

LESSON 30

The end of verse 1 says that “the Jews had rule over them that hated them.” Here the word “hated” refers to hatred in action. We see a similar usage in Deuteronomy 30.

Deuteronomy 30:7 – And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee.

This hatred was more than just an emotion – these haters were actively seeking to harm the Jews. They were acting on their emotion of hatred.

Verse 2 makes it clear that the Jews destroyed only those who sought to destroy them. That means they sought to destroy only those who physically attacked them, and not merely those who wished them harm. The Jews’ intention was not to go on a murderous rampage, but rather was to wreak vengeance on their attackers, or at least on those who were planning to attack them.

Verse 2 also shows that the Jews, as a whole, had, like Esther, undergone a transformation. No one could stand against the Jews because the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. Why the great fear?

Perhaps it was because the people now saw that the Jews had some favor and protection from the king. Or perhaps it was because the people now knew that Queen Esther was a Jew. Or perhaps it was because the people understood that there was power behind the scenes working on behalf of the Jews. And perhaps it was because the Jews themselves had become emboldened and encouraged when they recognized the hand of God at work in these events.

Esther 9:3-4

3 And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them. 4 For Mordecai was great in the king’s house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.

Verse 3 tells us that the Persian officials helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai, who was growing more and more powerful. And, unlike with Haman, the Persians apparently needed no order from the king to fear Mordecai.

It is amazing, both then and now, how fast the political winds can change. And then, as now, power draws politicians like moths to a flame. These same officials had, no doubt, been Haman's greatest admirers not too long ago; now they were proud members of the Mordecai fan club! And, in verse 4, Mordecai's fame spreads all throughout Persia.

The verb translated "helped" in verse 3 literally means "to lift, bear, or carry." The same verb was used in Esther 3:1 to describe the promotion of Haman. Once again, we see a reversal: previously it was Haman who was lifted up by the king (and later lifted up on the gallows by that same king!), but now it is the Jews who are lifted up.

Verse 4 tells us that "this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater." These descriptions may be an allusion back to another great deliverer of God's people.

Exodus 11:3 – And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.

If Mordecai is being compared with Moses, then that allusion serves another purpose – it suggests a parallel between the commemoration of the feast of Purim (established in this book) and that of Passover, which is the subject of Exodus 11. Both feasts celebrate a great deliverance.

Esther 9:5-11

5 Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them. 6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men. 7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha, 8 And Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha, 9 And Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vajezatha, 10 The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew they; but on the spoil laid they not their hand. 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.

The words in verse 5 – slaughter and destruction – parallel the words in the two decrees.

Verse 5 also tells us that the Jews "did what they would unto those that hated them." That is, the Jews did as they pleased with those who hated them. That phrase ("did as they pleased") is important because it highlights the reversal between this outcome and the outcome that Haman had planned for

the Jews.

Esther 3:11-And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

Haman had been told by the king that he could do as he pleased with the Jews, but in the end it was the Jews who did as they pleased with the Persians who attacked them.

The phrase “in Susa the palace” in verse 6 is emphasized by its placement at the beginning of the verse. Why the emphasis? Because the text is acknowledging the very unusual circumstances that would allow the killing of so many people right outside the king’s palace. Kings typically did not like that sort of activity to occur anywhere near them.

That only 500 men in Susa were killed by the Jews tells us that most Persians (at least in Susa) did not attack the Jews. (But later we will see that 75,000 were killed elsewhere.)

Why were Haman’s sons killed?

Most likely they were among those enemies who were seeking to harm the Jews. That is certainly suggested by the context in verse 5. The 500 Persians killed in Susa may have even been led by the 10 sons of Haman who are named in verses 7-9.

As one commentary notes, it was inevitable that Haman’s sons would be killed. They had lost their inheritance when the king gave away Haman’s house in 8:1, and they were, no doubt, causing trouble now that Haman’s big day had arrived. I suspect that Haman’s sons had been looking forward to this day more than anyone else.

And, of course, it was also a prudent political action that would prevent Haman’s descendants from taking vengeance against the Jews as Haman, a descendant of King Agag, had attempted to do earlier in this same book!

The death of his 10 sons also serves to demonstrate Haman’s total defeat. In Esther 5:11, Haman bragged to his wife and friends about his riches, his many sons, and all the ways the king had promoted him.

Each of those sources of pride has now been stripped away from Haman and given over to the Jews: his riches were given to Esther in 8:1; his promotions given to Mordecai in 8:2; and now his sons, too,

have fallen into the hands of the Jews. With the death of his sons, Haman's downfall is complete.

The names of Haman's sons provide us some more evidence of the authenticity of the book of Esther. How?

