

ESTHER

Week 9, Chapter 8

We ended last time about halfway through chapter 8 and things are moving very rapidly now. Like it is with so many Bible characters, when we take the Scriptures for what they actually say and add in the cultural context and known history of the time, we see a bit different Esther and Mordechai than what we typically see in films about them or in sermons that invoke their names.

Esther, although not an ambitious woman nor seeking to be royalty, nonetheless became Queen of Persia and there is not a whit of information in the Hebrew Scriptures that would suggest that she was a reluctant Queen or someone who despised her position. Most sermons regarding Mordechai are about identifying him as a biblical example of fatherhood; and yet there is almost nothing about Mordechai's parenting in the Book of Esther. Rather we have found that Mordechai seemed to be all for Esther becoming the Queen, and that he was neither an impoverished nor an oppressed man. In fact he was Jewish royalty (he was in King Saul's family line), well known in the capital city of Susa (Shushan) and he was a recognized Persian government official who sat nearly daily at the King's Gate, a gate with privileged access only for the king's court and for aristocrats.

Where some of these contrived characteristics of Esther and Mordechai come from are the extraneous Greek texts that we have read, and they cannot be accepted as valid. They are stereotypical Greek drama added to a Hebrew story of a real historical event. Their goal is not to demean Esther or Mordechai, but rather to add a sympathetic element to the story and to add in mention of God that is otherwise absent. While no one knows for certain when or where these Greek additions were made, or who made them, for the most part the Rabbis like them as they make gentiles out to be wicked barbarians and Esther and Mordechai pious and unwilling victims.

Indeed the wicked Haman, bearer of the spirit (if not the actual genealogical heritage) of Amalek, intended genocide upon Mordechai and the Jewish people primarily as a means to both retrieve his lost honor and as pay back for an insult. But we see no other person in our story that had any evident bigotry or distaste for the Jewish people who lived in the Persian Empire (this represented virtually all living Jews except for a handful who had returned to Judah). King Xerxes seemed to have no personal prejudice against the Jews; there isn't a whisper of such a thing from any of his court; and we don't read of outright oppression from the general population of Persia. Thus what we need to notice is how one man with enough influence can move an entire nation to commit the worst atrocities. There is no better example of that in modern times than Adolf Hitler. And yet as we'll read shortly, there had to be an underlying but unseen anti-Semitism among some in the Persian Empire, because many Persians would attack the Jews per Haman's decree and many of them would die as a result. So let us be acutely aware that the right person at the right time can tap into a hatred for the Jews that seemed tamped down, and suddenly like a pool of fiery lava that lay dormant and silent and undetected for ages, it erupts without warning and all hell breaks loose and the results are catastrophic. Let those who have an ear to listen, hear.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 8 WITH GREEK ADDITIONS FROM JERUSALEM BIBLE

Notice that the Greek addition to chapter 8 is essentially the supposed text of the edict that Mordechai and Esther created, which authorized the Jews of the Media-Persian Empire to arm themselves and assemble for their self-defense. This letter goes so far as to tell the gentiles of the Empire that they should NOT act upon the previous edict, something which in itself lacks credibility because this is a direct statement of revocation of the previous order; the very one that King Xerxes says could not be undone. That is, the king said he could not and would not revoke the previous edict, so Mordechai and Esther had to find a different solution. And here in the supposed body of the edict are the words: ***“You will therefore do well not to act on the letters sent by Haman son of Hammedatha, since their author has been hanged on the gates of Susa with his whole household; a well earned punishment which God, the ruler of all things, has speedily inflicted up him”.***

There are problems with this statement. First, as was stated in the Scriptures, the first edict was not sent out under Haman’s name, but rather the King’s name. Second, Haman wasn’t hanged (impaled) on the gates of Susa, he was hanged on a tall pole in front of his home. Third, the pagan King of Persia calls the God of the Jews the ruler of all things? Not possible. And fourth he specifically orders his subjects not to obey the 1st edict.

Other than for the sake of historical interest, the Greek addition cannot be taken seriously and we should disregard it.

