

## AUTUMN BIBLE STUDY

### Esther 9:1-10:3

#### Duelling Decrees and Purim Parties



The conclusion of the book of Esther causes many people uneasiness. The earlier chapters' sense of justice is not so clear at the end. The events in chapters 9-10 relate to events which take place several months later when two conflicting edicts come into effect. Again, there is a day of reversals:

*'.....on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes.....' (9:1)*

#### THREE ENDINGS

Chapter 9 deals with two general subjects:

- The fighting between the Jews and their enemies in the month of Adar.
- The institution of Purim.

Chapter 10 concludes with further information on the reign of King Ahasuerus and his new right-hand man, Mordecai.

Chapter 9 appears to have several endings to the story tacked together by an uncertain editor. Commenting on Esther's 'ragged ending', Johanna Van Wijk-Bos notes that life itself rarely has tidy endings: *"Esther is true to real life as it is lived messily with loose ends and threads coming undone."*

In the most common version of the ending of Esther, found in Protestant Bibles, the thirteenth day of Adar finally arrives and the Jews gather and defend themselves. It states that 500 enemies in Susa, and Haman's ten sons die. Ahasuerus then asks Esther what she now wants. She requests an extra day of battle and that Haman's sons

be hung up for public display. 300 more enemies die the following day in Susa, and large numbers (75,000) die in the provinces – probably an exaggerated number which is not unusual in this book! Although the decree authorised plundering, three times it states that the Jews do not touch the plunder.

Mordecai institutes the Jewish festival of Purim, or lots, to commemorate the event, because Haman cast lots to choose the day when the Jews would be destroyed. Queen Esther and Mordecai send out another letter about Purim.

Today the Feast of Purim is a minor holiday and the most festive on the Jewish Calendar. On Purim, the scroll of Esther is read in the synagogue, gifts of food are exchanged, charitable gifts are delivered, and a feast is prepared. During the reading of the scroll, participants twirl graggers (noisemakers) every time Haman's name is mentioned.

There are other endings to Esther, where details differ. In one (called the Septuagint) fewer people die, Haman's sons have different names, some plunder is taken, and Mordecai interprets a dream he apparently had at the beginning of the story.

In another version (called the A-Text) Haman's edict is **not** irrevocable, so Mordecai simply asks that it be revoked. Esther, though, asks that her enemies be slaughtered and the king grants permission. Numbers of those who die differ (700 in Susa) and plunder is taken. At the end, Mordecai succeeds Ahasuerus as emperor of Persia.

Such differences among these three versions are similar to what happens when a story is told and retold by a variety of people who do not remember the details in the same way. Though it makes it challenging for us, the reader, this is not something that happens in the Bible, only in Esther – see the Gospels, for example, sharing different details of Jesus' death and resurrection. This reminds us that

the Bible did not fall out of the sky but was shaped by the genius of many generations of writers.

### **ESTHER'S RESPONSE**

Esther's confidence before the king has changed dramatically from the beginning of the book. At the end we see how the king seeks advice from her. When he asks her what she would like now, her response is shockingly bloodthirsty. However, look at how she replies:

Her simple answer beginning with, *"If it pleases the king"*, suggests the change in her confidence before the king. She can now state what she wants without delay. The Jews are still in great danger, and so in many ways she shows great restraint – it is only those who are enemies that are dealt with under the king's authority. Putting Haman's sons on display is seen as a measure to horrify potential enemies and make them think twice. Might our reaction, too, be that it is Esther and not Mordecai who makes this request!

### **WHY HAVE A BATTLE AT ALL?**

It is difficult to understand a happy ending which involves so much violence.

If Haman had been the only enemy of the Jews, his death would have sufficed and resolved the issue. Throughout the book it has not been made clear how widespread hatred against the Jews is. The fact that Mordecai is cautious about his and Esther's ethnicity at the beginning shows concerns about their identity.

According to the response to Haman's decree it would seem that many enemies rose up to kill the Jews. Why so many enemies turned up to battle when the tide had turned against them is puzzling – especially on the second day.

A world in which enemies rise up to kill or be killed faces people of faith with extremely difficult questions:

- Is it right to kill in self-defense?
- What constitutes self-defense?

- At what cost is security attained?
- What is the cost to our families and to our civilization of the refusal to defend one's community?

Even in the midst of the cruellest oppression, stories like Esther, have served to suggest that danger would not always be the way of life, that providential forces may yet redeem what is out of joint in the circumstances of life.

The battles at the end of Esther remind us that violence can be rooted in the desire for peace and security. The Hamans of this world must be exposed and brought to justice. But how far do we go in order to limit the power of evil without violating the peace we are fighting for?

### **DAYS OF CELEBRATION (9:20-10:3)**

The very last part of the book returns to the theme of banquets – but these are very different from the earlier ones. Whereas the first ones celebrated the king's wealth, this final celebration commemorates rest from violence and constraint. Purim, which does not occur on the day of the battle itself, is not a celebration of victory, but on the following day as a celebration of hard-won peace.

Several practices are instituted. There is feasting and celebration, and gift giving to one another and to the poor. According to a long-standing tradition rabbinic tradition, participants are authorised to drink until they cannot tell the difference between 'blessed to be Mordecai' and 'cursed to be Haman.'

The book of Esther reminds us that we all have opportunities to engage in small acts of courage and hope. Those problems that faced Esther still exist today, but like Esther, rather than remaining children, rather than ignoring what is overwhelming to us, each of us has the God-given grace within us to step up for the people we care for, to engage in small acts of courage. We may be surprised as we discover forces beyond our power helping us to carry out God's good purposes.