In ancient times, it was common practice in many lands for parents to give their children names that incorporated the name of a deity. Haman's sons bear names that incorporate the names of Persian deities. The deities referenced here were still worshiped as gods by some Persians in the time of Xerxes, but as Zoroastrianism took hold in the realm (during the days of Xerxes' successor Artaxerxes I), these same Persian deities came to be regarded as demons. And so, these names reflect the language of the era of Xerxes rather than that of his successors, which is evidence that this book is historical fact and also that it was not written a long time after the events that it describes.

In the earliest Hebrew texts, the sons of Haman are listed in two parallel columns (with the names in one column and the conjunctions in the other column), and rabbis and commentators have speculated about it ever since. (See the handout. The manuscript on the right is from the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. It dates to around AD 1000.)

Why are those names written that way?

Some suggest that was the way they were hanged on the gallows. Others suggest it shows that God's enemies had been set apart for destruction. A similar arrangement of names is found in the list of conquered Canaanite kings in Joshua 12:9-24.

“It is as if the author wants the reader to ponder each name, for with each death comes the final blow to Haman's pride.”

At the reading of the Esther scroll on Purim, the names are recited in a single breath, to illustrate the contempt in which Haman and his lineage was held among the Jews.

The text unexpectedly tells us three times that the Jews did not lay their hand on any plunder. Why is that unexpected? Because the second edict – written by Mordecai – specifically allowed for the taking of plunder by the Jews.

It must have been very important that no plunder was taken because we are told that three times. Why was it important that no plunder be taken?

First, it was important for the Persians to know that the Jews were just defending themselves – the Jews, unlike Haman, were not motivated by material gain. In short, not taking any plunder would show the Persians that God’s people were different from the other peoples that surrounded them.

“The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and remembered and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities.”

One commentary described the repeated statements about plunder as “an explicit nudge to the reader,” and I agree. I think the text is telling us that, despite the horrific things the Jews were given permission to do, this is not all about the Jews becoming like the other nations. The Jews were different even when they had royal permission not to be!

Second, in not taking plunder, the Jews were pointing us all back to a key event in the life of Abraham. After Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek in Genesis 14, the king of Sodom offered Abraham the goods that had been recovered in battle. But Abraham did not take them. Instead, we read:

Genesis 14:22-23 - But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’

If that event is a backdrop here in Esther 9, then once again the reader is being invited to see the Jews’ faith in God and their reliance on God.

Third, in not taking plunder, the Jews were fulfilling God’s command to Saul regarding the Amalekites (although the only Amalekites we know about for sure are Haman and his sons, and they are all now dead), and, unlike Saul, they would not disobey that command by taking plunder. Remember what Samuel said to King Saul:

1 Samuel 15:19-“Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?”

Saul had pounced on the spoil! The Jews were not going to do that here. Perhaps they were also remembering Achan in Joshua 7 and how he brought destruction on the people by keeping plunder.

By not taking any plunder, the Jews were doing something here that we do not see them doing very often in the Bible - they were learning from their mistakes! The Jews of Persia obeyed God where King Saul had disobeyed God.

If we are looking for God in the book of Esther, he is pretty easy to see right here. Why else would the Jews not take the plunder? What reason could there be other than their faith and reliance on God?

Given that, it is again very odd that the decree – written by Mordecai – permitted plunder in the first place. Was Mordecai really motivated here by a desire to obey where Saul had disobeyed? If so, why did Mordecai include a plunder provision in his decree? Again, we aren't told.

But the simplest explanation may be the best - if the order had not permitted plunder, then certainly no inference about the Jews could be drawn from their failure to take plunder. It is only because plunder was permitted that we are now asking why the Jews did not take plunder.

Also, as with the permission to kill the women and the children, it was important that the two decrees be balanced - that each side would have the same permission as the other side to inflict damage.

I mentioned that Haman and his sons are the only Amalekites we know about here, but that is not how the Jews view these events. Jewish tradition has just about everyone in Persia being an Amalekite. They say that all of those killed were Amalekites, and that they represented “all the chiefs of the house of Amalek,” but the inspired text does not tell us that.

Note also that the text here says nothing about the killing of women and children, although (as we discussed) Mordecai's edict gave the Jews the right to do so (Esther 8:11). The text makes special note of the fact that the Jews departed from the express words of the decree by taking no spoils, but it says nothing about them not killing women and children.

Should we assume, then, that the Jews did kill women and children? Were some of Haman's ten sons still children when they were killed? There is no indication in the text that Haman was an old man, and in those days, a man would continue to father children as long as he could. Again, we are not told – and while the body count in verse 6 is of the “men,” the silence on that issue in verses 7-9 may be telling.

Esther 9:12-15

12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done. 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow also according unto this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and the decree was given at Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons. 15 For the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan; but on the prey they laid not their hand.

