

Esther, Lecture 4

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Esther Video chs 8-10

8:1-2

1-2. Esther's identities as ruling queen, recipient of what had been Haman's estate, and cousin of the honored benefactor of the king all converged at this point. In effect, she received more than "half the kingdom" previously offered to her (Wylter, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation" 129)! Mordecai's advance was parallel. Whereas the king's previous recognition of Mordecai had been a temporary display, at this point he came into the presence of the king, a place reserved for very few. He was given both Haman's political power, indicated by the signet ring (retrieved by the king in a moment of lucidity before the death of Haman), and his economic resources, as he was appointed custodian over Haman's estate.

Even though he was dead, Haman was still identified as "the adversary of the Jews," perhaps as a sobering reminder that the forces continuing to plan for their destruction had not been defanged. Given the nature of virulent hatred of any stripe, Haman's death may have made his "disciples" more blood-thirsty. The task of Esther and Mordecai would be to change that, and the measures necessary to deal with evil were themselves destructive.

Esther's Appeal for Justice for the Jews (8:3-6)

3. It is possible that this scene was a continuation of the same day's events (cf. Moore, *Esther* 82; Bush, *Esther* 439-440,444; Clines, *The Esther Scroll* 98). In that case, the Hebrew idiom "she added and spoke" would suggest a continuation of the high-level political exchanges that had already taken place. It seems more likely, however, that some time had elapsed. The quick succession of events necessary for that reconstruction does not seem likely in a Middle Eastern context and particularly in this court governed by excessive protocol. Mordecai's appointments alone might have taken considerable time. The reference in verse 9 to writing the counter-decree in the third month also suggests significant delay, during which time Esther and Mordecai grew increasingly anxious as they saw nothing transpiring in regard to the fate of the Jewish people. Thus, Esther again faced the prospect of entering into king's presence unannounced, uncertain as to whether he would extend to her the golden scepter. Her impassioned appeal was marked by falling at his feet, weeping, and imploring him for mercy, particularly with regard to the diabolical scheme of Haman, of whose lineage the audience is reminded. While the narrator did not use the term *D*t* (law), this summary of her plea referred to its irrevocability with the causative form of the same word employed in Esther 1:19. It is notable that Mordecai, even though he wore the king's ring, had not taken it upon himself to approach the king. Perhaps they concluded that only Esther, because of her relationship to the king, could possibly succeed in the endeavor. Nevertheless, Esther did venture into the king's presence fully aware that Mordecai wielded significant power as second to the king. As a result, Xerxes gave the matter over to both of them (verse 8).

4. Esther's posture in this appeal is noticeably different from her first entreaty. In that case, she stood at a distance and, only when the king extended the scepter, did she approach and touch

it. Here, perhaps already ensconced in his presence, she fell in supplication at his feet, after which, being assured of a hearing, she rose and stood before him.

5. Esther's artful plea, initiated with a four-part formula instead of two, appealed both to what was recognizably good (fob) and right (K*v@r), and to the king's regard for her. Each of these aspects appeared twice and her appeal to goodness took priority in each set. Her reference to what was right implied that the previous decree decidedly was not. In requesting that the evil decree of Haman be revoked, she followed good court form: "let it be written to cause to return (I+h*v'b) the dispatches," followed by a further full naming of Haman. These carefully chosen words got the king off the hook, even though the dispatches had been issued in his name, and put the blame for the edict squarely on Haman, now deceased. It is important to note that her initial and primary request was the revocation of the decree. When that was refused, other means had to be adopted.

6. Again, there are two parallel expressions in this continuation of Esther's plea. The first had to do with her people in general; the second addressed her kindred (a better translation of mol^dT'). This was a reversal of Mordecai's command not to reveal either (Esth 2:20). Because the king had evidenced little concern for her people, she grounded her appeal for them also in how it would affect *her* because that seems to be what moved the king. Her anguish was apparent in "How could I bear....?"

Over-Writing the First Edict (8:7-14)

7. Titles are prominent at this point: Esther *the Queen* and Mordecai *the Jew*. The word order of the king's response in Hebrew may hint at a slight degree of exasperation with this further request. He frontloaded his own actions of justice, saying, "Look, I gave Haman's estate to Esther and he has been hung..." Implicit in that might have been, "What more do you want?" Another interpretation: "Haman is completely off the scene; you are free to do as you wish."

8. Verse 8 begins with "you (plural) write concerning the Jews whatever seems good to you," suggesting that Xerxes wanted nothing more to do with the affair. That would fit his comprehensive indifference to anything that did not impinge directly on his own personal world. It could also imply that he knew he was trapped and again handed the responsibility over to someone else (Clines, *The Esther Scroll* 18-19). Theoretically, his reference to the irrevocability of an edict officially written in the name of the king and sealed with his ring referred to both Haman's decree and whatever was forthcoming. With this maneuver, Xerxes allowed the precedent established by Haman to stand, but also made a way, tortuous though it was, to address the problem. In this exchange, there may also have been simply a bit of realistic assessment. Runners had gone out to the entire kingdom giving permission to act on well-entrenched prejudices. How could the effects of such a decree ever be prevented? The only recourse may have been the one he chose.

