

The lot began to turn for the Jews with Mordecai's personal triumph and exaltation. His new standing with Ahasuerus (along with Esther's favor with him) was the providential foundation for the counter-decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves in the day of their destruction. And with this decree in place, the writer shifts his focus away from Mordecai and Esther back to his primary concern, namely the Jews and their impending deliverance. The balance of the narrative (apart from the epilogue of chapter 10) records the process of their triumph, which the author presents in four distinct and progressive stages. The first two – the Jewish and Gentile responses to the counter-decree – have already been considered; the third pertains to the events of the appointed day, and the last addresses the outcome of the Jews' national triumph.

3. From the issuing of Mordecai's counter-decree the writer moves quickly to the climax of the story, which is the Jews' victory over their enemies (9:1-16). But before he does so he is careful to take note of the responses elicited by Mordecai's counter-decree. For the Jews, this new edict produced jubilation expressive of a renewed sense of hope and confidence that God had heard their petitions. For the Gentiles, it provoked amazement and dread: amazement at such a remarkable shift in providence, and dread respecting the people who were the recipients of this providential favor. In this way the writer accomplishes two things: First, he heightens his readers' sense of anticipation of what is coming, but he also lays the necessary foundation for it. The Gentile dread incited by the decree would be instrumental in the Jews' miraculous triumph.

a. The author introduces this section with a summary statement that serves both a physical and metaphysical purpose (9:1). With respect to the former, it highlights the fact of the Jewish victory, but it more importantly emphasizes that that triumph was secured by forces operating behind the scenes: On the day when their enemies "*hoped to gain the mastery over them, it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them.*"

A key theme of the book of Esther is the inscrutability of providence. Things are not what they seem, and no one is able to judge the meaning or quality of any particular event or circumstance. Such judgments can only be made in retrospect, and even then only the light of eternity will fully reveal things as they truly are.

1) As the storyline unfolds in Esther, the irrevocability of Haman's decree appears to be a very negative providential circumstance, and the fact of the counter-decree does little to alter that sense. Ahasuerus did grant the Jews the right to defend themselves, but there was no reason to expect that they could prevail militarily against trained and equipped armed forces.

2) In spite of the second edict, the situation still appeared hopeless for the Jews, but this is precisely the point: The fact of a *naturally* hopeless predicament allows for – indeed, it necessitates – a deliverance and triumph that are *supernatural*.

- Left to its own, the natural mind would conclude that it would have been preferable if Ahasuerus could have revoked Haman's decree.

- But then there would have been no adversaries for the Jews to be delivered from, and therefore no actual deliverance. There would have been no triumphal victory because, with the revocation of the decree, their enemies would have ceased to exist. Haman's decree created these enemies; with its demise comes their demise.
- But more than that, if the first decree had been revoked – as both Esther and Mordecai hoped – *the Jews would have been robbed of the unspeakable privilege of seeing their God come to their rescue*. It is precisely the fact of the lot being determined against them that enabled the Jews to experience a glorious triumph in a miraculous victory over their enemies.

Just as it had been for their forefathers throughout the course of Israel's history – at the Red Sea, outside the walls of Jericho, under Gideon's leadership, during the Assyrian advance on Jerusalem, etc., seemingly hopeless circumstances provided the providential occasions for the manifestation of divine concern, power, and deliverance.

- b. After his summary statement, the writer proceeds to describe the events of the thirteenth day of Adar, the day in which Haman's decree was to be executed. He notes that the Jews throughout the empire rallied together within their communities and prepared themselves as best they could for the assault that was about to come against them. But those who hoped to gain mastery over the Jews found themselves being vanquished by them; their plan was "turned to the contrary," and at the heart of that reversal was the fact that the dread of the Jews had come over many of the Gentiles (cf. 8:17, 9:2-3).

The text indicates that there were two particular effects of this dread, one explicit and one implicit. The latter effect is unstated, but is clearly implied, namely *passive refusal* to come against the Jews. The author previously noted the widespread Gentile conviction that supernatural forces were at work on the Jews' behalf – a conviction so compelling that many were moved to convert to Judaism. Given such a response, there is no doubt that the same conviction would have prevented countless Gentiles from attacking the Jews.

The explicit effect of this dread was *active assistance* given to the Jews. This assistance came from the civil rulers throughout the kingdom (9:3), and would have involved providing weapons (ref. 9:5) and supplies as well as employing their authority to dissuade their subjects from going out against the Jews. The king's rulers, too, acted out of dread, but specifically dread of *Mordecai*, and that because of the reputation he had gained among them. Here again providence plays a crucial role. Ahasuerus had promoted Mordecai at the time of Haman's death, but it would have taken several months for his reputation to grow and his fame to spread. Without that time – in this case, nine months, Mordecai wouldn't have secured the respect from these men that motivated their assistance to his people.

