

Esther 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 9. Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred. The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm, and no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them.

For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.

In Susa the citadel itself, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, and also killed Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspetha, and Poretha, and Adalia, and Aradatha, and Parmashtha, and Arasei, and Aradai, and Vizurtha, the ten sons of Haman the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they laid no hand on the plunder.

That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king, and the king said to Queen Esther, In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men, and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces?

[1 : 3 1] Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled. And Esther said, If it pleased the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict, and let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.

So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed three hundred men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them. But they laid no hands on the plunder. This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested, and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villagers, who lived in the rural towns, held the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

And Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness, and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another, and gifts to the poor.

[3 : 15] So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast purr, that is, cast lots, to crush and to destroy them.

But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring, and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written, and at the time appointed every year.

That these days should be remembered, and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abahel, and Mordecai the Jew, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting.

[4 : 50] The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing. 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 is still on the books.

It's to be carried out in about eight 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, they start to join with the Jews. When the day of 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.

[5 : 53] 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. Urim Hazoni observes that Mordecai is probably concerned also to send 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. This is important to note, because the decree of Mordecai should not be regarded 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. The severity of the judgment, and the fact that they don't lay hands on any of the plunder, also should recall the judgment upon the Amalekites.

[7 : 08] 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.

Without the exertion of effective power, justice cannot be exercised, 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, could the security of the Jews be achieved after the horrors of the Holocaust. The merely chastened 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.

[8 : 23] 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.

Esther's request is that the right of the Jews in Susa to attack their enemies also continue for the following day. Perhaps there's 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 uncontestable.

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 fourteenth day, and in Susa, after the extra day, on the fifteenth.

The story of the book of Esther is a story of six feasts. There's the initial feast of chapter one, where Vashti fails to come when summoned. There's the feast of Esther's installation in chapter two.

In chapters five and seven, we have Esther's first and second feasts, the turning points of the book. In chapter eight, there is a feast as the Jews celebrate Mordecai's decree and his elevation.

[9 : 27] And now, in chapter nine, there is a final feast, the Feast of Purim, a feast originally celebrated as a rest after the deliverance, and then continued as commemoration 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's 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's a feast that makes central Jews living outside of the land.

It's a feast that the Jews voluntarily adopt, not just a feast that's imposed upon them by the Lord's command. In Esther chapter four, 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.

[10 : 34] The feast, it seems, was named for the casting of lots. 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. Purr 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, 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 Purr. 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's why they call these days Purim, because of the Purr. In other words, the Megillah's explanation for the name Purim is deliciously ironic.

[11 : 43] 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 Purr, for his instruments of chance.

But instead, the fate of the Jews was determined by something else, by another Purr, namely by Esther's act, her annulment of the decree. As such, that's why they call the day Purim, because of her Purr, 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.

[12 : 52] 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 and 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.

In the book of Esther, we see several recollections of 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 Rabbi Foreman observes that Mordecai plays off this language in his charge to Esther in chapter 4 verse 14.

[14 : 18] 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, at the one moment where approach 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 to the inner court, much as Aaron has to approach the inner court of the Holy of Holies. In Esther chapter 5 verse 2, 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. He has to intercede for himself as an individual, 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.

[15 : 48] 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 faiths, of Vashti and Esther, of Esther and Zeresh, of Mordecai and Haman.

Furthermore, the words Yom Kippurim could be translated as a day like Purim, and some Jewish commentators have long recognized 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 Day of Purim might be seen as a sign resting upon something greater. 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.

[17 : 04] He will divide them from their enemies, 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?