9. The narrative regarding the issuance of the decree (verses 9-14) bears distinct verbal parallels to Esther 3:12-15; this was explicitly a counter-measure. The changes, however, are noteworthy. This edict was written on the twenty-third day of the third month, seventy days after the first one, perhaps a subtle reminder from the narrator that just as the return from exile had

occurred as promised, so they could be certain of this deliverance (Bush, *Esther* 442). This one was in accordance with everything that Mordecai, now in Haman's position, commanded and the very first recipients on the list were the Jews, absent from the preceding roll of addressees. Even though the Jewish population quickly became aware of the first decree, it was the intent of its malevolent framer that they be excluded and therefore be caught unprepared. In this decree, the rest of the address list was compressed and the presumptuous titles removed, as if the satraps, governors, and nobles were all of a kind. The extent of the kingdom as articulated in the first chapter was repeated here, likely to indicate that this would have the most coverage governmentally possible, and it is followed by a repetition that this edict was directed to the Jews in their writing and their language.

10. An additional subtle change from the preceding edict is that the verb forms are active. Mordecai took responsibility; he wrote it in the name of the king, he sealed it with the ring, and he sent it by means of the government couriers ("runners"). In contrast to the previous decree, however, these couriers had excellent "horsepower" at their disposal. While it is clear that they rode the best horses the government could provide, even the ancient commentators were perplexed by the description (cf. Meg 18a). Two of the words, $r^{\wedge}M^*k^*m$ and $a^{\wedge}j^{\wedge}vT^{\wedge}r^*n^*m$ are hapaxes. The first part of the latter term, $a^{\wedge}j^{\wedge}v$, appears in both the king's name and the title of the satraps. It is clear that these were horses reserved for imperial use.

11. Mordecai's edict said that the king gave permission to the Jews in every city to organize themselves in order to take action and to (literally) "stand for their lives." The rest of the verse has prompted extensive commentary, particularly the reference to "little children and women" ($f^{\wedge}p w^*n^*v^*m$), which syntactically can be read as either the potential objects of Jewish action or as Jewish women and children attacked by enemy forces. To determine which interpretation is better, it is important to note the critical contrasts with the preceding decree as well as the terms that have been carried over precisely. In the prior decree the objects of "to destroy, kill, and annihilate" were "all the Jews, from young to old, little children and women." In Mordecai's edict the same three infinitives from the first decree have as their immediate objects "every armed force (j?) of people and province attacking them," followed by "little children and women." In each case, "little children and women" is not connected by a conjunction to what has preceded. In the first decree, they clearly represented the most vulnerable objects of enemy attack. Here, these words immediately follow "those attacking ($h^{\wedge}X^*r^*m$) them," suggesting the Jews were given permission to kill those in every location still intent on carrying out the original decree by "attacking them, their women and children." Because the direct focus of the Jewish self-defense was armed adversaries, it is illogical to think that the government mandate would be issued against those least likely to be in that category. A further direct quote of the previous edict comes at the very end with the permission to take plunder. Given the fact that the following narrative is emphatic that the Jews did not take plunder even though permitted to do so, it seems that if there had been a legal allowance to slaughter women and children, some comment would have been made in that regard as well. There is no such summary. Instead, it says how many "men" were killed in Susa, eight hundred in two days (Esth 9:12,15), and how many "enemies" throughout the empire, seventy-five thousand (Esth 9:16). In sum, Mordecai cited specific phrases from the previous decree to emphasize that this was specifically a counter measure.

Because of the irrevocability of these laws, the terms of the second edict had to reflect those of the first as protection for the Jews. Both the description of the circumstances and the text itself substantiate the claim that the Jews were not given wholesale permission to slaughter. Instead, they responded to the provocations that came as a result of those acting on the first decree.

12. Reiterating that this would occur in all the royal provinces, the edict closed with the already-established date, the thirteenth day of Adar.

At this point the LXX includes a full text of the edict, most likely encouraged by the first word of the next verse, “a copy.” It is ostensibly from the king (Artaxerxes in the LXX) and describes the danger of people like Haman, warning the recipients not to participate in the actions enjoined in the first decree because its author was dead. In the letter, the Jews were exhorted to live under their own laws, the populace was encouraged not to follow the previous decree while provision was still made for Jewish self-defense, and Haman was represented as a Macedonian, very likely a product of reading into the text the high-profile contemporary enemy. It then instituted the holiday of Purim.

13. The text of the first edict (Esther 3:14) is reproduced here with two additions. First, the *Jews* were to be ready for this day. Second, they were to be ready in order “to be avenged from their enemies.” Whereas the interpretive problems with verse 11 stem from syntactical ambiguity, this one is blatantly troubling. There is nothing that seems more foreign to a Christian world view than vengeance. Nevertheless, several important observations are in order. The Hebrew root n-q-m and its related verbal and noun forms refer not only to personal revenge that is reprehensible (cf. Lev 19:18; Judg 16:28) but also to God’s vengeance which is necessary in an evil world (Deut 32:41). It is an action that first presupposes a wrong and then sets it right. It is distinctly and appropriately punitive and is therefore a source of encouragement for those who suffer unjustly (cf. 1 Sam 24:12). While God Himself most frequently executes vengeance (Nah 1:2; Lev 26:25; Is 1:24; 34:8), there are occasions where He uses agents (Ex 21:20; Num 31:2). Haman’s crime against the Jews was heinous, all the more so because its effects did not cease with his death. The edict was designed to unleash pogroms across the empire. On the level of state, national, and international relations, provision for self-defense is a necessary prerogative of governments to protect their people. To be avenged meant for the Jews to be vindicated and, in this case, to live instead of die.