So where we are is that Esther and Mordechai have miraculously become a powerful Jewish team in the Persian court, and their Jewishness is well known by all. The King seems to have pushed Esther to the forefront, probably more than Vashti ever experienced or perhaps ever wanted. Esther has proven herself to be wise and adept at navigating the shark infested political waters of Persia, and yet not one who had personal ambitions or displayed a desire to usurp the power of the king.

Mordechai holds all the power that Haman used to wield, and as a result of Esther putting him in charge of Haman’s former estate, has become very wealthy. Yet the Jews of Persia are still in as a dire a circumstance as they were before Haman was executed and Mordechai assumed power. The edict for their annihilation remains in force. The good news is that with the exception of a revocation order under his name, the king has told Esther and Mordechai that they have carte blanche to find a clever way to mitigate the coming empire-wide attack on the Jews on the 13th day of the 12th month of the year.

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So in verse 9 on the 23rd day of the 3rd month of the year, the royal scribes were summoned to write down the decree that Esther and Mordechai have devised to end the genocide threat upon the Jews. It ought not to pass our notice that exactly 70 days have passed since the original edict was pronounced. As earlier in Esther we saw a series of sevens appear that made it clear that all that was happening was God-orchestrated, so now with the ten-times multiple of seven (70) appearing, we have confirmation that the timing of the 2nd edict was divinely ordained. God's fingerprints are all over this story and event even if we don't find direct mention of His Name (as the dubious Greek additions try to remedy).

Mordechai dictates, the scribes write, and then the edict is translated and transcribed into all the languages of the empire including the language and script of the Jews. They are sent to every province and district throughout the vast Media-Persian Empire, using the epithet: from India to Ethiopia. And just to be clear, exactly as it was with the edict that Haman wrote, verse 10 says that this went out under the king's name. The signet ring that the king first gave to Haman and now is possessed by Mordechai represents the king's name and authority. So it's not as though the king actually signed his name to the either edict.

And verse 11 sums up the message of this new edict: the Jews have royal permission to fight for their lives. But there is a condition attached: they may fight for their lives ONLY IF they are attacked. And IF they are attacked, they are given full right, without repercussion or restraint, to not only kill their attackers but to kill all the women and children associated with those attackers as well. Even more the Jews may plunder the belongings of those they have killed.

So remembering that only 70 days have passed since the 1st edict in which we're told it unnerved the citizens of the Persian Empire to no end (murdering the Jews is nothing they sought to do or wanted to be involved in), when they get this new edict it instructs the Jews to do to any who might attack them exactly as the 1st edict ordered the Persian to do to the Jews. This was nullification without revocation and it was obvious to everyone. However there were further caveats to how the Jews could react and defend themselves who read the decree. This battle was ONLY to occur on ONE DAY. Just as the Persians were to attack the Jews only on one day (the 13th of Adar), so the Jews could only attack their attackers on that same day, and not thereafter. Remembering that this is happening in the Middle East where blood vengeance was normal and customary, a date limit was established so that vendettas wouldn't get out of control and the bloodshed would become an endless back-and-forth.

As I mentioned the people of Persia fully understood that the goal of this new edict was nullification of the previous one. And each Persian had to understand that this was the case because the only alternative interpretation was that the king had set up a kind of nation-wide Gladiator event, pitting the people of Persia against the Persian Jews, for some cynical reason. That made no sense and there is no suggestion in Persian records of such wanton barbarity by the Persian kings.

This new decree was sent out in "urgent haste", says verse 14, using the royal mail system. Some scholars estimate that since the empire stretched as much as 2000 miles from Susa, that it might take up to 3 months for every corner of the empire to receive a royal decree.

