

## **Esther, Lecture 3**

### **by Dr. Elaine Phillips**

#### **The Jews in Mourning (4:1-3)**

**1-2.** “**And** Mordecai *knew* all that had been done.” The intelligence network in the gate area was thorough; he knew more than the general contents of the decree. “All that had been done,” a continuation of the passive, indicates his sources had provided him with the details, even to the payment for the extermination (Esth 4:7).

Mordecai’s response was visibly and audibly evident. Torn garments and sackcloth made of coarse goat or camel hair were the clothing of exposure and self-humiliation. Dust and ashes were reminders of death’s destruction of the flesh. These practices symbolized ritual impurity and separation from God (Laniak 92-94). Because of the inherent shame signified by sackcloth, it was not allowed to sully the arena of power in the king’s gate. The extreme bitterness of Mordecai’s outcry (literally, “he cried a great cry”) was due not only to the threat posed to his people, but also to the weight of his own responsibility in the circumstances that led to this point. His refusal to bow to Haman had been escalated to a crisis for the entirety of his people. His choice of location, however, is also indicative of a further motive in his public outcry. It was the best way to get Esther’s attention and move her into action. In the seclusion of the palace, she was not even aware that anything had happened.

**3.** Mordecai’s grieving on the individual level was mirrored and amplified as entire Jewish populations lamented openly. Fasting was a prominent feature of their mourning and is a counterpoint to the feasting that is prevalent throughout the text. The fast is particularly striking in light of the proximity of Passover which commenced the following day.

#### **As the rest of the chapter unfolds, Mordecai and Esther faced off, the confrontation mediated by Hathach (4:4-17). Initially, Esther challenged Mordecai.**

**4.** The communication network that had allowed Mordecai to keep watch on Esther and maintain some kind of contact with her through the years since her accession to the throne had been low profile. At this point, however, Mordecai’s actions were dangerously unsuitable given her position. The Hebrew uses the title “the Queen” as the subject of “was in great distress” (Tjt^lj^l – a hapax – the root of the word connotes *writhing*) and her reaction hints of embarrassment. Dispatching clothing to him was an attempt to quell his outburst as effectively and quickly as possible, lest it have bad ramifications for her. His traditional reaction would have appeared extreme and the ritual sackcloth would have been acutely distasteful and unseemly. Esther had spent five years functioning according to court protocol and was undoubtedly concerned for what the *king* would think and how he would respond (cf. Esth 4:11). At this point, the distance between Mordecai the Jew and Esther the Persian queen was significant. That Mordecai refused to remove his sackcloth is indicative of his complete identity with the national crisis.

**5.** Cutting through what was probably a flurry of attendants, Esther summoned Hathach, appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordecai. She must have had a high degree of trust in Hathach and would have even more cause to do so as the sensitivity of this situation unfolded.

In m>h-z\h w<sup>u</sup>^l-m>h-z\h, z\h strengthens the interrogative “what?” That plus the repetition of the phrase might be the equivalent of “What on earth are you doing?”

### **In response, Mordecai Challenged Esther (4:6-9)**

With verse six begins the extraordinary exchange mediated by Hathach. His continued presence serves to slow the pace of the narrative and thus heighten the tension. In this first venture of Hathach, the discourse is indirect as the circumstances of the edict were repeated for Esther's benefit.

6. The location may indicate that Mordecai had removed himself slightly from the gate of the king once he knew he had Esther's attention.

7. Mordecai first explained what had happened to *him*, no doubt including the edict to bow before Haman, his refusal to do so, and the harsh consequences that resulted in his mourning on behalf of the Jewish people. Then he presented the substantiating details which his sources had provided, even to the amount of money Haman had offered for their extermination. P\*r\*v>h is only found in Hebrew in this verse and Esther 10:2 and has to do with defining or specifying, in this case the amount of money. He demonstrated that his concern was not based on vague information but on precise knowledge.

8-9. To further confirm the gravity of the situation, Mordecai produced for Hathach a copy of the written edict. Mordecai expected Esther to absorb the report and act accordingly - to plead for mercy and beseech the king on behalf of *her people*. At this point, Mordecai was calling upon her to reveal the identity he had commanded her to hide until this point. This is the last time that Mordecai commanded Esther.

### **Esther Responded to Mordecai (4:10-11)**

10. From here on, Hathach mediated but the words of Esther and Mordecai are presented as direct dialogue. Literally, "Esther *commanded* him (Hathach)" as he returned to Mordecai. Esther's role as authoritative queen began to emerge at this point and would be fully operative in short order.

11. Esther's first articulated words constituted a valid apologetic for inaction in the face of almost certain death. She expressed reluctance on the basis of what was common knowledge about a comprehensive restriction; the text specifies "any man or woman." Furthermore, *everyone knew*. The implication is that Mordecai should have known it too, especially since he seems to have known everything else! Esther's concern for her own well-being was founded on her not having been called to the king for thirty days, something Mordecai would not have known. Esther was very likely aware of other ruthless acts on the king's part and the added provocation of admitting she was *Jewish* would, in her estimation, make the case hopeless.

