



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

When Times Change

Esther 1–10

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Introduction

Each year, sometime during February and March on the Gregorian calendar (see “Purim” n.d.), Jewish people around the world engage in the “most secular” and “one of the most joyful” of their celebrations. Barry Webb elaborates:

It is normally celebrated on only one day, the fourteenth of Adar (in February/March), preceded by a day of fasting. Children are given *gragers* (rattles) so that, when the story of Esther is read, they can make a loud noise to drown out the name of the wicked Haman whenever it occurs. Other festivities include exchanging presents, giving food parcels to the poor, performing Purim plays, and wearing costumes. In Israel, a Purim carnival is held (Webb 2008, 849–850).

You will not read about this festival in any of Moses’s writings. Its origins trace to a city hundreds of miles and centuries removed from Sinai. Called the *Feast of Purim*, it began in 473 BC, 2,500 years ago, and celebrates a great deliverance and the amazing survival of the Jewish people for centuries despite repeated persecution. It recalls the story of Esther, who, over the course of several years, is taken from her home to be part of the king’s harem from which she is chosen to be Queen. In that role, she and her cousin, Mordecai, deliver Jews from India to Ethiopia (Esth 1.1) from genocide.

As stories go, it’s a great read. It has “a beautiful and courageous heroine, a romantic love thread, a dire threat to the good characters, a thoroughly evil villain, suspense, ... sudden reversal of action, poetic justice, and a happy ending” (Webb 2008, 852). But more important is what it shows about advancing the cause of God’s people in an evil, threatening world.

The Story

Chapter 1.1 – 2.23 introduce the plot and two queens who figure prominently in the story. In 483 BC, in Persia’s capital city of Susa. Queen Vashti refused King Ahasuerus’s (Xerxes I) summons to a feast in which he intended to show off her beauty (1.1–22). Because of her

defiance and the fear of the impact her actions would have on other women in the empire, the king decreed that “Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus” (v. 19).¹

After some time to calm down, the king remembered Vashti and what she had done and realized a replacement for her would need to be found. Following the counsel of his advisers, he decreed that virgins from across the empire were to be brought to him and added to his harem. From those women, one would become the new queen (2.1–18; esp. vv. 1–7, 12, 15–18). These women, including “Hadassah, that is Esther” (v. 7), were considered the king’s wives (vv. 15–18) (Tomasino 2009, 482). From this group, a new queen would be selected, the title eventually being given to Esther who, upon the advice of Mordecai, her cousin and guardian, did not reveal that she was Jewish.

After she became queen, Mordecai overheard two of the king’s guards plotting against the ruler and reported it to Esther who in turn passed the report along. The men involved in the scheme were summarily “hanged on the gallows” (2.23).² In a key plot point, the episode, including Mordecai’s part in it, was added to the official records (2.19–23).

Chapter 3 introduces the event that will create the crisis for the Jews and for Esther in particular. Five years after Esther became queen (3.7), the prime minister Haman schemed to eradicate the Jews from the empire (3.1–15). Haman was a descendent of the Amalekites (“the Agagite”) who was angered when Mordecai refused to bow or pay homage to him, violating the king’s command (3.2).³ When he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he set out “to destroy all the Jews ... throughout the whole kingdom” (3.6). During the first Jewish month of Nisan “they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman” and eventually the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar, as the time when the Jewish genocide would be carried out. Haman subsequently persuaded Xerxes who gave Haman his signet ring so he could officially issue the decree and send it to all the provinces. This occurred on the day before Passover (3.8, 12–13).⁴

Chapter 4 relates how Mordecai and Esther together planned the salvation of their people. When he heard about the decree against the Jews, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, went through the midst of the city in bitter tears, and then went to the entrance of the king’s gate where a person wearing sackcloth was forbidden to be (vv. 1–2). When Esther heard what he was doing, she sent him some clothing and then learned why he was acting as he was (vv. 4, 8–11). Adding further distress to her situation was the fact that Esther had not been summoned to the king’s presence for thirty days (v. 11), perhaps due to a fall from favor (Tomasino 2009, 488). She shared that information with Mordecai who heightened the tension more by warning her that she should not expect to be spared from what

¹ Note that verse 19 says that Persian laws could not be repealed (cf. Dan. 6:8, 12). This is unattested in classical literature outside the Old Testament, but it is reasonable that, in practice, despotic kings refused to admit error, making laws immutable in effect (Tomasino 2009, 479).

² The gallows in v. 23 (cf. 5.14; 7.7–10) were literally “trees” or “wooden objects,” either stakes upon which victims (or their bodies) were impaled, or trees used for crucifixion (Tomasino 2009, 486).

³ “According to [the Greek historian] Herodotus, bowing to superiors was a normal part of Persian court etiquette rather than an act of worship (cf. Gen. 23:7; 1 Kings 1:16)” (Webb 2008, 856).

⁴ Although he stressed the Jews’ different laws and customs, Haman’s charge that “they do not keep the king’s laws” (3.8) was likely more persuasive since the Persians allowed subject peoples latitude with regard to their own laws and customs if they did not interfere with the empire. Rebellion was another matter, and Xerxes had dealt sternly with revolts in Egypt (485 BC) and Babylon (484, 482) just a few years before (Tomasino 2009, 488).

would befall the Jews just because she was Queen. The crucial turning point of the story appears in 4.12–16:

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”

On the third day following her promise to Mordecai, Esther “put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace” where she awaited the king’s decision to reject her or allow her to enter (5.1). When the king raised his golden scepter, signaling that she could enter, Esther followed Near Eastern protocol for preparing for her request (Tomasino 2009, 494) and began to activate her plan to expose Haman: “let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said” (5.8).

