

Back to Babylon.

(Esther 3: 1-11. Lesson for Oct. 8.)

The scene of our study shifts with the present lesson from Jerusalem to the region beyond Babylon, where lay Shusau, the winter capital of the Persian empire. When the first return to Jerusalem was made under Cyrus, the larger number of the Jews preferred to remain behind, among these the majority of the wealthy. After the completion of the temple there came a pause of some sixty years in the history of Israel, near the close of which period the incidents connected with Haman's diabolical plot took place. The Medo-Persian empire had grown to enormous proportions, outmeasuring all its predecessors. Greece, however, remained unconquered, having repulsed the invading armies of Darius at Marathon in B.C. 490 and Xerxes, the former's son and successor, at Thermopylae in B.C. 480. It was shortly after this decisive repulse that Xerxes, then in the seventh year of his reign, took Esther to be his wife. Esther was a Jewess, and her choice as the king's queen no doubt roused the jealousy and bitterness of those who had learned to hate the captive race that had made for itself so commanding a place in the fortunes and politics of the empire. Haman, called the Agagite, may possibly have been a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag whom Saul spared and Samuel afterwards slew, and thus may have cherished in his heart a special antagonism to Israel and desire for revenge. The opportunity for gratification came when Xerxes promoted Haman to the first place in the kingdom, making him his Prime Minister. This exalted position of course entitled him to the obsequious acknowledgments customarily bestowed upon oriental potentates, and his vanity was fed by the reverential bows of the royal household. One man only

REFUSED TO BEND THE KNEE.

It was Mordecai the Jew. Soon his strange conduct became the gossip of the king's gate, and his associates questioned him concerning it, no doubt suggesting the folly of his course. But Mordecai was loyal to his convictions; he would bow the knee to none but Jehovah. Haman should receive all proper respect due to his office, but no attitude approaching to worship would this man of devout and true heart adopt toward him. Mordecai was not of those who to-day make compromise and concession to the world spirit a practice in their manner of life. "When in Rome do as the Romans do," was not a rule in his code of ethics, or a maxim in his philosophy. His being centred in the worship of his father's God; from obedience to any other his reverent soul revolted. It is such inflexible backbone as this that men need to-day, when religion by the multitude is regarded as a mass of modeller's clay, to be shaped and patted into any form, no matter how grotesque, so that it suits personal convenience, profit, or idiosyncrasy. It was not long before the news of Mordecai's action reached Haman, and his indignation knew no bounds. To be thus apparently ignored by a servant, and a Jew at that, was beyond bearing. Revenge was the uppermost desire of his proud heart. But to slay the one offender would be too paltry a punishment; his injured feelings demanded a more potent salve. So he appeared before Xerxes with a monstrous proposition for a wholesale massacre of the Jews throughout the realm. The charge he made against them is simply Israel's persistent national characteristic of refusal to amal-

gamate with any other race, as marked to-day as at any time in their history. Xerxes in his reply showed himself utterly unfit to be a ruler. Without any enquiry he handed to Haman his cygnet ring, giving him full authority to do as he pleased with money and people. But Haman with every controllable factor favorable for the accomplishment of his vengeance, had forgotten to reckon with Jehovah, and the wealth and power of Persia were impotent against the people and purposes of God.

The Queenly Intercessor.

(Esther 8: 3-8, 15-17. Lesson for Oct. 15th)

When the decree of the Persian monarch, or rather his Prime Minister, came to the ears of Mordecai he was greatly distressed. He realized, no doubt, that his own conduct had induced Haman to take this desperate course. Like a man, however, he had no vain regrets for the past, no thoughts of recantation, only the brave purpose to do his best for his people's deliverance. He sent a copy of the fateful decree to Queen Esther, the beautiful Jewess who had succeeded Vashti in the king's affections some six years earlier. She was cousin to Mordecai and after her parents' death had been under his care and guardianship. He knew her spirit and loyalty, and felt he could trust her to do her best as queen for her people's safety. For a month the king had failed to summons his consort to his presence. For Esther to come before him unbidden was to risk the probability of death; the manner of her greeting rested upon the vagary of a royal whim. But she faltered not from her duty. Esther had faith in a greater ruler than Xerxes, whose sovereignty, though unrecognized, was not unexercised in the court of Persia. Three days of fasting on the part of herself and her friends preceded the putting into execution of Esther's purpose. It was thus by abstinence and prayer that God was given His place in the project. Henceforth it was not Mordecai nor Esther who worked, but God who worked in them; and even the fancies of a whimsical king became subservient to His will. Although in this strange story the name of God does not once occur, the hand of God is plainly evident controlling and directing circumstances to His own end. Esther, having sought first the favor of Jehovah, left her people praying and went to seek the favor of the king. With unfaltering step she crossed the sacred threshold and stood within his presence. Would his greeting be that of wrath or pleasure? With a leaping heart she saw

THE ROYAL SCEPTRE EXTENDED

and realized that all was so far well. The king bade her make request, and she simply asked the pleasure of his presence with Haman, his Prime Minister, at a banquet she had prepared. The desire was gladly granted, and again at the feast Xerxes gave her opportunity to make petition, and once more the simple plea was made that he and Haman should dine at her table on the morrow. This was more than the vain vizier could bear with modesty. Home he hied himself, and calling in his family and friends related how manifold were the honors bestowed upon him; but the wonderful story ended with the melancholy remark, "Yet this availeth me nothing so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." "Mordecai the Jew"; it was the last two words that rankled most even as they do in the Dreyfus case to-day. Then his wife came to his aid with a brilliant suggestion,