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Verse 15 backtracks a bit and takes up the issue of Mordechai and his commanding new position over the Empire of Persia. He is given royal robes to wear as an honor of his high position and he is cheered by the citizens of the capital city of Susa. The residents (meaning of all ethnicities) cried out joyously that Mordechai was the new Chancellor and that the new edict meant that they didn't have to do the unthinkable: kill their Jewish neighbors and friends. The Jews of course were overwhelmed with the good news and a feast and a holiday was declared. Understand: the Jews, although perhaps a couple of million strong and well represented in the empire, were a distinct minority. The gentiles controlled the society and the economy and it was they who declared the holiday and provided the feasts. Again: we must view this in the light of both the Biblical and non-Biblical evidence that the Jews were anything but an oppressed minority. They were accepted and welcomed and part of normative Persian culture.

While it is my speculation, I also think that the open affection displayed by the Persian public for Mordechai was real and not contrived. It is unimaginable that the people of Susa had much love for Haman; such a self-serving man who used his vast wealth to vault over others to get the king's ear and to essentially buy his way into power probably hadn't made him many friends. His advisors seemed only to be direct family members. Even when Mordechai is chastised for refusing to bow down to Haman, he is not told it is because Haman deserves respect but rather not doing so puts Mordechai's life in jeopardy. I suspect Mordechai was quietly applauded by thousands of secret admirers and looked upon as a man of principle unafraid to put his life on the line for what he believed in.

Thus the final words of this chapter say that many gentile Persians professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. Let's talk about this; there is a much more expansive and deeper issue present here than it might seem. Here is a direct reference in the Old Testament of people of other races becoming Jews. But what exactly does that mean? How did they become Jews? What did it mean to be Jewish? In reality the Hebrew term **yahad** that is used here to speak of people from many ethnic groups in Persia professing to be Jews is probably better said in English to mean that they 'Judaized themselves' (and while in Christianity Judaizing has been made into a negative connotation, it is certainly not meant in a negative way here in Esther). This doesn't mean that the males were necessarily circumcised, and if they were, it doesn't mean that they left their old racial or tribal identities behind and became Hebrews. Rather **yahad** in this usage has the sense of taking up the religion or lifestyle of the Jews, but not changing their ethnicity and certainly not their nationality.

This process and preference of becoming Jewish is different from what we saw long ago before Israel was conquered and scattered 250 years earlier, and then finally Judah was conquered and exiled a little over a century before the time of Esther. Back then, when the Jews lived in their own sovereign homeland, if a gentile foreigner became a Jew that meant they became a Hebrew; they wished to join their genes to the Hebrew gene pool. That inherently meant that they indeed gave up their former nationality or tribal affiliation and their identity as gentiles, and became more than merely a citizen of Israel or Judah: they identified themselves completely with every aspect of Israel's present and past and become part of Israel's future and destiny.

So in Babylon and then Persia, what did it mean to be a Jew, especially after 2 or 3 generations in

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exile? Mordechai and Esther called themselves Jews, and yet we've already learned that they were of the Tribe of Benjamin. Back in Judah a Jew was essentially a person from the Tribe of Judah, even though that had evolved somewhat into including Hebrews from other Israelite tribes who had moved to Judah and declared loyalty to the king of Judah. Since Mordechai and Esther were born in exile, and since Judah had ceased to be a nation or kingdom, then for Mordechai and Esther being Jewish could not mean seeing themselves as citizens of a Hebrew nation called Judah because it no longer existed. So what made them Jewish in their own eyes? Was it because their family used to live in Judah? Was it the religion they practiced, and if so what would that Jewish religion have looked like now, in Persia, since the religion that was practiced back in Judah completely revolved around Biblical Feasts, the Shabbat, a Temple and a Priesthood none of which was operable any longer?

And, as concerns verse 17, in what sense did these Persian gentiles become Jews, as we read about at the end of Esther Chapter 8? This might sound like non-essential stuff that only a professor or a Rabbi ought to care about, but Believers unless we can get a handle on this we can't possibly hope to understand what a Jew was and is, what Judaism was and has become, and what religion was it that Jesus participated in during His lifetime. Knowing this as best we can provides much needed context.

