

Handout Esther Lesson 2

The story presents Mordecai as the prototypical Jew who is wise, judicious, and devoted to Yahweh. Esther is the humble and dutiful Jewish daughter, and Haman is the worst example of someone who is proud, overbearing, and allows himself to become Satan's tool in his hatred of the Jews as God's holy covenant people.

The King returned to Susa in 480 BC after his defeat by the Greeks and sent the order to bring beautiful maidens to Susa from all the provinces across the Persian Empire the same year (2:1-4).

2:5-7 repeats LXX 1:m-r and also appears as a repeat in the Septuagint, but also contains additional information concerning Hadassah/Esther. Curiously, the name Hadassah is missing from all versions of the LXX. The "citadel" is a fortification within the city of Susa with the royal palace within the fortress.

Mordecai is not an authentic personal name from this period. In this period, the name Mrdk (without vowels) appears in Aramaic documents and in cuneiform tablets as Mar-du-uk-ka or Mar-duk-ka. In the LXX his name appears as Mardocheus which is similar to the Persian names. There is evidence of Mordecai's existence in a cuneiform text dating to the last years of Darius I or the early years of his son Ahasuerus I/Xerxes I. The tablet mentions a government official named Marduka who sat at the king's gate (see Est 2:19; 5:13; 6:10) and who was later rewarded with broad administrative authority (see Esth 8:2).

Archaeology confirms a sizeable Jewish population living in the Medo-Persian Empire in the discovery of an archive in the Persian city of Nippur in southern Mesopotamia and dating to the period of Ahasuerus' son Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC) and his son Darius II (424-405 BC). The archive contained the names of about 100 Jews living in the city with some having attained positions of importance and wealth.

In 2:9, the eunuch assigned seven maidservants to Esther. The number seven appears twelve times in the narrative, and there are seven feasts in the story. In the significance of numbers in Scripture, both seven and twelve are among the so-called "perfect numbers."

In 2:16, the tenth month of Tebeth in modern calendars is December/January. The seventh year of the king's reign was 479 BC (this is the seventh mention of the number seven in the narrative).

21 At this time Mordecai was attached to the Chancellery

The royal department of "the Chancellery" is literally "the king's gate" and refers to the king's administrative department that was often carried housed in the rooms associated with the main gate leading into the royal compound. Archaeologists excavated the main city gate of Susa in 1970 and uncovered the gatehouse where, according to 2:21, Mordecai had an administrative office. The gatehouse was an imposing structure about 87.5 yards (80 m.) east of the palace with a center room about 23 yards (21 m) square. Huge columns flanked the structure. An inscription in three languages from the period of Ahasuerus/Xerxes celebrated the construction of the gatehouse by his father Darius I and honored the Persian god Ahura Mazda.

The account in 2:19-23 differs from the LXX 1:12m-r account in several ways:

1. Esther is already the Queen.
2. Instead of Mordecai warning the king, he tells Esther who informs the king concerning the plot on his life.
3. There is no mention of Mordecai recording the events in a private journal.
4. There is no reward offered for his service.
5. The account does not mention that he came to the attention of Haman as the object of his hatred.

In 3:7 the date is in the spring (March/April) of 474 BC, five years after Esther married the king according to how we count the years but six years as the ancients counted. The twelfth month is Adar (February/March).

The two great dragons in Mordecai's dream are preparing to fight, and the Jew's salvation will depend on the humble "little stream" that is Esther. A gleam of hope comes from knowing that in the history of the people of God, the struggle between the Amalekites (Haman's ancestors) and the Israelites (Mordecai's ancestors) ended in victory for the Israelites/Jews. The conflict between Haman and Mordecai symbolizes the struggle between the people of God and the powers of the world. In that life or death battle, Israel, with God's help, remains victorious.

Concerning the choices Christians have to make when their obedience to God comes into conflict with the secular world, St. Josemaria Escriva wrote, "When the defense of truth is at stake, how can one desire neither to displease God nor to clash with one's surroundings? These two things are opposed: it is either the one or the other! The sacrifice has to be a holocaust where everything is burned up, even what we call our reputation" (St J. Escriva, *Furrow*, 34).

The banquet in 3:15 is the fifth of seven feasts in the Book of Esther:

1. the banquet for the king's ministers of state, provincial governors, and army commanders (1:3-4)
2. the king's feast for the people living in the citadel of Susa (1:5-5)
3. Queen Vashti's banquet for the wives (1:5-5)
4. Esther's wedding feast (2:18)
5. the feast celebrating the sending out of the edict for the destruction of the Jews (3:15)
6. Esther's first banquet for the King and Haman (5:6-8)
7. Esther's second banquet for the King and Haman (7:1-10)

"The Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplors all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews" (Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, 4).

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