

224—FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

(Esther 1–10)

During his reign over Persia and Media, King Ahasuerus⁷⁰ had dominion over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia,⁷¹ including all of the Middle Eastern countries. In the third year of Ahasuerus's reign, he made a 180-day feast for the nobles and princes of his provinces. And King Ahasuerus showed them all the wealth of his kingdom. After that feast was completed, he gave a seven-day feast for the people of Shushan. And, at the same time, Queen Vashti gave a great feast for the women of the royal house.

On the final day of the king's feast, when he had drunk too much wine, he ordered his chamberlains to bring Queen Vashti to him that he might show off her beauty, for she was very fair. The queen, however, was offended by the request and refused to come,⁷² which left King Ahasuerus embarrassed and angry.

After the king had brooded over his humiliation, he called his wise men and counseled with them what should be done to Queen Vashti for her disobedience to the king. Memucan, one of the seven princes of Persia, gave his opinion. "The queen has done wrong not only to the king," he reasoned, "but to all the princes and peoples in the kingdom. Once her disobedience becomes known, all women will disobey their husbands. And, just as she refused to come when summoned by the king, likewise—when they have heard—so shall the ladies of Persia and Media do to the king's princes."

"If it pleases the king," Memucan continued, "let him issue a royal decree, written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it cannot be altered, that

⁷⁰ The identity of the king, as given here, is believed to be incorrect. Most Bible scholars think that the king involved was actually Xerxes (the Great), son of Darius. The reason for the error is unknown, but it may be because the account was written some time later.

⁷¹ The Hebrews called Ethiopia Cush. It lay to the south of Egypt, and embraced, in its most extended sense, modern Nubia, Sennaar, Kordofan, and northern Abyssinia (see William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible, Gospelink*, CD-ROM, s.v. "Ethiopia").

⁷² According to Josephus, Vashti refused to respond to the king's request "out of regard for the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers" (Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:6:1). Certainly this was a righteous woman who, in her rebuff of the king, was willing to risk her position for her religious standards.

Vashti may come no more before the king and that the king will give her royal estate to one better than she. When this decree has been published throughout the empire, all wives—whether great or small—will honor their husbands."

Memucan's suggestion pleased the king and his princes, and a letter was sent throughout the kingdom, giving notice of the king's decree, so that every man would be supported as ruler of his own house.

When this was done, the king's servants counseled him to appoint officers in all the provinces to seek out fair young virgins and send them to Shushan for the king to choose a new queen from among them. The king agreed.

Living in Shushan was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, who was brought from Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar at the time of the captivity. Mordecai had reared his young cousin Hadassah—whom the Persians called Esther—as his own daughter, for her parents were both deceased. And when the fair virgins were brought to the king's palace, the beautiful young Esther was among them, but she told no one that she was a Jew.

Esther was given seven maidens from the king's palace to attend her and she began her purification according to Persian customs. She and her maidens were more pleasing to King Ahasuerus than all the others from the very beginning and, because of this, they were given the best place in the house of the women. And Mordecai walked daily in front of the court of the women's house to learn of Esther's status.

When the twelve months required for purification were past, the maidens were called to appear before the king, one each day. And each young woman took with her whatever she desired to take. After a maiden had gone before the king, she was sent next day to the house of the concubines, never again to come before him. However, if the king was pleased with her, he honored her by calling her by her name.

When it came Esther's turn to go before the king, she pleased the king more than all the other virgins, and he placed the crown upon her head. The king then sent word to the provinces that he had chosen a new queen and he made a great feast to honor her. He also gave her many precious gifts such as a king would give but, true to Mordecai's instructions, Esther still told no one that she was a Jew.

When the virgins were gathered together for a second time, Mordecai sat in the king's gate,⁷³ where he

⁷³ The king's gate, where Mordecai sat, is believed to have been a hall about 100 feet (30.5 meters) square (see William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible, Gospelink*, CD-ROM, s.v. "king's gate").

overheard two of the chamberlains who kept the king's gate plot against the king's life. Mordecai informed Esther of what he had heard, and Esther passed the message on to King Ahasuerus in Mordecai's name. When the matter was investigated and found to be true, both men were hanged and the whole matter was noted in the king's record book.