14. The extra urgency behind this decree is evident in the repeated fact that the “runners” were actually riders of the government-issued horses. They went out both hastened and pressed (passives), an expanded statement from that of Esther 3:15. Finally, the law was also given in Susa which experienced its own reversal. This law produced no consternation. Instead, the city went wild with joy (verse 16).

“It’s Good to Be Jewish!” (8:15-17)

15. Mordecai’s sackcloth and ashes of chapter 4 and the temporary robe from chapter 6 were replaced with permanent accoutrements of royalty. What Haman had craved, Mordecai was given and, in fact, given in abundance. One robe became an entire ensemble and instead of a paltry crown on a horse’s head, Mordecai wore his own large golden crown. Even so, a distinction was maintained between this diadem of gold (u[^]f\l\ t z* h* b) and the crown (K\ t\ r m^ l k W t) worn by the Persian royalty (Esth 1:11; 2:17; see also 6:8). In fact, the narrator may have subtly emphasized Mordecai’s Jewishness at this point as u[^]f* r > h is the word most frequently used in the Hebrew Bible for royal diadem. The colors of blue, white, gold, and purple

were indicative of royalty. Whereas he had been given the position of first minister earlier, this represented his official investiture. Susa was exultant and rejoicing (the reversal from Esther 3:15), expressed with another set of dyads.

16. In contrast to mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing (Esth 4:3), now the Jews had light, gladness, rejoicing, and honor. These are obvious reactions in the face of reprieve from genocide. The description starts with light, symbolic of goodness as opposed to evil, and moves through the emotional responses to the restoration of honor.

17. The spontaneous joy turned into an outright holiday with its own accompanying *m]vT\h* (feast) for the Jewish communities everywhere.

*U^m h*a*r\X* (“people of the land”) is used frequently throughout the biblical text with reference to both Israelite inhabitants of Judah (cf. 2 Kings 11:14,18,20; 24:14; Jer 1:18; Ezek 45:22; Hag 2:4; Zech 7:5) as well as non-Israelites with whom they had contact (Gen 23:7,12,13; Num 14:9). The plural (*u^M? h*a*r\X*) refers to non-Jews (1 Chr 5:25; Ezra 3:3; 4:4) and here it indicates those who chose to identify themselves with the Jews. Just what that identification meant, however, is a question. The word *m]ty^h^d'm* only occurs in Esther and it was a direct response to “dread of the Jews” falling upon them. The same dread is noted in Esther 9:2 along with the “dread of Mordecai” in 9:3. Both the noun and verb forms of P-j-d indicate intense and sudden fear to the point of trembling and they appear predominantly although not exclusively in prophetic and poetic texts with reference to dread of the Lord or a nameless, numinous terror. This may, therefore, indicate that this identification was prompted by something more than a political security concern, although that may have been part of it (cf. Clines, *The Esther Scroll* 40-41; Bush, *Esther* 448-449). On the other hand, it is uncertain that true conversion was implied here. The best interpretation seems to be that they professed to be Jews for a wide variety of motives, one of which may have been fear of the God of the Jews. Given the intertextual connections with the Passover and the Exodus that surface repeatedly through the text, it is of interest that numerous non-Israelites also joined the people leaving Egypt (Ex 12:38) and one of the poetic renditions of those formative events notes that “dread fell on [the Egyptians]” (Ps 105:38).

In the record of Jewish Self-Defense and Relief from Enemies (9:1-17), it is important to be sensitive to the time frames of the text

The first ten verses of chapter 9 describe the events of Day One

1. The Hebrew text highlights the date and the developing tension with one complex sentence. Because the two conflicting decrees established this day, the resulting bloodshed was inevitable and there are key stylistic indicators in the Hebrew text of the impending crisis. Even though there had been two edicts issued in the name of the king, the expression is singular here. Each side could appeal to “the word of the king.” The hope of the enemies of the Jews to dominate (*l]vlof*) was matched as the Jews dominated (same word) those who hated them. The centerpiece between these two statements is *n^h^pok hWa*, “it was overturned,” emphasizing the complete reversal and summarizing the victory to be described. At the same time, the bitter truth was that the deadly edict issued by Haman was not overturned in the same way that the gallows intended for Mordecai was revisited or the honor that Haman planned for himself was given to

Mordecai. God did not intervene directly and eradicate the existing decree. Instead, it had to be overturned with armed battles which were costly. It is telling that there were significant numbers of those who “hoped to overpower” the Jews.

