

## Chapter 9

**9:1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery (*shalet*) over them, the reverse (*haphakh*) occurred: the Jews gained mastery (*shalat*) over those who hated them. 2 The Jews gathered (*qahal*) in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen (*nephal*) on all peoples. 3 All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents (*melakah*) also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. 4 For Mordecai was great (*gadol*) in the king's house, and his fame (*shoma*) spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful (*gadol*). 5 The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated (*satam*) them. 6 In Susa the citadel itself, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, 7 and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha 8 and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha 9 and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, 10 the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.**

Scholars have argued whether or not the book of Esther originally concluded at the end of chapter 8, and that chapter 9 was a later addition to add closure to the story. It has been 9 months since Mordecai's edict in 8:9 - then it was "in the third month" - "Now it's the 12<sup>th</sup> month" - and there has been silence in the narrative history. It appears from 9:19 and 9:26, that Purim had already been named and begun to be celebrated (9:26, is in the past tense, "they called these days") and so the last part of chapter 9 seems to be written a bit after the first 8 and a half chapters.

But we can infer from 9:2, 5 and 16 that Haman's "edict" in 3:13 fanned the flames of anti-Semitism and that the "enemies of the Jews" (verse 1, 5, 10; those who "hated" the Jews, verses 1, 5, 16) were itching for a fight and eagerly awaiting the green light on the appointed day of violence (that is, "hoping to gain mastery over the Jews"). Finally, in March 473 BC, the beleaguered Jewish Church "assembled themselves together" (literally: "stand for their souls") (8:11; 9:16) (*qahal*) into militant "groups" or "companies" to defend themselves against the attacking anti-Semitic Persians. The Hebrew word used here (*qahal*) is used for any gathering or assembling, religious or non-religious (c.f., 1 Samuel 17:47; Ezekiel 17:17; Ezekiel 23:46-47).

The idea of corporate or community political action in which the whole church is involved and committed as one has been a controversial issue for centuries. What is the corporate Church's role in society? It is an ancient question. For us in the contemporary conservative wing of American Presbyterianism the issue also has legs because it was a huge division in our ranks in the 19<sup>th</sup>, century which has carried over into 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century PCA history.

Side note: A brief walk down Ecclesiastical Lane may be enlightening: In the 1830s, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PC,USA) split into two factions: Old School, out of which the PCA has largely come, and New School, out of which the liberals have largely come. The major disagreements in the 1830s involved both the revivalism of Presbyterian Charles Finney and the social gospel of Methodist Walter Rauschenbusch and Baptist Washington Gladden which the New School championed, while the Old School championed theological orthodoxy and rigor as evidenced by a strict adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The disagreements were big enough that in 1837/1838 the national Presbyterians divided into two General Assemblies – New School General Assembly and Old School General Assembly, both still within the PC,USA. New School ministers were primarily in New

York, New England and the new West, and Old School ministers were primarily in Pennsylvania/New Jersey and the South. Remember, the PCA is fundamentally a southern church and we northwesterners are currently odd ducks in the PCA. However, that 1837/1838 theological kerfuffle wasn't enough division for the Presbyterian fathers-in-the-faith, so the Old School boys split again – northern Old Schoolers and southern Old Schoolers. This Northern vs. Southern split among the Westminster-confessing conservatives was over several issues but the one issue of importance to us in this class on Esther is the concept of the spirituality of the church, the spiritual character of the Church.

The southern conservative Old Schoolers were led by such theological worthies as Robert Dabney:

\*whom the great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck recognized as one of America's greatest theologians

\*David Wells wrote that Dabney was the greatest Southern Presbyterian theologian of 19<sup>th</sup> century America

\*Charles Hodge repeatedly urged Dr. Dabney to join the Princeton Seminary faculty

\*AA Hodge and William T. Shedd considered Dabney the greatest teacher of theology in the United States

Along with Dr. Dabney, there was the southern Church statesman and theologian, James Henley Thornwell. Both Dabney and Thornwell taught at the Old School seminary in the South, Union Seminary in Richmond, VA. When I was at Covenant Seminary in the 1970s we learned the theology of these men, with reservations, and my personal library contains books written by these men.

The northern Old Schoolers were led by men at Princeton Seminary, most especially Charles Hodge.

Hodge and Thornwell, both brilliant Old School theologians and leaders of hundreds of ministers who followed them, debated divisive issues in print, in presbytery and in person using Scripture, the Westminster standards and church history to buttress their respective positions. What it must have been like to witness these two titans battle it out!

The theological problem that increasingly divided the Old School men along sectional lines was the notion, as I've said, of the spirituality of the church. This ferocious debate, more than any other, would underlie what became the most explosive controversy of 19<sup>th</sup> century America and into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – slavery and race issues. In the decades that followed the 1837/1838 division, Presbyterian theologians argued over the relationship between the church and civil authorities. What was the role of the church in culture?

In 1847, Old School leaders had debated this issue in reference to public education. As we Presbyterians sought to extend our influence into culture-at-large, the notion of Presbyterian-sponsored educational academies - parochial education - became popular. Advocates, mostly in the north, of this Christian education movement, argued that an important contribution these educational institutions offered was an opportunity to promote a distinctly Christian or biblical (read Calvinist) worldview to the populace at large. However, the southern Old Schoolers believed that the state, and not the Church, should take responsibility for educating the citizenry, and the southern brothers based this conclusion on the doctrine of the spirituality of the Church. That is, the mission of the church was purely spiritual. Its purpose and jurisdiction extended only to matters of religious faith. In the 1837 General Assembly of the entire Presbyterian Church, USA, before the split, the idea of Presbyterian educational institutions was put to a vote and was approved. The Southerners lost this issue. There would be Presbyterian schools, primarily colleges. But, in 1861 the Southern Old Schoolers, since they now had their own country, closed their Presbyterian colleges. This corporate Church vs. individual Christian action was part of the DNA of southern Presbyterianism.

Concerning the Presbyterian church and the issue of slavery, in 1835 the Chillicothe Presbytery along the Ohio River in southern Ohio sent a letter to all the other presbyteries in the PC, USA detailing its abolitionist stand on slavery and recommending that the still united denomination, north and south, New School and Old School bar slave holders from the communion table. The Presbytery of Mississippi replied that not only did the Bible support the institution of slavery but that, and here is the point for us, "the Presbytery of Chillicothe is advised not to preach on subjects which are merely moral or political, but preach Jesus Christ." (James Smylie, "A Review of a letter from the Presbytery of Chillicothe to the Presbytery of Mississippi on the Subject of Slavery," 1836).

In this highly charged pre-Civil War atmosphere, Dr. Thornwell launched a campaign (in 1850) in defense of the southern church's autonomy from the northern church, employing precisely the same argument he had used to oppose the parochial school movement, with a view now to race relations. In the

face of the increasing northern Presbyterian hostility to the notion that Christians could own slaves, Thornwell not only defended the practice of slavery as being permitted by Scripture: "Scriptures not only fail to condemn slavery, they distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man." . . . Where Scriptures are silent, the church must be silent too." but he also aggressively disputed the notion that the church had the right to even address the question of slavery – which he considered a civil matter – much less adopt an authoritative position on any political matter. With the election of Lincoln in 1860, Southern Old Schoolers echoed the rhetoric of secular political and New School ecclesiastical secessionists and began to call for the formation of a separate Southern Old School Presbyterian denomination, not just an assembly. Remember, such a southern Presbyterian Church is the mother denomination of the PCA. The brilliant Robert Dabney counselled caution in secession, but the equally brilliant James Thornwell pressed for speedy withdrawal from the United States. At Christmas time in 1861 the Southerners gathered in Augusta, Georgia for the first General Assembly of "The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America," with Thornwell as its chief architect. In his address to the Southerners, the lion of southern Calvinism, Thornwell, now 49 years old and dying of tuberculosis (he would die in a year), took up the theme of the spirituality of the church and eloquently but sadly argued that the Northern Old School General Assembly (e.g., Hodge and Princeton divines) earlier in 1861 had, by its affirmation of the Union against the Southern Old School secessionists, had grievously usurped authority that properly belonged only to the state. Secession was a political matter and not a spiritual matter, it was not a matter of the soul, so the Church must stay out of the slavery debate. This anti-secessionist action on the part of the North, the dying confederate theologian (Thornwell) argued, opened the door to "the worst passions of human nature, into the deliberations of Church courts." Thornwell argued had the Southern Old Schoolers acquiesced, capitulated in this error, like Princeton had, the spiritual purity of the Church would be forever tarnished by worldly politics. His argument was that the courageous southern Church had preserved the whole Church's purity by leaving the apostate northern Church which had embraced political action.

Dr. Thornwell argued that the Church has been given the power and authority by God to regulate personal morality, but not the patterns of society. He denied "that the proper end of the Church is the direct promotion of universal good. It has no commission to reconstruct society." The authority of the Church is limited to the Bible, and not to human opinions. Specifically, Thornwell argued that since the Bible recognizes slavery, the Church has no right to unrecognized slavery. Slavery might be evil, but the Church has no divine calling to condemn or fight against slavery since it is a civil institution. The real struggle in the slavery issue is not between the defenders and opponents of slavery, but between Christianity and atheism. Christianity views society as an "ordinance of God" and atheism views society as the "machinery of man." Therefore, in resisting the unchristian effort to base society on purely human speculations, like equality of humans, the Southern Church was defending the nation against the anarchy of the communist revolution of 1848.

For Thornwell, the Church was a purely spiritual body which "gives life; the concrete forms in which that life appears she leaves to the providence of God for individual expression to determine." The Church has no business in dealing with,

"The manner in which society has organized the relation of its classes and races: Their respective rights and privileges, the position of woman, the equality or inequality of citizens – these are questions which belong to the state; and when the state does not violate the law of God, the Church has nothing to do but to accept society as given, and labor to make all its parts work harmoniously." (*The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, Vol. 4, 1871)

Concerning slavery and the Church, Thornwell admitted that slavery was a chief reason for the split between north and south. The central issue for Thornwell, however, was the corporate position the Church took in regard to the institution of slavery. He noted that his new Southern denomination held no distinct position on the slavery question:

"In our ecclesiastical capacity, we are neither the friends nor the foes of slavery. We have no commission either to propagate it or abolish it. The policy of slavery's existence or non-existence is a question which exclusively belongs to the state. We have no right, as a church, to enjoin slavery as a duty, or to condemn slavery as a sin." (ET Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, Vol. 2, 1963).

A Christian believer, as an individual, could be against slavery. That Christian would be wrong-headed, but not a heretic, like many of Thornwell's colleagues at Princeton Seminary. It would be a personal determination based on reading the Bible. But the Church, as a corporate body, must stay out of

political, economic and social affairs to keep her powder dry to preach the gospel and minister to the souls of her neighbor.

Dr. Hodge agreed with Dr. Thornwell on the essential separation of the Church and state, but he disagree sharply with Thornwell on whether or not the Church should speak into public affairs and issues of public concerns. Hodge believed that Thornwell's view would "stop the mouth of the church, and prevent her bearing her testimony to kings and rulers, magistrates and people, in behalf of the truth and law of God." In his response, Hodge stated that Thornwell's view was a "poison" to be "dashed away." It was the Church's duty to speak the truth of God's law in the public arena. The Church, as a corporate entity, must speak to the unregenerate, since the Church itself was a mixed body, containing many baptized members of the invisible Church and others who are not regenerate. Wheat and tears. Hodge believed that the Church was not purely spiritual and that Presbyterians uniquely understood the mixed character of the Church.

Dr. Hodge argued that the Church, as a corporate body, should openly and boldly make formal pronouncements on issues of public morality, all the while threading the needle and avoiding pronouncements on political matters. According to the Great Commission, the church must speak only on moral matters of current issues and not public policy. The distinction between public morality and public policy was central to Hodge's understanding of how the church should engage in public affairs prior to the Civil War. While she must speak loudly on matters of public morality, she must be careful not to speak at all on matters that are purely political.

As the Civil War continued, Dr. Hodge began to blur the distinction between politics and public morality as his view was tested by the conflict. He eventually would write that the relationship between Church and state was an "exceedingly complicated and difficult subject."

After the Civil War, for 11 years, from 1883 to 1894, Robert Dabney was the first professor of moral philosophy at the new University of Texas in Austin.

As for James Thornwell, to give you a sense of the influence of Dr. Thornwell's ideas on Presbyterian thinking, mainly in the South but also in the North, when Thornwell's four volumes of collected writings (*The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*) were published in 1871-72, 6 - 7 years after the Civil War ended and 10 years after his death in 1862, the editors (both Southern Presbyterian ministers of standing) wrote the following:

"A day of reaction may yet come, when the force of the views here submitted to the world will be acknowledged when the justice which has hitherto been denied to the Church of the South will be rendered by the people of Jesus, who cannot always be blinded to scriptural truth by theories of human rights and humanitarian schemes, conceived in the womb of rationalistic philosophy." (*The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, Vol. 4)

Thornwell's post-Civil War reception compared with Dabney's eclipse is of such proportions that at the end of Dabney life in 1898, Dabney lamented, "I have no audience." But since I graduated from Covenant Seminary in 1973 there has been a remarkable revival in Robert Dabney's theological insights, all the while recognizing that, unhappily, like all of us he was a man of his times and geography and sinful racial attitudes. It grieves me to admit that while Dabney and Thornwell had so many helpful things to say about my faith in Christ, they were blind to the racist worldview they embraced.

The debate over the role of the Church in society is still with us and is present in our denomination and in our congregation. We have northerner Old Schoolers and Southern Old Schoolers of various stripes here at Faith. I am a Northern Old Schoolers, that's why I like the book of Esther, but as David Wells has pointed out, James Henry Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney continue to cast a giant and long shadow over Southern Presbyterians, particularly the PCA and Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

And all this Presbyterian history relates to the Persian Church's reaction to Haman's political edict of extermination.

As I have already noted, scholars have pointed out that a guiding principle of the structure of the book of Esther is "reversal" or "contrary" or "turning over" (*haphakh*) based primarily on chapter 9:

**\*9:1, "on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse (*haphakh*) occurred."**

**\*9:22, “as the month that had been turned (*haphakh*) for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday.”**

**\*9:25, “But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return (*shuv*) on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.”**

This interpretation of reversal foreshadows Georg W. F. Hegel’s (1770-1831) historical worldview of thesis – antithesis. This theological reversal, this thesis with a counter antithesis, has Yahweh’s providence at its center as we see in numerous other places in the Scriptures:

\*Genesis 50:20

\*Isaiah 29:17

\*Matthew 20:16

\*Luke 1:52-53

\*John 9:39

\*Acts 26:24

\*2 Thessalonians 1:6

The reversal – the tables are turned - occurs when actions from a secular, apparent dominate kingdom of man, are overturned by the actions from a holy, hidden but truly dominate kingdom of God. This reversal is an ancient and natural law provision from God as discerned by Josephus (*Antiquities, Book 19*) and even Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1452a) as the concept of reversal of fortune called *peripeteia*, “A peripety is the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events.”

9:2 tells us that the Church was to defend herself, not against general enemies or political opponents, but rather those unbelievers who looked for ways to legally kill Church members (those who “sought their harm”). It was the Persian version of the twisted movie, *The Purge*, where once a year criminals could do whatever they wanted – steal, rape, kill – thus purging themselves of all hatred and violence inside them. In verse 2 we see the narrator again mention the “assembling” of the Jewish Church into fighting units for self-preservation.

According to the irrevocable Persian edicts of Haman (3:13) and Mordecai (8:13), it is a free-for-all, the unbelievers can now kill all the Jews and the Jews can kill all the attacking unbelievers. It is noteworthy that the phrase, “sought their ruin,” refers to those anti-Semites who would actually attack the Jews, and not those who were merely biased or inadvertently hostile, like those referenced in:

\*Numbers 35:23

\*1 Samuel 24:10

\*1 Samuel 25:26

In 9:2 we have a repeat of 2:21 where everyone is trying to “lay hands” on their enemies. This is another example in the book of Esther of the biblical concept of “measure for measure,” as in Matthew 7:2, “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

One little bit of mercy in this account is that those Persian unbelievers who were killed were, apparently, all “men” (verse 6). There is no reference to Persian “women and children”

being killed by the Jews in self-defense, even though the Mordecai edict of 8:11 permits such killing.

