

At the end of chapter 8, which we looked at last week, the crisis that this story is all about, the threatened annihilation of the Jews in the Empire was almost resolved. Mordecai and Esther, in partnership with God, had saved the day – and yet that day, the day of the contradicting edicts, still had to be faced. Despite the celebrations of the Jews and the rise in power and prominence of Esther and Mordecai the Jew, and the Jewish people as a whole – the edict that ordered their destruction was still in force.

In the first 5 verses of chapter 9, the narrator tells us what happened on the day of the edicts. And after maintaining that suspense for just a moment longer with the longest possible description of the day that these edicts were to be executed, he quickly and succinctly reports the utter reversal of the hope of the Jews' enemies to triumph over them. The tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand.

This is the clearest example of the principle of reversal that the author has built into this story as a means of pointing to the hand of God. Who else other than God could effect a reversal on such a massive scale?

In the following verses he described in general terms how this reversal was effected, and there are 3 elements to this success.

Firstly, in accordance with the edict issued by Mordecai, the Jews gathered together to defend themselves. And they attacked those that were seeking their destruction. We will return to this in a moment.

Secondly, none of their enemies could withstand them, because fear had overtaken them. The Jews had gone from being a people facing certain annihilation, to a strong and powerful group, who had the support of the Queen and Mordecai, the second in charge of the empire, and with such strong support in such high places, had transformed themselves into a formidable force. And of course, there is a strong hint that as in other battle scenes in the scriptures, the hand of God was at work, striking fear in the opponents of God.

Thirdly, all the Persian ruling authorities came to the aid of the Jews. The nobles, satraps and governors, the three groups we have heard about already, and also a fourth group – the king's administrators, literally, those who carried out the king's business. By including this fourth group the narrator reveals the extent of the support for the Jews; even the lowliest officials now support the Jews. What an amazing reversal.

And we are told that the reason for this high level of support was because they were afraid of Mordecai. Mordecai's power and influence had grown and grown over the past few months, rising to second in charge of the empire – and this power and influence meant that those loyal to the King fought on the side of the Jews. Not only was it Esther that found herself in a particular place for such a time as this – so too did Mordecai.

And then in verse 5, the narrator restates the utter completeness of the Jewish victory, just so there is no doubt. The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, and they did what they pleased to those that hated them.

So the crisis that set this story in motion is over – with the destruction of the enemies of the Jews, the terrible threat to the life of the whole Jewish community has been fully and completely resolved – through the partnership of God’s providence, as seen through the remarkable series of coincidences, and the courageous obedience of Esther and Mordecai.

But, this victory for the Jews has frequently been interpreted in a negative light. Some have understood verse 5 to mean that all those who were known to be hostile to the Jews were hunted down and murdered. It has been described by others as the massacre of defenceless Gentiles within a peaceful empire with the connivance of the central government. The Jews have been accused by some of behaving the same way as the heathen, and Esther and Mordecai accused of merely putting Haman’s plan into reverse.

But, is this really what happened? Were the Jews guilty of mass murder on that day? I don’t think so.

We need to be clear that while the Jews did go on the offensive, the only people that they attacked were those that were attacking them. They only attacked those people that were attempting to put into effect Haman’s order to annihilate the Jews. They weren’t attacking people randomly, or attacking those people that had a different favourite colour or football team. They were only attacking the people that had picked up arms in order to execute Haman’s edict and exterminate the entire Jew race.

And so in such circumstance it is possible to argue that the Jews decision to fight back was necessary, and justified.

Indeed, if you apply the guidelines that the 13th Century Christian Monk, Thomas Aquinas said should be applied in order to decide whether a war was justified or not, which is known today as the Just War theory, then it is easy to conclude that it was indeed just.

Thomas Aquinas, just in case you are interested and don’t know, said that for a war to be just it has to meet 3 conditions

1. The war, must be started by the proper authority, such as the government or ruler, not by other independent groups – tick, Mordecai gave permission for the Jews to defend themselves against their attackers.
2. The reason for going to war must be just. It should not be for greed or revenge, but as a sincere attempt to make the world a better place in the end – tick, the only other option seemed to be the extermination of the whole Jewish race.

3. Everything should be done to make sure that good, rather than evil, results from the war. At the end of the war, the nations should restore peace. – tick, the only people that were attacked were those whose hearts were set on genocide. After their defeat, the empire was a much safer and peaceful place.

Later other people added two more conditions to those of Thomas Aquinas.

4. The war must be a last resort, when every other way of solving the conflict has been tried first – check, irrevocable edict, only way to counter it was to arm the Jews.

5. The force used during the war should be enough to win, but no more than that. It is wrong to attack people who do not pose a threat (such as children or old people), and wrong to use unnecessary cruelty during wars – I know there are times when it appears that this rule wasn't applied in the OT – but there is nothing to suggest that it wasn't in this situation – although the whole hanging people on gallows thing seems a bit OTT to me.

So, rather than being a massacre of defenceless Gentiles, this war was a just war, carried out as an act of self defence against armed aggressors intent on genocide. It is hard to think of a more just war in the history of the world.

However, before we move on we should also say two things. Firstly, most of those Christians that believe that on occasions war is just and necessary to prevent evil from prospering, would also acknowledge that war is not right. It is the result of mans sinfulness and should be avoided at all costs. Without being political, this is a message that needs to be shouted very loudly at the moment.

Secondly, we should acknowledge that in the light of the teaching of Jesus, there are Christians who believe that it is never right to go to war, never right to meet violence with violence. In principle I find myself drawn to this position, but I am not sure if I could put it into practice if it was my life or the life of loved ones that were threatened with annihilation.

