
Esther 8 — The Word That May No Man Reverse — Haman's House, the Signet on Mordecai's Hand, and a Second Decree

Answering the First

Esther 8: with Haman hanged, Ahasuerus gives his house to Esther and his signet ring to Mordecai; but the death-decree against the Jews, sealed in the king's name, cannot be un-written, so a second decree goes out granting the Jews the right to gather and defend their lives on the appointed day; Persia under Ahasuerus (Xerxes), c. 474 BC.

Haman is dead. The gallows he built fifty cubits high for Mordecai has hanged Haman himself, and the villain of the book is gone by the end of chapter 7. If this were an ordinary story, chapter 8 would be the curtain call. But Esther is not an ordinary story, and it does something here that is easy to read past and impossible to forget once you see it: **the death of the enemy does not save anyone.** Haman is hanged, and the Jews of Persia are still, every last one of them, under sentence of death. The man who wrote the decree is gone; the decree is not. And the law of the Medes and Persians has a terrible feature written into its own dignity — a thing published in the king's name and sealed with the king's ring "may no man reverse" (v. 8). The word of death has been spoken, and by the rules of that empire it cannot be unspoken.

Hebrew Word Studies

tabbaath (H2885) (ט.ב.א.ת) — **signet ring, seal-ring vv. 2, 8, 10.** The *tabbaath* is not jewelry; it is authority you can hold in your hand. Its root means to sink or press *in* — the ring is the thing that stamps the king's will into wax so that a piece of paper carries the weight of the throne. In Esther the ring changes hands twice: to Haman to seal death (Esth. 3:10), then to Mordecai to seal life (v. 2). The seal itself is morally neutral — everything depends on whose hand wears it and what that hand writes. The same object had lifted Joseph from prison to power (Gen. 41:42), and the same image runs all the way to the temple's promise: the Lord says of his covenant servant, "I... will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee" (Hag. 2:23). To be made the Lord's signet is to be trusted to carry his authority into the world — which is precisely the doctrine of the priesthood, that men are authorized to "act in the name of the Lord" (D&C 1:20), and of the sealing keys Elijah restored, by which what is bound on earth is sealed in heaven (D&C 132:7; 128:9–10). A ring is a small thing. What it stamps is not.

shuv (H7725) (שׁוּב) — **to turn back, return, reverse, bring back v. 5.** "Let it be written to *reverse* the letters" — the verb is *shuv*, the great turning-word of the Hebrew Bible, the same root that carries "return" and "repent" everywhere else in scripture. It is the word for turning a thing back the way it came. Esther asks that the decree be made to *shuv* — to reverse course, to un-happen. And the tragedy the chapter then exposes is that a Persian law sealed with the king's ring *cannot shuv*; "may no man reverse" it (v. 8). The word of death, once spoken with royal authority, will not turn back. That is not merely Persian legal trivia; it is a picture of a real spiritual predicament. Justice, once its sentence is pronounced against sin, does not simply un-say itself — "the law worketh out the demands of justice" and "justice exerciseth all his demands" (Alma 42:22, 24). A decree of condemnation stands. The whole hope of the gospel is that though the sentence cannot be reversed, it can be *answered* — that a greater word can be written beside it. Where a people cannot make the death-decree *shuv*, God provides a way for mercy to "overpoweth justice" through the atonement of a mediator (Alma 34:15–16). Esther cannot get the letters reversed. She can only get a second set of letters written — and so, in the economy of heaven, can we.

kathab (H3789) (כ.ת.ב) — **to write, inscribe, decree vv. 5, 8, 9, 10.** *Kathab*, "to write," is the busiest verb in the chapter — Haman *wrote* to destroy (v. 5), the king says *write* ye also for the Jews (v. 8), the scribes *wrote* Mordecai's decree (v. 9), Mordecai *wrote* in the king's name (v. 10). Everything in Esther's deliverance happens on paper. There is no thunder, no angel, no parted sea — there is a scribe and a pen and a seal. And that is the book's deliberate theology: providence works through the ordinary written instruments of a very human empire, its author never signing his name. But scripture never treats writing as merely clerical. What is *written* has covenant force: names are "written in the book of life" (Rev. 20:12; cf. Ex. 32:32, Moses' plea), the law is to be *written* on the heart (Jer. 31:33), and the Lord says of Zion's children, "I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:16). The Nephites are commanded to *write* so that a later people might be persuaded to Christ (2 Ne. 25:23; Morm. 8:35). A decree of life, written down and sealed and sent out, is exactly how heaven works too — "these are written, that ye might believe" (John 20:31). In Esther, a pen answers a pen; in the gospel, the "new and everlasting covenant" is likewise a written, sealed, published word (D&C 132:6).

or (H219) (אֹרֶךְ) — light, brightness — figuratively, well-being and gladness v. 16. "The Jews had *light*" — the noun is *orah*, a heightened form of the ordinary word for light (*or*), the very first thing God spoke into being: "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). Here it is used figuratively: for a people under a death-sentence, *light* means the whole of life restored — deliverance, gladness, a future. The pairing of light with the reversal of doom is deeply covenantal. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:2), a verse the New Testament claims for the coming of Christ (Matt. 4:16). "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Ps. 27:1). And the Restoration speaks the same language natively: the "light of Christ" is given to every soul (D&C 84:45–46; Moro. 7:16–19), the covenant path is one where the faithful "grow brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24), and Zion is called to "arise and shine forth" (D&C 115:5, echoing Isa. 60:1). When Esther's people receive *orah*, they are receiving in figure what the gospel offers in fulness — the reversal of a dark decree by the God who is himself the source of light, even where, in this book, he declines to sign his name to the dawn.

***simchah* / *sasson* (H8057 / H8342) (שִׂמְחָה / שֹׂסוֹן) — gladness, mirth / joy, exultation, rejoicing vv. 16, 17.** Two joy-words stand side by side in verse 16 and again in verse 17, and Hebrew loves to pair them precisely because they are not quite the same. *Simchah* (H8057) is gladness — the settled, festival joy of a people at a feast, the word for the "gladness" of a holy day (it is the joy the priests kept at the temple, Ezra 6:16). *Sasson* (H8342) is joy at a higher pitch — exultation, the leaping gladness of rescue. Together they name the full range of covenant rejoicing, and scripture keeps them together deliberately: Isaiah promises the redeemed of the Lord shall return "with songs and everlasting joy... they shall obtain *joy and gladness*, and sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (Isa. 35:10; 51:11) — the exact pair, promised as the reversal of grief. Esther's people live that verse: the death-decree is answered, and "sorrow and mourning" flee before *simchah* and *sasson*. And this same week's reading gives the doctrine its clearest line — "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). The Restoration names it as the very purpose of existence: "men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25), a joy Christ came to make "full" (John 15:11; 3 Ne. 17:20). The gladness in Shushan is a small, early taste of the everlasting kind — the kind that comes when a condemning word is answered by a saving one.

From the Chapter's Architecture

At the center of that mirror stands verse 8, the one immovable fact around which everything else has to bend: "the writing which is written in the king's name... may no man reverse." Every plot move in the chapter is a working-around of that sentence. Esther asks for reversal (v. 5); the law forbids reversal (v. 8); the king grants a counter-decree instead (v. 8); Mordecai writes and sends it (vv. 9–14); and the people receive light (v. 16). The whole chapter is the discovery that when a condemning word cannot be un-written, the only salvation left is a greater word written beside it — and that, mercifully, is a salvation that works.