In the first couple of verses of chapter 9, God's name is again clearly avoided, even though naming Yahweh might make some theological sense at this stage as it could have been mentioned previously in chapter 4:2, 14, 18 and chapter 6:1 (sleepless in Susa). In 9:3 the "help" does come, but not supernaturally from God but quite naturally from men. We see that it was Mordecai and the preparations, the "making ready," of the Jewish Church into combat units that ostensibly turned the tide of battle and not miraculous divine intervention. Verse 3 tells us the Persian "governing authorities" were caught between the two contradictory "edicts." They couldn't carry out both, so they decided to carry out the Mordecai edict over against the Haman edict because of the political power of Mordecai. The "officials," "satraps," "governors," "royal agents" (*melakah*) in verse 3 are the very officials (those "in charge of the king's business") who, in a different power structure did Haman's bidding, deposited Haman's bribe in the king's treasury in 3:9.

What a difference a day makes.

An important political consequence of the great religious civil war battles of Adar 13-14 is not the slaughter of the anti-Semites, but rather the assumption of a new status of honor and political dominion of the Church in Persia, at least momentarily, symbolized by the accession of Mordecai as Vice-President (8:15-17) to accompany Esther as queen.

In verse 9:4 note that the term "man" is applied to Mordecai in opposition to 2:5 where he is described as "a Jewish man" (*is yehudi*) thus drawing attention to the contrast between his status as an exiled tribal member to his status as a power-player, although he does return as "Mordecai the Jew" in 10:2 as a center of power.

In 9:5 we read the interesting phrase "as they pleased" (*kiretson*), as in the Jews "did what they wanted to do" to the anti-Semitic Gentile unbelievers. The phrase covers a multitude of sins and could include everything from boycott to punishment to enslavement to torture to killing (c.f., Nehemiah 9:24; Daniel 11:16). Because of this latitude given the Jewish Church, the LXX omits this verse because it reflects badly on the children of God. The Persian unbelievers are not ordinary townsmen but as 9:1 points out they are "enemies of the Jews" who had been expected to attack the Jews on the day selected for the genocide. 9:6-11 implies that the first Jewish attack was in the governmental seat of the Citadel in order to cut off the head of the Persian anti-Semitic movement.

One Old Testament scholar noted at this point that "the Jewish victory in Susa the citadel" is equivalent to the successful insurrection in the World War 2-era Warsaw ghetto when 75,000 SS troops were slaughtered by Polish Jews in self-defense (cf, Andre LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 1990). In verse 6 we are told that the Jews killed "500 men" in "Susa the citadel." That is strange because this governmental enclave would be filled with people who, because they would know who has the power, who the king was befriending – Esther the Jew Queen, Mordecai the Jew Vice President, and their tribe of Jew to attack the favored tribes wouldn't hesitate now. These initial Jewish attacks in "Susa the Citadel" also indicate that the Jews had established broad, and deep and informative involvement in the Persian government (c.f., 4:16, Esther to Mordecai, "Go gather all the Jews in Susa and fast for me.") just like the anti-Semites who knew who to attack.

The names of Haman's sons, perhaps demonic names, in verses 7 to 9 remind readers that the Church fights not against human enemies but against

“the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12; 2:2).

The name of Haman’s sons are of special interest because they may be *daiva* names of ancient Persia. *Daiva* is an early Persian word for “gods.” *Daiva* names were once used of the gods in early Iran, but later came to be associated with demonic powers in various Eastern religions. The narrator in chapter 9 listed the names of the ten boys, possibly to show the allegiance of Haman and his family to the Zoroastrian demonic powers of darkness and evil, and therefore proper casualties of a holy war (Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*). However, the meaning of the Persian names of Haman’s sons are uncertain, as is the meaning of the names of the seven Persian eunuchs in 1:10 or Xerxes’ seven Persian princes who were his “close advisors” in 1:14 or of the three Esther eunuchs (2:8, 14; 4:5). Furthermore, wife “Zeresh’s” name may come from the Elamite pagan goddess, “Kirisha” (Persian for “gold”) (Henry Gehman, “Journal of Biblical Language,” 1924).

Side note: Kirisha, the “Lady of Liyan,” was worshiped principally in the south of [Elam](#). Along with [Khumban](#) and [In-shushinak](#), she formed the supreme triad of the Elamite pantheon. “Kirisha” means the great goddess, in the Elamite language. The Elamite king, Khumban-Numena, had a chapel built at [Liyan](#) (a port on the [Persian Gulf](#)), dedicated exclusively to Kirisha. Kirisha was sometimes merely called “the Great” or “the divine mother.”

This is a shame because the names could unlock valuable information about Persian government under Xerxes.

The Jews had been brought into a position of mortal danger through no fault of their own, but by the prideful malice of a foe, and the prideful obstreperousness of the individual Jew, Mordecai. It was both natural and fitting that Mordecai and Esther should do what was in their power to extricate their fellow Church members from that danger that Mordecai helped cause. This reminds me of Moses killing the Egyptian overlord and being subsequently being accused by his fellow Jews for the apparent necessity of having to leave Egypt in Exodus 5:20-21. Thus no blame can be attached to the Persian Jewish Church, at this point, for self-defense.

The terms of the second edict were dictated by Mordecai and Esther themselves (8:8) and if all that it authorized the Jewish Church to do was to act in self-defense against any who assailed her, it would be perfectly legitimate. But, the Mordecai edict does more than this. It authorizes the Jews to take the lives of those who surely were harmless to them - the “children and the women” (8:11). Furthermore, when the terms of the second edict, the Mordecai edict, were announced, the people everywhere actually “rejoiced and were glad” (8:15-17). Is it believable that there were 75,800 Jew-haters in Persia itching to kill their Jewish neighbors? I say no, based on 8:15-17 (“the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced” at the news of the Mordecai edict). It is scarcely credible that as many as 75,800 Persian unbelievers would take the self-defense aggression against them by the Jewish Church laying down. Surely there would be a counter-counter attack by the Persian Gentiles. But perhaps this large number of violent Jew-haters is the reason for the third edict issued at the behest of Esther in 9:13-14.

In an interesting historical note, Adar 13 will become an important day in the history of the Jewish Church because it is also the day that Judah Maccabee’s forces slew the Greek Seleucid general Nicanor (Day of Nicanor) and beat back the Greeks noted in 1 Maccabees 7:43-49 and 2 Maccabees 15:28-37.

Furthermore, the private property of the attacking unbelievers, according to the Mordecai edict of 8:11, was to be taken by the Church (“the king granted the Jews the right to plunder their

spoil”). But 9:10 tells us that the personal possessions were in fact left untouched (that is, “no hand was laid on the plunder,” 9:10). The Jewish Church was about saving their lives, not their bank accounts. Their commission from Xerxes empowered them to destroy the families of their enemies and take their estates, but the Church killed only those who they found armed so they left alone the property and the unarmed women and children. One 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator was quick to point out that the Church left the unbeliever’s property so that unbelieving mothers and children had something to survive on. Perhaps there is a hint of Deuteronomy 20:19-20 where the Canaanite fruit-bearing trees are to remain untouched when everything and everyone else (“all that breathes”) is to be destroyed by the Israelite hoard, thus providing sustenance for the Israelites when they are through with the killing. Grant did the same thing for Lee at Appomattox when he agreed to allow the defeated Confederate army to keep their handguns to kill critters for food and horses for spring planting. Indeed, one 19<sup>th</sup> century Esther scholar wrote that the “people of God were morally far above their oppressors.” (John Haley, *The Book of Esther*, 1885). The author of the book of Esther wanted to be sure that we readers understood that “plundering” was not part of the Church’s counterattack since he mentions leaving the “plunder” alone three times in chapter 9:10, 15-16.

Some scholars interpret the Church’s action that no “personal possessions” were taken as another example of the theme of reversal. This time, the Persian Church reverses what the Church under King Saul did to the Amalekites hundreds of years before. That is, King Saul spared King Agag his enemy, but took some “personal possessions” from the Amalekites and destroyed the rest (1 Samuel 15:15). The Mordecai/Esther Church took no “personal possessions” but did not spare her enemy, Haman. This theological interpretation fails, I think, because it puts too much weight on the “plundering” part of the Mordecai edict. After all, the Persian enemies of the Jewish Church are not the Amalekites.

There is, however, another interpretation of the “no plundering” action of the Persian Church. Iain Duguid of Westminster Seminary, forcefully argues that this Persian Church action amounts to a holy war scenario. The narrator is careful to state three times that there was no “plundering” of the unbelievers’ possessions in chapter 9:10, 15, 16, a hallmark of a holy war, even though the Xerxes/Mordecai edict approved the “plundering.” One of the articles of a biblical holy war is that booty may not be taken. For instance:

\*In Genesis 14 when Abram fought on behalf of the city-kingdom of Sodom to rescue Lot, the king of Sodom offered him a material reward. Abram refused the offer lest he would prosper with gains from the wicked city. Apparently, the Persian Church imitated Abraham who scorned to enrich himself with the spoils of Sodom and Gomorrah (vs. 23).

\*In Joshua 6 and 7, the great general Joshua, as he led the Church into the Promised Land, could do anything he wanted to the people, but the gold, silver and precious articles were to be given or “devoted” to the LORD. Immediately after crossing the Jordan, Joshua attacked and defeated Jericho under the orders that “the city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD.” Joshua got his head handed to him when he later attacked Ai in chapter 7 because Achan had stolen some of the “devoted things” of Jericho.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Church took illicit plunder against the orders of Yahweh and thus lived no more righteous than the wicked people they conquered. In 1 Samuel 15:18-19) Samuel thunders at the Church, “Why did you pounce on the plunder and thus do evil in the eyes of the LORD?”

Returning to Esther, the narrator’s emphasis that no “plunder” was taken even though it was permitted may suggest to us that the attack against Haman and the anti-Semites was to be

understood as a holy war and not a military opportunity to enrich the Church for personal gain (c.f., Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

Side note: A little allegory here: God's edict of death hangs over a sinful humanity but he has sent forth his messengers on speedy steeds with edicts of salvation to the remotest parts of the world (c.f., Proverbs 24:11-12). Only by accepting and acting on the new edict of salvation can the edict of death be averted.

Besides, it wouldn't be pleasing to Yahweh, who some scholars believe is sanctioning a holy war here. One scholar (John Whitcomb) thinks that this no-plundering policy by the Jews shows the "purity of their motives" ("Esther," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*).

However, a less religious and more practical reason for this no-booty action was prudence in that the Jews were still a minority in Persia and self-defense was one thing, indiscriminate killing of women and children and confiscating unbelievers' property to enrich themselves was another thing altogether and would lead to permanent resentment on the part of the unbelieving Persians. We have the evidence of long memories with the experience of Saul and the Amalakies and Haman.

Still, the whole thing is a brutal event and the Esther/Mordecai assault is ruthless and ferocious, and it is hard for commentators to admit this, except if one colors it as a holy war. One scholar noted: "Rather than being indicative of her blood-thirsty nature, it is more likely that the reader should notice Esther's determination to eliminate hatred against the Jews" (Reid, *Esther*). I don't see it that way. Yahweh punished David for needlessly shedding too much blood in 1 Chronicles 22:8 and 2 Chronicles 28:3. And the fact is, this Mordecai/Esther bloody reprieve from Persian extermination does not stop the decline of the Jewish Church as she will morph into the Gentile Church in several hundred years.

**9:11 That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. 12 And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel, the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men (*ish*) and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." 13 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged (*talah*) on the gallows." 14 So the king commanded this to be done. A decree (*dath*) was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. 15 The Jews who were in Susa gathered (*qahal*) also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men (*ish*) in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.**

Xerxes seems more impressed by the death toll of his Persian unbelievers than by the Jewish Church's deliverance. In the course of chapter 9:11-15 we learn that despite Haman's slander about the Jews to Xerxes in 3:8 - the Jews do keep and abide by the king's laws - the Jews are, ironically, law-biding by slaughtering the unbelievers in accordance with the Mordecai law/edict. Except that, ironically, the Church was a law-breaker by not plundering the attackers. Astonishingly, the story tells us that Xerxes was content to let Esther kill more unbelieving Persians on the second day by issuing a third "edict" because, jaw-droppingly, he seems more interested in pleasing (ie, sleeping) with the beautiful Jewess than in curbing her blood-lust (verse 12). We ought now to be used to the insatiable appetites of Xerxes, but these appetites are still astonishing to us after all these years.

Verse 12 is interesting. The NIV has this verse containing a question: "What have the Jews done in the rest of my kingdom?" That is, "How many unbelievers have you Jews killed

today? Give me a report.” The NESV, however, has this as a declarative statement: “Good night, look at what your Jews have done in other parts of Persia. They have been on a rampage throughout my kingdom.” I prefer the NIV question because Xerxes follows his question with the promise “Do whatever you want. It doesn’t really make any difference to me.”

Side note: It kind of reminds me of **Jean Valjean** lament after robbing the kindly priest who had just given him shelter in [\*Les Misérables\*](#):

*“What have I done? What have I done?”*

*Become a thief in the night, become a dog on the run?*

*Have I fallen so far, and is the hour so late,*

*That nothing remains but the cry of my hate?”*

Xerxes’ offer to fulfill Esther’s second request is worded almost exactly, identically to the three offers that he has made to her earlier in 5:3, 5:6 and 7:2. However, there is nothing whatsoever in the chapter 9 narrative that would prepare us for Esther’s additional request for yet another “edict” or “decree.” Indeed, exactly the opposite is true. The Jewish Church’s victory of the preceding day has completely fulfilled the request Esther has already made. Why should Xerxes suppose that she has any further petitions to make? Some commentators see Xerxes as a pliable despot seeking courtly advice for his actions. I don’t see Xerxes like that, at all. Without any solicitation, he acts decisively on his own, giving Esther *carte blanche* with his unbelieving Persian subjects, as long as she goes to bed with him.

Esther’s actions are just as inexplicable. Haman’s edict had limited any legally-sanctioned attack on the Jewish community to just one day - Adar 13 (3:13). Mordecai’s edict likewise limited the Jewish response to just one day – Adar 13 (8:12). 9:5 tells us that the Jews are now perfectly safe since “they have put all their enemies to the sword.” So what is the need for yet another “edict” authorizing yet another day of slaughter? A huge day of slaughter. We are left to speculate.

There is a second massacre of 300 “men” or “husbands” in the capital city of Susa (9:15) on Adar 14 where 500 “men” or “husbands” (9:12) had already been massacred the previous day, Adar 13. If all these measures were necessary in self-defense, they need no justification, but the narrative seems to make it clear that this was not necessarily the case. One Old Testament scholar (Paton) notes that this second massacre of 300 “men” shows a malignant spirit of revenge more akin to the teaching of the Talmud than the Old Testament. I would add the Koran, as well. Abraham Kuyper compares Esther to King Herod’s wife as “embodying some of the same bloodthirstiness.” (c.f., Matthew 14:8) (*Women of the Old Testament*, 1933). The English Christian novelist, Evelyn Waugh once wrote,

“Barbarism is never finally defeated; given propitious circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly will commit every conceivable atrocity. The danger does not come merely from habitual hooligans; we are all potential recruits for anarchy.” (Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles and Review of Evelyn Waugh*, 1983).

The Esther story pictures the Jews surrounded by “haters” or “enemies” (*oyeb*) (9:1, 5, 16, 22; 8:13) but no overt act is attributed to the “haters.” In 9:15 we will be told that another 300 men were killed in the Citadel of Susa on the additional day of slaughter. The point to be taken is, that the Jews had a cadre, a nest of anti-Semitic government workers against them and were simply draining the swamp of Persian governmental anti-Semitism in the Citadel (Haman’s sons were hanged in the Citadel in 9:14). Mordecai’s command to Esther that she keep her ethnic identity a secret implies that some danger to her and the Jews may have been resident in

government circles - Susa the Citadel. So we can understand killing 500, presumably governmental leaders in the anti-Semitism movement on Adar 13, by armed and organized and trained Jewish militants (“Jews in Susa gathered or assembled themselves together,” 9:15).

But Esther is not through and implements another part of the third “edict” in 9:13, “And let the 10 sons of Haman be hanged up on the gallows.” Not satisfied with the already dead 10 sons of Haman, Esther demands their dead bodies be publicly exposed on the gallows. Like in the days of Joshua, the leaders of the defeated enemies of God’s people had their bodies hung on trees as a sign of being under God’s curse (c.f., Deuteronomy 21:23; Joshua 8:29). The hanging of Haman’s sons could be seen as a deceitful and bloodthirsty act on the part of Esther, a Jael-like woman of Judges 4:17-22 because Esther does not even attempt to justify to Xerxes her request for the bodies of Haman’s sons. She does not even mention the welfare of the Jewish Church. Old Testament Jewish scholar Michael Fox says, “Once sweet and compliant, Esther is now steely and unbending, even harsh . . . and bellicose.”