With the new queen chosen and the conspirators dead, King Ahasuerus went on to other business. His first official act was to promote Haman the Agagite,⁷⁴ a man whom he greatly admired. Haman was made superior to all the princes of the kingdom, and the king commanded that everyone should bow down before Haman in the king's gate.

Mordecai the Jew, however, did not bow to Haman. And when the servants pressed Mordecai to know why he disobeyed the king's command, Mordecai told them he was a Jew. "I have no disrespect for Haman," said Mordecai, "but the Jews bow only before God."⁷⁵

The king's servants reported to Haman that Mordecai refused to honor him. And when Haman himself saw that it was so and learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he became very angry. He reasoned in his mind that not only Mordecai should be punished, but all Jews in the kingdom. It would be best, he thought, if they could be destroyed. And, being a very superstitious man, Haman cast lots,⁷⁶ beginning in the first month and continuing until the twelfth, to determine the best time of year to act against the Jews.

When the proper time had been chosen, according to Haman's superstitions, he spoke to the king. "There is a certain group of people in your kingdom," said Haman to the king, "whose laws are different from the laws of all other peoples. Because they do not obey your laws, it is not good for you to tolerate them. If it pleases the king to let these people be destroyed, I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into your treasury."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ The Jews believe that Haman was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king mentioned in 1 Samuel 15 (see William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, *GospeLink*, CD-ROM, s.v. "Haman").

⁷⁵ Interestingly, there are no direct references to God in the book of Esther, but his influence is implied throughout.

⁷⁶ The scripture says that Haman "cast Pur," which means he cast lots (Esther 3:7).

⁷⁷ A talent of silver was equivalent to 3,000 shekels or just more than 75.5 pounds (34.29 kilograms). Thus, 1,000 talents of silver would be 75,600 pounds (34,290 kilograms) or 37.8 tons (33.75 long tons or 34.29 metric tons) of silver. It is not stated where Haman intended to get the silver he promised to the king. But it appears likely that he intended to take it as spoils from

Haman did not identify the offending people to King Ahasuerus, but his apparent concern for the welfare of the kingdom pleased the king; he gave his consent for their destruction. The king then took the ring from his own hand and put it on Haman. "Because of your love for me and for the kingdom," he said, "I will give the silver that you have promised into your own hands that you may use it to benefit the people of the kingdom in whatever way you think best."

The king called his scribes on the thirteenth day of the first month and they wrote to the governors of the provinces all that Haman commanded them. They wrote in the king's name, and Haman sealed it with the king's own ring.

Haman's decree was very clear: "You shall destroy, kill, and cause to perish all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day—on the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month. And you shall also take the spoils of them. A copy of this decree is to be published among the people so that they may prepare for that day." And so the decree went out, hastened by the king's commandment. The fate of the Jews was sealed.

When Haman's decree was announced in Shushan, the city was deeply troubled. When Mordecai learned what had happened he rent his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, where he cried with loud and bitter weeping. He came before the king's gate but was not allowed to enter wearing sackcloth.

When Esther's maids and chamberlains told her of Mordecai's weeping and wailing in the city, she too became grieved, though she did not yet know of the decree. When she sent clothing to Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth, he would not receive it.

Sensing that something was seriously wrong, Esther sent a chamberlain to Mordecai to discover the problem. When the man found him in the street beyond the king's gate, Mordecai explained all that had happened, and gave the chamberlain a copy of Haman's decree. Mordecai then charged Queen Esther, through her chamberlain, to go in to King Ahasuerus and ask him to intervene in behalf of her people.

When Esther received Mordecai's message, she was very fearful about what he had asked her to do, and she sent the chamberlain to explain her dilemma to Mordecai. She explained that all the king's servants and the people of the provinces knew that whoever comes

the Jews when they were destroyed. If the edict of the king applied to the entire kingdom, as appears to be the case, it would have also included the province of Judea. And the treasures of the temple in Jerusalem would have been fair game.

in to the king in his inner court, who has not been summoned by the king, is put to death, according to the Law.⁷⁸ Only if the king holds out his golden scepter—giving the interloper a royal pardon—may that person live. And then she said, “I have not been called to go in unto the king in the last thirty days.”