I've spoken a few times on the matter of Jews and Judaism and what those terms mean; so maybe this would be a good time to take a detour and discuss it yet again because it is as pertinent to the Book of Esther as it is to us in 2014. Let's begin with the concept of Judaism as we think of it today. Judaism is a religion, like Christianity is a religion. Anyone of any race or ethnicity can practice Judaism just as they can Christianity. And Judaism is a religion that is a mixture of part manmade tradition and part obedience to the Biblical commandments; and the proportions of each that form that mixture is dependent on which sect of Judaism someone might follow. Again, it is exactly the same way in Christianity.

The least spiritual, least Biblical, most casual kind of Judaism is what is called Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism doesn't adhere to Rabbinical Law, it also doesn't follow the Torah, and doesn't necessarily even believe in a spirit world or that the Hebrew Bible is anymore than Jewish philosophy. It involves a mild form of deism where most Reform

Jews believe in some sort of higher intelligence in the universe, but not necessarily of a God-centered intelligence as we might think of it. Reform Judaism doesn't usually see itself as a chosen people, or a set apart people, nor do they feel much connection with, or need for, the Jewish State of Israel. Reform Judaism is a product of the Enlightenment Era, and the goal was essentially to make Jews less separate and more like gentiles; less mystical and more practical in their religious beliefs and observances. So while they'll observe Jewish traditional holidays mostly as a means to show itself as concerned and part of the local community, it involves little to no spiritual element and it is mostly an acknowledgement of being Jewish from a cultural perspective.

At the other end of the spectrum of the religion of Judaism is the Ultra-Orthodox. They fastidiously follow Rabbinical Law. However WHICH Rabbinical Law under whose authority is what divides them into a few different Ultra-Orthodox factions. Their holy book is the Talmud, not the Torah or

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Tanach (Old Testament). It's not that they deny the inspiration of the Torah or Tanach, but rather the Talmud interprets the Torah and Tanach for them and puts it into applications pertinent to their lives. These applications are in the form of rules and regulations devised by Rabbis over the centuries that they call Halakah and we call Rabbinical Law. And because there is currently no Temple or Priesthood (something that is central to the true biblical Torah life) they have transferred their civic and religious loyalty to the laws and rulings that the Rabbis have created. The Ultra-Orthodox observe the Biblical Feasts fastidiously and the Shabbat strictly, but do so far more based on Tradition and Halakah than Biblical ordinance. They also take the command to "be ye separate" literally and have set up their own Ultra-Orthodox communities. For them, their identity is expressed in their dress and in a very rigid system of behaviors. And, for them, this defines their identity as Jews. Thus for the Ultra-Orthodox to be Jewish is to practice Judaism (and especially their form of Judaism).

Then we have completely secular Jews (like many of the so-called Hollywood Jews), who are unapologetic atheists. They see their Jewishness as simply a fact of family ancestry. Their parents and grandparents were Jews, so they are Jews and there's no getting around it (although some have tried mightily to obscure and disavow their Jewish heritage). How their Jewishness manifests itself in their lives varies; sometimes it's like belonging to a club or fraternity; sometimes it matters not all; at other times it is an unwanted burden.

Then we have a few thousand gentiles of various ethnicities and races around the world who Judaize each year (to use Christian lingo) and become "Jews". Interestingly, what is required to become a Jew isn't clear cut. Mostly it is a repudiation of being a gentile, but need not and regularly does not involve any declared loyalty to the God of Israel. One important requirement is that one must **not** believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. So from the world view of the Rabbis and the Israeli government, being a Christian and being a Jew are antagonistic to one another; being one disqualifies you from being the other. Thus even a person born in a Jewish household, with Jewish grandparents, great grandparents and so on is, as far as the Chief Rabbis of Israel are concerned, no longer Jewish if they accept Yeshua as their Messiah. They see that person as having renounced their Jewishness.

This leads to a question that is so basic and yet so complicated and undefined: then what is a Jew? Is it a race? Is it a religion? Is it a nationality? I'm asked some form or another of this question all the time, and it is a very good and important question that has Biblical implications and contemporary applications. The issue of Jews and Jewishness will dominate the Bible including the New Testament from here forward. And the best answer I can give you is that being a Jew is first and foremost an identity. I've taught you that what makes a Christian a Christian can be boiled down to our identification with Christ. It doesn't matter our former attachments; or what our heritage, race, nationality, former religion, or sex; all that matters is who we have decided to identify with. And if that decision is Yeshua, then we're a Christian (or Messianic).