### **Mordecai Responded to Esther (4:12-14)**

12. As the crux of the exchange approaches, the narrator dispensed with the mediating role of Hathach and the rest unfolds as direct discourse.

13. Mordecai's response was searing, pitting the privilege of her royal position against her Jewish identity and intimating that the danger was so great, even being the favored queen would not save her. Once Haman discovered she was both Jewish and related to Mordecai, her fate

would be a terrible one. Mordecai did *not* say how he anticipated Haman might find out that detail, or precisely from what “quarter” this treachery might come. There might have been a double meaning intended in “escape...from all the Jews.” Either she would not escape because her identity would become known along with those of the other Jews *or* she would not escape retribution at the hand of the Jews themselves who *would* be delivered from another quarter and then perhaps attack those who were turncoats (Beal 72). Esther may have been tempted to think that having concealed her identity for six years, she could continue. Mordecai shattered that illusion.

**14.** An initial reading of this verse seems to indicate Mordecai’s unwavering hope in the providence of God. Even if Esther kept silent, deliverance would arise from another place, but Esther herself had the opportunity to be a significant player in the deliverance of her people. Nevertheless, it is not at all clear how to read the statement about deliverance by itself and then how to read it in the context of the rest of the verse and the potential threat at the end of verse 13. For whatever reason, Mordecai had just warned Esther that she was not immune in the king’s household and he repeated the warning here; “you and your father’s house will perish.” The latter included him as he was her only “family.” That would be particularly poignant for her as she had been nurtured by him in the absence of her “father’s house.” Further, his challenge to consider the reason she had been brought to the royal position had its force only if there were no other alternative! Otherwise, she could easily be tempted to do nothing, resting in the hope that relief would indeed come from somewhere else. One way of addressing the issue is to posit that help might arise (y<sup>u</sup>^mod) but it would be somewhere else and the proximity of the royal palace to Haman and the center of the maelstrom would mean that Esther and Mordecai would get swept away. Here’s another possibility: Wiebe interpreted the second clause of this verse as a rhetorical question that assumes a negative response. The relevant portion would read, “if you keep silent at this time, will help and deliverance come for the Jews from another place? [Answer, “no it won’t...] and you and your father’s house will perish [as well].” This rendition addresses the problems that are incumbent in the traditional reading of the text, namely that if help did arise from whatever is meant by “another place,” why would not Esther’s family, and especially Mordecai, also be delivered by this agent? As a result of the truly dire nature of Mordecai’s challenge, Esther’s mood changed dramatically and the narrative takes a very decisive turn (Wiebe 409-415).

The use of “who knows” in this context is not an ambivalent expression of doubt but rather a strong statement that Esther was indeed the Jews’ only hope and that she was brought to this point for this time. On the confidence of the expression see Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9. Mordecai’s closing statement may be an oblique acknowledgment that Esther’s experience in getting to that point had been a horrifying one for her and for him as her guardian.

### **Esther Takes Charge (4:15-17)**

**15-16.** At this critical moment, Esther chose publicly to identify with her people even at the probable cost of her life. She had been adept at managing the delicate balance of obedience to her guardian and responsiveness to the demands of the pagan court. At this point, however, her strength of character was manifested in her resolve to defy the king’s law, reveal her Jewish identity, and confront the second most powerful person in the empire. Her choice was likely motivated by a messy combination of obedience to Mordecai, a sense of destiny, a grim fear of death, and maybe even a distinct awareness of God’s sovereignty.

With the knowledge that fasting was an ancient and venerable part of her tradition, she called for a corporate and comprehensive fast, thus continuing the communal participation in this crisis that had begun as a response to the edict. A radical appeal for God's intervention, this exceeded all mandated fasts for severity; there was to be neither eating *nor* drinking for three days and nights! Therefore, even though prayer is not mentioned, it was likely part of the enterprise. At the outset of her public identity with Judaism, Esther subjected herself to one of its most rigorous disciplines. She further determined that her young women (who may not have been Jewish) would fast in the same manner along with her. Following that, she would enter into the king's presence. Because Esther 5:1 indicates that Esther crossed the threshold into the king's presence in royal attire "on the third day," her call for the three-day fast presumably meant parts of the three distinct days. If the narrative reflects events in rapid succession, it is implied that this fast would have begun on the eve of Passover. Instead of feasting and rejoicing over the dramatic deliverance that was paradigmatic for all of Israelite history, they would be renewing the appeal for God's intervention "in their day."

Her closing words to Mordecai are telling; in spite of this astonishing corporate appeal for divine mercy, she expected the enterprise to fail because it was contrary to the law. Her statement might be translated "when I perish, I perish," indicating her recognition that death was the likely outcome of either choice. The irony is that her decision moved her from passive recipient to actor and initiator in the rest of the drama.

**17.** Because the verse literally said that Mordecai "crossed over," early rabbinic interpreters suggested that he transgressed the commandment of God by ordering a fast on the thirteenth and fourteenth of Nisan (Meg 15a; both Targums). He may simply, however, have left the citadel for the city of Susa to assemble the Jews and start the fast. In fact, both implications might be knit into the choice of the word. Mordecai's response was to do all that *Esther* has *commanded*; the tables were turned and he now obeyed Esther.