Not only did those months facilitate the cultivation of Mordecai's reputation and renown in the eyes of the people and leaders of Medo-Persia, they also provided the time needed to accomplish the considerable logistical task of arming and provisioning the Jews throughout the various provinces of the empire.

- c. In spite of all these favorable providences, some groups did rise up against the Jews, but their attacks were met with successful opposition. The Jews "*struck their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying*" (9:5). The decree calling for their slaughter was turned on its head; the Jews killed and destroyed those it authorized to kill and destroy them (ref. 3:13). They triumphed with the edge of the sword, but this component of the Jews' victory also was more than a merely natural outcome. The writer makes this clear by asserting the *one-sidedness* of the conflict: The Jews were able to do whatever they pleased to their enemies.

In every village and city across the empire, wherever enemies rose up against them, the Jews prevailed over their adversaries in great victories reminiscent of the triumphal battle of Jericho. And though it cannot be known for sure that no Jewish lives were lost in the fighting, the author's silence regarding Jewish casualties – especially in the light of his precise documentation of Gentile deaths (ref. 9:6-16) – certainly implies that no Jews were killed. At the very least, he wanted to communicate to his readers the lopsidedness of their victory.

- d. From his general discussion of the conflict, the writer turns his attention to the city of Susa. Specifically, he notes that five hundred men were slain there by the Jews along with Haman's ten sons (9:6-10). A few observations are in order:
- 1) The first is that this recounting emphasizes the purely defensive nature of the Jews' fighting. Mordecai's edict – reflecting its predecessor – authorized them to slay women and children. But unlike Haman's decree, which called for the slaughter of Jewish women and children toward the goal of annihilating the entire nation, Mordecai's edict didn't demand that such persons be killed; it simply made allowance for this action as necessary in the cause of self-defense (ref. 8:11). The Jews in Susa didn't slay women and children because none rose up against them (9:6). Unlike their Gentile adversaries, they had no interest in taking innocent lives.
 - 2) Similarly, the writer is also careful to state that the Jews in Susa didn't seize any of their enemies' possessions as plunder, though this, too, was granted as a reciprocal right by Mordecai's decree (cf. 8:11 and 3:13). He then makes the same observation with respect to all the Jews throughout the provinces (ref. 9:15-16). The fact that he mentions this behavior three times indicates that he regarded it as important to his story, but he doesn't say *why* it's important. Neither does he explain why the Jews refused to take spoil from those they had killed. He obviously assumed his Jewish readers would know the reason for their action, and, knowing that, they would understand how it contributes to the overall story.

One possibility is that the Jews refused to take spoil for *cultic* reasons. That is, they viewed the property of their Gentile enemies as being unclean. But if this were the case, why would Mordecai authorize it? Wouldn't he share the religious convictions of his countrymen? *Ethical* considerations provide another possible reason. The Jews saw their actions as self-defense rather than warfare. This being the case, there was no justification for taking their enemies' goods as plunder. Whatever the actual reason (or reasons), it seems the writer emphasized this refusal in order to highlight the contrast between the Jews and their adversaries.

With respect to the latter, the promise of plunder provided an incentive for taking the lives of innocent people. For some, hatred is insufficient in itself to motivate cold-blooded murder. But when combined with the prospect of material gain, many people are able to justify it. Nazi Germany is an excellent case in point. But the Jews had no such evil motivation. They neither hated those who came against them nor sought to acquire their property. Their cause was noble and their motives pure. Even though they had a legal right to plunder their enemies, they refused to do so.

- 3) A third observation concerns Haman's sons. Two things in particular are notable. The first is the way their deaths are recounted. Of all the people who are slain in the conflict, only these men are identified by name. Clearly the writer was trying to communicate more than simply that Haman's sons joined the others who came against the Jews. By naming them and noting their relation to Haman, he was again reinforcing the absoluteness of the turning of the lot (6:13). Haman's sons are reckoned as a core component of his personal preeminence (5:11), and so their demise – paralleling his own – underscores (along with the transference of his household) the fulfillment of the prediction of his complete downfall.

The second matter pertaining to Haman's sons is the apparent contradiction in the account of their deaths. The text indicates that Haman's sons were slain along with the other five hundred men on the thirteenth day of the month. But then the writer has Esther petitioning the king to have Haman's sons hanged on a gallows the next day, in addition to extending Mordecai's decree (9:12-14). The difficulty evaporates when it is realized that Esther's petition was for the dead bodies of Haman's sons to be put on public display in Susa by hanging them on poles. This was a common practice in Middle Eastern cultures, and its purpose was to shame the dead person and/or publicly portray him as a criminal or malefactor (cf. Deuteronomy 21:22; 1 Samuel 31:8ff; Ezra 6:11).

- 4) Finally, some commentators have struggled with Esther's petition in v. 13. They question what appears to be a bloodthirsty attitude on her part. But Esther was motivated by concern rather than vengeance; her only desire was that her people could continue defending themselves as necessary.