Back in Esther, at this point, the narrator has really finished telling the story of the rescue of the Jews, he has made his point, he has given the Jews living in exile a story about the mighty saving work of God in the exile, in addition to the countless stories about rescue from the exile. His job is complete and yet he carries on with the story.

The reason he does that is because he has another objective to complete; one that goes beyond the story of the resolution of the threat to the life of the Jewish community; and that is the establishment of a festival to perpetually remind the Jews of this saving event, the festival of Purim.

And so in verses 6 to 19, the narrator gives us more details of the events of that day. In Susa 500 men were killed along with the 10 sons of Haman, who we must assume took up arms in order to implement their father's edict – and their deaths reinforce the utter ruin that Haman had come to by opposing Mordecai and God's people.

Then the narrator recounts a conversation between the King and Esther where the King is shocked, surprised, by the events of the day, and asks the Queen if there is anything else that she wants to be done. And in a way that is surprising and seems totally detached from the previous events, she asks for Mordecai's edict to be enforced for another day – let the Jews in Susa be allowed to defend themselves against their enemies tomorrow also –

But before we assume that the Jews were now the aggressor not the defender, it is likely that the people that they fought against the second day were the people that opposed them the day before, rather than a witch hunt.

However, as I said I'm not so keen on Esther's other request, the hanging the dead bodies on the gallows thing. All I can say is that it served the purpose of reinforcing just how complete a reversal the previous day had been –and just how complete the rescue that God and Esther and Mordecai had won really was.

But perhaps more important than that, the narrator was giving his readers these extra details to explain why the festival of Purim, as it became known, was celebrated over two days. Verse 19, because the Jews in the country rested and partied on the 14th, but the Jews in Susa rested and partied the next day, the 15th.

And that would explain why the narrative detail of these verses is of a different standard to the rest of the book of Esther, because the narrator is less concerned about the events of the story, what the king or queen said, and more concerned about explaining why the festival is held on two days.

And having answered that question that his readers, who of course already celebrated the festival may have been wondering about, the narrator moves on to the main purpose in these final verses of his story, the account of the establishment of the festival of Purim.

On the day after the fighting, the Jews spontaneously celebrated and rested and had a day of feasting and joy. And the narrator tells us that this spontaneous celebration was formalised by Mordecai the Jew. He wrote letters to all the Jews encouraging them to mark these celebrations annually, to make it a permanent fixture in the calendar. And in his appeal, and it is recorded as an appeal not a law, Mordecai not only clarifies the dates of the celebration, the fourteenth **and** fifteenth, why not make it a two day celebration – he also established the character of the celebration.

They are to be joyful days of feasting, like the days when we celebrated our rescue from our enemies, that include everyone in our community, especially the poor who can't afford to join with the party.

And it is vital to note that this festival wasn't a celebration of military success, it wasn't to mark success on the battle field, it wasn't a malicious celebration over the slaughter of enemies – it wasn't a day when they remembered how they had stuck one on their enemies –

The festival celebrated their relief from their enemies and the fact that their life was transformed from sadness to joy, mourning to a holiday. It was a celebration of relief from persecution, the joy of deliverance from the threat to their existence. And so in these verses there is no mention of the battles of that day.

And the Jew's warmly welcomed the idea of this festival. Verse 23, they agreed to continue the celebration and verse 27, they took it upon themselves to establish the custom. They wanted to commemorate and remember what had taken place on that day, those two days – as they continued to live in exile, they wanted to remember that God had rescued them from destruction and delivered them from evil.

And then in verse 28 the narrator stops telling what the Jewish community did and speaks directly to his own readers and reminds them of their responsibility to continue to keep this festival. And it is worth noting that the narrator is not making an appeal, but is using the language of obligation.

These days should be remembered, their observance should never cease to be celebrated, their memory should never die out.

And so the narrator not only retells the story of how the festival came to be, the events that it celebrates, but also reinforces the importance of observing it for all time.

And having done that, the narrator returns back to his narrative style, and concludes the story with the retelling of how Esther in her position as Queen confirmed the observance of the festival, corroborating what had already been done by Mordecai.

So, with Esther adding her authority and confirming for all time the need to remember and celebrate God's rescue of the Jews from evil, the story has reached its conclusion – our narrator has retold the story of the crisis that the Jews faced, and its amazing resolution, and he has formalised the celebration of the festival that arose from these events- the festival of Purim – not a celebration of slaughter but a celebration of rescue.

And I have to say that I have found Esther a fascinating and deeply encouraging book. But not all Christians would agree- Martin Luther for example said that he hated the book so much that he wished it didn't exist at all. Why, because it is too Jewish. Others have accused it of being too nationalistic or even too pagan with all that joy and celebration.

And while as Christians, we don't celebrate the festival of Purim, not least because we have other, better ways of celebrating our deliverance from evil, namely communion. I believe that the book of Esther and the festival of Purim is relevant to us as Christians today, not just the OT Jewish Community.

Like the Jews this book was written for, many Christians have lived in a dangerous and unfriendly exilic world, marked by hatred and persecution. The Roman world of the early Christians, the communist regimes of last century, Islamic countries today. And even living in the west today, there are similarities to situation faced by the Jews in Esther.

Our increasingly more secular culture is becoming less and less tolerant of our faith. For example, last week I read that another Christian Union had been expelled from the Students Union and had its bank account frozen.

And so the deliverance story of Esther renews our hope that relief and deliverance from our enemies will be ours, and that it will come through a combination of human effort and the intervention of God. And the festival of Purim reminds us, in our own way of course, to celebrate the joy of deliverance, perpetually, all the time, even in the face of unmitigated and unthinkable evil.