#### **Just a note about the fasting mentioned in this chapter.**

**16.** The Torah was reticent in regard to fasting; the command in conjunction with the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31) to "afflict oneself" (u\*n>h) was the only mandate. Nevertheless, throughout Israel's history, there were significant occasions when both individuals and the nation engaged in fasting (xom) to demonstrate repentance and beseech God to avert some impending disaster (2 Sam 12:16-22; 1 Kings 21:27; Joel 2:15). After the exile, it seems that the practice was institutionalized, perhaps because there was a communal dread that disobedience would bring a repeat of that disaster (Zech 7:2-3; see also Neh 9:1). Daniel fasted on behalf of his sinful people (Dan 9). According to the book of Jonah, it was a recognized practice in the Ancient Near East (Jon 3:5) as the king of Nineveh called for a society-wide fast. Just as the Jews' fast of mourning was a counterpoint to the casual drinking feast of the king and Haman, so also the discipline of this three day fast contrasted with the theme of Persian revelry. Fasting would continue to hold an important place, as is evident in the commemorative activities (Esth 9:31).

At this critical juncture, the LXX includes long and impassioned prayers of Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai reminded God that his motives for refusing to bow to Haman were not pride but concern for the glory of God. Esther set aside her royal apparel, donned garments of humiliation along with ashes and dung, and cried out to God to accept her confession of the people's sins,

intervene against their enemies, and grant her the necessary boldness and eloquence in order to effect deliverance. Part of this prayer is her declaration that everything associated with her position had been repulsive to her. In the LXX, these additions are followed by an expanded description of Esther's approach to the king.

### **After three days of fasting, Esther made her Grand Entrance (5:1-2)**

1. To prepare for the encounter with the king, Esther clothed herself in royal attire (מלכות) and took her position. This was not just clothing; she was presenting herself on the king's footing (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 68). Esther stood; the king sat. The structure of the sentence focuses on the palace in such a way as to build the suspense. בית המלך ("palace" and "king's hall"), בית המלכות ("hall"), and הבריכת ("entrance" – of the house) are used four times in one verse. The two actors were positioned opposite the critical point of the doorway; the king was ensconced *in* the palace; she was approaching it. The word נכח ("opposite") is used in regard to the position of each of them. The Persian court under Darius had created the separation of the king in order to enhance his majesty and dignity (Herodotus I. 99). For Esther to cross the threshold of the entrance was a recognized invasion of an almost sacred space.

2. What the king saw was Esther the Queen. Her regal demeanor again "won his favor" (see comments on Esther 2:9,15,17), and he demonstrated the evidence of that favor by extending the scepter. That there was a precise and unchangeable protocol is suggested by the measured and careful language; "the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand and Esther approached and she touched the head of the scepter."

The LXX has Esther delicately leaning on her maids as she approached, her heart filled with fear, and the Talmud picks up with "As Esther was going into the king, she reached the chamber of the idols and the Divine Presence left her. She said, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Do You punish the unintended offense?" (Meg 15b) The LXX follows with a description of the fierce anger of the king designed to inspire fear and awe. Perhaps thinking that the MT lacked sufficient spice, the translations/interpretations continue the melodramatic additions. Esther fell down, turned pale and fainted, and three angels came to her rescue. One lifted up her head, the second granted her grace, and the third lengthened the king's scepter. Although the king was wrath, God changed his heart and instead he leapt from the throne to her assistance and comforted her in his arms while she heaped upon him appropriate acknowledgements of his royal majesty and glory!

### **Invitations and Promises (5:3-8)**

3. Back to the Hebrew text, the king was obviously aware that something critical made Esther risk her life and transgress court protocol. His question commenced with מה לך, literally "what is to/with you?" This is an idiom used elsewhere (Josh 15:18; Judges 1:14; 18:3, 23,24; Ezek 18:2; Jon 1:6) and may mean simply "what do you want?" or "what are you doing?" This was not, however, the patterned rhetoric that he used on subsequent days. Perhaps he was moved by her appearance and part of the inquiry was into her own distress. While it sounded brusque, he followed with the further standard question: "What is your request?" The promise of "up to half the kingdom" seems to have been a convention (cf. Mk 6:23) but an interesting one nevertheless. Even though he held the power of life and death in the form of his own scepter, he was ready to be dominated by her request and, in fact, promised to grant it before she spoke.

