Enemies (8:3-9:32)

By honoring her promise to Mordecai and going before the king, Esther had averted her own death. Her petition, particularly as it meshed with Mordecai's newly acquired status with Ahasuerus, resulted also in Haman's execution on the gallows he intended for Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai had been spared, but as yet there was no such deliverance for their Jewish countrymen. The decree calling for the Jews' annihilation remained in force, and the appointed day of their slaughter was hastening upon them.

### A. The Counter-Decree (8:3-15)

1. Realizing that the lot was still cast against her people, Esther again approached the king on their behalf. Specifically, she requested of him that he revoke Haman's decree (8:3-6).

2. Ahasuerus' response to Esther was two-fold:

a. He began by affirming to her that his own attitude toward the Jews was favorable; had he not executed Haman and given his house over to her?

b. Ahasuerus had no desire to see Esther's countrymen destroyed, but even he had no authority to revoke a decree once it had been sealed with the royal signet ring and issued as law. This was precisely the reason Haman had insisted upon this procedure. As much as Ahasuerus lamented this tragic situation, there was nothing he could do to reverse it.

Though the king didn't say as much, it is evident from the course of action he prescribed to Esther. When asked by her to repeal the former decree, Ahasuerus responded by instructing her to write a *counter-decree*. Like its predecessor, this second decree should also be issued in his name and sealed with his signet ring, thereby giving it the same irrevocable status (v. 8).

3. Once again the king's scribes were assembled to compose a decree to be distributed throughout the entire empire. By employing the same language as before the writer emphasizes the intimate relationship between the two edicts (cf. 8:9-10 and 3:12-13). Given that both of them were permanent and unalterable, the second one effectively served as a corrective appendix to the first. Haman's edict called for a day of carnage that couldn't be averted; this new one authorized and outlined a counter response. The two decrees were legislative "twins," yet they stood sharply opposed to one another.

a. This opposition is expressed first in the fact that, though the process of writing, formalizing, and distributing the decrees was identical, they were composed by adversarial authors. Haman had drafted the content of the first decree; Mordecai did the same with its successor. In this way, too, the writer highlights the fact that Mordecai's triumph over Haman was absolute. Haman was dead, but his decree lived on just as he had intended. Nevertheless, it was not untouchable; the one who had overcome the "creator" now set himself against his creation.

- b. The subject matter of the decrees was also antithetical. Haman’s decree had called for the annihilation of the Jews and the seizing of their property as plunder; Mordecai’s decree authorized his countrymen to act in kind. The Jews throughout the empire were granted the right to rise up against their enemies on the appointed day of destruction and slay them in self-defense (8:11-13). What the former decree appointed against them, the latter placed in their own hands. They, too, were authorized to kill all who came against them, including women and children, and take their property for themselves.
- c. Finally, the writer observes that both decrees originated in the capital city and were first disclosed to its citizens before being distributed to the various provinces. But the response to them in Susa was very different. Haman’s edict had provoked confusion and anxiety (3:15); Mordecai’s brought rejoicing and celebration (vv. 14-15). In particular, the writer associates the city’s jubilation with Mordecai’s personal exaltation. Two things about this are notable:
  - 1) First, this response provides another point of contrast between Mordecai and Haman. Both men were equally exalted by the king, but the writer marks Haman’s promotion with silence and compulsion. Not only did the citizens of Susa not turn out to celebrate Haman like they did Mordecai, the honor they paid him was external and insincere; it was nothing more than outward compliance with the king’s command (3:2).
  - 2) The second thing verse 8:15 does is show solidarity between Ahasuerus and his subjects. The favor and honor extended to Mordecai by the king were shared by the people of Susa. This points first to the fact that Mordecai’s goodness and integrity were evident to all who observed him, but more importantly it hints at supernatural involvement: Mordecai’s favored standing and exaltation were grounded in favor arising from another, unseen source (ref. again 6:13).

## **B. The Process of Triumph (8:16-9:32)**

The first decree had stunned the city of Susa – a city whose citizenry was predominantly Gentile. Though it called only for Jewish annihilation, all the people of Susa (and likely other Gentiles across the empire) were unnerved by this shocking turn of events. So also the writer is careful to note both a Jewish and Gentile response to the second decree.

- 1. The whole city was filled with a spirit of joy and celebration, but for the Jews especially there was great exultation, which the author expresses in terms of *“light and gladness and joy and honor”* (8:16). Of particular interest are the first and last characterizations.
  - a. The noun “light” is a common metaphor in the Old Testament, often relating in some way to the person and work of God. Considered in terms of the immediate context and the broader narrative, the writer likely intended it to convey the idea of hopeful encouragement grounded in the growing sense that the lot was turning.

