

The Story of Purim. Really.

The story starts, really, with the death of Achashveirosh I, king of the Medes. He was a vassal-ally of Nevuchadnezzar, had helped Nevuchadnezzar conquer Assyria, and led armies across Asia Minor all the way to the Ionian (Greek) coast. He, in turn, was the overlord of Cambyses I, king of Persia.

When Achashveirosh I died, he was succeeded as king of the Medes by his son Darius the Mede, but Darius was a vassal of Cambyses I. Because that's how the Persians and Medes did it. Achashveirosh had been assassinated by a Scythian named Astyages, who took over Media. Cambyses did nothing to help Darius get his kingdom back. And that's part of what happened.

Cambyses's son Koresh II and Darius' son Achashveirosh II were contemporaries. They grew up together, almost as brothers. In fact, Koresh married Achashveirosh's sister, so they were brothers-in-law. Achashveirosh grew up resentful of everyone. His father was supposed to be king of the Medes in Ecbatana. He was supposed to be a prince. Instead, he was a guest in Shushan.

When Cambyses died, Koresh succeeded him as king of Persia, but Darius the Mede was his overlord. He probably could have gotten away with ignoring that, because Darius was a king in exile. But Koresh was a good guy, and he honored his father-in-law. Still, because Darius was getting on in years, Koresh did the heavy lifting. He reclaimed Media for Darius, and he campaigned across Asia Minor, conquering the Lydians who had helped Astyages to take Achashveirosh's throne.

Darius reigned long enough to enter Babylon triumphantly and kill Belshazzar, son of Nabonidus. And to take Belshazzar's daughter Vashti as a wife for his son. But he died shortly thereafter. And that's where things went awry. With Darius dead, Achashveirosh II became king of the Medes. And vassal to Koresh. But Darius had hardly had a chance to rule at all, and Achashveirosh was around 40 years old. As was Koresh. By the time Koresh died, Achashveirosh would likely be an old man. It all seemed terribly unfair to him. And Koresh was out in Asia Minor, while he, Achashveirosh, was right in the center of power. So he declared himself king of both Media and Persia. Koresh raised an army of Persians and Greeks to contest this, but after three years of fighting, he died. Achashveirosh put it out that Koresh had been the rebel, and victors write the histories.

Achashveirosh was now the uncontested ruler of the Medes and Persians. And we know this part of the story. He threw a huge party, to impress the entire empire. He needed to show his wealth and power to consolidate his authority. He also wanted to ensure that people didn't see Vashti as the one with royal blood and him as a mere usurper, so he issued a decree to humiliate her. When she disobeyed, he got rid of her.

When Achashveirosh was younger and bitter, he'd met a man named Memuchan, son of the Arch-Magian Gaumata. The Arch-Magian was the head of the Mithraist religion. Like their pope. The Mithraists were old-style polytheists. They worshipped Mithra and Anahita, who were similar to Osiris and Isis, or Baal and Ashtoret. But they weren't the only religious game in town. There'd been a prophet named Zoroaster, who preached monotheism and had gotten many adherents, including Koresh's cousin Hystaspes, who became his biggest disciple. The Magians *hated* the Zoroastrians with a fiery passion. To them, the idea of monotheism was a huge threat.

Memuchan got Achashveirosh into Magianism, and he became a big supporter. Paganism wasn't as big on strict morality as monotheism, and the Persians had gone in for Zoroastrianism, so being a Magian was rebellion against the Persians as well.

The Magians also worshipped a fermented milk product called Haoma. You can look this up. Or they associated the god Haoma with the alcoholic drink of that same name. In any case, Gaumata's Magian name was Haoma-data. Or Hammedata, in your Megillah. And his son Memuchan's Magian name was Haoman. Or

Haman. The reason Haman is called by his patronymic 4 times in the Megillah is that everyone at the time knew who Hammedata was. It was Memuchan who gave Achashveirosh the idea of getting rid of Vashti.

When Achashveirosh chose Esther as his new queen, it gave her the opportunity to influence him. Given the king's Magian tendencies and the Magian hatred of monotheism and monotheists, this was a good idea, but so was keeping her background secret. When Mordechai discovered a plot against the king's life and reported it to Esther, she brought the plot to the king's attention, and the would-be assassins were killed. While it was recorded in the Persian royal chronicles that Mordechai was the source of the information, it was Esther who told Achashveirosh, and it was Esther whom he rewarded.

When Achashveirosh killed Koresh, Koresh's son Cambyses II should have taken the Persian throne, as a subject of Achashveirosh. But Achashveirosh claimed both thrones. The Jews owed a debt of gratitude to Koresh, and it's likely that Esther asked as her reward that Cambyses be restored to his throne. Achashveirosh was in a quandary. He had to show his gratitude, but he probably didn't expect that. His friend Memuchan, now going by Haman, gave him a way out by recommending that the king send Cambyses to Egypt, to quell the rebellion there. This way, he could give Esther the reward she'd asked for, but not have to worry about Cambyses.