4. Esther's request that Haman and the king attend a private banquet that she had already prepared is indicative that she had carefully devised her strategy. Given her venture into the king's presence, for her merely to invite him to a banquet signaled to him that the real issue was yet to be divulged. Undoubtedly, this maneuver piqued his curiosity. The feast, in addition to fitting both court "culture" and textual themes, would provide a less rigid and public place for addressing the difficult and delicate nature of her request. It would also be a venue where it would be appropriate to ask for Haman's presence, as second to the king, without "tipping him off" that something was amiss. Esther's request for Haman's presence has been perceived as both brilliant and foolhardy. Facing him directly with the accusation would not allow "wiggle room," but it would also demand a large dose of courage. From another perspective, given the fact that the king clearly found her alluring, having Haman there *might* have been a bit of an irritant. Perhaps provoking the king's jealousy was part of Esther's strategy. In any case, in the two banquet scenes, Haman was entirely disarmed and unaware of the danger brewing for him. The Hebrew form of Esther's invitation was in keeping with the stature of the two intended guests: "Let the king come (a singular verb) and Haman..." The same formula appears in verse 8 as well.

5. The king complied with Esther's request. Haman was brought hastily and the king entered (again the singular verb, perhaps setting him apart) along with Haman. At this point, the three ostensibly most powerful people in the Persian Empire were together in one room.

6. It seems there was a separate course for the consumption of wine (m]vT@h h^Y^y)n toward the end of the banquet. Perhaps it served as the occasion for addressing issues that were deemed inappropriate during the main dinner. The king's first abbreviated query (verse 3) had been partly in response to Esther's uninvited entry and her evident distress. In this context, his manner was more measured, perhaps in keeping with protocol. If indeed the doublet ("petition" and "request") was standard court rhetoric, Esther would have known the pattern and may have prepared her critical request which she would offer at the second banquet (Esth 7:3) ahead of time to fit perfectly.

7. This doublet rhetoric shaped both the narrative framework and Esther's first patterned response. A literal rendition is: "She answered and said, 'My petition and my request...'" The incomplete sentence is intentional although this runs counter to most modern translations which read verse 8 as the continuation of *this* request. Clearly, however, her request was not simply that they come to the next banquet. A sensitive audience could imagine her pause, perhaps to steady herself if she was faltering under the pressure. It may be that she spontaneously put off the moment when she had to expose the treachery of the king's favorite advisor and declare her own identity. On the other hand, the pause may represent the next step in her calculated scheme to undo Haman systematically.

8. Here Esther was in full command of the rhetoric, the consummate diplomat using the full extent of the double forms as the king himself had articulated them. She phrased the matter exquisitely, making the king obligated to grant the request when it would finally come – "if it *seems good to grant my request...* then let him come..." Furthermore, she prefaced it all by her own flourish: "If I have found favor...and if it seems good..." The first expression ("to find favor" as opposed to her "winning favor") is the more common idiom and indicated a certain

deference on her part. The invitation to a second banquet, if planned from the outset, would further lull Haman into a mindset that would be stunned when the announcement was made and perhaps prevent a clever political evasion on his part. Esther's promise was literally to "do according to the word of the king," an interesting declaration in light of the fact that he had said he would do anything up to half the kingdom for her! In contrast to her first invitation, here Esther said she prepared the banquet "for them," an unexplained inclusion that may have piqued twinges of jealousy on the king's part, thus keeping him awake the following night. At this point, the narrator masterfully leaves the audience in suspense as the relationship between Haman and Mordecai is resumed.

### **We again see the volatility of Haman in these next two vignettes (5:9-14)**

**9.** Verse 9 is also built on dyads; joy and high spirits (fob l@b) characterizing Haman, contrasted with Mordecai's refusal to rise or tremble. Previously, the command that Mordecai defied was to bow and prostrate himself before Haman. Now, having completed the three days of fasting and likely aware that Esther had successfully entered the throne room, he was back to sitting in the gate, possibly intent on gathering every shred of information he could discover. Seeing Haman coming, he refused to stand up as the first step in the mandated procedure. The additional verb is telling. Haman had intended by his decree to arouse terror but Mordecai did not flinch. Moore declared that Mordecai acted in a "needlessly rash" way (*Esther* 60) but it is more appropriate to call his actions consistent. As a result, Haman's state of mind changed to fury.

**10-11.** Haman pretended to be indifferent, but his emotion poured out in his overwrought boasting to his friends and the final eruption of his injured pride. Craving an audience, he summoned his friends and Zeresh, his wife, who had to listen to a recital of things they already knew, and perhaps had heard numerous times before. The order in the verse may hint at what was most important to him; he spoke first of his great wealth and then of his many sons. After that, he waxed eloquent about his own exalted status, especially above everyone else of any comparable stature. The friends served in the capacity of advisors (cf. *Esth* 5:14 and 6:13); it seems that neither the king nor Haman functioned without them. The text names his wife, she was summoned along with his friends, and ably served as an advisor.

**12.** If the friends had heard all of his preceding boasts before, the fact that he alone was privileged to dine privately with Queen Esther and the King *was* new! Literally, he was "brought" to the banquet, just as he would be to the second one (*Esth* 6:14). And if that were not enough, the same would happen tomorrow!

**13.** Haman here revealed the great flaw of his self-centered pride. Even though he was second to the king, he craved the obeisance of one person who refused it and whose very people he despised, Mordecai *the Jew*. By this time, he was so overwrought that Mordecai's very existence made him lose control. "*None* of his accomplishments was satisfactory as long as Mordecai was alive."