2. The Jews were given the right to organize (“be assembled together”) in order to “stand for their lives” (Esth 8:11). As the events unfolded on the thirteenth of Adar, they attacked those who sought their harm. The expression for “attack” (literally, “to send the hand”) is the same one used to describe the assassination attempt against Xerxes. In fact, no one could stand before them, suggesting the possibility of offensive action on the part of the Jews (cf. Judg 2:14 for same use of the idiom). The language accurately portrays the complexity and “messiness” of situations such as this. A somewhat undefined horror had fallen upon the non-Jewish inhabitants in anticipation of the day when Jews could defend themselves, and now there was a very real dread as the result of seeing their power and the effective measures of self defense.

3-4. Just as common folk dreaded the Jews, leadership at every rank had come to dread Mordecai. As a result of his decree, attacking the Jews was no longer officially sponsored (cf. Esth 3:12). In fact, Mordecai’s decree commanded these authorities to permit Jews to defend themselves and to kill those who would attack them (Esth 8:11). The rulers throughout the realm, being politically astute, chose to go with the second decree because in the intervening months, Mordecai had become increasingly powerful (hol@k w⁺g*dol).

5. Verse 5 is central in the ethical discussion that rages over the events at the end of Esther. Simply put, was this a massacre of Gentiles that was no different from any other ethnically-based offensive? There are those who claim that it was indeed a harsh pre-emptive strike; after the second decree no one would have been intent on attacking the Jews. Instead, the Jews struck all their enemies, there was wholesale killing and destruction of life, and they did “as they pleased” to their foes. The last has an undefined but very repugnant sound to it. Nevertheless, this attack, for such it was, was a response to those who attacked them, who were intent on their harm (Esth 9:2), and who viewed this as an occasion for their complete destruction. Their offensive action was necessary in light of the irrevocable decree that officially sanctioned their demise. The unfolding of these events intimates that there was a strong anti-Semitic sentiment that had been brewing all along. The victims of the Jews were enemies, those who hated them, and men. The verbal pair h-r-g and a-b-d recurs through this description of the Jewish attack on their attackers (verses 5,6,12) and represents the measured response put precisely in the terms of the decrees. Once the bloodshed subsided, the narrative repeatedly emphasizes that the Jews got *rest* from their enemies (Esth 9:16,17,18); the relief was palpable.

6. If the five hundred men (a!v) killed in Susa represented those who had attacked Jews, there was great hostility to Jews right in the capital. There are those who view this number and the figures that follow as further indications of exaggeration in the text. It is very likely, however, that long-festering hatred, having been nurtured by the leadership, had a life of its own quite apart from rationality and blazed in the Persian “street” after Haman’s death. The order of words in the Hebrew text “forefronts” Susa to prepare the reader for the distinction between it and other locations and the subsequent institution of two days of festival observance (Bush, *Esther* 472, 474).

7-10. In the Hebrew text, the names of Haman's ten sons are placed in two columns, possibly an allusion by the ancient copyists of their ultimate suspension on poles (Esth 9:14). The sons may have attacked Jews to avenge their father's death and, as a result, lost their own lives. They may also have been leaders in an anti-Jewish and anti-Mordecai insurrection. The name and honor of Haman would have been carried on by his descendants. Thus, this action cut off his posterity, and the point is driven home by reiterating the title that had defined his presence in the book: Haman, son of Hammedatha, adversary of the Jews. Publicly hanging their bodies was a form of humiliation for the name of Haman (cf. the Philistines' exposing the bodies of Saul and his sons - 1 Sam 31:10). Finally, three separate statements stress that the Jews did not lay their hands on the enemy's plunder (verses 10,15,16). This was extraordinary restraint. Mordecai's generation succeeded where Saul himself had failed. In his encounter with the Amalekites and king Agag, he had kept the best of the animals instead of giving them over to the Lord for destruction (jvr\m) and then shamelessly tried to rationalize that maneuver when Samuel challenged him (1 Sam 15:2-23).

Conference Between the King and Esther (9:11-14)

11. "On that day" commences the verse in Hebrew, emphasizing again the time factor that was so important for eventually establishing the festival.

12. In reporting to Queen Esther, the king repeated the Susa casualty list in the same words as it was originally narrated (Esth 9:6) followed by the specific reference to the sons of Haman. The next clause about the rest of the provinces, rather than being a direct question, might rather be "I wonder what they have done in the rest of the provinces." "They" is ambiguous here; it could refer to either the adversarial forces or the Jews or to both. The uncertainty embedded in the "question," along with the unexpected large numbers in Susa, may have contributed to the king's reiteration of his promise to grant Esther further action. Perhaps it began to dawn on him that this was an exceedingly serious problem *for him* as well as for the Jews. Forces that attacked Jews were attacking two people who were now closest to him, one of whom he had publicly honored as "Mordecai the Jew." In court contexts that seemed always to be brimming with intrigue, the consequences of the turmoil set in motion by Haman's decree were alarming. In his response to Esther, he slightly altered the formal question, no longer promising half the kingdom, but asking "what more..?" allowing her to define the necessary measures.