In an apparent response to a request coming from Mordecai and Esther Xerxes grants the Jewish Church the right to “defend” themselves with “vengeance” (“take vengeance on their enemies”) (*naqam*) by “killing and annihilating” all the people (“the army”) that would “attack them, including women and children.”

The Hebrew word usually translated “children” in 8:11 (*taph*) is also translated “little ones” since the word does not refer to teenagers but adolescents, those children between toddlers and teenagers (c.f., Numbers 14:29-31; Deuteronomy 20:14). The root of the word means “tripping gait or short, mincing steps,” describing the walking patterns of young children (c.f., Isaiah 3:16). Had Esther wanted to specify that “children” meant “young men” or “teenagers” with long memories of retaliation she would have used a different Hebrew term. She could have used *naar* or *yeled*, for instance. *Yeled* is used in Joel 3:3 to indicate a boy old enough to have sex and worth as a slave laborer (cf, 1 Kings 12:8-14; 2 Chronicles 10:8-14). *Naar* is used in Genesis 25:27 to indicate a boy on the verge of becoming a man capable of providing for his family (cf, Job 33:25; Proverbs 29:21). 2 Kings 2:24 is particularly instructive since it uses both terms in reference to rowdy teenagers tormenting Elisha. So the argument that Jews were aware that they needed to kill wives and teenage children of attacking male anti-Semites lest a new generation of haters be generated in retaliation is a bit more tough to make since the “children” were represented as being so young.

Furthermore, the use of the term “avenge” or “revenge” (*naqam*) to describe the response of the Jewish Church adds an element of intensity and pay-back that is startling. The Hebrew word translated here “vengeance” usually means that Yahweh is the source of proper vengeance and not man. Man is the secondary cause of vengeful actions doing Yahweh’s bidding. This is the case where the Old Testament Church avenge themselves on their enemies in Joshua 10:13 and Numbers 31:2-3. Sometimes Yahweh becomes the vengeful champions of his Church against her common enemy, as in Psalm 94. But sometimes, the Old Testament Church misapplied the doctrine of divine vengeance to justify vengeful feelings and actions against their enemies, as in Leviticus 19:18. The point being in Esther is Esther’s “vengeance” coming from Yahweh or from her. Because of her actions in other parts of the narrative, I take Esther to be the source of the Church’s vengeance and not Yahweh.

One interesting note to consider: Esther makes her request to Xerxes on Adar 13 to publicly hang the bodies of Haman’s boys the next day on Adar 14<sup>th</sup> (9:13) and 9:14 tells us the boys were, in fact, hung on Adar 14. The question I raise about Esther and Mordecai at this point is: In all the enthusiasm for slaughter, did Esther take the time to personally require the bodies of

the boys to be taken down before night fall on the Adar 14 as prescribed by Moses in Deuteronomy 21:23 and practiced by Joshua in Joshua 8:29 and 10:27, or did she let them swing in the wind through the night of Adair 14<sup>th</sup> and into the day of Adair 15 until the second slaughter on Adar 14 was completed. In Esther 9:18 we see that the Susa Church was busy slaughtering her city neighbors on Adar 13 and 14 and rested only on the 15th. She probably would not have stopped the blood-letting to take the 10 bodies off the gallows before nightfall on the 14<sup>th</sup> – just one day on the tree, as prescribed by Moses. So once again, it is questionable whether or not Esther was scrupulous in observing the Mosaic requirements, even though in her defense it was in the fog of war. If it is true that the names of Haman's sons are indicative of the allegiance of Haman and his family to the demonic powers of Zoroastrianism then perhaps the Mosaic law is suspended and an extra day or two on the scaffold is in order. The Persians would have no problem in letting the boys rot in the air, but perhaps the Jewish priests should have. We are not told what happened but I think there is room for speculation that Esther was not scrupulous in following Mosaic instructions in this matter since she apparently was not scrupulous in following other Mosaic requirements.

However, to be fair to Esther, without full knowledge of Esther's internal state of mind (remember the author doesn't get into the minds of these folks, other than Haman) and without knowledge of all the external circumstances, judgments against Esther should be a bit reserved. To be sure, the hanging would send an emphatic message to any remaining anti-Semites still living in Susa (c.f., Joshua 8:28-29; 10:26; 1 Samuel 31:8-10). If, after the killing of 500, presumably governmental officials, on Adar 13 and another 300 governmental officials on Adar 14, there were still pockets of anti-Semitism in "Susa the Citadel," then Esther's request for a third edict permitting the exposure and desecration of Haman's boys on Adar 14 would be an exclamation point on the message, "Don't mess with the Jewish Church."

In an attempt to defend Esther and the Jewish Church, the early Church Father Rabanus Maurus, wrote,

"Queen Esther's endeavor to successfully crush her enemies and root them out reveals the eagerness and zeal of a true queen, namely, of the holy church that constantly fights against her enemies and strives to defeat them completely and subdue them. . . And when [Esther] first kills 500 people in Susa, and then 300, she shows that eternal death awaits not only those who do not want to repent of their sins, but also those who neglect to adorn the faith of the Holy Trinity with good works." (*Explanation on the Book of Esther*, 12).

**9:16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered (*qahal*) to defend their lives, and got relief (*shaqat*) from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. 17 This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. 18 But the Jews who were in Susa gathered (*qahal*) on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting (*misteh*) and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting (*misteh*), as a holiday (*tov*), and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.**

The scene now changes from the city to the flyover country. The next 9 verses contain a departure from the historical narrative to an analysis of the slaughter of the Persian unbelievers. It is interesting to see that the country folk had one day of slaughter on the 13<sup>th</sup> and one day of celebration on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar, and the city folk in Susa the Citadel had two days of slaughter on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> and one day of celebration on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar. There is still no indication that these days were marked by worship or thanksgiving to Yahweh – only “eating and drinking,” “gladness,” “rest” and “sending gifts.” Persian believers and unbelievers, alike, loved to eat and drink.

In verse 17 we read that the provincial Church, (“village” = verse 19; Deuteronomy 3:5; 1 Samuel 6:18), empire-wide, killed 75,000 anti-Semites on one day - Adar 13 - and we read in 9:15 that on the next day, Adar 14, the city Church killed 300 men. Remember that 9:12 told us that the city believers had already killed 500 men on the Adar 13. Meanwhile, the rural Church was taking a break from the butchery with “drinking” or “feasting,” “rejoicing” and “sending gifts” - a macabre Christmas celebration of death in the spring in the desert. Making joyful noise after a military slaughter seems to be an Old Testament Church tradition:

\*We did this after the Egyptians were buried at sea in Exodus 15.

\*We did this after the victories at Jericho in Joshua 8.

\*We did this after the Church annihilated 10,000 Canaanites (and 900 chariots of Canaanite king Jabin and his commander Sisera) in Judges 5

\*And we did this after killing 75,800 (500 + 300) anti-Semitic unbelievers on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the day after their minor slaughter in Esther 9.

So the rural Jews had only one day of vengeance, Adar 13, while the urban Church in Susa had two days of vengeance, Adar 13 and 14 (verse 18)

Now, the “75,000” killed in verse 16 may be a hypothetical figure to indicate a huge revenge number rather than an exact count. The LXX reduces the number to 15,000, but first century Jewish historian, Josephus, agrees with the Hebrew text of 75,000, as does, interestingly enough, Jerome’s 4<sup>th</sup> century Vulgate Latin translation of Esther which normally depends on the Greek LXX. The author of Esther seems to have no moral problem for the large slaughter because there is no value judgment in the narrative. After all, the Persian empire was huge, the distribution of the Jewish Church was widespread throughout “the king’s provinces,” and anti-Semitism infected the Gentile population. So, 75,000 spread out over the huge Persian kingdom was probably just a drop in the bloody bucket. The liberal commentators don’t seem to have a problem with the large number because they don’t believe the historicity of Esther in the first place. As one commentator (Berlin) wrote,

“the number should be understood as being just as exaggerated as the other numbers in the story. The unbelievably large number is an additional sign that this overkill is not real killing.”

However, conservative scholars have a more difficult time with the number 75,000 because we believe the text. Gleason Archer writes, “It is most precarious reasoning to insist that the unusual is equivalent to the impossible. . . . it is by no means incredible that the Jews could have encountered and overcome such a large number of foes (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 1968). The reliable conservative Old Testament man, R.K. Harrison interprets the Hebrew word “thousands” (*alep*) in verse 16 to mean “group” or “family” and not “individual” thus vastly reducing the number of slaughtered, so it is 75 “families” or “groups” being killed (*A History of Old Testament*, 1969). However, most scholars dismiss this interpretation as not

having scriptural or little textual support. It is still possible for conservative scholars to believe that the number is hyperbole and meant to indicate a huge number of Gentiles killed, but it involves some mental gymnastics or simply passing over the verse, which some of the commentaries that I consulted did. The fact of the matter is that the Old Testament Church was a warrior Church and its history is replete with mass killings:

\*King David killed more than 80,000 (22,000 + 18,000 + 40,700) Edomites and Syrians in 2 Samuel 8 (5-13; 10:18). Also in 2 Samuel 8 (2) David defeated the Moabites and made them lie down on the ground in three rows to choose which ones to kill and which ones to spare.

\*King David annihilated the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 27 (8-9), “not leaving a man or a woman alive.”

\*King Ahab killed 127,000 Syrians in a couple of days of slaughter in 1 Kings 20 (29-30)

\*King Jehu massacred the entire town of Jezreel, plus hundreds of family members and followers of King Ahab in obedience to the will of Yahweh in 2 Kings 10. Hosea will call it “the massacre (*dham*) of Jezreel” (1:4).

The Jewish Church “gathered” to kill and “gathered” to celebrate. The closest biblical analogy to the “celebration,” the “holiday” (*tov*) commended in verse 19 is found in Nehemiah 8:10-12 in which Ezra and Nehemiah urge the Jews of Jerusalem to “eat rich foods and drink sweet wine,” “to rejoice” and to “send presents to those who have nothing,” but the Nehemiah celebration isn’t after a bloodbath.

**9:20 And Mordecai recorded (*dhabar*) these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 obliging (*koom*) them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews got relief (*nahu*) from their enemies (*oyeb*), and as the month that had been turned (*haphak*) for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday (*tov*); that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.**

With verse 20 the narrator returns from the past to the present, seemingly many years after the events recited in the first 8½ chapters of Esther. The narrator tells us that Mordecai “recorded these events and sent letters” (past tense) to the Church to have her celebrate Purim each year on Adar 14 and 15. Verse 26 is past tense: they “had faced” what had “happened to them,” and Purim has apparently become an annual festival (“what the Jews had started to do,” 9:23). Xerxes has probably been assassinated in his bedroom by this time, Mordecai is probably dead (note that he “recorded” and “sent” is the past tense), Esther may still be the queen mother.

It is noted that “Mordecai recorded or wrote (*dhabar*) these things” in 9:20 which has led some to believe that Mordecai is the author of Esther. However, it is probable that Mordecai simply recorded the celebrations that were breaking out all over Persia (in “all the provinces of Persia, near and far,” 9:20). It is thought by most contemporary scholars that Mordecai’s records do provide the source material for the book of Esther, but not the authorship of the book.

Apparently, after several years, Mordecai reviewed the events and “decreed” or “obliged” or “required” (*koom*) that there should no longer be two distinct holidays - 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar for the country folk and the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar for the city folk - but that the celebration of Purim should be on both days for both groups. Interestingly, there is no mention of Esther’s part or Xerxes’ part in

the Adar Civil Wars. Only Mordecai is mentioned by name in verses 20 to 28 in chapter 9. He is, after all, writing the history.

We finally come to the popular point of the entire book of Esther, the establishment of the holiday of Purim. “Purim,” the word, occurs 7 times in the Bible and only in the book of Esther and only in chapter 9 (vss. 24, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32), except for Haman’s “casting of pur” in chapter 3:7. “Pur” is a loan word from the Persian language. The Hebrew equivalent is *goral* which is translated into the English word “lot,” which refers to either the means used to make chance selections or the result of the chance selections (ie, “lottery” or my “lot” in life).

In verse 22, “relief” (*nahu*) is mentioned and is another theme of exilic realities. In Jeremiah’s vision of exiles returning to Zion, he predicts that young women will “dance” and “rejoice” and young and old men will be merry (31:13 c.f., Lamentations 5:15) and Isaiah predicts the same thing in Isaiah 35:10; c.f., 51:11; 57:19; 61:3). The use of these same terms, “feasting and rejoicing” in Esther may suggest that Mordecai was framing this Purim event in the great prophets’ terms of God’s covenant faithfulness to the post-exilic community. What the Jews are to celebrate is not the victory itself; were this the case, Purim would fall on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, not the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. Rather, they are to celebrate the consummated “relief from their enemies” (9:22). The verb that designates this “relief” (*nahu*) is the same word that calls to mind Haman’s words to Ahasuerus in the verse that follows his casting of pur to determine the date of the annihilation of the Jews in 3:8: “It is not in Your majesty’s interest to give them relief (leave them alone) (*lehanniham*).” Now the Jewish Church is, at long last, able to “get relief,” to “be left alone” to do God’s will, which 1 Timothy 2:2 tells us is the existential goal of the Church.

**9:23 So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. 24 For Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush (*hamam*) and to destroy them. 25 But when it came before the king, he gave orders, in writing, that [Haman’s] evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return (*shuv*) on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Therefore they called these days “Purim,” after the term “Pur.” Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, 27 the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined (*lawa*) them (*hannilvim*), that without fail they would keep these two days, according to what was written and at the time appointed, every year, 28 that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan (*mishpachah*), province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.**

Mordecai’s letter (“what Mordecai has written to them,” 9:23) gives a summary of events. However, he omits all mention of the Xerxes’s own involvement in the evil plot, thus demonstrating Mordecai’s diplomatic skill. But he does give Haman his full family identity. To have mentioned Xerxes in the context of Haman’s evil plot would have been to risk alienating Mordecai’s new political patron and incriminating a large segment of the unbelieving ruling class loyal to Xerxes who might still have anti-Semitic leanings. It is fascinating to me to see how history is spun in Mordecai’s false narrative. This retrospective summary in vss. 24-25 not only does not faithfully recount history, but it deliberately differs from the narrated facts given earlier in the book. It’s fake news. For instance:

1. The statement that “pur” or “lots” were cast to “destroy” or “consume” or “crush” or “make extinct” (*hamam*) the Jews is not accurate. Pur was cast to determine the day for the destruction, not the fact of destruction. - Haman had already decided that without the use of purim (3:16).
2. Mordecai writes that Haman’s plot was against the Jews, but it wasn’t initially. Initially, Haman’s plot was against him - “Mordecai the Jew” (3:5; 5:9, 13-14; 6:3).
3. The wording that the hanging of Haman (7:10) and the hanging of his 10 sons (9:7-10) suggests that it was one event. But the hangings were two separate events on two separate days requiring Esther to make two pleas for two separate royal edicts. Besides, the hanging of the sons might have been gratuitous.
4. Mordecai’s summary makes it appear that Xerxes’ decisive and quick response to Haman’ lethal plot delivered the Jews: “the king gave orders in writing” (9:25). Good for Xerxes, but that doesn’t tell the whole story. Xerxes dithered and only acted after the request was made by Esther, days later in 8:5-8.
5. Mordecai’s summary represents his “edict” as the direct expression of Xerxes’ personal anger at Haman in a royal edict (“The king gave orders in writing that Haman’s evil plans should turn back or return (*shav*) on his own head,” 9:25). Good for Xerxes, but that doesn’t tell the whole story. Xerxes only issued his two edicts at the behest of Mordecai and Esther, and beside Xerxes had approved and authorized “Haman’s evil plan.”

In short, Mordecai’s summary spins history because the political situation of Xerxes, Haman, Mordecai, Esther, the Jews and the anti-Semitism is radically different in chapter 9 than it was in the first 8 chapters of the book:

\*Now, Mordecai and Esther have great power. They are now part of the ruling class, the establishment, the swamp.

\*Now Xerxes is the protector and patron of the world-wide Church.

\*Now the Jews create fear and respect among the unbelieving populace

\*Now the ardent anti-Semitic movement has been decimated, or at least beheaded in Susa the Citadel.

