

C. Esther's Second Banquet (7:1-8)

Chapter seven chronicles Haman's downfall, and in this way records the fulfillment of the prediction made by his wife and friends (ref. 6:13). Haman's demise completes what began with Mordecai's public exaltation at his expense (6:10-11). As implied by that episode, Haman would "fall," but, most importantly, he would fall *before Mordecai*: Haman's downfall was to be accompanied by Mordecai's ascension. The reversal of the lots of these two men is the focus of this part of the story (7:1-8:2), and the writer highlights it by saturating the passage with irony. In various ways and through various means, things are "turned on their head."

1. The chapter begins with Esther's second banquet, and the author introduces it as a virtual repetition of its predecessor, including even Ahasuerus' question to Esther and pledge to give her what she desired (7:2, cf. 5:6). By presenting the two banquets as virtual duplicates the writer effectively spotlights the one crucial difference between them: As she had promised, at this second banquet Esther would answer the king's question and divulge to him her petition.
2. Esther's request was for her own life and the lives of her people. She explained to Ahasuerus that she and her countrymen had been marked out for annihilation, and this was the reason she felt compelled to come to him (7:3-4). Were it only a matter of their enslavement, she would have remained silent, but since the Jews faced total destruction, her conscience wouldn't allow her to stand by and say nothing.
3. Ahasuerus' response was to ask the identity of the person who would presume to do such an outrageous thing, and Esther replied that that person was Haman, the foe and sworn enemy of her countrymen. This unexpected news sparked the king's anger and he immediately dismissed himself from the banquet and went into the palace garden in order to gather his thoughts and determine what course of action to take (vv. 5-7).

Seeing the king's response – and now realizing that the queen was herself a Jew – Haman became terrified. His wife and counselors had warned him just hours earlier that he would fall before Mordecai because he was a Jew; how much more was that outcome to be expected in light of the fact that Queen Esther was a Jew?

It needs to be noted here that this passage represents the turning point in the story with respect to the Jews' future, just as Ahasuerus' sleepless night was for Mordecai. At the moment Esther uttered her petition, Haman became aware that she was Jewish, and he sensed he was in desperate trouble. As he had begun to fall before Mordecai, it now seemed certain to Haman that his end was at hand because of the Jews. *How quickly things had changed*: The man who only a day before had stood triumphant over the Jews was now on the verge of being destroyed before them. The writer highlights this immediate and startling reversal in two notable ways:

- He does so first by providing a window into Haman's thinking. He observes that Esther's petition provoked terror in his heart, and specifically ties that response to the way the king reacted to her words (ref. again vv. 6-7). Haman realized that Ahasuerus' disposition toward him was turning; his privileged position and power were slipping away.

- Secondly, the writer is careful to note Haman's response. He comments that, when Ahasuerus withdrew to the palace garden, Haman remained behind in order to beg Esther for his life. *Only moments earlier Esther had been pleading for her life to be delivered from Haman's hands; now here he was begging her to grant him his own life.*

The psychology of Haman's thinking and response is transparent in the story, but this is not the case with Ahasuerus. In particular, his angry reaction to Esther's words seems unexpected and somewhat perplexing. For, though Haman concocted the murderous plot against the Jews, hadn't the king agreed with his assessment that they should be destroyed? Hadn't he given Haman his signet ring and so personally authorized the decree calling for their annihilation? *Why, then, would the reminder of that decree now provoke outrage in him?*

Many tie Ahasuerus' extreme reaction to his new awareness of Esther's Jewish identity. Having learned that the coming destruction of the Jews implicated his beloved wife, the king realized he was faced with an agonizing situation. The decree could not be revoked, and this left him frustrated and angry with the man who had requested it. Ahasuerus had, in effect, unknowingly signed Esther's death warrant. But a closer examination of the text points in a different direction.

- 1) First of all, it's often presumed that Ahasuerus knew that the decree pertained to the Jews, but the text doesn't say as much. Haman simply told the king of a "certain people" scattered throughout the kingdom who stubbornly followed their own laws and refused to honor the king's law (ref. 3:8). This generic designation could have applied to any number of nations and ethnic groups within the vast Medo-Persian Empire, and Ahasuerus clearly wouldn't have tolerated insubordination from any of them. Given Haman's description of this people and Ahasuerus' full confidence in him, he didn't need to know who they were in order to authorize action against them.
- 2) There is also no indication that Ahasuerus knew of Mordecai's existence (let alone his Jewish identity) prior to the event of the reading of the Book of the Chronicles. Although it is possible he was told at the time of the plot against his life that a person named Mordecai had come forward and reported it, the text is silent about it. What is clear is that, subsequent to that providential late night reading, Ahasuerus knew that Mordecai was a Jew, and still insisted upon honoring him (ref. 6:1-10). This fact itself supports the conclusion that the king didn't realize which people group Haman was targeting when he authorized the decree. For if he was aware that the edict pertained to the Jews – the edict that everyone in his kingdom knew he had personally approved, he would never have made the politically disastrous decision to publicly exalt a Jew.
- 3) Another thing to note is that the text nowhere reveals when or how Esther disclosed her Jewish identity to the king (though most assume she did so at the banquet). The writer only mentions that she told him that day of her relationship with Mordecai (8:1). When the various pieces of data are assembled, a likely scenario is as follows:
 - In making her plea to Ahasuerus – and assuming his ignorance of the specific ethnic group targeted by the edict, Esther would have explained to him that it pertained to the destruction of the Jewish people.