Mordecai understood Esther’s concern, but he pointed out to her that she would not escape Haman’s dreadful decree, even in the king’s own palace. “I know that if you do nothing to save your people,” he said, “relief will come from another source, but you and your father’s house will be destroyed. And who knows but what Jehovah has brought you to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

When Esther had pondered her cousin’s message, she sent back her answer. “Gather all the Jews who are in Shushan and fast for me,” she said. “Tell them to neither eat nor drink for three days and nights. My maidens and I will also fast—then I will go in unto the king. And if I perish, I perish.”

Mordecai was relieved by Esther’s response, and he went and did as she commanded him, calling on all the Jews in Shushan to fast for Queen Esther.

On the third day of Esther’s fast, she put on her royal clothing and stood near to the king’s palace, in the inner court. And as the king sat on his throne near the gate, he saw Esther standing in the court. Her prayers were answered when the king held out his golden scepter to her, and she came in and touched the top of the scepter.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Such a law was necessary in a society where the king lived in constant fear of assassins, as was the case here. There were always plots against the king’s life, and coming into his court without being summoned was a sentence of death—automatically. A pardon could be granted to the intruder only by the king extending his scepter. And certainly there were no guarantees—not even for the queen.

⁷⁹ Josephus tells the story somewhat differently. He says that when Esther came into the king’s presence “her joints failed her immediately, out of the dread she was in, and she fell down sideways in a swoon: but the king changed his mind...and was concerned for his wife, lest her fear should bring some very evil thing upon her, and he leaped from his throne, and took her in his arms, and recovered her, by embracing her, and speaking comfortably to her, exhorting her to be of good cheer, and not to suspect anything that was sad on account of her coming to him without being called, because that law was made for subjects, but that she, who was a queen, as well as he a king, might be entirely secure: and as he said this, he put the scepter into her hand, and laid his rod upon her neck on

“What will you have me do for you, Queen Esther?” asked the king. “Whatever you request, it shall be given to you—even unto half my kingdom.”

Esther answered carefully. “If it seems good to you, O King,” she replied, “let the king and Haman come today to a banquet that I have prepared.” The king consented, and Haman was invited to Esther’s banquet.

At the banquet, the king repeated his pledge to grant Esther’s request, even unto half his kingdom. But Esther answered him much as she had before. “Let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them tomorrow,” she replied, “and then I will tell you my request.”

Haman rejoiced all that day for the great honor of dining with the king and queen. But his day was ruined when Mordecai refused to bow to him in the king’s gate. And though Haman was filled with anger, he restrained himself and did not react.

Once Haman was home, he called his wife and friends to tell them of all his great riches and what an honorable man he was in the king’s eyes. “And besides all that,” he boasted, “Queen Esther is preparing a banquet tomorrow for only the king and me.”

Haman then suddenly became very serious. “But all these honors are of little value to me,” he said, “as long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate.”

“Your problem can be easily solved,” Haman’s friends assured him, “because of your great influence with the king. Build a gallows fifty cubits high,⁸⁰ and then speak to the king tomorrow that Mordecai may be hanged on it. Then you can go merrily to your banquet with the king.” And Haman gave orders for the gallows to be built immediately.

That night, when the king was unable to sleep, he asked for his record book to be brought and read to him. When the servants read how Mordecai had exposed the plot against his life by the two gatekeepers, he asked, “What honor was given to Mordecai for saving my life?” And he was told him that nothing had been done.

As the servants finished reading, Haman entered the outer court of the king’s palace, having come to ask about hanging Mordecai on his newly constructed gallows. When the king saw Haman, he invited him in. “What shall be done,” the king asked Haman, “for the man whom the king wishes to honor?”

Haman, thinking in his prideful heart that it was he who would be honored, replied, “Let this man be dressed in the king’s own clothing and the king’s crown

account of the law; and so freed her from her fear” (Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:6:9).