What is the king thinking in verse 12? Is he worried that so many had been killed so close to where he himself now was? Is he upset by it? Is he concerned? Is he angry? Is he astonished? Does he admire the Jews' victory? We don't know.

The king informs Esther about the 500 deaths in Susa and about the deaths of Haman's 10 sons, and he wonders what must have taken place in the other provinces. He also asks Esther what she wants now – although this time there is no mention of half his kingdom.

Some suggest the king's question should be read, "Surely in light of what you have achieved, you can't want anything more!" But Esther does want something more. Esther wants a second day of fighting in Susa, and she wants the bodies of Haman's 10 dead sons to be hanged on the gallows.

A detail that seems to have escaped many commentators is why Esther is with the king here in the first place. The queen was not in the habit of lingering in the king's presence, and the king was not in the habit of summoning her. Why are they together in verse 12?

Evidently, the reason Esther is with the king now is because she has come before him once again as a suppliant. Certainly, that is how Xerxes interprets her presence, because he asks her to present her petition in verse 12. (Xerxes couldn't get Vashti to appear in Chapter 1 – and now he can't seem to get Esther to disappear!)

Esther's request has caused some controversy among commentators. She asks the king to let the fighting continue for another day in Susa, and she asks that the bodies of Haman's 10 already dead sons be hanged on the gallows for all to see.

Here is how some commentators have described Esther's request:

- “For this horrible request no justification can be found.”
- Esther’s request shows that she was “a deceitful and bloodthirsty woman.”
- Esther “had begun to feel the heady intoxication of the power she has so remarkably attained.”
- “Esther seems harder, blunter, even cruel.”
- Esther’s request to hang the dead bodies of Haman’s sons is “a case of her malignant spirit of vengeance pursuing them even after death.”

Before we ask why Esther made these two requests, we should first note that her requests are granted without hesitation. For whatever it is worth, the queen’s requests do not seem to have been a shock to the king. He grants them at once in verse 14.

Haman’s ten sons, killed the day before, are impaled in a public demonstration to serve as a deterrent to others. To any who might have had doubts, it is now graphically clear to all that Haman’s ambitions have come to nothing. Haman’s lineage has been cut off; his house has been left destitute. The fate that Mordecai had warned might come upon Esther (Esther 4:14) has instead befallen Haman.

But why was the fighting in Susa to continue for a second day? After all, under Haman’s original decree the Persians could not lawfully have attacked the Jews on the second day, and so the Jews did not need to defend themselves on that second day. Why did Esther request that the fighting continue another day?

Had Esther turned vindictive? She provides no justification to the king for the request, and he doesn’t ask for one. She makes no mention of the welfare of her people.

Mordecai is not mentioned as being in on this request, which may suggest Esther is acting on her own. Had the power gone to her head? What was Esther thinking? As usual, we aren’t told.

So why the continued fighting? The wording of Esther’s request is the key to understanding the reason for the second day of fighting - “let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow **also according unto this day’s decree.**”

Esther asks that the Jews (only in Susa) be allowed to do for a second day as they had done on the first day. The same rules would apply on this second day as had applied on the first day: the Jews

would be permitted to kill anyone who attacked them.

Given the carnage that the Jews had just visited on their enemies, it seems reasonable that survivors might seek revenge, whatever the law would allow. In fact, in an honor-driven culture, it would be their responsibility to do seek revenge. A royal edict allowing a second day of violent self-defense would serve as a deterrent against any such reprisals.

Another factor that may play into Esther's request for the second day of killing is the backdrop of the Jewish-Amalekite struggle. In 1 Samuel 15, the Israelites had failed to carry out God's instructions to utterly annihilate the Amalekites. Now, that failure had come back to haunt the Jews in the person of Haman and his evil decree. This time, the Jews were going to make sure that their enemies were destroyed utterly.

Perhaps some Amalekites had survived the first day. Haman had been a very powerful person in the empire, and he may yet have had allies in the empire just waiting for their opportunity to carry out his evil plans. A big clue to the reason for Esther's request for more fighting is Esther's request that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman be publicly exposed to serve, no doubt, as a warning to others - especially to other Amalekites.

I think Esther was not being vindictive or bloodthirsty – Esther was being wise. She knew with whom she was dealing, and she was not going to make the mistake of underestimating her enemy.

Why only in Susa? Perhaps that was only where the Amalekites lived, but more likely it was the practical reason that word of a second day of fighting would not be able to reach the provinces in time to make any difference.

On the second day of fighting, 300 additional men are killed in Susa, which shows that there were in fact some enemies who remained alive after the first day.

And this second day of fighting explains why the feast of Purim is celebrated on two consecutive days. The Jews referred to this second day as "Mordecai Day" (which is odd because Esther is the one who requested it).

#ezra-esther