Mordecai gives all the credit for the Jewish Church’s salvation to his benefactor, Xerxes, not to himself, not to Esther, and not to Yahweh.

Thus, Mordecai’s short, written retrospective to the Jewish Persian community in chapter 9:23-25 not only informs the Jews of the recent history in order to justify the celebration of Purim, but his history does so in such a way as to solidify the patronage of the powerful, but mercurial pagan tyrant of Persia, Xerxes. Political statecraft at work in the Bible.

Verse 25 is the clearest statement, along with 9:1, of one of the biblical principles that the book of Esther illustrates: people are caught in the traps they set for others, or the concept of reversal, particularly in Persian culture:

\*In Daniel, the “valiant Chaldean warriors” who cast the three Jews into the fiery furnace were, themselves, consumed by its flames (Daniel 3:8, 20)

\*In Daniel, the Persian accusers were devoured by the very lions intended for him (Daniel 6:24; c.f., Psalms 33:10; 94:11; Proverb 19:21; Matthew 23:11-12).

Genesis 12:3 states about Abraham’s descendants: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Like Pharaoh, Haman learns the hard way that the God’s people cannot be toyed with, with impunity.

Before we leave 9:25 and all its royal unctuous flattery, note the dark undertones. What Mordecai is saying is frightening: The Church's friends in high places are fickle and our relationships with the world are fragile, and that makes the security of the Church tenuous. We children of God cannot rely on the state to protect our lives and our property. Rather, if we are to follow the example of Esther and Mordecai, we must engage the state apparatus which Yahweh has provided for our protection and flourishing. The power lies in our united numbers, not in our individuality.

Verse 26 is in the past tense: they "had faced," and "what had happened to them," and Purim had already become an annual festival ("what the Jews had started to do," 9:23).

The phrase "all who joined them" (*lawa*) in verse 27 refers to genuine Persian unbelieving proselytes and not the quicky conversions of 8:17. It is the same Hebrew phrase used in:

\*Isaiah 14:1

\*Isaiah 56:3, 6

\*Jeremiah 50:5

\*Zechariah 2:11

to indicate genuine salvation for these "strangers to the covenant of promise" as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:12. The Hebrew word here for "joined" is also used for military units (Psalm 83:8) and even for conjugal union between husband and wife (Genesis 29:34). The unbelievers mentioned earlier in 8:17 "who declared themselves Jews" did not really have to convert to save their lives; they merely had to refrain from assaulting the Jews because the Mordecai "edict" only allowed the Jews to kill, in self-defense, those who attacked them. Once again, co-belligerency at work to accomplish God's will.

It is noteworthy that in the book of Esther an unexpected theme is God's blessing apart from returning to the Promised Land, Zion. God's faithfulness can be expected wherever his people are, and many times the "people of the land" or foreigners or the host culture will join us in worshipping Yahweh. That is a new thought for the Old Testament Church prophets and one that caused Jonah problems and one that had to be spelled out by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 29. And like the Sabbath celebration we are never to forget the faithfulness of God in preserving his Persian Church (vs. 28).

**9:29 Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming (*qum*) this second letter about Purim. 30 Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, 31 that these days of Purim should be observed (*qum*) at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts (*tsom*) and their lamenting (*zaaq*). 32 The command of (*maamar*) Queen Esther confirmed (*qum*) these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.**

Verse 29 is hard to understand and some commentators believe that the best interpretation of this verse is that Queen Esther and Mordecai, invoking the full authority of their respective offices, wrote a second letter to the Jewish Persian Church confirming the observance of Purim. The identifying of Esther as "the daughter of Abihail," so late in the narrative (after 2:15), is odd and not explained. A second batch of official letters (first batch was in 9:20) "were sent" (notice the past tense recollection) to all the Persian Jews throughout the kingdom by Esther and Mordecai

endorsing the Purim celebration of deliverance. Apparently, these missives “contained words of peace and truth” (literally: “words of good will and assurance,” c.f., Zechariah 8:19). The juxtaposition of such letters of “peace” or “goodwill” in the context of the Adar Civil War is jarring.

“Fasting” again is mentioned (verse 31) (as it was in 4:3; 4:16 and 9:31) and this time “lamenting” or “crying out” is mentioned, but still no religious meaning is given to the practice (c.f., Esther 4:16). The “fasting” is not directed towards God in worship but rather it seems, again, to be almost a secular, governmental appeasing of the Persian god - Ahura-masda. The Hebrew word for “lamenting” or “crying out” (*zaaq*) is for “crying with a loud voice,” chiefly from sorrow or fear. It is used to complain of some great sorrow or affliction or oppression or great distress. It is also used to call together a group. Purim is called a “good” day (“beneficial,” “favorable” “lovely,” “cheerful,” “delightful,” “joyful”) (*tov*) in chapter 9 (19, 2), and not a “holy” or “righteous” day. The celebration had nationalistic, non-religious tones, somewhat like our Thanksgiving or Fourth of July or Memorial Day.

Side note: But the great Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius (295-373), had a different allegorical take on Purim: “In the face of all this, brothers and sisters, what should we do but give thanks to God, the king of all? Let us start by crying out the words of the psalm, ‘Blessed is the Lord, who has not let them eat us up’ (Psalm 124:6). Let us keep [Purim] the feast in that way that he has established for our salvation – the holy day of Easter – so that we, along with the angels, may celebrate the heavenly feast. Remember that Israel, coming out of [Egyptian] affliction to a state of rest, sang a song of praise for the victory as they kept the feast. And in the time of Esther the people kept a feast to the Lord because they had been delivered from a deadly decree. (*Festal Letters*, 367).

In verse 31 we note that there is no mention of priestly approbation for celebrating Purim by “fasting” (*tsom*) and “crying out” (*zaaq*) to the LORD, only the political approval of Persian Vice President Mordecai and Persian Queen Esther and the sufferance of the Zoroastrian king, Xerxes.

The phrase “that these days of Purim should be “observed” or “remembered” or “confirmed” (*qum*) focuses on the steadfastness of our memory. From the Ten Commandments of “remembering” the Sabbath and Yahweh’s deliverance in Exodus 20:8 to “remembering” that God delivered his children from the ruthless Amalakites in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 to “remembering” the deliverance of the exiled Church from the Persian unbelievers here in Esther 9, we are to “remember” God’s faithfulness. Christianity, like Judaism, is a historically-based religion in which our practices emerge from our personal experience and corporate memory. And our experiences are to be “remembered” by “writing them down” so that we can celebrate them, as Mordecai did in 9:32 when he “recorded in writing.” Our history is the history of God’s dealing with his people and when he appears absent or hidden, these historical records are crucial in reminding us of his faithfulness. When we “remember” correctly, we conduct ourselves correctly. We see this in the ninth chapter of Esther.

The section on Purim in Esther 9:20-32 to “confirm” and “reconfirm” and “establish” the festival is parallel to attempts to establish Hanukkah as an annual festival celebrating the Maccabean rededication of the Jerusalem temple in 1 Maccabees 4:56-59 and 2 Maccabees 10:1-8. Hanukkah was also a secular holiday endorsed in letters sent by Jewish authorities (2 Maccabees 1:1- 2:18) and not by Levitical edict from Moses. Nowhere in Purim or Hanukkah do we find any word about God’s people binding themselves again to faithfulness to Yahweh or praising God for his faithfulness or reminding themselves of the need for obedience to God’s law. It is all man centered. It is like celebrating a graduation from college, a job promotion, a

political victory, good health, independence. Good and wonderful things to celebrate and all accomplished by providence, but the celebrations are not Levitical mandates.

The notion that the political Persian queen would authorize rules or “decrees” internal to the Jewish Church, while odd, finds a parallel in the Persian Zoroastrian king, Artaxerxes, commissioning Ezra to order the affairs of Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of Ezra’s own God in Ezra 7:14, 25-26. It is also noteworthy in 9:29 Esther’s name is mentioned for the first time since 8:7 indicating a subtle shift in focus in the book from Esther to Mordecai. It is a mixing of Church and state - which is on the horizon in contemporary Washington State, if not America.

## Chapter 10

**10:1 King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account (*parasa*) of the high honor (*gadol*) of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? 3 For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he had high honor (*gadol*) among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.**

The narrative returns to the domestic politics of Xerxes quite apart from the Jewish question. The shift in focus is abrupt, intrusive and strange. The greatness, wealth and splendor of Xerxes noted in verses 1 and 2 forms an *inclusio* for the entire book, going all the way back to the first couple of verses in the book of Esther, and gives a sense that politics and not religion is at the heart of the narrative. Xerxes' need for money, now that he never got Haman's dough, is stressed by his levying an empire-wide tax.

It seems that the elevation of Mordecai to the Persian Vice-President was beneficial to all Persian citizens, but especially the Jews. Mordecai is called "great" or "honorable" (*gadol*) in verse 2 and 3, as he has been called "great" twice before in 9:4. And once again we have this strange juxtaposition of Mordecai being a messenger of "goodness" and "peace" to "all" the Jews ("his brothers," "his people") while leading them in a historic massive killing spree – a sanctioned civil war. It is like we Americans did to General Ulysses Grant by electing him president of the United States (1869-1877) after he slaughtered thousands of Southern citizens in our Civil War.

All of this activity was "recorded" (given a "full account" or "story" c.f., 4:7) in a lost volume of the *Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia* (c.f., 1 Kings 14:19; 15:7, 23, 31; 1 Chronicles 27:24). The writing in verse 3, the last verse in the book of Esther, describes Mordecai in language patterned after statements about kings Solomon (1 Kings 11:41) and Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:29), thereby providing Mordecai with a concluding historical status as leader of the Jewish Church. He is celebrated like a king, and 2 Maccabees 15:36 refers to a national Old Testament Jewish Church celebration called, "Mordecai's Day."

The book of Esther ends by referencing Mordecai and not Esther. The displacement of Esther at the end of the book serves the same narrative purposes that the displacement of Ruth does in the last scene of the book named after her. In Ruth, the story ends as Ruth bears a child, thereby saving the family name that was put at risk by the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons in chapter 1. But the women in Ruth's village praise God for Naomi and Naomi's kinsman-redeemer, Boaz for the birth of his son, Obed (Ruth 4:14-15), but not Ruth, Obed's mother ("And the neighbor women said, 'A son has been born to Naomi.'" Ruth 4:17). In both stories – Ruth and Esther - the crisis begins with the individual whose identity is more typical in the community, Naomi and Mordecai. The "savior" is a marginal person – a woman in both stories – a Moabite in Ruth's case, a Jewish Persian orphan in Esther's case. Neither woman has any inherited status by birth. Esther was a Benjaminite, for sure, but in pagan Persia. Once the threat to the Church is resolved, the focus shifts back to the original persons most immediately threatened – Mordecai and Naomi. It is these threatened figures whose experience represents the plight of the whole Church.

No other woman in the Bible wrote with such authority as to permanently establish a religious holiday as Esther did in chapter 9. Towering biblical women tend to be identified as

mothers (Sarah, Ruth, Hannah, Mary) and not political figures. Esther was biblically a queen; she was only extra-biblically a mother (perhaps to Artaxerxes and Darius III?). She was politically, culturally and economically the most prominent woman the biblical Church ever produced.

Mordecai and Esther, the displaced Persians, typify for us American Christians the possibility of living a creative, rich and consequential life in a foreign and hostile environment as part of the social, political and economic dynamics of the unbelieving world. While being raised in the Old Testament Church, Mordecai and Esther were not necessarily godly persons. We have no evidence or testimony that they were pious people. They were flawed. At the same time, they remained devoted, loyal and faithful members of the Jewish Church.

Mordecai and Esther represent the reality that God places believers in high places whose dual loyalty to the social position that God has placed them and to their membership in the Church is a means of deliverance and comfort for the Church from the evil resident in the unbelieving world. 100 years before Esther, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Babylonian Church, Yahweh's admonition:

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Yahweh tells his people to be loyal to Nebuchadnezzar, and then to Xerxes and finally to Trump. The LORD says to us, “Live on the ragged edge of dual commitments to your culture and to my Church and I will preserve a remnant.” Esther teaches us that we can welcome good and beneficial political outcomes without endorsing all the means to achieve those outcomes. We Christians can participate in a government with a dubious and ambiguous political record. We can hold to a pragmatic political lifestyle while at the same time be faithful children of God. In a remarkable statement, the prophet Amos is used by Yahweh to tell the Jewish Church that the political fortunes of the Ancient Near East kingdoms are in his hands just as surely as is the future of Israel (Amos 9:7). Politics matters to our God.

In the book of Esther we see, with eyes of faith, that without a king from the Church, a believing man and woman in high places in a hostile government can be God's ambassadors for the Church's protection. Mordecai and Esther were the highest ranking believers in the world at that time, basically bearing the authority of a king and queen, not only of the Jewish Church but of the largest pagan nation in the world! Nehemiah was just the governor of Judah, an outpost of a western Persian province.

Furthermore, for those looking for a sanctified partnership between male and female in the Church, Esther provides comfort. Here was Persian queen Esther sharing her power with her older cousin, Mordecai. Marriage did not create this partnership but rather political positioning and intrigue, arising from Church nepotism. Neither Esther nor Mordecai held ordained positions in the Old Testament Church. They were secular officials, but both have come down to us in an honored place in Church redemptive history. In a world without divine direction, Mordecai and Esther are better models for the Christian political activist than Moses or Aaron (Bauckham, 1989).

Finally, it bears noting that God's people throughout the Persian empire celebrated their deliverance from extinction through the providential care of a mysterious hidden God. But at the end of the day, or more precisely at the end of the book, the earthly power was still in the hands of Xerxes, and the pagan evil Persian empire was still intact and would be for another 100 years, long after the death of Mordecai and Esther. In 331 BC another pagan, Alexander, would conquer Persia, and the evil Greek empire would take control of the hostile host culture in which

the Church existed. It would be another 700 years – to Constantine the Great (272-337) 300 years after Christ - before the Church had any real “Purim,” any real “lasting relief (*shaqat*) and deliverance (*notsal*)” that she so desired (4:14; 9:16).

## Chapter 9

**9:1** Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery (*shalet*) over them, the reverse (*haphakh*) occurred: the Jews gained mastery (*shalat*) over those who hated them. **2** The Jews gathered (*qahal*) in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen (*nephal*) on all peoples. **3** All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents (*melakah*) also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. **4** For Mordecai was great (*gadol*) in the king's house, and his fame (*shoma*) spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful (*gadol*). **5** The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated (*satam*) them. **6** In Susa the citadel itself, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, **7** and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha **8** and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha **9** and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, **10** the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

Scholars have argued whether or not the book of Esther originally concluded at the end of chapter 8, and that chapter 9 was a later addition to add closure to the story. It has been 9 months since Mordecai's edict in 8:9 - then it was "in the third month" - "Now it's the 12<sup>th</sup> month" - and there has been silence in the narrative history. It appears from 9:19 and 9:26, that Purim had already been named and begun to be celebrated (9:26, is in the past tense, "they called these days") and so the last part of chapter 9 seems to be written a bit after the first 8 and a half chapters.

But we can infer from 9:2, 5 and 16 that Haman's "edict" in 3:13 fanned the flames of anti-Semitism and that the "enemies of the Jews" (verse 1, 5, 10; those who "hated" the Jews, verses 1, 5, 16) were itching for a fight and eagerly awaiting the green light on the appointed day of violence (that is, "hoping to gain mastery over the Jews"). Finally, in March 473 BC, the beleaguered Jewish Church "assembled themselves together" (literally: "stand for their souls") (8:11; 9:16) (*qahal*) into militant "groups" or "companies" to defend themselves against the attacking anti-Semitic Persians. As I have noted, the Hebrew word used here translated "gathered" (*qahal*) is used for any gathering or assembling, religious or non-religious (1 Samuel 17:47, and that all this assembly (*qahal*) may know that the LORD does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and he will give you into our hands"; Ezekiel 17:17, "And Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company (*qahal*) will not help him in the war"; Ezekiel 23:46-47, "For thus says the LORD God, 'Bring up a company (*qahal*) against them, and give them over to terror and plunder, and the company will stone them with stones and cut them down with their swords.'").

The idea of corporate or community political action in which the whole church is involved and committed as one has been a controversial issue for centuries. What is the corporate Church's role in society? It is a relatively easy question if the "gathering" is for self-defense, but it is still an ancient question. For us in the contemporary conservative wing of American Presbyterianism the issue also has legs because it was a huge division in our ranks in the 19<sup>th</sup>, century which has carried over into 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century PCA history.