⁸⁰ This would be a very high gallows—about seventy-five feet (22.9 meters).

upon his head. Then let him ride through the streets of the city upon the king's horse, with one of the king's most noble princes going before him to proclaim to the people that this man is the man the king delights to honor."

King Ahasuerus, being greatly pleased with Haman's suggestion, said, "Make haste, Haman. Take my clothing and my horse and do to Mordecai the Jew as you have said. Let nothing fail of all that you have spoken." So, in obedience to the king's command, Haman dressed Mordecai in the king's apparel, put him on the king's horse, and led him through the streets of Shushan proclaiming that Mordecai was the man whom the king delighted to honor. Nothing could have been more humiliating to Haman than this.

When the procession ended, Mordecai returned to his place in the king's gate and Haman to his own house—but with his head covered in humiliation. When Haman told his wife and friends what had happened, they replied, "If this Mordecai is a Jew, you shall not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him."

As Haman and his friends talked, the king's chamberlain came to take Haman to Queen Esther's banquet.

When the king, Haman, and Esther were gathered for their private feast, the king again asked Esther, "What is your petition, my queen? It shall be granted to you, even to half of my kingdom."

Esther spoke carefully. "If I have found favor in your sight, O King," she said, "and if it pleases you, let my life be given me and also the lives of my people. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. You should know, however, that if we had been sold as bondsmen, I would hold my tongue, for that would not have damaged the king's interests."

King Ahasuerus was astonished and angry by what Esther had just told him. "Who is responsible for this?" he asked. "Who dares to presume in his heart to do such a thing?"

"The enemy," replied Esther, "is this wicked Haman." And Haman sat by, listening in great fear.

Rising in his wrath, King Ahasuerus went out from the banquet into the palace garden. Meanwhile, Haman stood up and began to plead with Queen Esther to spare his life. It was not difficult for him to foresee the evil that the king had determined against him.

When the king returned from the garden, he saw that Haman had fallen onto the Queen's bed as he pleaded with her for his life. "Will you also force the queen before me in my own house?" he asked.

As the king spoke, his servants took hold of Haman and covered his face. Then one of the chamberlains said to the king, "There is a gallows fifty cubits high

standing at Haman's house, which Haman built to hang Mordecai."

"Hang Haman on his own gallows!" ordered King Ahasuerus.

So that day Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, and the king's anger was pacified. King Ahasuerus gave Haman's house to Queen Esther. And when Esther told the king that Mordecai was her cousin and had raised her as his own child, Mordecai was brought before the king. The king gave Mordecai his ring, and Esther made him the ruler over her house.

There was, however, one more problem that needed to be resolved, and Queen Esther fell weeping at the king's feet to seek this one more favor. When the king held out his golden scepter and bid her to rise, she said to him, "If it pleases the king and if I have found favor in your sight, let a decree be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, in which he commanded the destruction of all Jews. For I cannot endure to see this great evil come upon my people."

King Ahasuerus commanded Mordecai to prepare a new decree. "Write for the Jews as it pleases you," he said. "Write it in my name and seal it with my ring, and that which you write, no man can reverse."

So Mordecai drafted a new decree to be sent to the provinces. It read: "The Jews in every city are to gather themselves together and stand for their lives, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all those in the provinces who would assault them." And on the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month—that same day which Haman had named for the destruction of the Jews—Mordecai's decree was enforced as a commandment of the king.

The fourteenth and fifteenth days of the twelfth month were decreed by Mordecai—and confirmed by Queen Esther—to be remembered yearly, from generation to generation, as the Festival of Purim in remembrance of how Queen Esther saved the Jews from destruction.⁸¹

⁸¹ Purim is also known as the Festival of Lots. The name Purim came from the word *pur*, which means "lots." It was called this because Haman cast pur to decide the day of the Jews' destruction. Purim is still celebrated and the book of Esther is read as part of the celebration. Everyone hisses and boos whenever Haman's name is read. They also eat triangular cookies that represent Haman's three-cornered hat.