

Now Write a Counter-Decree in the King's Name on Behalf of the Jews

8: 3-14

DIG: Before Haman's estate is settled, what must be done first? Why the anguish for Esther, who is now quite secure in the king's favor? What is the problem with getting the king to reverse the death sentence on the Jews (see 1:19, 3:1 to 4:3, 6:10)? What does the counter-decree do for the Jews? For others? What is particularly symmetrical about its timing (see 8:12, 3:7 and 13)? What counter-decree has Messiah written?

REFLECT: The Jews had nine months to prepare their defense. What could you accomplish in the next nine months to put your life in better order? What part of that reorganizing will you do this month? If you were in a position to destroy your enemy without fear of the consequences to you, would you take advantage of the situation? Why or why not?

Since the decree to exterminate the Jews (3:13) was still in effect, something had to be done. So Esther appeared a second time without an invitation (5:2). Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end, literally, to cause to pass over the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews (8:3). Esther did not stop with her personal deliverance, she was also concerned about her people - the entire Jewish community. She pled for the king's mercy.

Some assume that Esther risked her life a second time to come uninvited into the king's presence because he again extended his scepter to her (4:11, 5:1-2). However, the scepter was extended only after her emotional plea and not at the moment of her entrance before the king. Therefore, his gesture was intended to encourage her to rise from her prostrate position before continuing to speak.⁹¹ Again, the king was favorably disposed and extended his gold scepter to Esther, she touched it, arose and stood before him (8:4). Esther's request was simple. She wanted a counter-decree written that would cancel out the first one with equal force.

Esther used great wisdom in presenting her request. Ahasuerus was already furious that Haman had tricked him into making the first decree. Was he to embarrass himself further? Never! She pressed gently: If it pleases the king, and if he regards me with favor and

thinks it the right thing to do (the word *kasher* or *kosher*, meaning *fit*, *proper* or *right* is found only in the book of **Esther** and nowhere else in the TaNaKh), and if he is pleased with me, let a counter-decree be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces (8:5). Esther avoids the word "law," for she knew that the Persian laws could not be repealed. She wisely put all the blame on Haman and avoided the king's involvement altogether. Yes, technically, the first decree had gone out in the king's name, but he had no knowledge of the plot.

Again she was willing to be known as a Jewess for she spoke of my people and my family. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family (8:6)? The repetition of the verb, *how can I bear*, points to Esther's empathy with the suffering of others. It is heartwarming to see the extent to which this young girl, who had everything money could buy, identifying herself with her own people, and was ready to risk everything in an attempt to prevent the disaster that threatened them.⁹²

King Ahasuerus replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up (8:7). The author was making it clear that whoever attacks the Jews would fall. We are reminded of ADONAI's call to Abram emphasizing that God will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Genesis 12:3a). Here the king reminded both Esther and Mordecai of all he had already done, to show that he favored the Jews. But it was Queen Esther, not King Ahasuerus, who took the initiative in counteracting Haman's decree of death to her fellow countrymen.

Chapter 8, verses 8 to 17 are parallel in language to 3:9 to 4:4, but here the whole situation is reversed. If God's people were to pass from death to life, a counter-decree was necessary to cancel out the first one. Now the Jews could destroy their enemies instead of being destroyed.

Now write, literally *you write* (the pronoun did not need to be expressed in the Hebrew). The word *you* is in the emphatic first place in the sentence and, because it is plural, includes both Esther and Mordecai. *Both of you write a counter-decree in the king's name on behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring - for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked (8:8). The Jews*, who were once a helpless target of evil, were then empowered.

The practice of making decrees of the king irrevocable is unknown in any of the extrabiblical texts during the reign of Ahasuerus; therefore, some say this was not plausible. But the Persian king's decrees could not be revoked because he was believed to be a god whose plans couldn't be changed (Daniel 6:9, 13, 16). A change would suggest a correction for a mistake. And their king making a mistake was against the Persian belief system. The Bible, however, declares that ADONAI is immutable and His plans are indeed unchangeable. But the LORD always reaches out with his mercy, so people will turn from their sin and seek forgiveness.⁹³

This verse illustrates the author's tendency of repeating his previous wording in another context, creating reversals of situations. **At once the royal secretaries were summoned - on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan (May-June) 474 BC.** The date was two months and ten days since Haman's original decree had been written. The seventy days between the threatened annihilation of the Jews and their release from danger would have struck a chord with every attentive post-exilic reader of the book: the seventy days would remind them of the seventy years of exile.⁹⁴

Thus, the Jews had about nine months to prepare themselves for the conflict. **They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to the Upper Nile region of Egypt. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people.** This time, however, Hebrew was also added to the copies sent to the Jews in their own script and language (8:9). This is the longest verse in the third part of the TaNaKh, the Writings (or *the Hagiographa*). In Hebrew it contains 43 words and 192 letters, and in English (depending on the translation) it contains from 80 to 90 words.⁹⁵

As he had done with Haman, the king gave Mordecai the authority to write the edict any way he wanted and to stamp it with the king's signet ring. **Mordecai wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and like Haman's first edict, sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.** It seems that Mordecai went to extreme measures to ensure the swift delivery of his new edict. *Ahashteranim*, which is the Persian word for mounted couriers or the king's servants (8:10 and 14), is found only in the book of Esther and nowhere else in the TaNaKh.

The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies (8:11). They would not be the aggressors, but they could protect

themselves if attacked. The decree of Mordecai mirrors the words of Haman's decree and is one of the great reversals in the book of Esther. A pagan king granted the Jews the right to defend themselves. **Providence!**

The reversals in Esther:

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| 3:10 the king gives Haman his ring | 8:2 the king gives Mordecai the same ring |
| 3:12 Haman summons the king's scribes | 8:9 Mordecai summons the king's scribes |
| 3:12 letters written, sealed | 8:10 letter written, sealed with same ring |
| 3:13 the Jews to be killed in one day | 8:11 their enemies to be killed in one day |
| 3:14 Haman's decree displayed as law | 8:13 Mordecai's decree displayed as law |
| 3:15 couriers go out in haste | 8:14 couriers go out in haste |
| 3:15 the city of Susa is bewildered | 8:15 the city of Susa rejoices |
| 4:1 Mordecai goes thru city crying | 6:11 Mordecai led thru city in honor |
| 5:14 Zeresh advises Mordecai's death | 6:13 Zeresh predicts Haman's ruin |

The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus was the same day Haman's edict had set for plundering the Jews, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar (8:12). The obvious reason for the same date was so that the Jews could defend themselves. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies if attacked (8:13). In that case it would be justice that prevailed, not revenge! The word *patshegn*, which is a Persian word for a copy of the text (3:14; 4:8 and here), is only found in the book of Esther. This shows that the author was familiar with the language of the royal court.

The couriers, riding the royal horses, went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa as Haman's was (8:14). The verbs riding, went out and spurred on, only heighten the sense of urgency in the story.

In **Esther**, the irrevocable **decree** of death and a **counter-decree** of life, were both given from the same authority - **the king's signet ring**. Just as **King Ahasuerus** could not merely withdraw **the first decree** of death, ADONAI cannot merely withdraw **the decree** of death pronounced in the garden of Eden against humanity. In its place, He issues a **counter-decree** of life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Both were given by the same authority - **the KING of kings**. However, the LORD did not simply withdraw the curse of death, His **counter-decree** of salvation rendered it null and void by His Son's death on the cross. So when we pass from the family of Satan and spiritual darkness, to the family of God and spiritual light, that is the greatest reversal of all!