13-14. A hint of Esther's boldness may lie in the fact that she no longer prefaced her request with the two-fold condition including an appeal to the king's attachment to her. This time she simply placed it in the context of "if it seems good to the king."

From this point on, two issues intertwine in the narrative developments. First, it was evident that the threat of hostilities still lingered; a deterrent action was advisable. Second, from the standpoint of legislation, the two day festival had to have a firm foundation. The latter has its beginnings here and is expanded considerably in the rest of the chapter. Regarding the former, both the initial decree of Haman and Mordecai's counter decree had limited the fighting to one day. The day had come and gone with the Jews victorious, *as far as they knew*, only in the citadel of Susa, and the fighting sufficiently fierce that five hundred men were killed. Esther's request may have been formulated within the framework of the continuing uncertainty. Just as

the report dealt with the citadel of Susa and Haman's ten sons, so also did her request, although the first expanded to the entirety of Susa. Both parts of the plan were designed to forestall further attack. In Susa, the Jews could act the following day "according to the D*t of today," which meant self-defense when attacked, and the bodies of Haman's sons would be hoisted high on the poles. What they did not know at that point was the extent of the Jewish resistance throughout the empire. Those figures came in slowly no doubt. At this point, the king's response was in the context of the known events in Susa.

Relief from Those Who Hated Them (9:15-17)

15. The expansion to the entire city of Susa is initially puzzling. The confusion in the city at Haman's edict (Esth 3:15) and its rejoicing when it was overturned (Esth 8:15) may indicate that Susa had been sympathetic to the Jews. Even so, it appears there was a minority that harbored malevolent intentions. Since the mandate (Esth 9:13) was that they act according to the law, the 300 that the Jews killed on the fourteenth of Adar in Susa would have been those who initiated the attack, a sobering commentary on the tenacity of hatred. As before, the narrative emphasizes the point of honor that the Jews refrained from taking plunder.

16-17. If Esther is to be read within any kind of historical framework, then to be just to its characters, it is necessary to assess these developments in the context of their access to information. As events unfolded in Susa into the fourteenth day, the narrative resumes its summary of the confrontations empire-wide that had occurred the previous day, even though those results may not have been known for some time in the power center of Susa. The rest of the Jews organized and "*stood* for their lives" (as in Esth 8:11). The theme of "rest" resounds in the next three verses. That the text is so emphatic in this regard is a commentary on the fierceness of the anti-Jewish sentiment that compelled seventy-five thousand persons empire wide to act with sufficient aggression toward the Jews that they got themselves killed. Although this number is widely dismissed as an exaggeration along with other aspects of the narrative, it was a vast empire, there were extensive Jewish populations in major cities both in the eastern and western parts of the realm and, once the statistics had filtered back, this does not strain credulity. Four centuries later, Mithridates VI, a Persian ruler, ordered satraps and overseers of cities in western Asia Minor to kill all Italian residents including women and children. The royal treasury would share the property of the victims. Depending on the source, the massacre claimed between 80,000 and 150,000 persons (John G.F. Hind, "Mithridates" in *Cambridge Ancient History* second edition, ed. J.A. Crook, Andrew Lintott, Elizabeth Rawson, Vol. IX [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994] 148; Appian *Roman History, Mithridatic Wars* Book XII.4.22-23, narrates the details; Plutarch gives a figure of 150,000 in his *Life of Sulla* xxiv; Valerius Maximus [ix.2.4] gives the number 80,000). That no Jewish casualties are mentioned does not mean there were none. The point to be taken from this figure is the depth and breadth of anti-Jewish hatred.

Just as the relief is emphasized, so also is the fact that the Jews did not take any plunder from their enemies, even though they were permitted to do so by the measure-for-measure form of the decree. This last detail is stated three times immediately following the number of persons slain (verses 6,15,16). The time factor is the focus of verse 17; it was important to underscore that the conflict in the provinces was limited to the thirteenth day and that was followed by cessation on the fourteenth day. In spontaneous response to the great relief, the day was marked

with feasting and joy. These two features would characterize the subsequently established institution of the festival. Already, after Mordecai's elevation and the issuance of the decree, rejoicing occurred and honor was restored for the Jews (Esth 8:16). There had continued to be, however, a cloud of uncertainty with the edicts still impending. The thirteenth and fourteenth of Adar were necessary to accomplish the "rest."

Establishing the Festival (9:18-9:32)

The Distinctives in Days (9:18-19)

18. At this point, because "legislation" was forthcoming regarding the days of celebration, the distinctions between Susa and the vast empire are reiterated. The actions in Susa echo those from the provinces; they *assembled* for two days, *rested* on the fifteenth, and *observed* the day with feasting and joy. The time indicators are important as they are woven into the verbal pattern of finite verb followed by two infinitive absolutes.

19. "Therefore" (u^l-K@n) indicates a forthcoming summary statement of practice based on the preceding recital of events. It reappears in verse 26 with the naming and final authorizing of the festival. In contrast to the urban Jews of Susa, those who lived in villages outside celebrated their festival on the fourteenth day. These rural contexts were defined in terms of the Jews who were P+rWz'm, probably meaning that they were in jurisdictions outside the capital.