A brief walk down Ecclesiastical Lane may be enlightening: In the 1830s, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PC,USA) split into two factions: Old School, out of which the PCA has largely come, and New School (you know, “new” way of looking at Christianity), out of which the liberals have largely come. The major disagreements in the 1830s involved both the revivalism of Presbyterian Charles Finney and the social gospel of Methodist Walter Rauschenbusch and Baptist Washington Gladden which the New School championed, while the Old School championed theological orthodoxy and rigor as evidenced by a strict adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The disagreements were big enough that in 1837/1838 the national Presbyterians divided into two General Assemblies – New School General Assembly and Old School General Assembly, both still within the PC,USA. New School ministers were primarily in New York, New England and the new West, and Old School ministers were primarily in Pennsylvania/New Jersey and the South. Remember, the PCA is fundamentally a southern church and we northwesterners are currently odd ducks in the PCA. However, that 1837/1838 theological kerfuffle wasn’t enough division for the Presbyterian fathers-in-the-faith, so the Old School boys split again – northern Old Schoolers and southern Old Schoolers. This Northern vs. Southern split among the Westminster-confessing conservatives was over several issues but the one issue of

importance to us in this class on Esther is the concept of the spirituality of the church, the spiritual character of the Church.

The southern conservative Old Schoolers were led by such theological worthies as Robert Dabney:

\*whom the great late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, recognized as one of America's greatest theologians

\*David Wells wrote that Dabney was the greatest Southern Presbyterian theologian of 19<sup>th</sup> century America

\*Charles Hodge repeatedly urged Dr. Dabney to join the Princeton Seminary faculty

\*AA Hodge and William T. Shedd considered Dabney the greatest teacher of theology in the United States during his lifetime

Along with Dr. Dabney, there was the southern Church statesman and theologian, James Henley Thornwell. Both Dabney and Thornwell taught at the Old School seminary in the South, Union Seminary in Richmond, VA. When I was at Covenant Seminary in the 1970s we learned the theology of these men, with reservations, and my personal library contains books written by these men.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century northern Old Schoolers were led by men at Princeton Seminary, most especially Charles Hodge.

Hodge and Thornwell, both brilliant Old School theologians and leaders of hundreds of ministers who followed them, debated divisive issues in print, in presbytery and in person using Scripture, the Westminster standards and church history to buttress their respective positions. What it must have been like to witness these two titans battle it out!

The theological problem that increasingly divided the Old School men along sectional lines was the notion, as I've said, of the spirituality of the church. This ferocious debate, more than any other, would underlie what became the most explosive controversy of 19<sup>th</sup> century America and into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – slavery and race issues. In the decades that followed the 1837/1838 division, Presbyterian theologians argued over the relationship between the church and civil authorities. What was the role of the church in culture?

In 1847, Old School leaders had debated this issue in reference to public education. As we Presbyterians sought to extend our influence into the American culture-at-large, the notion of Presbyterian-sponsored educational academies - parochial education - became popular. Advocates, mostly in the north, of this Christian education movement, argued that an important contribution these educational institutions offered was an opportunity to promote a distinctly Christian or biblical (read Calvinist) worldview to the populace at large. However, the southern Old Schoolers believed that the state, and not the Church, should take

responsibility for educating the citizenry, and the southern brothers based this conclusion on the doctrine of the spirituality of the Church. That is, the mission of the church was purely spiritual. Its purpose and jurisdiction extended only to matters of religious faith. In the 1837 General Assembly of the entire Presbyterian Church, USA, before the split, the idea of Presbyterian educational institutions (colleges) was put to a vote and was approved. The Southerners lost this issue. There would be Presbyterian colleges. But, in 1861 the Southern Old Schoolers, since they now had their own country, closed their Presbyterian colleges. This corporate Church vs. individual Christian action was part of the DNA of southern Presbyterianism.

Concerning the Presbyterian church and the issue of slavery, in 1835 the Chillicothe Presbytery along the Ohio River in southern Ohio sent a letter to all the other presbyteries in the PC, USA detailing its abolitionist stand on slavery and recommending that the still united denomination, north and south, New School and Old School, bar slave holders from the communion table. The Presbytery of Mississippi replied that not only did the Bible support the institution of slavery but that, and here is the point for us, “the Presbytery of Chillicothe is advised not to preach on subjects which are merely moral or political, but [rather] preach Jesus Christ.” (James Smylie, “A Review of a letter from the Presbytery of Chillicothe to the Presbytery of Mississippi on the Subject of Slavery,” 1836).

In this highly charged pre-Civil War atmosphere, Dr. Thornwell launched a campaign (in 1850) in defense of the southern church's autonomy from the northern church, employing precisely the same argument he had used to oppose the Christian college movement, with a view now to race relations. In the face of the increasing northern Presbyterian hostility to the notion that Christians could own slaves, Thornwell not only defended the practice of slavery as being permitted by Scripture ("Scriptures not only fail to condemn slavery, they distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man." "Where Scriptures are silent, the church must be silent too."), but he also aggressively disputed the notion that the church had the right to even address the question of slavery – which he considered a civil matter – much less adopt an authoritative position on any political matter. With the election of Lincoln in 1860, Southern Old Schoolers echoed the rhetoric of secular political and the more liberal New School ecclesiastical secessionists and began to call for the formation of a separate Southern Old School Presbyterian denomination, not just an assembly. Remember, such a southern Presbyterian Church is the mother denomination of the PCA. The brilliant Robert Dabney counselled caution in secession, but the equally brilliant James Thornwell pressed for speedy withdrawal from the United States. At Christmas time in 1861 the Southerners gathered in Augusta, Georgia for the first General Assembly of "The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America," with Thornwell as its chief architect. In his address to the Southerners,

the lion of southern Calvinism, Thornwell, now 49 years old and dying of tuberculosis (he would die within a year), took up the theme of the spirituality of the church and eloquently, but sadly, argued that the Northern Old School General Assembly (eg, Hodge and Princeton) earlier in 1861 had, by its affirmation of the Union against the Southern Old School secessionists, had “grievously usurped authority that properly belonged only to the state.” Secession was a political matter and not a spiritual matter, it was not a matter of the soul, so the Church must stay out of the slavery debate. This anti-secessionist action on the part of the North, the dying confederate theologian (Thornwell) argued, opened the door to “the worst passions of human nature, into the deliberations of Church courts.” Thornwell argued had the Southern Old Schoolers acquiesced, capitulated in this error, like the Princetonian Old Schoolers had, the spiritual purity of the Church would be forever tarnished by worldly politics. His argument was that the courageous southern Church had preserved the whole Church’s purity by leaving the apostate northern Church which had embraced political action.

Dr. Thornwell argued that the Church has been given the power and authority by God to regulate personal morality, but not the patterns of society. He denied “that the proper end of the Church is the direct promotion of universal good. It has no commission to reconstruct society.” The authority of the Church is limited to the Bible, and not to human opinions. Specifically, Thornwell argued

that since the Bible recognizes slavery, the Church has no right to unrecognized slavery. Slavery might be evil, but the Church has no divine calling to condemn or fight against slavery since it is a civil institution. The real struggle in the slavery issue is not between the defenders and opponents of slavery, but between Christianity and atheism. Christianity views society as an “ordinance of God” and atheism views society as the “machinery of man.” Therefore, in resisting the unchristian effort to base society on purely human speculations, like equality of humans, the Southern Church was defending the nation against the anarchy of the communist revolution of 1848.

For Thornwell, the Church was a purely spiritual body which “gives life; the concrete forms in which that life appears, she leaves to the providence of God for individual expression to determine.” The Church has no business in dealing with,

“The manner in which society has organized the relation of its classes and races: Their respective rights and privileges, the position of woman, the equality or inequality of citizens – these are questions which belong to the state; and when the state does not violate the law of God, the Church has nothing to do but to accept society as given, and labor to make all its parts work harmoniously.”

Concerning slavery and the Church, Thornwell admitted that slavery was a chief reason for the split between north and south. But the central issue for Thornwell was the corporate position the Church took in regard to the institution of slavery. He noted that his new Southern denomination held no distinct position on the slavery question:

“In our ecclesiastical capacity, we are neither the friends nor the foes of slavery. We have no commission either to propagate it or abolish it. The policy of slavery’s existence or non-existence is a question which exclusively belongs to the state. We have no right, as a church, to enjoin slavery as a duty, or to condemn slavery as a sin.”

A Christian believer, as an individual, could be against slavery. That Christian would be wrong-headed, but not a heretic, like many of Thornwell’s colleagues at Princeton Seminary. It would be a personal determination based on reading the Bible. But the Church, as a corporate body, must stay out of political, economic and social affairs to keep her powder dry to preach the gospel and minister to the souls of her neighbors.

Dr. Hodge agreed with Dr. Thornwell on the essential separation of the Church and state, but he disagree sharply with Thornwell on whether or not the Church should speak into public affairs and issues of public concerns. Hodge believed that Thornwell’s view would “stop the mouth of the church, and prevent her bearing her testimony to kings and rulers, magistrates and people, in behalf of the truth and law of God.” In his response, Hodge stated that Thornwell’s view was a “poison” to be “dashed away.” It was the Church’s duty to speak the truth of God’s law in the public arena. The Church, as a corporate entity, must speak to the unregenerate, since the Church itself was a mixed body, containing many baptized members of the invisible Church and others who are not regenerate. Wheat and

tears. Hodge believed that the Church was not purely spiritual and that Presbyterians uniquely understood the mixed character of the Church.

Dr. Hodge argued that the Church, as a corporate body, should openly and boldly make formal pronouncements on issues of public morality, all the while threading the needle and avoiding pronouncements on political matters. According to the Great Commission, the church must speak only on moral matters of current issues and not public policy. The distinction between public morality and public policy was central to Hodge's understanding of how the church should engage in public affairs prior to the Civil War. While she must speak loudly on matters of public morality, she must be careful not to speak at all on matters that are purely political policy.

However, as the Civil War continued, Dr. Hodge began to blur the distinction between politics and public morality as his view was tested by the conflict. He eventually would write that the relationship between Church and state was an "exceedingly complicated and difficult subject."

In 1867, two years after the Civil War ended, Robert Dabney spoke to the Presbyterian Synod of Virginia:

"I oppose the entrusting of the destinies of our Church, in any degree whatsoever, to black rulers, because that race is not trustworthy for such position. There may be a few exceptions: (I do not believe I have ever seen one, though I have known Negros whom I both respected and loved, in their proper position), but I ask emphatically, Do legislatures frame general laws to meet the rare exceptions? Or do they adjust them to the general averages?"

To conclude, after the Civil War, for 11 years, from 1883 to 1894, Robert Dabney was the first professor of moral philosophy at the new University of Texas in Austin.

As for James Thornwell, to give you a sense of the influence of Dr. Thornwell's ideas on Presbyterian thinking, mainly in the South but also in the North, when Thornwell's four volumes of collected writings were published in 1871-72, 6 - 7 years after the Civil War ended and 10 years after his death in 1862, the editors (both Southern Presbyterian ministers of standing) wrote the following:

“A day of reaction may yet come, when the force of the views here submitted to the world will be acknowledged when the justice which has hitherto been denied to the Church of the South will be rendered by the people of Jesus, who cannot always be blinded to scriptural truth by theories of human rights and humanitarian schemes, conceived in the womb of rationalistic philosophy.”

Thornwell's post-Civil War reception compared with Dabney's eclipse is of such proportions that at the end of Dabney's life in 1898, Dabney lamented, “I have no audience.” But since I graduated from Covenant Seminary in 1973 there has been a remarkable revival in Robert Dabney's theological insights, all the while recognizing that, unhappily, like all of us he was a man of his times and geography and thus holder of sinful racial attitudes. It grieves me to admit that while Dabney and Thornwell had so many helpful things to say about my faith in Christ, they were blind to the racist worldview they embraced.

The debate over the role of the Church in society is still with us and is present in our denomination and in our congregation. We have northerner Old Schoolers and Southern Old Schoolers of various stripes here at Faith. I am a Northern Old Schooler, that's why I like the book of Esther, but as David Wells has pointed out, James Henry Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney continue to cast a giant and long shadow over Southern Presbyterians, particularly the PCA and Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi (cf, *Presbyterians and the Negro-A History*, Andrew Murray, 1966; *The Presbyterians*, Balmer/Fitzmier, 1993; *Reformed Theology in America*, David Wells, 1997; *Princeton Seminary*, Gary Steward, 2014).

And all this Presbyterian history relates to the Persian Church's reaction to Haman's political edict of extermination.

As I have already noted, scholars have pointed out that one of the guiding principles of the structure of the book of Esther is "reversal" or "contrary" or "turning over" (*haphakh*) and we see that clearly in chapter 9:

**\*9:1, "on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse (*haphakh*) occurred."**

**\*9:22, "as the month that had been turned (*haphakh*) for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday."**

**\*9:25, "But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return (*shuv*) on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows."**

This interpretation of reversal foreshadows Georg W. F. Hegel's (1770-1831) historical worldview of thesis – antithesis. This theological reversal, this thesis with a counter antithesis, has Yahweh's providence at its center as we see in numerous other places in the Scriptures:

**\*Genesis 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear.”**

**\*Isaiah 29:17 (“Is it not a very little while until [the forests of] Lebanon shall be returned (*shuv*) into fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?”)**

**\*Matthew 20:16 (“So the last will be the first and the first last.”).**

**\*Luke 1:52-53 (“he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”).**

**\*John 9:39 (“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who may become blind.”)**

**\*Acts 26:24 (“Paul, your great learning is turning you (*peritrepo*) to madness.”)**

**\*2 Thessalonians 1:6 (“God is just. He will pay back (repay) (*antapodidomi*) trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled.”)**

The reversal – the tables are turned - occurs when actions from a secular, apparent dominate kingdom of man, are overturned by the actions from a holy, hidden but truly dominate kingdom of God. This reversal is an ancient and natural law provision from God as discerned by Josephus (*Antiquities, Book 19*) and even Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1452a) as the concept of reversal of fortune called *peripeteia*, “A peripety is the change of the kind described from one state of things

within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events.”

9:2 tells us that the Church was to assemble in order to defend herself, not against general enemies or political opponents, but rather those unbelievers who looked for ways to legally kill Church members (those who “sought their harm”). It was the Persian version of the twisted movie, *The Purge*, where once a year criminals could do whatever they wanted – steal, rape, kill – thus purging themselves of all hatred and violence inside them. It is a secular expiation of sin (c.f., Isaiah 53:6; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24).

According to the irrevocable Persian edicts of Haman (3:13) and Mordecai (8:13), it is a free-for-all, the unbelievers can now kill all the Jews and the Jews can kill all the attacking unbelievers. It is noteworthy that the phrase, “sought their ruin,” refers to those anti-Semites who would actually attack the Jews, and not those who were merely biased or hostile, like those referenced in

**\*Numbers 35:23** (“or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him so that he died though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm”)

**\*1 Samuel 24:10** (“Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD’s anointed.’”) and **25:26** (“Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives, and as your soul lives since the LORD has restrained you from shedding blood, and

from avenging yourself by your own hand now then let your enemies, and those who seek evil against my lord, be as Nabal.”)

In 9:2 we have a repeat of 2:21 where everyone is trying to “lay hands” on their enemies. This is another example in the book of Esther of the biblical concept of “measure for measure,” as in **Matthew 7:2, “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”**

One little bit of mercy in this account is that those Persian unbelievers who were killed were, apparently, all “men” (verse 6). There is no reference to Persian “women and children” being killed by the Jews in self-defense, even though the Mordecai edict of 8:11 permits such killing.

In the first couple of verses of chapter 9, God’s name is again clearly avoided, even though naming Yahweh might make some theological sense at this stage, as it could have been mentioned previously in chapter 4 (2, 14, 18) and chapter 6 (1) (sleepless in Susa). In 9:3 the “help” does come, but not supernaturally from God but quite naturally from men. We see that it was Mordecai and the preparations, the “making ready,” of the Jewish Church into combat units that ostensibly turned the tide of battle, and not miraculous divine intervention. Verse 3 tells us the Persian “governing authorities” were caught between the two contradictory “edicts.” They couldn’t carry out both, so bowing to political reality they decided to carry out the Mordecai edict over against the

Haman edict because of the political power of Mordecai. The “officials,” “satraps,” “governors,” “royal agents” (*melakah*) in verse 3 are the very officials (those “in charge of the king’s business”) who, in an earlier power structure did Haman’s bidding, deposited Haman’s bribe in the king’s treasury in 3:9 - what a difference a day makes.