Achashveirosh appreciated Haman's advice, and appointed him viceroy. This was a giant step for Mithraism, and a major blow to the Zoroastrians, as well as to the Jews. Haman had taken on his Magian name because he'd become a high official amongst the Magians, if not the chief Magian himself. And when the king decreed that everyone had to bow down to Haman, it was much, much more than being required to bow down to a public official. Mordechai was aware of this. The midrash that says Mordechai didn't bow to Haman because Haman had an idol on his chest is puzzling, if taken literally, because surely the other Jews could see the idol just as well. But when we see that the midrash is speaking metaphorically about Haman's representing the Magian faith, it's much more understandable. Not everyone knew that, and not everyone who knew it agreed with it.

(The Jews who had assimilated in Persia get a lot of bad press. The truth is, never in all of history had a nation been exiled from its land and retained its national identity. And Yirmiyahu had given the Jews Hashem's command that they settle in. It wasn't all that clear cut in the early days to what extent we were to keep ourselves separate. To what extent we had to stand apart. Decrees like *pat Yisrael*, *shemen Yisrael*, *chalay Yisrael*, and the like, wouldn't be made for centuries.)

When Haman saw Mordechai refusing to bow, he realized that of all the monotheists, it was the Jews who presented the greatest danger to Mithraism. It was for this reason that he got Achashveirosh to let him kill all the Jews. It's also likely that his plan wasn't merely for the Jews, but for all monotheists. They may not have made the distinction.

When Mordechai told Esther she needed to go to the king to request his help, her resistance wasn't only a matter of it being unlawful to go to the king yourself. There were certainly ways to get a message to the king, via eunuchs and the like. It was an issue of what had happened with Esther's request. Achashveirosh never forgot how Esther's request had resulted in his giving over part of his kingdom, albeit in name only, to his hated brother-in-law's son. He loved her, so he allowed her to approach. But he couldn't help but poke her about her previous request. Over and over. "You can have whatever you want. Up to half my kingdom." The subtext being that she'd already caused him to lose half his kingdom, so he only had half left. He probably thought he was a real card, and repeated the phrase a few times.

Esther choked. The king's reminder spooked her, and she stalled, asking for the king and Haman to join her for a meal. Once they arrived, he said the thing about half his kingdom again, and again, she choked. She asked for them to come back for *another* meal. When they did, this time, she mustered up the courage to speak. Haman was busted. And hanged.

Achashveirosh repeated his offer, but this time, his jab about half the kingdom didn't frighten her. She knew the king was seeing her in a good light. The last time, Esther's request had been political. This time, it was politico-religious. Because the anti-monotheist crusade was a majorly significant event that would change the religious balance of power in the kingdom in a big way. But Achashveirosh wasn't nearly as fanatical about Mithraism as Haman, and after Haman was caught seemingly trying to make a play for the queen, Achashveirosh was more than willing to switch sides on the religious front.

When the Megillah says that many of the non-Jews converted at that time, it may not mean that they literally became Jews. As we mentioned earlier, the term Yehudi may have been seen as a general term for monotheists at the time. While some surely converted to Judaism, it's not unlikely that many of them converted to Zoroastrian monotheism.

Not long after the Jews' triumph, Achashveirosh was assassinated. At about the same time, Cambyses, still fighting down in Egypt, was assassinated as well. Back in Persia, Cambyses' brother Bardiya claimed the throne, since Cambyses had no children. Darius, who was Cambyses' cousin and armor bearer, and the son of Koresh's cousin Hystaspes, who we mentioned earlier, rushed back to Shushan and killed Bardiya. He claimed that the real Bardiya had been killed secretly by Cambyses before he left for Egypt, and that this fake Bardiya was actually Gaumata the Magian masquerading as Bardiya. Whether that's true or not is anyone's guess, but it's probably not a coincidence that Darius dates Pseudo-Bardiya's revolt to the 12th day of the 12th month when he mentions it in his Behistun inscription. That's the day before Haman's intended slaughter of the Jews. It's also interesting that one version of the Behistun inscription (Darius put it up in a number of places) gives Gaumata's name as Vahyazdata, which is the same as Haman's son Vayzata.

Darius may have married a daughter of Esther and Achashveirosh, which would account for the midrashim that say he was the son of Esther. He named his son Achashveirosh, which makes that even more likely. When Darius was getting up in age, he decided to step aside for his son. Or to make him coregent. Either way, he required governors from all of his provinces to come back to Persia to pledge their fealty to him. Nechemya was one such governor, and he describes being called back to Persia temporarily.

Bavli rebels killed Achashveirosh III, and Darius took the throne back and demolished Bavel, leaving it in ruins until today. A few years later, Alexander met Darius in battle. Darius, according to the Greek accounts, fled, and Alexander became the king of the entire region. That was the end of the Medo-Persian empire.