In addition to the immediate feasting and joy of the holiday, the tradition began to solidify with sending "presents" to each other. The Hebrew word is m*n^{ot} (plural), the same term used to indicate the "portions" that Hegai arranged for Esther to have (Esth 2:9). This care to make verbal connections is another indication that the book was authored as a unit (Baldwin 112-114). The wider biblical usage of the term indicates the special nature of these portions. The m*n>h was the part of the offering waved before the Lord (Ex 29:26; Lev 7:33; 8:29). Elkanah gave m*n^{ot} to both his wives (1 Sam 1:4-5); Samuel reserved a m*n>h in anticipation of Saul's coming (1 Sam 9:23); and priests and Levites received m*n^{ot} from the contributions brought to the Temple (2 Chr 31:19). When Ezra read the Torah, the people were told to rejoice, eat and drink, and send m*n^{ot} on this day set apart for the Lord (Neh 8:10-12). Psalm 16:5 links together "portion" and "lot" (Gor*l) and the following verse, "lines have fallen in pleasant places" attests to God's providence in the life of the psalmist, a point of connection with the Esther narrative. See Berg 45-46; Baldwin 112-113.

Starting the verse with "therefore" and noting the traditions that developed served as a transition from the events of the original Purim to the narrator's temporal context (Bush, *Esther* 477-478).

Writing to Confirm (9:20-32)

The Impetus to Write (9:20-23)

At this point, the focus of the text moves from the narrative of deliverance to rejoicing and rest and finally to the means for perpetuating the memory of that tremendous occasion. It appears that the Jews had immediately set aside particular days and began "doing" the observances associated with the festival. It was, however, with an intent to preserve the memory that Mordecai wrote (verses 20 and 23) "these matters" of Purim and they were established,

confirmed, or imposed – the word is $l^+q^{\wedge}Y@m$ which occurs seven times, three times without the following $u^{\wedge}l$ (upon), meaning “confirm” or “validate,” and four with $u^{\wedge}l$, meaning to make binding, to impose upon someone (see HALOT). These uniformly appear after some indication of writing (verses 21, 27, 29, 31 [three times], 32). The repetitious element in these verses and the general tangle of language to “establish” this new tradition come together in a remarkably apt form to convey the monumental effort to confirm the observance of Purim.

20. While there is some question as to what exactly Mordecai wrote and what he sent out, the repetition of “he wrote” in verse 23 followed by the summary of events from Haman’s evil scheme to his demise (verses 24-25) suggests that the intervening material (verses 21-23) serves as another recapitulation stressing the need for commemoration. Undoubtedly the essence of it was in Mordecai’s summary. Verse 24 begins with K' (“that”), indicating that what follows are the contents of Mordecai’s dispatch to the Jews near and far summarizing the events leading up to the fateful decree. Those in more distant locales may not have had clear knowledge of how all the tumultuous events had occurred. If this particular document included only that material, that might explain the necessity of subsequent memoranda to clarify all the details about observance. There is a subtle contrast between Mordecai who *wrote*, suggesting that he was literate, and the king and Haman who had scribes writing for them (Klein 173-174). Esther would also write (verse 29).

21. The Hebrew, “to impose upon them to be observing...,” suggests that what follows was the intended *result* of Mordecai’s sending out his dispatch, not necessarily what was in that communication. The communication from Mordecai would enjoin upon them the continued annual observance of both days. Presumably the recipients would know which of the two they would celebrate depending on where they were and their experience.

22. This two-part statement engaged Jewish memory of the roots of the festival. Echoing key words, it harked back again to the days when they got rest from their enemies (Esth 9:16-18), and to the month of the great turnabout (Esth 9:1). Subsequent generations were to celebrate these days with the same vitality and in the same manner as those original communities who experienced deliverance. The fourteenth and fifteenth days and the month of Adar would be freighted with meaning because anguish had turned to joy and mourning to a festival. It was all too extraordinary; the narrator did not want to lose that sense of wonder and the activities that were spontaneous were now to serve as equally vibrant reminders. They were to have days of feasting, rejoicing, exchanging *m*not* and, in an addition that made certain no one was excluded, sending them to the poor. The last may have been a reminder of Esther’s original marginalized status.

23. In developing the tradition, the Jews received ($q]B@l$) information from two sources that were equally authoritative in defining what would become a new festival. First, allowing popular practice to define future observance, they accepted what they had already begun to do. These activities that were immediately part of the celebrations were summarized in verses 19,21-22. Second, the Jews received what Mordecai wrote regarding the events that led up to the crisis, the historical *précis* in verses 24-25.