- b. The last of the four nouns (“honor”) also has a broad range of meanings, and it perhaps seems out of place in a sequence of terms emphasizing happiness and rejoicing. But when viewed in the larger context, its use here seems perfectly appropriate, especially when the Jews are regarded as the *objects* of this honor rather than its subjects. For the writer’s chief design in this section is to show the favorable providential shift for the Jews that will culminate in their exaltation:
- 1) He does so first by highlighting the king’s favor toward the Jews expressed in his promotion of Mordecai and provision of a counter-decree.
  - 2) The writer secondly recounts the celebratory response Mordecai received from the citizens of Susa as he presented himself in the splendor of his new status as Ahasuerus’ chief administrator (v. 15).
  - 3) Finally, he takes note of the wider Gentile response to the Jews provoked by the broadcast of the new edict (v. 17).
2. At the time that the lot had been cast against the Jews, Mordecai declared to Esther that deliverance would come to them from somewhere (4:14). Only a few days later, having observed a most remarkable turn in providence, Haman’s wife and friends warned him that the lot was now clearly on the side of the Jews; his present humiliation at Mordecai’s hand was the promise and foretaste of what was to come (6:13). Within hours, their prediction bore fruit as Haman writhed in agony on the gallows he had built for Mordecai and Mordecai went on to assume his position and the oversight of his household.
- a. With these predictions and their initial realization still echoing in the background, the writer looks ahead to the next stage of their fulfillment: As Mordecai’s decree went out from Susa, everywhere it was read it provoked Jewish celebration and Gentile awe (8:17). What had begun with Zeresh and Haman’s “wise men” was now being replicated across the kingdom: The Gentiles everywhere perceived by this startling turn of events that some supernatural power or “god” was acting in defense of the Jews.

In order to confirm to his readers that this was indeed the perception among the Gentiles, the author asserts that the new decree (and, by implication, the providential circumstances that led up to it) provoked in them *dread* of the Jews. But he further states that this dread led to widespread *conversion*. Having concluded that supernatural forces were effectually intervening for the Jews, many Gentiles sought to bring themselves under this same protection and provision by converting to Judaism. Speaking of this phenomenon, C. F. Keil observes: “... *the majority acted from... a conviction, forced upon them by the unexpected turn of affairs in favour of the Jews, of the truth of the Jewish religion; and the power of that faith and trust in God manifested by the Jews, and so evidently justified by the fall of Haman and the promotion of Mordecai, contrasted with the vanity and misery of polytheism, to which even the heathen themselves were not blind.*”

b. The absence of any reference to God in a context like this is as remarkable as it is conspicuous. Of all the places in the narrative to introduce the powerful and triumphant God of Israel (who is equally the God of all men), this is the perfect one. In fact, it seems almost impossible that the writer could avoid speaking of Him here. He strongly *suggests* God – and even indirectly glorifies Him – while yet refraining from mentioning Him. There’s no way this silence could have been accidental; this passage virtually screams God’s name. By not speaking of God in a context where he overtly implicates Him, the author leaves no doubt concerning his design in the book as a whole:

- 1) He sought to demonstrate and underscore for his exiled Jewish readers that the God who seemed to have nullified His promise and abandoned His people has done neither; though David’s kingdom is in ruins and the covenant nation now exists under the domination of the Gentile world-empire, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is present among them, ever mindful of and committed to the promise He swore to the patriarchs.
- 2) Mordecai’s triumph and exaltation – as astounding as they might be – were only a foretaste of what was coming. His prediction of deliverance by an unnamed power had been fulfilled in his own case (and Esther’s), and so it would be for his people. Mordecai hadn’t triumphed because of human resource or ingenuity; providential circumstances beyond his control had led to this outcome. He could never have predicted – let alone orchestrated – the sequence of events that brought him to the place of preeminence in the Medo-Persian Empire.

Given that the writer uses Mordecai’s personal experience as a prophetic precursor, the reader is led to expect that the same dynamics will be at work in the experience of the Jewish nation. *Already the writer has made clear that the Jews’ deliverance will not come through natural means.* Though Esther did all she could to intervene for her people, the decree against them stood fast. Even the supreme power and goodwill of the king himself could not deliver them. The only human remedy available was to allow the Jews to defend themselves on the decreed day of destruction. But considered realistically, this provision meant little. It was well and good to give the Jews the right to fight back against their adversaries, but what chance did a scattered group of powerless exiles have against organized, trained, and well-equipped militias?

The Jews reading this story were to make no mistake – despite what their own discouraging circumstance indicated to them, Yahweh has not forsaken the seed of Abraham, *and the writer makes his call to faith all the more pointed by emphasizing that even the Gentiles were able to perceive a divine presence and power behind the favorable outworking of providence for the Jews.* To many of them, it was so obvious and compelling that it led them to make this alien deity their own by embracing His people and giving themselves to His worship.