

## THE STORY OF ESTHER

Scripture Reading: Esther 4:1-3, RSV

The story of Esther is set in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire under Xerxes (or Ahasuerus). A party was given by the king for an enormous number of his officials and soldiers in his own part of the city which was known as the “acropolis,” including more than the palace. There is evidence that a number of ancient kings threw banquets for many thousands of guests, and this banquet appears to have been no exception.

Susa is an unbearably hot place. One ancient source (Strabo XV 3. 10-11) describes the “heat at noon as being so intense that snakes and lizards trying to crawl across the roads were burned to death, and barley grains become ‘Popcorn.’” (Moore, p. 6)

As important as eating was at these banquets, drinking received the major attention. At this party they even drank in violation of the law; that is, they drank without restraint. The drinks were served in gold goblets, no two alike. We have some of these goblets, which have been found by archaeologists, and they are truly magnificent works of art.

Xerxes begins to feel light-headed from the drinking and orders some of his eunuchs—for they alone had access to the king’s harem—to bring his very beautiful Queen Vashti to him in order that he might show her off to his guests.

At the time, Vashti was giving a party of her own for the women and, for reasons not given, refused to come. Josephus hints that strangers were not allowed to look at the beauty of Persian wives, and some feel that Vashti’s defiance was totally justifiable. Her modesty would not allow her to appear, even fully clad, before a group of drunken men.

Nevertheless, Xerxes is furious at this humiliation and consults with his advisors about what legal recourse he has to punish her. Persian law was strict, binding, and unchangeable, even for the king. His advisors tell him that when the word of her defiance gets around none of the men in the empire will be respected by their wives. She must be deposed. A new queen must be found.

Xerxes follows their advice but regrets it to some extent soon after. Like so many before and after him, what he does in anger he repents of when tranquil.

His most immediate attendants, afraid of his being discontented for long, suggest that beautiful young maidens from every province be brought to the king for his inspection and that the one most pleasing be named queen. Xerxes, rather excited at the prospect of enlarging his harem, agrees and the women are brought.

Xerxes and the others do not know that Esther is a Jewess. Obviously, as a member of the harem, she eats the same food as the others and lives as they do. From all outward appearances, there is nothing distinctive about her ethnically or religiously.

She had been raised by her Uncle Mordecai in the city of Susa. One point mentioned about him becomes important later on in the story. The writer indicates that Mordecai is a descendant of Kish,

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whose son Saul conducted an unsuccessful campaign to exterminate the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). Haman, the villain in the story, is a descendant of the Amalekites, and this detail helps explain the hatred between the two.

Quite by chance, Mordecai overhears a plot against the king as he is sitting at the king's gate—no doubt concerned about Esther and—what was happening inside the palace. He sends word to Esther who then informs the king in Mordecai's name. The two conspirators are hanged, and Mordecai's name is included in the official record of the event. Strangely, however, the king fails to reward Mordecai adequately, and his role in the affair is forgotten. (Eventually, another conspiracy in the court is successful and Xerxes is assassinated.)

At this point, Haman enters the narrative, having been promoted to prime minister. Accustomed to obsequious treatment by the king's servants who tend the gate as he enters, Haman is infuriated to learn that a Jew named Mordecai refuses to bow down to him. Not content to punish Mordecai, Haman plots to destroy the entire Jewish population. Here is a sharp contrast between the two men. Mordecai, with merit, is unrewarded by the king. Haman, without merit, is prime minister.

There was no Talmudic law forbidding Jews to bow down before their Gentile kings. Why Mordecai, did not comply is unclear. Perhaps he understood the kind of person Haman was and refused as a personal protest, or it may have had some unknown religious significance.

In any case, Haman convinces the king that there is a certain people who refuse to obey his commands and that they should be destroyed. Apparently, without even knowing who they are, Xerxes signs the document sealing the fate of the Jews. To encourage the king to do this, Haman offers him an incredible sum of money—perhaps as much as two-thirds of the empire's annual income.