It is the same with being a Jew; it is all about identification.

So the first thing for us to grasp is that Judaism (a religion) and being a Jew (an identity) are separate issues. You can be a Jew and have no religion whatsoever; that is you can be a Jew and

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not practice any element of Judaism. In fact you can be a Jew and completely renounce Judaism and as long as you don't adopt some other religion in its place then you are generally still accepted as a Jew. You can be fully a gentile today, and become fully a Jew tomorrow by agreeing to assume a fully Jewish identity (and the definition of what that amounts to will depend on the particular Rabbinical council that judges you on that matter).

This Jewish conundrum of who and what a Jew is, is evident in our story of Esther and it is why I have chosen to go on this extensive detour to discuss Jewishness. My research over several years has lead me to conclude that, without question, the religion of Judaism as well as the primary religious expression of Judaism, which is the synagogue, were born in exile in Babylon and Persia. That is, the religion of Judaism did not exist until after Judah had stopped existing as a Hebrew nation. Rather the Jews who lived in the Hebrew nation of Judah practiced a religion that I label Hebrew-ism (to give it word) because it was based around the ideas of Abraham, the first Hebrew. The Torah, the Laws of Moses, the Temple and the Priesthood were what defined Hebrew-ism. Judaism however was a manmade response to the Jewish exiles' impossible position of wanting to remain loyal to the God of Israel on the one hand, but having no nation, no Priesthood and no Temple on the other hand (and this is exactly the same position modern Jews have been in for over 1900 years).

Let me say this another way: what the religion of the citizens of the Hebrew nation of Judah consisted of before Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, and what it consisted of while they were in exile, changed drastically. But the next question is: what happened when these Jews-in-exile returned home to Judah? History and the Bible shows us that rather than revert to the way they practiced their worship of God in the pre-exile days, when many thousands of Jews finally returned to Judah and rebuilt the Temple and re-established the Priesthood, they brought their new religion of Judaism home with them from Babylon and Persia and mixed the old with the new together to form yet another variation of religion and worship. But, and just as important, what the definition of a Jew was before they left Judah for Babylon, and what the definition of a Jew was after they returned was substantially different as well.

What happened was that away in exile in Babylon and Persia the notion developed that prayer and meeting together as a congregation could become the new means to righteousness and atonement (they could attain this, then, without the Temple and without sacrifice). When they lived as a nation of Jews in Judah, there were no houses of worship where they congregated. In fact technically such houses of worship were forbidden because the Torah says that there is to be only one place where Hebrews were to assemble and pay honor to God: the Temple in Jerusalem. Of course central to paying honor to Yehoveh was sacrificing on the Altar of Burnt Offering. But what do you do when you are in exile in a foreign land, the Temple and Jerusalem are destroyed, the Priesthood is defunct, and yet you remain a Hebrew who continues in your allegiance to Yehoveh? You know what sin is, and you know that when you sin you must be atoned for or you carry the burden of guilt indefinitely. But what means is there to attain atonement under the circumstances?

Thus from their viewpoint the Jews in Babylon and Persia couldn't eat properly kosher food; they couldn't ritually cleanse themselves per the Torah instructions; they couldn't atone for their sins with the only means the Lord gave to them to do so: animal sacrifice on the TempleAltar in