**14.** It seems that Zeresh took the lead in advising Haman how to proceed. The verb is singular (as in verses 4 and 8) even though the friends were also part of the consultation. As with the other women in the narrative, she acted and spoke in ways that elicited responses, all quite amusing in light of the decree that men were to master their own houses. The counsel was designed to shame Mordecai and the people he represented and, in so doing, address the humiliation and wounded pride that nagged at Haman every time he saw Mordecai.

The request to have Mordecai impaled on a ludicrously high pole (u@x) indicates Haman's frenzy to debase him completely. It would be seen all over Susa. The height may also be intended to reflect the fact that everything "official" in this setting was done on a grand scale. For a parallel "grand scale," see Daniel 3:1 (the ninety-foot statue). The hanging was, as in 2:23, for the purpose of humiliating display, not death. The word "tree" (pole) haunts in the book (Esth 2:23, 6:4, 7:9-10, 8:7; 9:13,25).

Haman's advisors may have congratulated themselves on the irony they created. Mordecai first would not bow; now he would not rise, so Haman would elevate him seventy-five feet high! That being done, they knew he would be able to wine and dine joyfully with the king and queen. The suggestion was "good in his eyes."

### **"What Should Be Done for the Man the King Wishes to Honor?" (6:1-13)**

The pervasive coincidences in Chapter 6 are clear indications that something more was afoot. The king just happened to have insomnia, the chronicles just happened to be open to the point of Mordecai's good deed, Mordecai just happened to have waited for five years saying nothing, Haman just happened to be outside at the propitious moment when the king determined that this matter needed to be set right, and the king just happened *not* to name the person whom he desired to honor so that Haman presumed it could be none other than he. The reversals were the hand of Providence; insomnia turned the story on its head. If that hadn't happened, Mordecai would have been dead before Esther's second banquet.

### **Revelation of a Minor Catastrophe: Mordecai's Honor Neglected (6:1-3)**

1. That very night the sleep of the king "fled," a remarkably apt picture of the frustration of sleeplessness. The verb n\*d^d means "flee," "wander," or "be disturbed or shaken" (HALOT, BDB). Commentators, both ancient and modern, have speculated on why the king was afflicted in this manner. Caught in the tangled web of his thoughts might have been apprehension that he had promised Esther up to half the kingdom, suspicion of Esther's motives for inviting Haman to both private banquets and her intimation that she was equally solicitous of Haman and the king (Esth 5:8), and the memory of an assassination attempt that had brewed just outside his door some years ago (Meg 15b; Midrash Rabbah; Walfish 165).

The reading material was "the book of the remembrances, the matters of the days." This is an expansion of s@p\r D]br? h^Y\*m'm (see Esth 2:23), the expression commonly used for "chronicles," and is another example of the excesses of language when the action returned to the sphere of the Persian court. The same may be said of the following passive verbal form; "they were read." The verb form (w^Y]h+yW plus the passive participle) suggests a process of some duration. The court reader(s) may have been droning on for a good part of the night. That the Persian court maintained such records is attested also in Ezra 6:1-5.

2. The record of the assassination attempt, with names and titles, "was found written," two passive verbs reflecting the impersonal court and serving as a subtle indicator of the providential unveiling of these matters at just the right time.

3. The passive voice continues: "what...was [literally] done (n^u^c>h)?...nothing was done (n^u^c>h)." The young attendants provided the answer, as they did in chapter two.

The specific reference to honor (y+q\*r) and "greatness" (G+dWl>h) in this context is an echo of Haman's promotion in Esther 3:1; the misdirected honor there was an injustice that needed to be addressed. Herodotus informs us that, as a general rule, special services to the king were immediately honored (Herodotus III.138-141; V.11; VIII.85; IX.107). Five years had been a long time and the king may have been more concerned with his own shame in neglecting this

than for Mordecai's well-being (Laniak 105-06). Mordecai would be honored in this chapter but not specifically promoted until Esther 8:2.

#### **“Whom Could the King Wish to Honor More than Me?” (6:4-9)**

4. Neither the king nor Haman had slept and both had Mordecai in mind but with entirely different objectives! One wonders why the king was going to address his question to whatever unknown person was in the court unless that location was restricted solely to trusted advisors. By this time that meant only Haman, who continued to be confident of his access to the king. As he entered the outer court, Haman was also *very* early, indicative of the unseemly haste with which he was intent on doing away with Mordecai. He also came to *tell* (l@amor) the king, not to ask, truly a brash attitude (Gordis, *Megillat Esther* 45)

5. Haman had stationed himself in the courtyard to be ready for the earliest moment of access. His entrance into the king's presence came on the heels of the all-night soporific reading, suggesting that he was ushered into the bedroom of the king.

6. Regal prerogative meant that the King's concern came first. That the king did not reveal the identity of Mordecai here was providential. If he had, given Haman's influential position, it would have gone ill with Mordecai! The expression “the king delights to honor” lodged firmly in Haman's mind. He first savored it “in his heart” (B=]Bo) and then returned to it repeatedly to define precisely what should be done for, as he assumed, *him*. The character of Haman is the most transparent one through the entire narrative; here the audience has a window into his innermost thoughts and sees there over weaning pride.