Believe it or not, such bloodthirsty massacres had parallels in ancient times. Cicero accuses Mithradates of Pontus of killing between 80,000 and 150,000 Romans in one day in 90 B.C. (*Oration de Lege Manilia III*, from AB, Moore, p. 43.)

Mordecai, with the other Jews, puts on sackcloth and ashes and stands outside the king's gate. Rather remarkably, Esther has not yet heard of the edict. Esther's maids and eunuchs know that, for some reason, she has a special relationship to Mordecai. After spying him dressed so strangely, they report to her. (It is interesting to note that in this narrative, there is no reference to prayers being offered while Mordecai and the other Jews are dressed in sackcloth. All of the other Bible stories referring to sackcloth indicate that the individual prayed while he was dressed in this manner.)

After learning the full particulars, Esther is told by Mordecai to go directly to the king and intercede for the Jews. Understandably, Esther balks at this suggestion, for unless she were summoned she could be executed for presuming to enter the king's presence. Whether this was a safety precaution or designed to protect the king's privacy is uncertain. Josephus, the ancient historian, says this rule applied only to the royal family. And he adds the interesting detail that men stood by the throne with axes in hand ready to punish anyone who appeared unsummoned.

Mordecai reminds Esther of who she is and tells her that if she refuses, relief and deliverance will come from another quarter; but she and her family will perish. He tells her, "It's possible that you came to

the throne for just such a time as this.”

The Targums [Aramaic translations—or rather paraphrases—of the books of the Old Testament] see this statement as a veiled allusion to God, and they are probably correct. God's name is never mentioned in the entire story. All explicitly religious references are missing, and this seems to be clearly deliberate on the part of the author.

Esther asks all the Jews to fast for three days, and then she lays a trap for Haman. Courageously, she appears before the throne and is received favorably by the king. Clearly, Xerxes understands that only the most urgent request would prompt her to risk her life, and he offers her up to half his kingdom. (This extravagant offer was seldom made in seriousness. Rather, it is a polite, oriental exaggeration.)

Esther deliberately passes up the king's offer and invites him and Haman to a private dinner instead. They come, but when the king inquires as to the reason for the dinner, Esther cleverly responds, “Please come again tomorrow, and then I will tell you.”

While this is transpiring, Haman and Mordecai are coming to a confrontation. No sooner has Haman left the dinner party than he notices Mordecai standing at the gate, refusing to bow. None of the honors or wealth he is receiving can make him happy as long as this one Jew defies him.

He represents a perfect example of the insatiability of the lust for power. Haman has the soul of a tyrant, a Machiavelli. His relatives are equally distressed by Mordecai and urge Haman to have a gallows constructed, and then ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai. Haman likes the idea and issues the necessary orders.

Unable to sleep that night, Xerxes, fortuitously (providentially?), asks to have the court record read to him. He learns of Mordecai's faithfulness to him and realizes to his shame that he has not properly honored this man for his service. To Persian kings, it was a point of honor to reward benefactors.

As you know, Haman comes in the morning to ask for Mordecai's life. Before he can discuss this matter, Xerxes asks him to suggest an appropriate honor for someone who has provided outstanding service to the king.

Because Haman thinks he is the man being referred to, he thinks of the highest possible honors. He suggests that a royal robe and horse, already used by the king, be given to this man and that his good deeds be announced everywhere.

Imagine his horror when he learns it is Mordecai who is to be honored in this fashion. To punctuate the humiliation, Haman is told to lead the horse around. Xerxes identifies him as “Mordecai the Jew”—knowing that the pogrom was going to be effective soon. The author mentions this but leaves us dangling as to its meaning. Was Mordecai to be excluded? We do not know.

The second dinner is held, and it is here that Haman is unmasked. Esther addressed the king with the more intimate ‘you,’ observing all the etiquette of the court. She knows Haman is a powerful man, a confidant of the king, but it is all or nothing. She denounces him as that “wicked Haman!” Then she goes on to explain that her petition is for “the deliverance of my people.”