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Jerusalem with a Levite Priest officiating. Since the first day of their exile there was no operating Priesthood to teach and remind them of the Law, to enforce the Law, or to perform the required rituals of the Law. Humans being human, the Jewish leadership began to devise ways around this serious problem as they saw it. Prayer became the new means of atonement. They naturally met together as likeminded Believers to pray and to worship God and to remember the Scriptures. Eventually, the size of the groups needed designated places to meet; designated leaders to lead. There had to be some repeatable order to the service to avoid disagreement and chaos; someone and something had to determine what was appropriate and what was inappropriate in their lives and in their worship. There had to be a system of leaders in a hierarchy to achieve some measure of uniformity. Thus while many pious Jews hung on firmly to their Hebrew faith and to their Hebrew God (people just like Esther and Mordechai) a new system of religion had evolved that we call Judaism and so even with the opportunity to return to Judah from Babylon and Persia and to rebuild the Temple and to reestablish the Priesthood, only a handful of Jews elected to do so. Why? They didn't see the need. This new religion, Judaism, was all they had ever known. None of them had ever lived in Judah or had ever seen the Temple (now laying desolate). They had never been to the Altar of Burnt Offering and presented their sacrifice of atonement. Rather in Babylon and Persia they had created a new system of religion that in their minds solved most of the issues of kosher eating, atonement, purity, and worship practices. What was the point of going back and rebuilding the Temple? They had solved the problem themselves.

Judaism had no ability to have a central house of worship so it incorporated many houses of worship around the Persian Empire that eventually came to be called synagogues. Synagogue worship was necessarily different than Temple worship and so it involved hundreds of new customs and practices that did NOT require the Temple furnishings or a Priest to preside. This new religion called Judaism and the accompanying synagogue system fundamentally redefined Jewishness.

I've given you an awful lot to think about so let me clarify and summarize: there were no such things as synagogues with non-Priest leaders of worship while the Jews were still living as a nation in Judah; there was only the Temple. But in between the time of Nebuchadnezzar's conquering of Judah and exile to Babylon, and their return in mass to Judah to rebuild the Temple and reestablish a predominately Jewish presence in Judah, the synagogue system and a religion that we call Judaism was born. And we read of it at every turn of the page, it seems like, in the New Testament. And if you know what to look for you'll notice that the synagogue was often antagonistic to the Temple and the Priesthood. Even the creation of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious court, an institution that was separate from the Priesthood, was a by-product of Judaism. It had little to do with the Torah, and it never existed until after the Jews were exiled and then returned to rebuild their homeland.

So back to our initial question: what did being a Jew mean to Esther and to Mordechai? What did being a Jew mean to couple of millions Jews dispersed throughout the Persian Empire? And what did it mean to the many gentile Persians who decided to become Jews when Mordechai's edict was circulated and it was learned that Mordechai the Jew was now the 2nd most powerful man in the empire? Esther and Mordechai no doubt practiced some unspoken form of whatever Judaism was in their day. They also had a distant blood relation to the other (but not all) Jews in the empire. Yet there was no tangible national connection because Judah didn't exist during their lifetimes,

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and they were born in exile.

Certainly the label of Jew also had a definable meaning to the Persians, because a person could be singled out as a Jew. Or if a person identified themselves as a Jew, it meant something to the gentile Persians. Ethnic groups did then, as they do now, tend to band together in ghettos or communities. And the words of Daniel and Esther and non-biblical historical records prove that the Jews indeed banded together in communities within the many gentile nations wherever they found themselves. There had also been a substantial mixing of races by then; so one couldn't judge entirely by skin color or head shape or other physical features and say, "Oh you must be a Jew". Probably a Jew was mostly identifiable as Jewish by his or her traditional living practices, methods of worship, what village or enclave they were known to live in, as well as a personal and public declaration of their identity as a Jew.

So as we will soon finish up the Book of Esther and then move into Ezra and Nehemiah; and as we study other books of the Old Testament from around this period of time, or the books of the Apocrypha, and then especially as it pertains to the New Testament, understand that being a Jew, or what Jewishness amounted to, and how this new religion of Judaism operated and how it splintered into sects and groups formed the essential backdrop and context for the days of Yeshua and the Apostles. Christ railed against many elements of the Judaism of His day and at the many manmade traditions that was its backbone; essentially arguing that a true Jew would not practice many of the elements of the popular Judaism of His day that had ventured so far away from the Word of God.

I wonder what He would say if He wandered through the door of many of our modern churches or Messianic Synagogues? Would He recognize what had become of the true religion as taught in the Holy Scriptures?

We'll get back on track and begin Esther chapter 9 next time.