Haman’s joy at receiving her invitation was short lived. As he left the palace, he saw Mordecai sitting in the king’s gate. Filled with wrath at the sight of Mordecai, Haman went home and vented his anger to his wife and some friends. Their advice, which pleased Haman, was to build a gallows fifty cubits high (seventy-five feet) to have Mordecai hanged the following day (5.9–14).

As it happened, that night the king suffered insomnia and ordered that “the book of memorable deeds” be read to him (6.1). Hearing the record of how Mordecai had rescued him from the plot to assassinate him, Ahasuerus asked what honor or distinction had been done for Mordecai. Learning that nothing had been done, the king decided something should be. As the king was seeking advice about what should be done, Haman was arriving to ask the king about hanging Mordecai. The king asked what should be done for a man the king wanted to honor and Haman, assuming that the king had him in mind, recommended the honoree be dressed in royal robes and led on horseback through the square of the city. Liking the idea, the king ordered Haman to immediately get the robes and horse and lead the parade for Mordecai (6.1–11). Haman did so, and then returned home more distressed than he had been before, a condition made worse by the blunt prediction of his wife and counselors: “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him” (6.12–13).

“While they were yet talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared” (6.14). On the feast’s second day, the king asked Esther what he was requesting. The climactic scene of the book is reported in 7.1–6:

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, “What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther,

“Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

The king was furious and went into the palace garden, one suspects to calm himself. While he was gone, Haman began to beg Esther for his life, falling on her couch to plead his case. At that point, the king returned and assumed that Haman was assaulting Esther. Harbona, one of the eunuchs, then intervened, pointing out that the gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai was standing at Haman’s house. Haman’s fate was sealed: “And the king said, ‘Hang him on that.’ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated” (7.9b–10).

Haman was no longer a threat, but the peril of the Jews still needed to be addressed, as Tomasino explains;

Since the king’s first decree could not be revoked (1:19), this decree was designed to ameliorate its effects. We can assume that the Jews would have defended themselves against those who tried to kill them. But this decree specifically gave the Jews the right to ‘assemble’ [8:11]. The Hebrew term used here often means to muster an army (e.g., 2 Sam. 20:2; 21:5, 8; Ezek. 16:40, and elsewhere). Thus, the Jews are authorized to defend themselves against Haman’s mercenaries (Tomasino 2009, 498).

The problem was resolved by giving Mordecai the position (and signet ring) formerly held by Haman and allowing Esther and Mordecai to issue a second edict: Jews across the empire were granted the right “to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods” (8.11). So empowered, “the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them” (9.5).

The book concludes with an explanation of the origin of Purim and a report on Mordecai’s service as prime minister (9.20–10.3).

Three Observations

I’ll limit the take-aways from Esther’s story to three observations.

First, the fact that God is not obviously or apparently involved does not mean he is not present and working. It is commonly known that God is never mentioned in Esther, but there are several indications of his presence in the story and both the main characters and author believed his hand was at work (Webb 2008, 850–851). Recall these events that seemed unlikely to occur and/or happened at just the right time.

- The downfall of Queen Vashti (1.10–22).
- The decision to have what amounted to a beauty contest to replace her (2.1–18).
- Mordecai overhearing a plot against the king (2.19–23), a fortuitous occurrence that set in motion a series of events that resulted in Esther and him being in positions of power and influence before Haman’s plot even began.
- Later fortuitously timed events such as the king’s insomnia the night before Mordecai was to be executed (6.1–3), Haman’s entry at the exact moment Ahasuerus was wondering how to reward Mordecai (6.6), and the king’s return from the garden just as Haman was falling on Esther’s couch to make his plea (7.8).

“All significantly affect the eventual outcome, but none is knowingly caused by any of the human characters” (Webb 2008, 851).

That said, the characters are aware that something more than mere chance must be affecting events. But in the absence of specific revelation, they are restrained in definitive announcements about it (cf. 4.14b - “... And who knows whether...”). Webb summarizes the point:

The deliverance experienced here in Esther is very different from the exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses. There are no signs and wonders, no special revelations, no prophet like Moses—and no one even mentions God! Yet the way the story is told makes it clear that, even when God is most hidden, he is still present and working to protect and deliver his chosen people (Webb 2008, 851).

Second, God works out his purpose, but does not override human free will or keep people from doing the evil they intend. Chapter 4.13–14 is instructive relative to this point. Mordecai was sure the Jews would be delivered whether or not Esther chose to be involved. Others also made important choices, including Vashti, Ahasuerus, the rulers of the different provinces (9.3), enemies of the Jews who proceeded with their attempted pogrom, and especially Haman. From these occurrences we learn that human responsibility and even growth in character (e.g., Esther) are not impeded because God is involved in events.

Third, circumstances demand adjustments. Esther illustrates this reality throughout the book. When she was taken for the harem, she responded with good behavior (2.8–9, 15). After five years as Queen, she made the tough decision to intervene for her people (2.10; 4.16; 7.3–4). After Haman’s death, her position allowed her to do what was needed to save all her people (at that point, she was already safe) (cf. 8.3–6). We therefore learn that God’s people should never be surprised that circumstances change but should be open to changing what they need to change to righteously deal with them.

Conclusion

Reportedly, Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712–1786) once asked his court chaplain for proof of the Bible’s supernatural origin. The chaplain replied, “The Jews” (Shelly 1975, 25).

God’s deliverance of his people in Esther’s time illustrates the point and reminds us that his purposes will be realized. More importantly, her story reminds us of the virtue of continuing to trust him and commit ourselves to knowing and doing his will for all people.

Works Cited

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