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Haman is horrified to learn that the queen is Jewish. Xerxes, surprised and angry, storms out of the room—an act which sets the scene for Haman’s final indiscretion which seals his fate.

Esther was no doubt reclining on the couch during the dinner according to ancient custom. Haman knew that unless Esther interceded for him he would almost certainly die, so he approached the couch. There is some evidence that he either seized her feet or kissed them as a gesture of humility. If he had, this would explain why Xerxes was so shocked when he reentered the room and accused Haman of exceeding the bounds of good taste. Very strong feelings and strict regulations existed in antiquity in relation to the harem—even one foot away from the couch would have justified Xerxes’ reaction. (See *Anchor Bible*, pp. 71-72.)

Remember also that Esther has just revealed her identity at this time. Much is happening in just a few verses.

Esther is not moved by Haman’s pleadings, and Xerxes orders him executed. Was this because she was callous? Or was it her understanding that if Haman were to survive he would continue to be a threat to her, to Mordecai, and to all Jews? Perhaps, what she did was the most prudent.

As you know, the Persian kings were unable to revoke an established law, but Xerxes tries to undo the evil perpetrated by Haman. The Jews are armed and encouraged to defend themselves, and the officials throughout the empire were instructed to support them. In the end, the Jews are delivered, and Mordecai is elevated to the rank of prime minister—the ultimate irony.

Throughout the story, human beings are given the credit for the deliverance of the Jews—at least on the surface. God is not mentioned.

The writer then concludes his book by saying that this is the reason why the Jews celebrate the Feast of Purim. It was commanded by Esther and Mordecai to commemorate this event.

Purim is an unusual feast and needs the book of Esther to justify its existence, for it is the only Jewish festival not commanded in the law. Gay and noisy in character, the Talmud instructs Jews to drink until they can no longer distinguish between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordecai.” It has come to symbolize all the deliverances of the Jews through history from those many acts of genocide attempted against them.

“Isn’t it unusual to preach on the book of Esther?” someone asked me this week. Most of you have probably never heard a sermon on Esther, although you are familiar with the story, having heard it many times during childhood.

Moreover, few, if any of you, ever pick Esther to read for worship or find in it much material that is devotional and spiritually inspiring. Throughout history, both the Jews and the Christians have had ambivalent feelings about this book, so much so that it was one of the most hotly debated writings to go in the Scriptures. Most Jews praise Esther; most Christians dislike it. The great Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135-1204 A.D.) “ranked it after the Pentateuch.” On the other hand, Martin Luther voiced the sentiments of many Christians in declaring, “I am so hostile to this book [III Maccabees] and to Esther that I could wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too greatly and have much pagan

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impropriety.” (*Table Talk*, XXIV, Quoted by Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, *Anchor Bible*, VIIb, p. XVI.)

Esther is a very different story than Ruth; for example, Ruth was a Gentile who lived like a Jew and was immortalized for her devotion. Esther was a Jewess who lived like a Gentile and was immortalized for her courage.

In some respects, Esther is the record of a young woman who compromised her Jewish religion in order to become the queen of Persia and then used her influence to save her people. Perhaps her courage before Xerxes indicates, however, her decision not to live in hypocrisy any longer. We do not know.

We may not fully understand why Esther is in the Scriptures. Certainly, it is meaningful to the Jews as a symbol of deliverance.

Can it be meaningful to us? What does it say to us? Interestingly, Ellen White uses it to symbolize the final persecution of God’s people before the second coming of Jesus Christ, that time described in Revelation when the powers of the beast are arrayed against the church. She tells us that God will never allow His people to be annihilated, that they will be delivered, and that the book of Esther is a guarantee, as it were, that He will keep His word.

Today, as in the days of Mordecai and Esther, God will vindicate His truth and His people. It may be that that truth alone justifies its place in Scripture. For it will take planning, wisdom, courage, and the power of God to outmaneuver evil men in the last days.

The outlines of the conflict between good and evil remain the same—all that changes are the culture and the names of the participants .