- In so doing, she also revealed her own Jewish identity (7:3).
- This discussion would have naturally brought Mordecai to mind as a Jew whom the king had just distinguished only a few hours earlier.
- With the mention of that episode, Esther – who probably had no idea of what had transpired with Mordecai, would have revealed to Ahasuerus that Mordecai was not only a Jew, but the cousin who had raised her.

In the end, no one really knows how the scenario of that afternoon actually played out, for the writer simply doesn't say. Consistent with his overall approach to the story, he doesn't bother with unimportant, and arguably distracting, details. His concern is that the reader focus on the fact of Haman's downfall and Mordecai's exaltation, *particularly as this ironic outcome results from the convergence of separate providential streams.*

4. A series of unforeseen and amazing circumstances had brought Haman to this place, and the writer has his fate now being sealed by one more irony of providence. After excusing himself to consider what to do with Haman, Ahasuerus eventually returned to the banquet site. Haman had remained behind to plead with Esther to intervene on his behalf, and at the very moment the king entered the scene Haman was throwing himself on her. The irony in this situation is that Haman was actually abasing himself before Esther and desperately pleading for his life, but what Ahasuerus perceived was a brazen assault on his queen (7:8). There are two possible ways to interpret this scene:
 - a. The first is that the king believed Haman was trying to murder Esther. Clearly Haman had strong motivation to take her life: After the episode with Mordecai he hated the Jews more than ever and now he knew that Esther was Jewish. But more than that, she had exposed his plot and thereby put his life in jeopardy.
 - b. The second interpretation better fits the writer's language and description, which is that Ahasuerus thought Haman was trying to force himself on Esther. The Hebrew verb in context points in this direction, as does the statement that the king saw Haman "falling on the couch" where Esther was seated. This interpretation is further supported by Ahasuerus' astonishment that Haman would be bold enough to commit this assault on his wife while he was present in the palace.

D. Haman's Demise (7:9-10)

When Ahasuerus saw Haman accosting the queen he cried out against him, and that denunciation signaled his end; at the king's word his servants laid hold of Haman and covered his face, which action symbolizes the sentence of death. This is made explicit by the response of one of the king's eunuchs: "*Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high...*" In another point of irony, Ahasuerus had misunderstood Haman's actions, and yet his sentence was perfectly appropriate. At least in part, Haman was executed for a crime he didn't commit, but his hanging on the gallows he had built for Mordecai – who "*spoke good on behalf of the king*" – pointedly testifies that justice was served. Thus his death assuaged the king's anger (7:10b).

E. Mordecai's Exaltation (8:1-2)

Beginning with Mordecai's prophetic declaration in 4:14, the writer has predicted and traced out Haman's fall. But that outcome is only of secondary importance: The matter of concern in the developing storyline is not Haman's destruction per se, but his fall *before Mordecai*. Mordecai was to prevail over Haman, and not merely in escaping the gallows; the narrative is emphatic that he was to triumph in personal exaltation. The parade through Susa was simply a foretaste of the remarkable outcome that stood on the horizon.

The previous context (6:5ff) predicted that Haman's downfall would be accompanied by Mordecai's ascension, but what the present passage reveals is that this reversal constituted an **exchange**: *In the process of their individual transformation, each man assumes the other's place*. With respect to Haman, he is "lifted up" by meeting death on the gallows he intended for Mordecai. As for Mordecai, he is exalted by gaining everything that had belonged to Haman.

1. The first thing transferred to Mordecai is Haman's *position*. Haman had enjoyed the place of preeminence under Ahasuerus as attested by his possession of the king's signet ring. Such rings bore the king's personal seal, and this seal was stamped in wax on the face of official documents in order to establish their origin and binding authority. Thus a signet ring represents the ruler whose seal it contains; whoever possesses it possesses the authority and right to act in the king's name and on his behalf. Haman had held Ahasuerus' signet ring since the day of the decree, but now it was on the finger of Mordecai; he was now exalted to Haman's place as second only to the king himself.
2. Not only did Mordecai gain Haman's position, he also acquired Haman's *house*. Ahasuerus gave his signet ring to Mordecai, but he bequeathed Haman's house to Esther. In its present use the word *house* doesn't refer merely to the physical dwelling itself, but to everything connected with it. It signifies the totality of Haman's property, including all the servants and attendants associated with his household. Thus when Esther set Mordecai over Haman's house (8:2b), she was giving him possession of and authority over his entire household. He had replaced Haman as master of his house.

In the outcome of his exaltation Mordecai had fully assumed Haman's place: he supplanted him *professionally* as the king's prime minister and *personally* as the head of his house. Thus Mordecai's triumph was absolute. But this isn't the end of the story; again it is crucial to keep in mind that the circumstances and outcomes recounted in these chapters have significance beyond themselves. The writer has devoted so much detailed attention to the Mordecai/Haman subplot, first because of the role it plays in preparing for what is coming for the entire Jewish people, but also because it marvelously portrays that outcome by serving as a prefiguration of it.

Mordecai's exaltation stands in the narrative as the first point of fulfillment of the prediction of Jewish deliverance and triumph, and in that way it both points to and strengthens the expectation of the corresponding outcome for the Jews as a whole. The writer's interest is ultimately not the person of Mordecai (or Esther, for that matter), but a larger concern that the Mordecai subplot serves to epitomize and prefigure. With Mordecai's triumph complete, he can now turn his attention to that concern, which is the fate of the Hebrew people.