7. Although the NIV translation smoothes out this verse by attaching it to the following one, it should be read independently. Haman repeated the phrase, relishing it, and then started in to the description of the honors he so ardently desired, continuing to interweave “the man whom the king delights to honor.” This was a practice session; he would announce it repeatedly and publicly with reference to Mordecai!

8-9. There are three critical aspects to Haman's response and he repeated each element with increasing detail, making it quite clear that he intended the king to understand the full import of his advice. There was to be a public declaration that symbols of royal power and position were shared by someone of great importance to the king. Both the royal horse and the regal garment were to be ones that the king himself had used, investing them with a significant degree of sovereign power. If Xerxes had thought that Haman was speaking on his own behalf, it could be construed as the first step in a plan to usurp the throne (Cohen 93; Levenson, *Esther* 97; Baldwin 90). Perhaps as a result of his nighttime ruminations the king was suspicious of Haman. If so, in addition to proposing the necessary ceremony for Mordecai, the king took advantage of this timely appearance of Haman to test him and see what designs he had. Haman, for his part, may have counted on the king's trust that this was simply a maneuver to elevate the king further and to solidify his own position in a context that was always potentially uncertain.

It has been suggested that this was not to be a parade through the streets but rather a stationery demonstration in the city square (B]rjob h\*u'r). The verbs that are translated “has ridden” and “led through” (r\*k^b and h]rK'b) are better understood as “mount,” implying the symbolic position to which Haman would be required to raise Mordecai as a public act of honor. Because this was the horse the *king* had mounted, the honoree would share the king's own glory and honor (W. Boyd Barrick, “The Meaning and Usage of RKB in Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 101 [1982]: 488-490).

A crest (literally “crown”) on the horse’s head was not an unusual ornamentation in Near Eastern art; such equine headpieces appear regularly in Assyrian reliefs from palaces in Nineveh that are on display in the British Museum [slide]. The pattern continued into the Persian period as reliefs from Persepolis demonstrate (Briant 223). Nevertheless, the syntax of the final clause of verse 8 is ambiguous because, unlike the preceding two  $a^{\wedge}v\text{r}$  clauses, this one does not have an immediate antecedent; therefore it might be read as the king who wears the royal crown while riding the royal horse. See Oswald T. Allis, “The Reward of the King’s Favorite (Esther vi.8),” *Princeton Theological Review* 21 (1923): 621-632; Berg 62.

### **Mordecai Honored; Haman Humiliated (6:10-13)**

**10.** Hearing “Mordecai the Jew” must have frozen every fiber of Haman’s being. He despised that name above all others and Mordecai was the person whose end was, in his mind, tantalizingly close. In the public sphere, the plot turned at this point. There is a great deal that this verse does *not* say, leaving much to the imagination of the audience.

Questions also arise: How did the king know Mordecai was Jewish and how could he have forgotten that the Jews were doomed to destruction? Mordecai’s identity may have been written into the chronicles but more likely the attendants who clearly knew the circumstances (verse 3) filled the king in on this detail as well. Haman had carefully avoided naming the objects of his decree and the king had turned the whole sordid business over to Haman. Thus, even though the decree named the Jews, Xerxes may never have bothered to read the text. The events to this point forcefully demonstrated his ability to miss just about everything of significance. Equally puzzling is why the king would be eager to honor “Mordecai the Jew” if anti-Semitism was lurking in the empire. Perhaps he was oblivious to that as well. The king’s parting shot not to neglect anything is literally, “do not let anything fall,” prescient in light of what was forthcoming for Haman.

**11.** After Haman’s extended description, the actual ceremony is described with great economy as if to suggest that Haman did it as quickly and perfunctorily as possible. The narrator brilliantly leaves to the audience’s imagination what the event in the city square was like both for Haman and for Mordecai. While the king may have been unaware of the antipathy between Haman and Mordecai, everyone in the public sphere who watched the spectacle would have known the preceding incidents. This was the crowning humiliation as the proclamation was repeated: this was “the man the king wishes to honor.” At the same time, it must have felt like a cruel irony to Mordecai because the seemingly inevitable and deadly decree was still in effect. Perhaps, not knowing any of the precipitating events, he construed it as a scene of mockery in which he was forced to be the passive recipient.

**12.** While nothing is noted about Mordecai’s response, Haman’s flight home was in mourning with a covered head, an adumbration of the final covering of his face in Esther 7:8. This indication of mourning contrasted entirely with what he had anticipated. The symbolism of the covered head appears in 2 Samuel 15:30 to describe David’s mourning and shame as he exited Jerusalem at the time of Absalom’s rebellion and Jeremiah 14:3,4 to indicate the mourning of Jerusalem.

