

THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

ESTHER 8:13 – 10:3

The Jews celebrate their deliverance

¹³A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies.

¹⁴So the couriers, mounted on their swift royal steeds, hurried out, urged by the king's command. The decree was issued in the citadel of Susa.

¹⁵Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. ¹⁶For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honour. ¹⁷In every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday. Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

^{9:1}Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and edict were about to be executed, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes, ²the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who had sought their ruin; and no one could withstand them, because the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples.

³All the officials of the provinces, the satraps and the governors, and the royal officials were supporting the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. ⁴For Mordecai was powerful in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces as the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.

⁵So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.

To this point we have the impression that Xerxes has given permission to the Jews to defend themselves should any of Haman's supporters take advantage of the earlier edict and attempt to annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (see 8:11). We notice a shift in verse 13 which speaks of the Jews taking revenge.

As expected the edict brought joy to the Jews. Furthermore they had a powerful ally in Mordecai: one of their own is now prime minister of the Empire.

Chapter 9 verse 1 speaks of the Jews gaining power over their enemies. The verb 'gathered' in verse 2 is derived from the Hebrew word for the Jewish 'assembly' [קָהָל, qāhāl].

Their action in verses 2 and 5 is not presented as a defensive one. Rather, they are taking the initiative with a pre-emptive strike, doing to their enemies what their enemies had plotted to do to them.

In this passage the author changes focus. Having finished the main drama he begins to move to the background for the festival of Purim.

He gives an account of the slaughter instigated by the Jews, who have turned the tables on their enemies. They are acting according to the so-called *lex talionis*:

If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

– Exodus 21:23-25

The detail that the Jews did not plunder (verse 10) is repeated in verses 15 and 16. The author seems to want to stress that the Jews fought for survival, not plunder. There is also an allusion to King Saul's action against the Amalekites (1Samuel 15). He lost his crown because he plundered.

The author seems unconcerned at the picture he paints of Esther in verse 13. The function of her request is to explain the second day of celebration of Purim, based on a second day of battle.

Verse 19 appears to be a marginal note added to explain a custom for which we have no other evidence. It does not fit with verses 21-22.

⁶In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people. ⁷They killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, ⁸Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, ⁹Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha, ¹⁰the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews; but they did not touch the plunder.

¹¹That very day the number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king.

¹²The king said to Queen Esther, "In the citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people and also the ten sons of Haman. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." ¹³Esther said, "If it pleases 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 exposed on the gallows." ¹⁴So the king commanded this to be done; a decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were exposed.

¹⁵The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed three hundred persons in Susa; but they did not touch the plunder.

¹⁶Now the other Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder. ¹⁷This 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.

¹⁸But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the open towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, a holiday on which they send one another gifts of food.

Purim – an established festival

²⁰Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. ²³So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

²⁴Haman 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 “the lot”—to crush and destroy them; ²⁵but when Esther came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.

²⁶Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur. Thus 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, ²⁷the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them, that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written and at the time appointed. ²⁸These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Having offered a ‘historical’ basis for the festival of Purim, the author, in verses 20-28, ‘explains’ why Purim, though not in the Torah, came to be celebrated as a religious festival.

Verses 29-32 appear to be an addition to the Hebrew text. It supports the practice of fasting and lamenting in memory of the ways in which Jews have been oppressed, leading up to celebration and joy at their deliverance.

To reinforce the thrust of his story, the author tells his readers that they can check the ‘facts’ for themselves in ‘the annals of the kings of Media and Persia’ (verse 2). No such record is extant.

²⁹Queen Esther daughter of Abihail, along with the Jew Mordecai, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. ³⁰Letters were sent wishing peace and security to all the Jews, to the one hundred twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, ³¹and giving orders that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as the Jew Mordecai and Queen Esther enjoined on the Jews, just as they had laid down for themselves and for their descendants regulations concerning their fasts and their lamentations. ³²The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

^{10:1}King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea. ²All the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? ³For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants.

