

VI. Jewish Response to the Edict (4:1-17)

The news of Ahasuerus' edict spread like wildfire, and in every place its words were read it brought a visceral response from those who heard. Interestingly, the writer first concerns himself with the anxious response of the residents of Susa – most of whom were not Jewish. Two questions ought to arise in the reader's mind:

- First of all, why would the whole population of the Medo-Persian capital be startled and dismayed by the edict when it called for the Jews' annihilation and not their own?
- Second, why would the author take note of the Medo-Persian response before addressing the reaction of the Jews?

The first question is reasonably answered by observing that the edict authorized every armed force of every province in the empire to rise up on the appointed day and slaughter all the Jews within their jurisdiction (ref. 8:11). Such an arrangement would certainly provoke astonishment and confusion. But the text suggests more than that; it seems the writer intended to convey that *this sort of decree was without precedent* in Medo-Persia. Susa's citizens were shocked because they had never before seen such an edict calling for the annihilation of an entire race of people.

This also helps to explain why the author chose to address the Gentile response first. By indicating that this act of genocide was unprecedented in the history of the Medo-Persian Empire – an empire well acquainted with massive and brutal military campaigns, he puts in perspective the scope and severity of this coming “purging.” In this way the writer not only heightens the story's tone of despair, he provides a context for understanding the intense reaction of the Jews.

A. The Jews' Lamentation (4:1-5)

1. In considering the Jewish response to the edict, the narrative begins with Mordecai and then mirrors his reaction in all the Jews throughout the provinces. Everywhere the news spread it was met with loud and bitter wailing and the donning of sackcloth and ashes.
2. The writer also notes that the Jews responded with *fasting*, and this observation makes an important contribution to the story. The reason is that the Jews fasted in relation to their interaction with God, particularly as they sought His forgiveness or merciful intervention (1 Samuel 7:1-6; 1 Kings 21:18ff; Ezra 8:21ff). The Day of Atonement provides a good case in point. God's prescription for Yom Kippur didn't specify fasting, but the sons of Israel fasted nonetheless. For the Lord did command them to prepare for that most holy day by denying themselves – by “bringing their souls low” before Him (Leviticus 23:27), and such a focused and contrite state of mind naturally tends to express itself in fasting.

And so, by pointing out the Jews' fasting the writer was reinforcing the story's perspective, namely that the God who is unmentioned – unmentioned because He has apparently abandoned His people in exile, is not absent. Furthermore, their fasting implies hearts and voices crying out to Yahweh in hope that He has not forgotten His promise to the fathers and His covenant with David.

3. Even within the sheltered world of the king's palace Esther could not escape the crisis, and her attendants soon brought her word of what had been decreed. At this point, however, she didn't have a clear idea of all that was involved. She was filled with anguish at the news, but also sent Mordecai new clothes to replace his sackcloth. The implication seems to be that she didn't understand the full scope or significance of the king's edict. When Mordecai refused her gift, she sent again to inquire what exactly had transpired that had put the city and him in such a state of distress (3:4-5).

B. Mordecai's Plea (4:6-14)

1. When Esther's eunuch Hathach came to Mordecai with her inquiry, he sent him back to her with a copy of the king's edict along with the explanation that this decreed destruction was the fruit of an evil scheme concocted by Haman because of Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to him. Most importantly, he instructed the servant to issue Esther his personal charge that she go in to the king and, beseeching his favor as his wife, plead for the lives of her people (4:6-8).
2. Hathach returned to Esther, showed her the edict and relayed Mordecai's words to her. In response she sent the eunuch back once again to inform her cousin that, while she, too, was in agony over this turn of events, Mordecai wrongly presumed that she had a peculiar place of influence with Ahasuerus. While Medo-Persian law permitted anyone to seek an audience with the king, no one – not even the queen herself – could simply march into his presence without permission. Anyone who dared to do so, unless by chance he caught the king at a time of unusual generosity, would find his impudence rewarded with death. Furthermore, the king had not called for her for the past month, and so she had no reason to believe he would grant her an audience (vv. 9-12). And even if he did, this matter involved Haman, a man whom Ahasuerus had just exalted to the head of his kingdom.
3. To this response Mordecai sent back his own reply: Esther should not presume that her privileged position would afford her exemption from the coming destruction. She, too, was a Jew and would surely receive the same sentence as her countrymen. Death confronted her whether she remained silent or not. At the same time, she must not think that the fate of her people rested upon her decision. Should she fail to act, *the Jews would nonetheless obtain relief in the form of deliverance from another place* (4:14a).

As he did before, but this time explicitly, the writer gives a glimpse into his perspective and purpose in composing his account. To some, the inclusion of this statement in the narrative may appear pointless, since by the time of his writing the outcome of this crisis had already been realized (10:2). But the author was not merely stating the obvious; he recorded Mordecai's insight in order to draw attention to the fact that forces and concerns were at work behind the temporal events. The story goes far beyond what meets the eye.

The present course of events, regardless of how certain their outcome appeared, would not prevail. Whether or not Esther rose to the occasion provided to her by providence was ultimately irrelevant (4:14b); the covenant people would not be subjected to annihilation. Deliverance would come from another place, either natural or supernatural.

The Jewish people would be delivered, but this did not mean no Jews would die. Part of Mordecai's message to Esther was the warning that, should she fail to act, she and her household would perish. Given his previous declaration, this is a perplexing statement.

- a. One interpretation of it is that Mordecai was hinting at *divine judgment*. He was warning Esther that, though deliverance for the Jews would come from somewhere else if she refused to step forward, God would visit severe retribution upon her for abandoning her people in their hour of need. They would survive but she and her household would die.
- b. A second, and arguably better interpretation is that Mordecai was predicting a *limited deliverance*. In other words, he was saying that somehow the Jewish race would be preserved through this catastrophe, but that didn't mean numerous Jews wouldn't be murdered. Mordecai wasn't a fool: Whether or not he was aware of the irrevocability of Ahasuerus' edict, he knew first-hand Haman's relentless hatred. Averting Jewish slaughter altogether seemed almost unthinkable.

And if Jews were indeed going to die, surely Esther and her household would be among them. The reason is two-fold: First, having decreed the destruction of the Jews, how could Ahasuerus spare Esther if he were to discover *she* was a Jew? How would it look to have issued a royal edict calling for the annihilation of a supposedly lawless people, and then have one of their own serving as his queen? But secondly, it was certain that Mordecai himself would die; Haman would surely see to that. And if Mordecai, then also anyone connected to him.

C. **Esther's Promise (4:15-17)**

When Esther received this final message from Mordecai she sent her servant back to him one last time. She would present herself to the king as Mordecai demanded of her, but she, in turn, required something of him.

1. Esther would go before Ahasuerus, but she would not go alone. If she were to do this act it would only be in solidarity with her people. All the Jews in Susa must come together in a solemn fast, eating and drinking nothing for the next three days and nights. Though she couldn't join them personally, she, too, would fast along with her maid servants.

Once again the implication is that this fast was to be a time of humble, unceasing petition to God. But if this is the case, why was the writer so careful not to mention prayer as the point of the fast, either here or in the previous passage (ref. 4:3)? The simple answer is that, by conscious design, God is absent from the narrative. His purpose and hand are *intimated* in various ways, but an outright reference to prayer would draw Him directly into the story and thereby destroy what the writer intended to do.

2. If her people agreed to stand together with her, Esther would yield to Mordecai's challenge. According to his word, she would trust herself once again to an unseen and unpredictable providence (4:14b). If she were appointed to perish, then perish she would.