Linking the Narrative and the Celebration (9:24-28)

24-25. Verse 24 begins with K' ("that") suggesting that the next two verses were intended as the summary of Mordecai's communication. In this public document, Mordecai demonstrated that he was an exceedingly skillful diplomat, fully implicating Haman while carefully reshaping the king's part in the events to present him as the hero of the narrative. In the process Mordecai avoided any reference to the parts that he and Esther played. This was a delicately executed maneuver to restore the significantly tarnished honor of the king. Mordecai's letter also compressed the details considerably. As the events originally unfolded, Haman cast *pur*, the lot, in order to determine the *day* for the annihilation of the Jews. In this abbreviated summary, the lot was cast to crush and destroy them. Likewise, the succinct statement here makes it sound as if Haman and his sons were hung on the poles at the same time. Mordecai stated outright Haman's full lineage and the designation, "adversary of all the Jews," followed by a terse description of his intent and methodology. The description served notice that the festival was designed to celebrate deliverance from the terrible evil of Haman and not the para-military victory. As Mordecai turned to the king's part (verse 25), his choice of words obfuscated the issue considerably and very likely intentionally. The first Hebrew word of verse 25 is Wb+b)a*h translated "and when she/it (feminine suffix) came." This might refer to Esther's initial venture into the king's presence (Esth 5:1) or to the news of Haman's plot (m^j^v^bTo – a feminine noun) coming before the king *or* ambiguously to both as Esther made her second impassioned plea to the king, a context which refers to "the plot which he plotted against the Jews" (Esth 8:3). With some small degree of compression, Mordecai could successfully make it appear as if the moment the king discovered Haman's plot, he ordered that this evil be addressed. Thus, Mordecai avoided any mention of that embarrassing first decree that had to be overturned. Further, by using the expression "he [the king] said with the edict (s@p\r) let his [Haman's] evil plan return," Mordecai subtly put together his own written decree, issued in the name of the king, to counter Haman's edict and the king's command to display the bodies of Haman and his ten sons. In this presentation, the end of Haman came to be representative of the end of the crisis initiated by his criminal decree. As an intriguing parallel, Haman had re-presented the truth about the Jews when he brought the matter to the king in chapter 3; here Mordecai reshaped the truth about the king when he presented it to the Jews.

26-27. At this point, there is another summary statement, ostensibly to bring further focus to the flurry of details that lay behind the legislation for a new festival. "Therefore" in verse 19 had to do with the important distinction of two days. "Therefore" at the beginning of this verse addressed the official name of the festival. A culminating "therefore" precedes the statement in verse 27 that the Jews actually did take upon themselves and their posterity the obligation to observe the two days of Purim without fail every year.

There are several possible reasons for substituting the plural "Purim" even though *pur* was singular. First, the original casting of *pur* determined one day for the slaughter of Jews. As the events unfolded, there were ultimately two days that were occupied with the events. For that reason, the name recognized the multiple days. No doubt, these elements were an intentional part of the doubling pattern throughout the book. Second, the plural name was a way of recognizing the reversals themselves. In effect, there were two lots; one was cast by Haman to determine a day of disaster; the second came from God on behalf of the Jews.

The third “therefore” in this lengthy and convoluted legislative piece draws together a final statement that the Jews both obligated themselves and accepted (q]Y+mW w+q]BIW) the obligation. There was nothing new here; it reiterated the prior material but in yet another formal statement presented with the proper rhetorical dyad. Their resolve to establish the festival was based on all the words of “this letter” (just quoted), what they had seen in this regard, and what had happened to them. Again, the written testimony was augmented by the experience of the people as already noted (verse 23). The force of this commitment extended to their descendants and to those who would join them. From the Exodus onward, there was a consistent pattern of non-Israelites being welcomed and likewise accepting the attendant religious obligations (Ex 12:48-49). In a clear parallel to the irrevocability of the laws of the Persians and the Medes (Esth 1:19), this obligation would not pass away (Oa y^u^bor). The permanent establishment of this two-day festival on the basis of written word and developing ritual was assured.

28. This finale emphasized the boundless nature of the celebration in terms of time, social structures, and geographical locations. There was a return to the passive form here, hinting that what had been active legislative process had now moved into the category of accepted law. The components of the verse emphasize the “two-ness,” with the repetition of generation, family, province, and city. The days themselves are mentioned twice, and they were to be both remembered and observed. Memory was also invoked two times. There is a second reference to these days not passing away and the mention of Jews in that context is matched with “their descendants” in the clause that follows. In sum, this is a forceful testimony to the power of memory within community to sustain that community.

Esther and Mordecai Authorized the Festival (9:29-32)

29. With all of the emphatic and repeated language of confirmation and obligation that accompanied the writing and distribution of Mordecai’s first letter (Esth 9:20,23,26), Queen Esther’s composition of a second letter, to which Mordecai also contributed, is puzzling, especially since it initially sounds like she (they) wrote a second letter to confirm (l+q^Y@m) the second letter! Several observations may help sort this out. First, there was a louder ring of authority with this letter. Esther added the weight of her Persian royal position and her Jewish patrimony to the standing of “Mordecai the Jew” and together they wrote as forcefully as possible (a\T-K^l-T)q\p). This is an admittedly awkward grammatical construction but the main point is that they recognized the challenges of establishing a new festival amidst the venerable collection of already existing ones and they did not hesitate to bring their authority as two as members of the Jewish community to establish, institute, affirm, confirm, and make obligatory this newly minted festival! Thus, the text includes extensive repetitions of imposing and accepting the obligation to observe these days. The significance of this process of institution cannot be over-stated. That Esther wrote authoritatively is repeated in verse 32. Mordecai’s presence here is to prepare for the specific reference to his sending these documents. Second, just as the narrative referred to Mordecai’s writing and sending his letter (verse 20) significantly before addressing the details of that letter (verses 24-25), so also the contents of this second letter, which constitute the material that Esther affirmed, may yet be forthcoming. These matters included Mordecai’s “words of shalom and truth” (verse 30), the repeated confirmation and exhortation to accept the obligation, and the added details about outcry and fasting (verse 31). These last two items were new and may give a further indication of the need for another authoritative letter. Given the potential for confusion regarding days, locations, and appropriate

practices, certain aspects were articulated more thoroughly while the overall shape of the festival was reiterated.