#### **“What a Difference a Day Makes”**

"What a Difference a Day Made" is a [popular song](#) originally written in [Spanish](#) by [María Grever](#) in 1934. The song is known in English as “What a Difference a Day Makes.” The [English](#) lyrics were written by [Stanley Adams](#) in late 1934 with the famous lyrics, “Lord, what a difference a day makes, just 24 little hours.” The most successful early recording of the song was by the [Dorsey Brothers](#) in 1934. However, [Dinah Washington](#) recorded the song in 1959 and won a [Grammy Award](#) that year. Her version was also inducted into the [Grammy Hall of Fame](#) in 1998. It also earned her first top ten Pop hit, reaching #8 on the [Billboard Hot 100](#). Many artists consider the song one of the greatest songs of the 1950s.

**“What a difference a day made Twenty-four little hours. Bought the sun and the flowers where there used to be rain. My yesterday was blue dear. Today I'm a part of you, dear. My lonely nights are through dear since you said you were mine. Lord, what a difference a day makes. There's a rainbow before me. Skies above can't be stormy since that moment of bliss, that thrilling kiss.”**

An important political consequence of the great religious civil war battles of Adar 13-14 is not the slaughter of the anti-Semites, but rather the assumption of a new status of honor and political dominion of the Church in Persia, at least momentarily, symbolized by the accession of Mordecai as Vice-President (8:15-17) to accompany Esther as queen.

In 9:5 we read the interesting phrase “as they pleased” (*kiretson*), as in the Jews “did what they wanted to do” to the anti-Semitic Gentile unbelievers. The phrase covers a multitude of sins and could include everything from boycott to punishment to enslavement to torture to killing (cf, Nehemiah 9:24, “So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they

would.” Daniel 11:16, the king of the south against the king of the north). Because of this latitude given the Jewish Church, the LXX omits this verse since it reflects badly on the children of God. The Persian unbelievers are not ordinary townsmen but as 9:1 points out they are “enemies of the Jews” who had been expected to attack the Jewish Church on the day selected for the genocide. 9:6-11 implies that the first Jewish counter-attack was in the governmental seat of the Citadel in order to cut off the head of the Persian anti-Semitic movement.

One Old Testament scholar noted at this point that “the Jewish victory in Susa the citadel” is equivalent to the successful insurrection in the World War 2-era Warsaw ghetto when 8000 SS troops were killed by Polish Jews in self-defense (cf, Andre LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 1990). But unlike the 460 BC Persian Uprising the Jews lost 13,000 in the 1943 Polish Uprising. In verse 6 we are told that the Jews killed “500 men” in “Susa the citadel.” That is strange because this governmental enclave would be filled with people who, because they would know who now has the power, who the king was befriending – Esther the Jew Queen, Mordecai the Jew Vice President, and their tribe of Jews – would hesitate to attack the favored tribe. These initial Jewish attacks in “Susa the Citadel” also indicate that the Jews had established broad, and deep and informative involvement in the Persian government (cf, 4:16, Esther to Mordecai,

“Go gather all the Jews in Susa and fast for me.”) just like the anti-Semites who knew who to attack.

The names of Haman’s sons, perhaps demonic names, in verses 7 to 9 remind readers that the Church fights not against human enemies but against

**“the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12; 2:2).**

The names of Haman’s sons are of special interest because they may be *daiva* names of ancient Persia gods. *Daiva* is an early Persian word for “gods.” *Daiva* names were once used of the gods in early Iran, but later came to be associated with demonic powers in various Eastern religions. The narrator in chapter 9 listed the names of the ten boys, possibly to show the allegiance of Haman and his family to the Zoroastrian demonic powers of darkness and evil, and therefore, proper casualties of a holy war (Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*). Furthermore, wife “Zeresh’s” name may come from the Elamite pagan goddess, “Kirisha” (Persian for “gold”) (Henry Gehman, “Journal of Biblical Language,” 1924).

Kirisha, the 'Lady of Liyan,' was worshiped principally in the south of [Elam](#). Along with [Khumban](#) and [In-shushinak](#), she formed the supreme triad of the Elamite pantheon. [Pinikir](#), another goddess, was held in the same regard in the north of Elam, but "as the centre of the kingdom gradually shifted southward, she became less important, and gave place to the 'lady of Liyan', Kirisha." Kirisha, strictly translated, means "the great goddess," in the Elamite language. This reflects a feature of the Elamite pantheon, and, likely, other ancient pagan religions of Western Asia—that of the "ill-defined character of the individual gods and goddesses. ...Most of them were not only ineffable beings whose real name was either not uttered or was unknown, but also sublime ideas, not to be exactly defined by the human race." The king, Khumban-Numena, had "a chapel built at [Liyan](#) (an Elamite port on the [Persian Gulf](#))...dedicated exclusively to Kirisha." Kirisha was sometimes merely called "'the Great' or 'the divine mother'."

However, the meaning of the Persian names of Haman's sons are uncertain, as is the meaning of the names of the seven Persian eunuchs in 1:10 or Xerxes' seven Persian princes who were his "close advisors" in 1:14 or of the three Esther eunuchs in chapters 2 and 4 (2:8, 14; 4:5). This is a shame because the names could unlock valuable information about Persian government under Xerxes.

The Jews had been brought into a position of mortal danger through no fault of their own, but by the prideful malice of a foe, and the prideful obstreperousness of the individual Jew, Mordecai. It was both natural and fitting that Mordecai and Esther should do what was in their power to extricate their fellow Church members from that danger that Mordecai helped cause by refusing to honor Haman. This reminds me of Moses killing the Egyptian overlord and being subsequently accused by his fellow Jews for the apparent necessity of having to leave Egypt in Exodus 5 (20-21). Thus no blame can be attached to the Persian Jewish Church, at this point, for self-defense.

The terms of the second edict were dictated by Mordecai and Esther themselves (8:8) and if all that it authorized the Jewish Church to do was to act in self-defense for self-preservation against any who assailed her, it would be perfectly legitimate. But, the Mordecai edict does more than this. It authorizes the Jews to take the lives of those who surely were harmless to them - the "little children and the women" (8:11). Furthermore, they were to engage in self-defense

with a “vengeful” enthusiasm. When the terms of the Mordecai edict, were announced, the people everywhere actually “rejoiced and were glad” (8:15-17). Is it believable that there were 75,800 Jew-haters in Persia itching to kill their Jewish neighbors? I say no, based on 8:15-17 (“the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced” at the news of the Mordecai edict). It is scarcely credible that as many as 75,800 Persian unbelievers would take the self-defense aggression against them by the Jewish Church laying down. Surely there would be a counter-counter attack by the Persian Gentiles. But perhaps this large number of violent Jew-haters is the reason for the third edict issued at the behest of Esther in 9:13-14 concerning the “hanging” of the sons of Haman.

In an interesting historical note, Adar 13 will become an important day in the history of the Jewish Church because it is also the day that Judah Maccabee’s forces slew the Greek Seleucid general Nicanor (“Day of Nicanor”) and beat back the Greeks (1 Maccabees 7:43-49 and 2 Maccabees 15:28-37).

Furthermore, the private property of the attacking unbelievers, according to the Mordecai edict of 8:11, was to be taken by the Church (“the king granted the Jews the right to plunder their spoil”). But 9:10 tells us that the personal possessions were in fact left untouched (that is, “no hand was laid on the plunder”). The Jewish Church was about self-preservation, not self-enrichment. Her commission from Xerxes empowered her to destroy the families of her enemies

and take their estates, but the Church killed only those who she found armed so she left alone the property and the unarmed women and little children. One 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator was quick to point out that the Church left the unbeliever's property so that unbelieving mothers and toddlers had something to survive on. Perhaps there is a hint of Deuteronomy 20:19-20 where the Canaanite fruit-bearing trees are to remain untouched when everything and everyone else (“all that breathes”) is to be destroyed by the Israelite hoard, thus providing sustenance for the Israelites when they are through killing the unbelievers. General Ulysses Grant did the same thing for Lee at Appomattox when he agreed to allow the defeated Confederate army to keep their handguns to kill critters for food and horses for spring planting. The author of the book of Esther wanted to be sure that we readers understood that “plundering” was not part of the Church's counterattack since he mentions leaving the “plunder” alone three times in chapter 9 (10, 15-16). Indeed, one 19<sup>th</sup> century Esther scholar wrote that the “people of God were morally far above their oppressors.” (John Haley, *The Book of Esther*, 1885).

Some scholars interpret the Church's action that no “personal possessions” were taken as another example of the theme of reversal. This time, the Persian Church reverses what the Church under King Saul did to the Amakekites hundreds of years before. That is, the King Saul Church spared King Agag his enemy, but took some “personal possessions” from the Amakekites and destroyed the rest (1

Samuel 15:15). The Mordecai/Esther Church took no “personal possessions” but did not spare her enemy, Haman. This theological interpretation fails, I think, because it puts too much weight on the “plundering” part of the Mordecai edict. After all, the Persian enemies of the Jewish Church are not the Amalakites so it is not the closing of the circle of the 1 Samuel 15 directive.

There is, however, another interpretation of the “no plundering” action of the Persian Church. Iain Duguid of Westminster Seminary, forcefully argues that this Persian Church action amounts to a holy war scenario. The narrator is careful to state three times that there was no “plundering” of the unbelievers’ possessions in chapter 9 (10, 15, 16), a hallmark of a holy war, even though the Xerxes/Mordecai edict approved the “plundering.” One of the articles of a biblical holy war is that booty may not be taken. For instance:

\*In Genesis 14 when Abram fought on behalf of the city-kingdom of Sodom to rescue Lot, the king of Sodom offered him a material reward. Abram refused the offer lest he would prosper with gains from the wicked city. Apparently, the Persian Church imitated Abraham who scorned to enrich himself with the spoils of Sodom and Gomorrah, “**But Abram said to the king of Sodom . . . I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’**” (vs. 23).

\*In Joshua 6 and 7, the great general Joshua, as he led the Church into the Promised Land, could do anything he wanted to the people, but the gold,

silver and precious articles taken in war were to be given or “devoted” to the LORD. Immediately after crossing the Jordan, Joshua attacked and defeated Jericho under the orders that “the city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD.” Joshua got his head handed to him when he later attacked Ai in chapter 7 because a Jewish Church member, Achan, had stolen some of the “devoted things” of Jericho.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Church took illicit plunder against the orders of Yahweh and thus often times lived no more righteous than the wicked people they conquered. In 1 Samuel 15 (18-19) Samuel thunders at the Church, “Why did you pounce on the plunder and thus do evil in the eyes of the LORD?”

Returning to Esther, Duguid and like-minded scholars argue the narrator’s emphasis that no “plunder” was taken even though it was permitted, may suggest to us that the attack against Haman and the anti-Semitics was to be thusly understood as a holy war and not a military opportunity to enrich the Church for personal gain (cf, Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

Side note: A little allegory here: God’s edict of death hangs over a sinful humanity but he has sent forth his messengers on speedy steeds with edicts of salvation to the remotest parts of the world (cf, Proverbs 24:11-12). Only by accepting and acting on the new edict of salvation can the edit of death be averted.

Besides, the enrichment of the Church it wouldn’t be pleasing to Yahweh, who some scholars believe is sanctioning a holy war here. One scholar (John Whitcomb) thinks that this no plundering policy by the Jews shows the “purity of their motives.”

However, a less religious and more practical reason for this no-booty action was simple prudence, in that the Jews were still a minority in Persia and self-defense was one thing, indiscriminate killing of women and little children and confiscating unbelievers' property to enrich themselves was another thing altogether and would lead to permanent resentment on the part of the unbelieving Persians. We have the evidence of long memories with the experience of Saul and the Amalakies and Haman.

Still, even without the "plundering" the whole thing is a brutal event and the Esther/Mordecai assault is ruthless and ferocious, and it is hard for commentators to admit this, except if one colors it as a holy war. One scholar noted: "Rather than being indicative of her blood-thirsty nature, it is more likely that the reader should notice Esther's determination to eliminate hatred against the Jews" (Reid, *Esther*). Perhaps, but I don't see it that way. Yahweh punished David for needlessly shedding too much blood in 1 Chronicles 22:8 ("But the word of the LORD came to me saying, 'You have shed much blood, and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood on the earth before me.'") and I Chronicles 28:3. And the fact is, this Mordecai/Esther bloody reprieve from Persian extermination does not stop the decline of the Jewish Church as she will suffer under Greek and Roman oppression and eventually morph into the Gentile Church in several hundred years.

**9:11 That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. 12 And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the**

**citadel, the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men (*ish*) and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." 13 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged (*talah*) on the gallows." 14 So the king commanded this to be done. A decree (*dath*) was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. 15 The Jews who were in Susa gathered (*qahal*) also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men (*ish*) in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.**

Xerxes seems more impressed by the death toll of his Persian unbelievers than by the Jewish Church's deliverance. In the course of this paragraph in chapter 9 (11-15) we learn that despite Haman's slander about the Jews to Xerxes in 3:8 - the Jews do keep and abide by the king's laws – the Jews are law-biding by slaughtering the unbelievers in accordance with the Mordecai law/edict. Except that, ironically, the Church was a law-breaker by not plundering the attackers. Astonishingly, the story tells us that Xerxes was content to let Esther kill more unbelieving Persians on the second day by issuing a third "edict" because, jaw-droppingly, he seems more interested in pleasing (ie, sleeping) with the beautiful Jewess than in curbing her blood-lust (verse 12). We ought now to be used to the insatiable appetites of Xerxes, but these appetites are still astonishing to us after all these years.

Verse 12 is interesting. The NIV has this verse containing a question: "What have the Jews done in the rest of my kingdom?" That is, "How many unbelievers

have you Jews killed today? Give me a report.” The NESV, however, has this as a declarative statement: “Good night, look at what your Jews have done in other parts of Persia. They have been on a rampage throughout my kingdom.” I prefer the NIV framing a question because Xerxes follows his question with the promise “Do whatever you want. It doesn’t really make any difference to me.”

It kind of reminds me of **Jean Valjean** lament after robbing the kindly priest who had just given him shelter in [Les Misérables](#).

*“What have I done? What have I done?  
Become a thief in the night, become a dog on the run?  
Have I fallen so far, and is the hour so late,  
That nothing remains but the cry of my hate?”*

Xerxes’ offer to fulfill Esther’s second request is worded almost exactly, identically to the three offers that he has made to her earlier in 5:3, 5:6 and 7:2. However, there is nothing whatsoever in the chapter 9 narrative that would prepare us for Esther’s additional request for yet another “edict” or “decree.” Indeed, exactly the opposite is true. The Jewish Church’s victory of the preceding day has completely fulfilled the request Esther has already made. Why should Xerxes suppose that she has any further petitions to make? Some commentators see Xerxes as a pliable despot seeking courtly advice for his actions. I don’t see Xerxes like that, at all. Without any solicitation, he acts decisively on his own, giving Esther *carte blanche* with his unbelieving Persian subjects, as long as she goes to bed with him.

Esther's actions are just an inexplicable. Haman's edict had limited any legally-sanctioned attack on the Jewish community to just one day - Adar 13 (3:13). Mordecai's edict likewise limited the Jewish response to just one day – Adar 13 (8:12). 9:5 tells us that the Jews are now perfectly safe since “they have put all their enemies to the sword.” So what is the need for yet another “edict” authorizing yet another day of slaughter? A huge day of slaughter. We are left to speculate.

Thus on Adar 14 there is a second massacre of 300 “men” or “husbands” in the capital city of Susa (9:15) where 500 “men” or “husbands” (9:12) had already been massacred the previous day, Adar 13. If all these measures were necessary in self-defense, they would need no justification, but the narrative seems to make it clear that this was not necessarily the case. One Old Testament scholar (Paton) notes that this second massacre of 300 “men” shows a malignant spirit of revenge more akin to the teaching of the Talmud than the Old Testament. I would add the Koran, as well. Abraham Kuyper compares Esther to King Herod's wife as “embodying some of the same bloodthirstiness.” (cf, Matthew 14:8) (*Women of the Old Testament*, 1933). The English Christian novelist, Evelyn Waugh once wrote,

“Barbarism is never finally defeated; given propitious circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly will commit every conceivable atrocity. The danger does not come merely from habitual hooligans; we are all potential recruits for anarchy.” (Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles and Review of Evelyn Waugh*, 1983).

