

Mordecai's Choice

By Richard C. Baker

Mordecai, a midlevel bureaucrat, served as a gatekeeper under Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. At this time, around 478 B.C, the Persian Empire was the greatest in the world, spanning all the way from Egypt to India. Not only did Mordecai have a secure government position, but his cousin, the lovely Esther, was now Queen of this vast Empire.

For nearly 50 years, under the reigns of Cyrus and his son Darius, liberal policies allowed life in the Empire to go on with relative freedom. It is understandable that Mordecai, like so many fellow Jews, over a century after their deportation to Babylon, had assimilated into Persian society, opened businesses, and settled in. Indeed, Mordecai and Esther's very names were derivatives from Babylonian gods. No wonder, when King Cyrus gave the Jews the opportunity to return to Israel some 50 years earlier, only about 50,000 took advantage of it.

But times change. Xerxes did not share the more tolerant policies of his father and grandfather. In the early part of his reign he attempted a crackdown on the Greeks and Egyptians ending in the famous Persian defeat at the hands of the Greeks. At home he offended his Babylonian countrymen not only by raising taxes but by defacing a revered statute of the Babylonian god, Marduk.

As in every society there are rules of conduct you must follow to succeed. Now days we call this "political correctness." Apparently, in Mordecai's circle, those rules included keeping one's Jewish identity under wraps. Not only did Mordecai conceal his nationality, but he repeatedly instructed Esther to do the same. For many years this worked to their advantage under the liberal policies of the Empire.

But there comes a time when one must choose between status, position, and sometimes, even one's very safety or

one's deepest convictions. For Mordecai this came about as the winds of political change shifted with the ascendancy of Haman, a rising political star whose ego, like his success, seemed to have no bounds. The Scriptures tell us Haman was an Agagite. As one commentator put it, "Haman may have been Hitler's favorite Old Testament character." As a descendant of King Agag and the Amalekites, his people had been at war with Israel since they attacked the Jews at the time of the Exodus. (Ex. 17:8-16) And it is no coincidence that we are told that Mordechai was a Benjamite, a relative of King Saul, who had defeated the Amalekites, eventually ending with the beheading of King Agag himself.

Securing his political ascendancy, a law was passed that required all royal officials to bow before Haman when he passed through the King's gate. Though the law did not target Mordecai directly, nevertheless, as an official gate keeper, Mordecai was forced to choose between bowing down, or out of conscience as a Jew, disobeying the King's law and disclosing that he was a Jew. When put to the choice, Mordecai followed conscience and kept faith with God.

However, when Haman learned that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman used political capital to get an additional royal decree to punish not just Mordecai, but the entire Jewish race throughout the Empire. Citing 'national security concerns' and 'revenue benefits' to the cash strapped treasury, Haman lobbied King Xerxes:

There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not the king's best interest to tolerate them... let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver...for the treasury. (Esther 3:8-9.)

And so ended religious toleration in the Empire for all Jews because their customs were different and as a matter of conscience they could not follow certain laws. Overnight, through one decree, all Jews became targets in retaliation for Mordecai's conscientious objection. In the face of this, with fasting and prayer, Mordecai went to the Queen seeking political support for the Jews saying:

Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverances for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14)

And so, at great risk Mordecai and Esther, after prayer and fasting by the Jewish people throughout the Empire, lobbied the king. Eventually their courage and action led to the salvation of the Jews from annihilation.

So too, times are changing in the U.S. Under the current Administration, our constitutional rights guaranteeing religious freedom are under attack as never before. With the erosion of religious freedom, more and more Americans are being put to "the choice." Conform, or be targeted for retaliation because your religious views are now deemed discriminatory and dangerous.

And it is not just big businesses like Hobby Lobby, colleges like Notre Dame and Wheaton College, or religious ministries like the nuns at Little Sisters of the Poor that have been threatened with closure under the HHS Mandate because they refuse to provide abortifacients out of religious conviction. Nor is it not just adoption agencies such as Catholic Charities which have already been forced to close their doors in Illinois and Massachusetts for declining to place children with same-sex couples based on Catholic teaching. Now targeted are people like Atlanta's Fire Chief Kelvin Cochran, who after 30 years of service was fired for a book he had written about biblical morality. Or Officer Eric Moutsos who was suspended from the Salt Lake Police Department. His offense was to ask, because of his religious convictions, for a different assignment at a gay pride event after being assigned

to lead the motorcycle brigade doing celebratory circles. Or Navy Lt. Commander Wes Modder, a veteran military chaplain who was relieved of duty for discrimination because he continued to counsel troops in accordance with the biblical teaching that discouraged sexual activity outside of marriage. And this, despite assurance from the Navy that after the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" that chaplains "will continue to have the freedom to practice their religion according to the tenets of their faith. In the context of their religious ministry, chaplains are not required to take actions that are inconsistent with their religious beliefs..."

So the circle continues to expand. Photographers in New Mexico and bakers in Oregon and others serving the wedding industry around the country are being hauled before human rights tribunals and found guilty because they decline to serve same-sex marriages due to their religious conviction that marriage is between one man and one woman. And now the government has itself begun suing dissenters. Barronelle Stutzman, a 70-year-old grandmother and long-time florist found this out when a State's Attorney sued her for a deceptive trade practice and won under Washington's Consumer Fraud Act. Her deceptive practice was her "per se" discriminatory act of telling two men that while she'd be happy to sell them flowers, as she had for many years, she couldn't -- in good conscience -- arrange them for a ceremony that violated her faith.

As Officer Moutsos told the Deseret News, his experience should be a warning to every American who thinks same-sex "marriage" and homosexuality won't affect them. No longer is it a discussion of toleration or of "live and let live," for the sexual revolution has moved on. Now, conscientious objection is a matter of discrimination for which there should be no toleration and a very limited, if any, religious exemption.

Many of us will soon be faced with Mordecai's choice. Will we, for the sake of status, position or even livelihood, choose to stay silent and just to go along? Or will we choose, like Esther and Mordecai, Chief Cochran, Officer Moutsos, and Barronelle Stutzman, with fasting and prayer, to speak up and defend religious freedom in both the cultural and political realm? ■