30. Mordecai oversaw the distribution of this official document as he did the preceding one (verse 20). Noting the 127 provinces at the end of the book balanced their mention from chapter 1. Both shalom and truth were fundamentally significant concepts in the biblical world view. It may be that part of the forceful and authoritative tone of these texts for the Jewish communities also was the result of their being laced with already existing and recognized biblical language. In deliberately using scriptural “words of peace and truth,” Mordecai set the widely flung Jewish community at ease. There are echoes of Zechariah 8:19 which indicates that institutionalized fasts would become festivals of joy and urges the people of God to love truth and peace. These people had been through disruptions and trauma caused by insidious lying. By contrast, *shalom*, related to the verbal root v**l@m*, implies setting matters right by means of recompense. Thus, the victory of the Jews had contributed in some small way to the righting of the social order (Laniak 161-163).

31. Most of this verse restates the sense of obligation to keep the festival of Purim. It is both imposed by Esther and Mordecai and acknowledged as self-imposed as well. In both cases the expression is *l**q^Y@m u^l**. Esther’s letter, however, added the matter of fasting and lamenting, perhaps giving credence to a practice that had developed to mark the danger they had experienced. This memorialized the great three-day fast (*h^X*)*mot*, an intensive plural) as well as the outcry as they marked the Jewish response to the initial crisis. Because anguish and mourning were noted as elements of the great reversal (Esth 9:22), they might have thought it appropriate that the ritual serve to remind participants of both the weeping and the joy.

32. The power of Esther’s word (*m^a^m^r*), the first word in the Hebrew, is evident in that it established these commemorative aspects (*D]br?*) of Purim and was written, made permanent, and therefore accessible (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 127). *m^a^m^r*, used only in Esther, indicates the authoritative word of the king (Esth 1:15), Mordecai (Esth 2:20), and now Esther. In effect, her words were on a par with those of Xerxes and Mordecai.

Honor in the Realm of Ahasuerus (10:1-3)

1. These final verses bring appropriate closure to the text. Xerxes, the magnitude of his realm, and *his* power were key themes in chapter 1. Here they are restored after having experienced some shock waves. To close the text with accolades to Esther and Mordecai but no acknowledgement of the king would be a serious lapse. At the same time, however, the point was not to be missed that Mordecai shared significantly in that honor. Xerxes imposed tribute or forced labor (*m^s*), indicating his control to the farthest reaches. This imposition affected “the land and the islands of the sea,” a possible inference that the western “border” stopped at that point instead of reaching to Athens. Perhaps the tax was designed to address the potential loss of revenue from Haman’s failed scheme and was a more stable economic measure than a round of pillaging. In any case, it indicated that the kingdom was back to stability.

2. The reference to the authority and power of Xerxes served as a backdrop for the real focus on Mordecai. In closing, this encomium awarded him a place in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia, drawing explicitly on the stock phrase describing the deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 11:41; 14:19,29; 2 Chr 32:32; 35:26-27; etc.). It also echoed the record established in Esther 2:23 and revisited in Esther 6:1, although that chronicle seems to have been something less official. Up to this point, even though Mordecai was a leader in the Jewish community with his position in the gate and his public mourning, Esther had arranged for each of his political advances. Here, the record indicates that he was an excellent grand vizier of his own accord.

3. The introductory “that” (K) at the beginning of the verse indicates the basic contents of the record about Mordecai. He was second to the king, a fact clearly echoing Joseph’s role, and he was a benefactor to the Jews. This may be linked to the indication in verse 1 about the tax. By urging Xerxes to re-establish regular taxation, he assisted the king in creating a system for economic stability and providing a context for his own people to contribute to their government in a systematic way rather than as the target of plundering assaults (Daube 145). His prominent position set the stage for the historical roles of Ezra and Nehemiah who would follow him as leaders both in the Persian court and in the struggling Jewish community in Judah. He continued as an advocate and spokesperson in the government for the Jewish community. The text closes with “speaking *shalom* for all his descendants,” a poignant reminder of the necessity for Jews throughout the succeeding centuries to have someone able to intercede for their well-being. While Mordecai had expressed the confidence that help would arise from “another place,” the grim reality was that persecution also continued to arise from “other places” (Beal 106). That great need for *shalom* for Mordecai’s descendants (“his seed”) lies in the shadow of the greater One of those descendants who both spoke and made *shalom*. The events of Esther meant that God’s people, through whom blessing would come to all nations (Gen 12:3), were preserved for the coming Intercessor.