The Esther story pictures the Jews surrounded by “haters” or “enemies” (*oyeb*) (9:1, 5, 16, 22; 8:13) but no overt act is attributed to the “haters.” In 9:15 we will be told that another 300 men were killed in the Citadel of Susa on the additional day of slaughter. The point to be taken is, that the Jews had a cadre, a nest of anti-Semitic government workers against them and were simply draining the swamp of Persian governmental anti-Semitism in the Citadel. Mordecai’s command to Esther that she keep her ethnic identity a secret implies that some danger to her and the Jews may have been resident in government circles - Susa the Citadel. So we can understand killing 500, presumably governmental leaders in the anti-Semitism movement on Adar 13, by armed and organized and trained Jewish militants (“Jews in Susa gathered or assembled themselves together,” 9:15).

But Esther is not through and implements another part of the third “edict” in **9:13, “And let the 10 sons of Haman be hanged up on the gallows.”** Not satisfied with the already dead 10 sons of Haman, Esther demands their dead bodies be publicly exposed on the gallows in Susa the Citadel (9:14). Like in the days of Joshua, the leaders of the defeated enemies of God’s people had their bodies hung on trees as a sign of being under God’s curse (Deuteronomy 21:23; Joshua 8:29). The hanging of Haman’s sons could be seen as a deceitful and bloodthirsty act on the part of Esther, a Jael-like woman of Judges 4 (17-22) because Esther does not even attempt to justify to Xerxes her request for the bodies

of Haman's sons. She does not even mention the welfare of the Jewish Church. Old Testament Jewish scholar Michael Fox says, "Once sweet and compliant, Esther is now steely and unbending, even harsh ... and bellicose."

impalement

One interesting note to consider: Esther makes her request to Xerxes on Adar 13 to publicly impale the bodies of Haman's boys the next day on Adar 14<sup>th</sup> (9:13) and 9:14 tells us the boys were, in fact, impaled on Adar 14. The question I raise about Esther and Mordecai at this point is: In all the enthusiasm for slaughter, did Esther take the time to personally require the bodies of the boys to be taken down before night fall on the Adar 14 as prescribed by Moses in Deuteronomy 21:23 and practiced by Joshua in Joshua 8 (29) and 10 (27)? Or did she let them swing in the wind through the night of Adair 14<sup>th</sup> and into the day of Adair 15 until the second slaughter on Adar 14 was completed? In Esther 9:18 we see that the Susa Church was busy slaughtering her city neighbors on Adar 13 and 14 and rested only on the 15th. She probably would not have stopped the blood-letting to take the 10 bodies off the gallows before nightfall on the 14<sup>th</sup> – just one day on the stake, as prescribed by Moses.

So once again, it is questionable whether or not Esther was scrupulous in observing the Mosaic requirements, even though in her defense it was in the fog of war. If it is true that the names of Haman's sons are indicative of the allegiance of Haman and his family to the demonic powers of Zoroastrianism then perhaps the Mosaic law is suspended and an extra day or two on the pike is in order. The Persians would have no problem in letting the boys rot in the air, but perhaps the Jewish priests should have. We are not told what happened but I think there is room for speculation that Esther was no more scrupulous in following Mosaic instructions in this matter than she was scrupulous in following other Mosaic requirements. We are left in the dark.

However, to be fair to Esther, without full knowledge of Esther's internal state of mind (remember the author doesn't get into the minds of these folks, other than Haman) and without knowledge of all the external circumstances, judgments against Esther should be a bit reserved. To be sure, the impalement of the boys would send an emphatic message to any remaining anti-Semites still living in Susa (Joshua 8:28-29; 10:26; 1 Samuel 31:8-10). If, after the killing of 500, presumably governmental officials, on Adar 13 and another 300 Persian bureaucrats on Adar 14, there were still pockets of anti-Semitism in "Susa the Citadel," then Esther's request for a third "edict" permitting the exposure and desecration of Haman's

boys on Adar 14 would be an exclamation point on the message, “Don’t mess with the Jewish Church.”

#### “Hang’em High” theme

"Hang 'Em High" is a musical theme composed by [Dominic Frontiere](#) for the 1968 Clint Eastwood [film of the same name](#). It was recorded by the [Hugo Montenegro](#) orchestra for the film, but the tune became a hit in 1968 by [Booker T. & the M.G.'s](#).

#### “The Hanging Tree”

“The Hanging Tree” is a western ballad written by [Mack David](#) and [Jerry Livingston](#) for the 1959 Yakima-filmed movie, [The Hanging Tree](#). David and [Livingston](#) received nominations for the [Laurel Awards](#) and the [Academy Awards](#) in 1960. Sung by Marty Robbins in the film the song was also released Robbin’s best-selling 1959 album, [Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs](#). [Frankie Laine](#) performed the song at the [32nd Academy Awards](#) in 1960. Members of the [Western Writers of America](#) chose it as one of the Top 100 Western songs of all time.

**“I came to town to search for gold and I brought with me a memory. And I seem to hear the night wind cry, "Go hang your dreams on the hangin' tree, your dreams of love that could never be. Hang your faded dreams on the hangin' tree!" I searched for gold and I found my gold, and I found a girl who loved just me, and I wished that I could love her too. But I'd left my heart on the hangin' tree, I'd left my heart with a memory.”**

In an attempt to defend Esther and the Jewish Church, the early Church Father Rabanus Maurus, wrote,

“Queen Esther’s endeavor to successfully crush her enemies and root them out reveals the eagerness and zeal of a true queen, namely, of the holy church that constantly fights against her enemies and strives to defeat them completely and subdue them. . . And when [Esther] first kills 500 people in Susa, and then 300, she shows that eternal death awaits not only those who do not want to repent of their sins, but also those who neglect to adorn the faith of the Holy Trinity with good works.” (*Explanation on the Book of Esther*, 12).

**9:16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered (*qahal*) to defend their lives, and got relief (*shaqat*) from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. 17 This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. 18 But the Jews who were in Susa gathered (*qahal*) on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting (*misteh*) and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting (*misteh*), as a holiday (*tov*), and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.**

The scene now changes from the city to the flyover country. The next 9 verses contain a departure from the historical narrative to an analysis of the

slaughter of the Persian unbelievers. It is interesting to see that the country folk had one day of slaughter on the 13<sup>th</sup> and one day of celebration on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar, and the city folk in Susa the Citadel had two days of slaughter on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> and one day of celebration on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar. There is still no indication that these days were marked by worship or thanksgiving to Yahweh – only “eating and drinking,” “gladness,” “rest” and “sending gifts.” Persian believers and unbelievers, alike, loved to eat and drink.

In verse 17 we read that the provincial Church, (“village” = verse 19; Deuteronomy 3:5; 1 Samuel 6:18), empire-wide, killed 75,000 anti-Semites on one day - Adar 13 - and we read in 9:15 that on the next day, Adar 14, the city Church killed 300 men. Remember that 9:12 told us that the city believers had already killed 500 men on the Adar 13. Meanwhile, the rural Church was taking a break from the butchery with “drinking” or “feasting,” “rejoicing” and “sending gifts” - a macabre Christmas celebration of death in the spring in the desert. Making joyful noise after a military slaughter seems to be an Old Testament Church tradition:

\*We did this after the Egyptians were buried at sea in Exodus 15.

\*We did this after the victories at Jericho in Joshua 8.

\*We did this after the Church annihilated 10,000 Canaanites (and 900 chariots of Canaanite king Jabin and his commander Sisera) in Judges 5

\*And we did this after killing 75,800 (500 + 300) anti-Semitic unbelievers in Persia in Esther 9.

So the rural Jews had only one day of vengeance, Adar 13, while the urban Church in Susa had two days of vengeance, Adar 13 and 14 (verse 18)

Now, the “75,000” killed in verse 16 may be a hypothetical figure to indicate a huge revenge number rather than an exact count. The LXX reduces the number to 15,000, but first century Jewish historian, Josephus, agrees with the Hebrew text of 75,000, as does, interestingly enough, Jerome’s 4<sup>th</sup> century Vulgate Latin translation of Esther which normally depends on the Greek LXX. The author of Esther seems to have no moral problem for the large slaughter because there is no value judgment in the narrative. After all, the Persian empire was huge, the distribution of the Jewish Church was widespread throughout “the king’s provinces,” and anti-Semitism infected the Gentile population. So, 75,000 spread out over the huge Persian kingdom was probably just a drop in the bloody bucket. The liberal commentators don’t seem to have a problem with the large number because they don’t believe the historicity of Esther in the first place. As one commentator (Berlin) wrote,

“the number should be understood as being just as exaggerated as the other numbers in the story. The unbelievably large number is an additional sign that this overkill is not real killing.”

However, conservative scholars have a more difficult time with the number 75,000 because we believe the text. Gleason Archer writes, “It is most precarious

reasoning to insist that the unusual is equivalent to the impossible. . . . it is by no means incredible that the Jews could have encountered and overcome such a large number of foes (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 1968). The reliably conservative Old Testament man, R.K. Harrison interprets the Hebrew word “thousands” (*alep*) in verse 16 to mean “group” or “family” and not “individual,” thus vastly reducing the number of slaughtered, so it is 75 “families” or “groups” being killed (*A History of Old Testament*, 1969). However, most scholars dismiss this interpretation as not having scriptural or little textual support. It is still possible for conservative scholars to believe that the number is hyperbole and meant to indicate a huge number of Gentiles killed, but it involves some mental gymnastics or simply passing over the verse, which some of the commentaries that I consulted did. The fact of the matter is that the Old Testament Church was a warrior Church and its history is replete with mass killings:

\*King David killed more than 80,000 (22,000 + 18,000 + 40,700) Edomites and Syrians in 2 Samuel 8 (5-13; 10:18). Also in 2 Samuel 8 (2) David defeated the Moabites and made them lie down on the ground in three rows to choose which ones to kill and which ones to spare.

\*King David annihilated the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 27 (8-9), “not leaving a man or a woman alive.”

\*King Ahab killed 127,000 Syrians in a couple of days of slaughter in 1 Kings 20 (29-30)

\*King Jehu massacred the entire town of Jezreel, plus hundreds of family members and followers of King Ahab in obedience to the will of Yahweh in 2 Kings 10. Hosea will call it “the massacre (*dham*) of Jezreel” (1:4).

Esther’s Jewish Church “gathered” to kill and “gathered” to celebrate. The closest biblical analogy to the “celebration,” the “holiday” (*tov*) commended in verse 19 is found in Nehemiah 8:10-12 in which Ezra and Nehemiah urge the Jews of Jerusalem to “eat rich foods and drink sweet wine,” “to rejoice” and to “send presents to those who have nothing,” but the Nehemiah celebration isn’t after a bloodbath.

#### “Celebration”

“Celebration” reached #1 on the [Billboard “Hot 100”](#) chart in 1981, and held that position for two weeks. By late 1980, the song had also reached #1 on both the Billboard “[Dance](#)” and [R&B](#) charts. The song featured heavily on the radio for nearly the entire year of 1980 and is still heard today at weddings and parties, and is a popular anthem for sporting events, especially if the team wins. It was also an international hit, reaching #7 in the [United Kingdom](#) in 1980, overall spending 13 weeks in the chart.

**“Yahoo! This is your celebration Yahoo! This is your celebration. Celebrate good times, come on! (Let’s celebrate) Celebrate good times, come on! (Let’s celebrate). There’s a party goin’ on right here A celebration to last throughout the years So bring your good times, and your laughter too We gonna celebrate your party with you. Come on now. Celebration Let’s all celebrate and have a good time Celebration We gonna celebrate and have a good time. It’s time to come together It’s up to you, what’s your pleasure. Everyone around the world Come on! Yahoo! It’s a celebration Yahoo! Celebrate good times, come on! It’s a celebration Celebrate good times, come on! Let’s celebrate. We’re gonna have a good time tonight Let’s celebrate, it’s all right We’re gonna have a good time tonight Let’s celebrate, it’s all right. Baby. We’re gonna have a good time tonight (Celebration) Let’s celebrate, it’s all right We’re gonna have a good time tonight (Celebration) Let’s celebrate, it’s all right. Yahoo! Yahoo! Celebrate good times, come on! (Let’s celebrate) Celebrate good times, come on! It’s a celebration! Celebrate good times, come on! (Let’s celebrate). Come on and celebrate, good times, tonight (Celebrate good times, come on!) ‘Cause everything’s gonna be all right Let’s celebrate (Celebrate good times, come on) (Let’s celebrate).”**

**9:20 And Mordecai recorded (*dhabar*) these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 obliging (*koom*) them to keep the fourteenth day of the**

**month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews got relief (*nahu*) from their enemies (*oyeb*), and as the month that had been turned (*haphak*) for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday (*tov*); that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.**

With verse 20 the narrator returns from the past to the present, seemingly many years after the events recited in the first 8½ chapters of Esther. The narrator tells us that Mordecai “recorded these events and sent letters” (all past tense) to the Church to have her celebrate Purim each year on Adar 14 and 15. Verse 26 is past tense: they “had faced” what had “happened to them,” and Purim has apparently become an annual festival (“what the Jews had started to do,” 9:23). Xerxes has probably been assassinated in his bedroom by this time, Mordecai is probably dead (note that he “recorded” and “sent” – all past tense), Esther may still be the queen mother.

It is noted that “Mordecai recorded or wrote (*dhabar*) these things” in 9:20 which has led some to believe that Mordecai is the author of Esther. However, it is probable that Mordecai simply recorded the celebrations that were breaking out all over Persia (in “all the provinces of Persia, near and far,” 9:20). It is thought by most contemporary scholars that Mordecai’s records do provide the source material for the book of Esther, but not the authorship of the book.

Apparently, after several years, Mordecai reviewed the events and “decreed” or “obliged” or “required” (*koom*) that there should no longer be two distinct

holidays - 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar for the country folk and the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar for the city swells - but that the celebration of Purim should be on both days for both groups.

Interestingly, there is no mention of Esther's part or Xerxes' part in the Adar Civil Wars. Only Mordecai is mentioned by name in verses 20 to 28 in chapter 9. He is, after all, providing the source material for the history.

We finally come to the popular point of the entire book of Esther, the establishment of the holiday of Purim. "Purim," the word, occurs 7 times in the Bible and only in the book of Esther and only in chapter 9 (vss. 24, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32), except for Haman's "casting of pur" in chapter 3 (7). "Pur" is a loan word from the Persian language. The Hebrew equivalent is *goral* which is translated into the English word "lot," which refers to either the means used to make "chance" selections or the result of the "chance" selections (i.e., "lottery" or my "lot" in life).

In verse 22, "relief" (*nahu*) is mentioned and is another theme of exilic realities. In Jeremiah's vision of exiles returning to Zion in 31:3, he predicts that young women will "dance" and "rejoice" and young and old men will be merry:

**"I will turn (overturn) (*haphak*) their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow" (c.f., Lamentations 5:15)**

and Isaiah predicts the same thing in **Isaiah 35:10,**

**"and the ransomed of the LORD will return (turn back) (*shub*). They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.**

**Gladness and joy will overtake them; and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”**cf, 51:11; 57:19; 61:3).

The use of these same terms, “feasting and rejoicing” in Esther may suggest that Mordecai was framing this Purim event in the great prophets’ terms of God’s covenant faithfulness to the post-exilic community. What the Jews are to celebrate is not the victory itself; were this the case, Purim would fall on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, not the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. Rather, they are to celebrate the consummated “relief from their enemies” (9:22). The verb that designates this “relief” (*nahu*) is the same word that calls to mind Haman’s words to Ahasuerus in the verse that follows his casting of pur to determine the date of the annihilation of the Jews in 3:8: “It is not in your majesty’s interest to give them relief (leave them alone) (*lehanniham*).” Now the Jewish Church is, at long last, able to “get relief,” to “be left alone” to do God’s will, which 1 Timothy 2:2 tells us is the existential goal of the Church.