**13.** Haman’s description of his humiliation uses the same language that appears with regard to Mordecai’s lowest moment (Esth 4:7). After hearing his narrative, Zeresh and the advisors (“the wise ones”), whose distance from him is indicated by their no longer being called friends, recognized that his fate was sealed. He had begun to fall and there was no stopping it; the verbal root of  $n^*p^{\wedge}l$  occurs three times, the last being the emphatic infinitive absolute with the finite form. Because Mordecai was Jewish, Haman would not be able to prevail. The  $a]m$  clause is not

conditional (“if” he is Jewish – they knew that), but causal. The next verse skillfully gets the reading audience back to the banquet after this most important tangent. The declaration of Zeresh and the advisors fits into the pattern of non-Israelites who were aware of God’s support for Israel. See Numbers 22-24; Joshua 2:8-11; 1 Samuel 4:8.

### **The Second Banquet of Esther (6:14-7:8)**

#### **Arrival of the Guests (6:14-7:1)**

14. One can just imagine the previous scene with Haman’s tormented recital of events, perhaps prolonged as each was revisited, and the sobering responses of all of his “comforters.” Any hope that he might have sought from them was dashed and it is understandable, then, if he had not prepared himself in a timely manner for the next banquet. The escort of eunuchs may have been court protocol for someone of Haman’s stature but when they arrived, they found him still in the midst of the agonizing conversation and were compelled to hurry him to the queen.

1. The lower status of Haman *vis a vis* the king is again indicated by the singular verb as it referred to the king’s entrance. Literally, they came “to drink” (לִיְוֹת) but no doubt it was an entire sumptuous banquet.

From this point on, Esther is repeatedly called *Queen* Esther.

#### **The Royal Requests and Questions (7:2-5)**

2. If indeed the *mishteh hayiyyin* was a course toward the end of the meal, there had been a significant amount of time for tension to build. This was the third time the king asked to know Esther’s request and, although court rhetoric determined the form of the question, it changed slightly again. He addressed her directly as “Queen Esther” and, for the second time, promised to grant her petition entirely.

3. Following the lead of the king and perhaps in keeping with court etiquette, Esther shaped all of her response, which is narrated as a doublet (“Esther the queen answered and said”) in pairs. The first set includes the two conditionals, “if I have found favor, O king, in your eyes” and “if it pleases the king.” Even these were exquisite preparations for what followed. Esther used the more deferential “found favor” as opposed to “won favor” and appealed directly to the king’s relationship with her, a factor to which she returned in the next phase. Knowing that her own life was more significant as far as the king was concerned, she first asked that her life be granted as her petition and then her people as her request. His honor would, after all, be profoundly damaged if the queen were killed in conjunction with Haman’s edict against the Jews.

4. The next part of her plea was a masterpiece in diplomacy. She had to set the stage for the accusation of Haman without implicating the king who was, to be sure, equally culpable in the matter. Haman was the king’s choice as second in the realm and the king had granted him free reign to unleash his fury against the Jews. In declaring “we have been sold, I and my people,” Esther identified herself with the Jews even though she did not yet name them. Her direct quote of the language of the decree did away with any ambiguity; Haman at this point would have realized with mounting horror what this meant for him. In light of the possibility of Haman’s having exploited the convenient similarity between verbs meaning “to annihilate” and “to enslave” (recall the discussion of chapter 3), Esther’s use of the term “sold” has multiple layers of meaning. They had been “delivered over” (literally “sold”) for destruction, a term used repeatedly of God’s response to Israel’s disobedience (cf. Judg 2:14; 3:8; 4:2); they had literally

been sold as Haman had offered the king money for their annihilation and Xerxes appears to have accepted (Esth 3:9; 4:7); and the king may have been “sold a bill of goods” by the deceitful pun that Haman made, lulling him into thinking this was a matter of slave trade. Even sale into slavery, Esther maintained, would have been sufficiently tolerable that she would have kept quiet. This was also a clever maneuver because, while it was quickly becoming manifestly clear that she *could* keep quiet, if she were sold into slavery by an edict that the king himself had sanctioned, that would have been unthinkably shameful. Esther’s statement served as an apology for being a messenger bringing news of disgrace but it also put the matter in stark terms of his own honor. He had to respond. The final clause is difficult because the three key words have multiple and ambiguous meanings, perhaps for the very reason that this had to be the epitome of diplomatic language on the part of Esther. *x\*r* (“distress” or “calamity”) could also mean “adversary,” an interpretation that would personalize the problem and would connect with verse 6 where Esther identified Haman with that very word. *x)w\h* (translated “would justify” in the NIV) means “to be like or equal” and could imply both monetary value and the value of an action, particularly appropriate for the messy situation here (Laniak 113, n 30). It occurred previously at the end of Haman’s accusation of “a certain people;” it was not worth it to the king to let them rest (Esth 3:8). In both cases, Haman and Esther expressed their concern to maintain some sort of equilibrium for the king who was known to be a bit volatile. *n@z\q* (“disturbing”) is also a problem. Only used here in biblical Hebrew, it is generally a very strong term, meaning “damage,” in rabbinic texts. It could also have financial overtones, referring to the “loss” to the king of a sizable bit of income. A literal rendition of this clause would be “there is no calamity (or adversary) that is equivalent to damage to the king.” If *x\*r* referred to a person, it would be a disdainful comment on Haman; he was so worthless that disrupting the royal equilibrium in order to accomplish his punishment would be too high a price, implying utmost respect for the king and utmost contempt for Haman.

5. The Hebrew literally reads: “Then said King Ahasuerus, and he said to Queen Esther, ‘Who is he? And where is he who has filled his heart to do such a thing?’” The awkward repetition of “said” is not a textual error. Instead, it works very well to indicate the “sputtering” of the king. He was so shocked that he had to catch his breath and start all over again. Both the description of his talking and his direct question indicated his dismay. Notably, the king did not recognize the language of the decree or make the connection between Esther’s reference and Haman. Because he had been negligent in knowing about Haman’s real activities and the identity of his queen, he asked the question that allowed Esther to point at Haman.

### **Haman’s Perfidy Revealed and His Fate Sealed (7:6-8)**

6. Esther started with general terms, “a man, an adversary and enemy,” and proceeded to “*this* evil Haman.” It was a terse indictment. She called him an “enemy,” not “the enemy of the Jews,” thus intimating it was a much bigger problem. In effect, Haman was a traitor to the king as well as an enemy of the Jews (Baldwin 93). It was horrifying news to Haman that the *queen* was Jewish and therefore condemned by his edict to die. Face to face with the king and the queen, who are noted together at this point, he was gripped with sudden terror (*n]bu^t*). The next events are compressed; Haman’s fate was quickly sealed.

7. This revelation infuriated the king; he had been duped by Haman in more ways than one and Esther’s own subterfuge might have irritated him to a degree. How humiliating that his own queen identified herself with a people officially consigned to destruction! His enraged exit matched his character. The Hebrew is a “dramatic ellipsis” - “he got up in his rage from the wine course...to the palace garden” – suggesting both haste and confusion. Haman turned to

Esther to plead for his life. The king's mind was made up but perhaps Haman hoped that the king again would not act on his own. If so, Esther was his only very slim hope.

**8.** In the final irony of Haman's life, he fell onto the couch where Esther, the Jewish queen, was reclining, and was in that posture of entreaty when the king returned and found him there. Some commentators have castigated Esther for not showing mercy (Paton 264) but that judgment betrays an astonishingly poor memory regarding Haman's intended genocide. To spare Haman's life would have been an act of folly (Gordis, *Megillat Esther* 50). Whether the king deliberately misinterpreted this action or actually thought Haman was assaulting Esther is unclear. To violate the queen would have been tantamount to tyranny, a practice that is evident at other points in Israel's history when potential usurpers slept with concubines (cf. 2 Sam 16:21-22; 1 Kings 2:13-22). What the king saw allowed him to make a charge that would resolve his dilemma about the dishonorable implications for him of the edict. Everything could be blamed on Haman (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 87; Bush, *Esther* 433). Polish ("Aspects of Esther" 88) noted that a sensitive reading of this verse raises the question as to Esther's complicity in Haman's precarious position. Perhaps in the king's absence, she duplicitously invited Haman to her in order to seal his fate. In a tidy demonstration of measure-for-measure justice, Haman would die because of a false accusation just as he had falsely accused the Jews (Laniak 115, n 33). The "word" from the mouth of the king may refer to the statement about assault and not his judicial condemnation of Haman. If so, covering Haman's face would be the mark of shame, not the immediate prelude to death (Baldwin 93; Bush, *Esther* 430).

The extreme brevity of the narrative suggests the blur of activity and haste with which these traumatic last moments of Haman's life passed. As in numerous earlier instances, the indefinite plural subject indicates passive; Haman's face was covered.

### **Effecting Justice (7:9-9:17)**

#### **Measure for Measure (7:9-8:2)**

**9.** Given its excessive size, the pole that Haman had hastily erected (u@x) could not be missed. Undoubtedly curious inquiries prompted Haman to disclose his intent of getting rid of Mordecai. Harbona was shrewd and, having heard what had happened in the interval to both Haman and Mordecai, he weighed in against the man whose star was falling. His words resolved a possible ticklish situation for the king. Harbona supplied a second reason for effecting the death penalty against Haman (see Herodotus I.137 for possible context), reminding the cluster of eunuchs and other court functionaries that Mordecai had just been celebrated as a benefactor of the king. Attacking someone of that stature was deadly business (Fox, *Character an Ideology* 88; Laniak 110, n 23). Xerxes commanded that Haman be hung.

**10.** Haman's "fall," noted with foreboding by Zeresh and the advisors, was completed when his body was hoisted on the pole for the final humiliation. The measure-for-measure justice is also noted; he was hung on the pole he had prepared for Mordecai. Nevertheless, even though this king was superficially concerned to operate according to law, one of the charges against Haman was, contrary to appearances, not true.

The significance of the king's anger subsiding must not be overlooked. It meant that his attention was focused solely on the events and persons as they affected *him*. The fate of Haman, whose plot had threatened the king's own honor, was sealed. The fate of Esther's people, still unresolved, did not concern him.