**9:23 So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. 24 For Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush (*hamam*) and to destroy them. 25 But when it came before the king, he gave orders, in writing, that [Haman’s] evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return (*shuv*) on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Therefore they called these days “Purim,” after the term “Pur.” Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, 27 the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined (*lawa*) them (*hannilvim*), that without fail they would keep these two days, according to what was written and at the time appointed, every year, 28 that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan**

**(*mishpachah*), province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.**

Mordecai's letter (noted in 9:23 "what Mordecai has written to them") gives a summary of events. However, he omits all mention of the Xerxes's own involvement in the evil plot, thus demonstrating Mordecai's diplomatic skill. But he does give Haman his full family identity. To have mentioned Xerxes in the context of Haman's evil plot would have been to risk alienating Mordecai's new political patron and incriminating a large segment of the unbelieving ruling class loyal to Xerxes who might still have anti-Semitic leanings. It is fascinating to me to see how history is spun in Mordecai's narrative. This retrospective summary in vss. 24-25 does not faithfully recount history, but it deliberately differs from the narrated facts given earlier in the book. It's fake news. For instance:

1. The statement that "pur" or "lots" were cast to "destroy" or "consume" or "crush" or "make extinct" (*hamam*) the Jews is not precisely accurate. Pur was cast to determine the day for the destruction, not the fact of destruction.  
- Haman had already decided that without the use of the purim (3:16).
2. Mordecai writes that Haman's plot was against the Jews, but it wasn't initially. Initially, Haman's plot was against him - "Mordecai the Jew" (3:5; 5:9, 13-14; 6:3).

3. The wording that the hanging of Haman (7:10) and the impaling of his 10 sons (9:7-10) suggests that it was one event. But the hangings were two separate events on two separate days requiring Esther to make two pleas for two separate royal edicts. Besides, the impaling of the sons might have been gratuitous.

4. Mordecai's summary makes it appear that Xerxes' decisive and quick response to Haman's lethal plot delivered the Jews: "the king gave orders in writing" (9:25). Good for Xerxes, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Xerxes dithered and only acted after the request was made by Esther, days later in 8:5-8.

5. Mordecai's summary represents his "edict" as the direct expression of Xerxes' personal anger at Haman in a royal edict ("The king gave orders in writing that Haman's evil plans should turn back or return (*shav*) on his own head," 9:25). Good for Xerxes, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Xerxes only issued his two edicts at the behest of Mordecai and Esther, and beside Xerxes had approved and authorized "Haman's earlier evil plan."

In short, Mordecai's summary spins history because the political situation of Xerxes, Haman, Mordecai, Esther, the Jews and the anti-Semitism is radically different in chapter 9 than it was in the first 8 chapters of the book:

\*Now, Mordecai and Esther have great power. They are now part of the ruling class, the establishment, the swamp.

\*Now Xerxes is the protector and patron of the world-wide Church.

\*Now the Jews create fear and respect among the unbelieving populace

\*Now the ardent anti-Semitic movement has been decimated, or at least beheaded in Susa the Citadel.

Mordecai gives all the credit for the Jewish Church's salvation to his benefactor, Xerxes, not to himself, not to Esther, and not to Yahweh.

Thus, Mordecai's short, written retrospective to the Jewish Persian community in chapter 9 (23-25) not only informs the Jews of the recent history in order to justify the celebration of Purim, but his history does so in such a way as to solidify the patronage of the powerful, but mercurial pagan tyrant of Persia, Xerxes. Political statecraft at work in the Bible.

Verse 25 is the clearest statement, along with 9:1, of one of the biblical principles that the book of Esther illustrates: people are caught in the traps they set for others, or the concept of reversal, particularly in Persian culture:

\*In Daniel, the "valiant Chaldean warriors" who cast the three Jews into the fiery furnace were, themselves, consumed by its flames (Daniel 3:8, 20)

\*In Daniel, the Persian accusers were devoured by the very lions intended for him (Daniel 6:24) (cf, Psalms 33:10; 94:11; Proverb 19:21; Matthew 23:11-12).

**Genesis 12:3** states about Abraham's descendants: **“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** Like Pharaoh, Haman learns the hard way that God's people cannot be toyed with, with impunity.

Before we leave 9:25 and all its royal unctuous flattery, note the dark undertones. What Mordecai is saying is frightening: The Church's friends in high places are fickle and our relationships with the world are fragile, and that makes the political security of the Church tenuous. We children of God cannot rely on the state to protect our lives and our property. Rather, if we are to follow the example of Esther and Mordecai, we must engage the state apparatus which Yahweh has provided for our protection and flourishing. The power lies in our united numbers, not in our individuality.

Verse 26 is in the past tense: they “had faced,” and “what had happened to them,” and Purim had already become an annual festival (“what the Jews had started to do,” 9:23).

The phrase “all who joined them” (*lawa*) in verse 27 refers to genuine Persian unbelieving proselytes and not the quicky conversions of 8:17. It is the same Hebrew phrase used in:

**\*Isaiah 14:1** (“sojourners will join (*lawa*) them and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob”), **\*Isaiah 56:3, 6** (“foreigner who has joined (*lawa*) himself to the LORD”),

**\*Jeremiah 50:5** (“Come let us join (*lawa*) ourselves to the LORD in an everlasting covenant.”)

**\*Zechariah 2:11** (“Many nations shall be joined (*lawa*) to the LORD in that day.”).

to indicate genuine salvation for these “strangers to the covenant of promise” as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:12. The Hebrew word here for “joined” is also used for military units (Psalm 83:8) and even for conjugal union between husband and wife in Genesis 29:34. The unbelievers mentioned earlier in 8:17 “who declared themselves Jews” did not really have to convert to save their lives; they merely had to refrain from assaulting the Jews because the Mordecai “edict” only allowed the Jews to kill, in self-defense, those who attacked them. Once again, co-belligerency at work to accomplish God’s will.

It is noteworthy that in the book of Esther an unexpected theme is God’s blessing apart from returning to the Promised Land, Zion. God’s faithfulness can be expected wherever his people are, and many times the “people of the land” or foreigners or the host culture will join us in worshipping Yahweh. That is a new thought for the Old Testament Church prophets and one that caused Jonah

problems and one that had to be spelled out by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 29. And like the Sabbath celebration we are never to forget the faithfulness of God in preserving his Persian Church (vs. 28).

Finally, now to wrap up chapter 9:

**9:29 Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming (*qum*) this second letter about Purim. 30 Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, 31 that these days of Purim should be observed (*qum*) at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts (*tsom*) and their lamenting (*zaaq*). 32 The command of (*maamar*) Queen Esther confirmed (*qum*) these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.**

Verse 29 is hard to understand and some commentators believe that the best interpretation of this verse is that Queen Esther and Mordecai, invoking the full authority of their respective offices, wrote a second letter to the Jewish Persian Church confirming the observance of Purim. The identifying of Esther as “the daughter of Abihail” in verse 29, so late in the narrative (after 2:15), is odd and not explained. But the family connection is worth noting because the narrator puts Abihail and Xerxes in the same sentence. So we have in one statement Esther’s identity as a Church member and a secular government official – one foot in both camps.

A second batch of official letters “were sent” (first batch was in 9:20, notice the past tense recollection) to all the Persian Jews throughout the kingdom by

Esther and Mordecai endorsing the Purim celebration of deliverance. Apparently, these missives “contained words of peace and truth” (literally: “words of good will and assurance,” cf, Zechariah 8:19). The juxtaposition of such letters of “peace” or “goodwill” in the context of the Adar Civil War is jarring.

“Fasting” again is mentioned (verse 31) (as it was in 4:3; 4:16 and 9:31) and this time “lamenting” or “crying out” is mentioned, but still no religious meaning is given to the practice: (4:16, “Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, I and my young woman will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.’”). The “fasting” is not directed towards God in worship but rather it seems, again, to be almost a secular, governmental appeasing of the Persian god - Ahuramasda. The Hebrew word for “lamenting” or “crying out” (*zaaq*) is for “crying with a loud voice,” chiefly from sorrow or fear. It is used to complain of some great sorrow or affliction or oppression or great distress. It is also used to call together a group. We note that there is no mention of priestly approbation for celebrating Purim by “fasting” (*tsom*) and “crying out” (*zaaq*) to the LORD, only the political approval of Persian Vice President Mordecai and Persian Queen Esther and the sufferance of the Zoroastrian king, Xerxes. Purim is called a “good” day (“beneficial,” “favorable” “lovely,” “cheerful,” “delightful,” “joyful”) (*tov*) in chapter 9 (19, 2), and not a “holy” or “righteous” day. The celebration had nationalistic, non-religious tones, somewhat like our Thanksgiving or Fourth of

**July or Memorial Day.** But the great Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius (295-373), had a different

allegorical take on Purim:

“In the face of all this, brothers and sisters, what should we do but give thanks to God, the king of all? Let us start by crying out the words of the psalm, ‘Blessed is the Lord, who has not let them eat us up’ (Psalm 124:6). Let us keep [Purim] the feast in that way that he has established for our salvation – the holy day of Easter – so that we, along with the angels, may celebrate the heavenly feast. Remember that Israel, coming out of [Egyptian] affliction to a state of rest, sang a song of praise for the victory as they kept the feast. And in the time of Esther the people kept a feast to the Lord because they had been delivered from a deadly decree. (*Festal Letters*, 367).

The phrase “that these days of Purim should be “observed” or “remembered” or “confirmed” (*qum*) focuses on the steadfastness of our memory. From the Ten Commandments of “remembering” the Sabbath and Yahweh’s deliverance in Exodus 20:8 to “remembering” that God delivered his children from the ruthless Amalakites in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 to “remembering” the deliverance of the exiled Church from the Persian unbelievers here in Esther 9, we are to “remember” God’s faithfulness. Christianity, like Judaism, is a historically-based religion in which our practices emerge from our personal experience and corporate memory. And our experiences are to be “remembered” by “writing them down” so that we can celebrate them, as Mordecai did in 9:32 when he “recorded in writing.” Our history is the history of God’s dealing with his people and when he appears absent or hidden, these historical records are crucial in reminding us of his faithfulness. When we “remember” correctly, we conduct ourselves correctly. We see this in the ninth chapter of Esther.

## **“Try to Remember”**

The section on Purim in Esther 9:20-32 to “confirm” and “reconfirm” and “establish” the festival is parallel to attempts to establish Hanukkah as an annual festival celebrating the Maccabean rededication of the Jerusalem temple in 1 Maccabees 4 (56-59) and 2 Maccabees 10 (1-8). Hanukkah was also a secular holiday endorsed in letters sent by Jewish authorities (2 Maccabees 1:1- 2:18) and not by Levitical edict from Moses. Nowhere in Purim or Hanukkah do we find any word about God’s people binding themselves again to faithfulness to Yahweh or praising God for his faithfulness or reminding themselves of the need for obedience to God’s law. It is all man centered. It is like celebrating a graduation from college, a job promotion, good health, independence - a political victory, which it was. Good and wonderful things to celebrate and all accomplished by providence, but the celebrations are not Levitical mandates.

The notion that the political Persian queen would authorize rules or “decrees” internal to the Jewish Church, while odd, finds a parallel in the Persian Zoroastrian king, Artaxerxes, commissioning Ezra to order the affairs of Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of Ezra’s own God in Ezra 7 (14, 25-26). It is also noteworthy in 9:29 Esther’s name is mentioned for the first time since 8:7 indicating a subtle shift in focus in the book from Esther to Mordecai. It is a

mixing of Church and state - which is on the horizon in contemporary Washington State, if not America.

## Chapter 10

**10:1 King Ahasuerus imposed (*sum*) tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account (*parasa*) of the high honor (*gadol*) of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? 3 For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he had high honor (*gadol*) among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.**

The narrative returns to the domestic politics of Xerxes quite apart from the Jewish question. The shift in focus is abrupt, intrusive and a bit strange. The greatness, wealth and splendor of Xerxes noted in verses 1 and 2 forms an *inclusio* for the entire book, going all the way back to the first couple of verses in the book of Esther, and gives a sense that politics and economics, and not religion is at the heart of the narrative. Xerxes' need for money, now that he never got Haman's dough, is stressed by his "imposing" or "levying" a empire-wide tax.

It seems that the elevation of Mordecai to the Persian Vice-President was beneficial to all Persian citizens, but especially, of course, the Jews. Mordecai is called "great" or "honorable" (*gadol*) in verse 2 and 3, as he has been called "great" twice before in 9:4. And once again we have this strange juxtaposition of Mordecai being a messenger of "goodness" and "peace" to "all" the Jews ("his brothers," "his people") while leading them in a historic massive killing spree – a sanctioned civil war. It is like we Americans did to General Ulysses Grant by

electing him president of the United States (1869-1877) after he slaughtered thousands of Southern citizens in our Civil War.

All of this activity was “recorded” (given a “full account” or “story” cf, 4:7) in a lost volume of the *Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia* (cf, 1 Kings 14:19; 15:7, 23, 31; 1 Chronicles 27:24). The writing in verse 3, the last verse in the book of Esther, describes Mordecai in language patterned after statements about Kings Solomon (1 Kings 11:41, “Now the rest of the acts of Solomon and whatever he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon?) and Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:29, “Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah?”), thereby providing Mordecai with a concluding historical status as leader of the Jewish Church. He is celebrated like a king, and 2 Maccabees 15:36 refers to a national Old Testament Jewish Church celebration called, “Mordecai’s Day.”

The book of Esther ends by referencing Mordecai and not Esther. The displacement of Esther at the end of the book serves the same narrative purposes that the displacement of Ruth does in the last scene of the book named after her. In Ruth, the story ends as Ruth bears a child, thereby saving the family name that was put at risk by the deaths of Naomi’s husband and sons in Ruth 1. But the women in Ruth’s village praise God for Naomi and Naomi’s kinsman-redeemer, Boaz for the birth of the boy, Obed (Ruth 4:14-15), but not Ruth, Obed’s mother (“And the neighbor women said, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’” Ruth 4:17). In both stories

– Ruth and Esther - the crisis begins with the individual whose identity is more typical in the community, Naomi and Mordecai. The “savior” is a marginal person – a woman in both stories – a Moabite in Ruth’s case, a Jewish Persian orphan in Esther’s case. Neither woman has any inherited status by birth. Esther was a Benjaminite, for sure, but that meant nothing in Persia. Once the threat to the Church is resolved, the focus shifts back to the original persons most immediately threatened – Mordecai and Naomi. It is these threatened figures whose experience represents the plight of the whole Church.

No other woman in the Bible wrote with such authority as to permanently establish a religious holiday as Esther did in chapter 9. Towering biblical women tend to be identified as mothers (Sarah, Ruth, Hannah, Mary) and not political figures. Esther was biblically a queen; she was only extra-biblically a mother (perhaps to Artaxerxes and Darius III?). She was politically, culturally and economically the most prominent woman the biblical Church ever produced.

Mordecai and Esther, the displaced Persians, typify for us American Christians the possibility of living a creative, rich and consequential life in a foreign and hostile environment as part of the social, political and economic dynamics of the unbelieving world. While being raised in the Old Testament Church, Mordecai and Esther were not necessarily godly persons. We have no

evidence or testimony that they were pious people. They were flawed. At the same time, they remained devoted, loyal and faithful members of the Jewish Church.

Mordecai and Esther represent the reality that God places believers in high positions whose dual loyalty to the social position that God has placed them and to their membership in the Church is a means of deliverance and comfort for the Church from the evil resident in the unbelieving world. 100 years before Esther, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Babylonian Church, Yahweh's admonition:

**“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).**

Yahweh tells his people to be loyal to and pray for Nebuchadnezzar, and Xerxes and finally, Trump. The LORD says to us, “Live on the ragged edge of dual commitments to your culture and to my Church and I will preserve a remnant.”

In the book of Esther we see, with eyes of faith, that without a king from the Church, a believing man and woman in high places in a hostile government can be God's ambassadors for the Church's protection and advancement. Mordecai and Esther were the highest ranking believers in the world at that time, basically bearing the authority of a king and queen, not only of the Jewish Church but of the largest pagan nation in the world! Nehemiah was just the governor of Judah, an outpost of a western Persian province.

Furthermore, for those looking for a sanctified partnership between male and female in the Church, Esther provides comfort. Here was Persian queen Esther sharing her power with her older cousin, Mordecai. Marriage did not create this partnership but rather political positioning and intrigue, arising from Church nepotism. Neither Esther nor Mordecai held ordained positions in the Old Testament Church. They were secular officials, but both have come down to us in an honored place in Church redemptive history.

Finally, it bears noting that God's people throughout the Persian empire celebrated their deliverance from extinction through the providential care of a mysterious, hidden God. But at the end of the day, or more precisely at the end of the book, the earthly power was still in the hands of Xerxes, and the pagan evil Persian empire was still intact and would be for another 100 years, long after the death of Mordecai and Esther and anyone else alive during their time. In 331 BC another pagan, Alexander, would conquer Persia, and the evil Greek empire would take control of the hostile host culture in which the Church existed. It would be another 700 years – to Constantine the Great (272-337) 300 years after Christ - before the Church had any real "Purim," any real "lasting relief (*shaqat*) and deliverance (*notsal*)" that she so desired (4:14; 9:16).