

AUTUMN BIBLE STUDY

Esther 1:1-2:4

Parties, Politics and Power



INTRODUCTION

The story takes place in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire, during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Gk. Xerxes) in the early 5th Century BC. Esther and her older cousin Mordecai are Jews living in Persia as a result of the Babylonian exile a century before.

It should be noted that while Ahasuerus is an historical figure, and some of the customs cited are genuine, there are several factual inconsistencies which would make this story historical fiction, rather than history. However, we should be careful and not associate fiction with untruth. Fiction can be seen, not as the absence of truth, but as a way of conveying truth. Maybe the intention is to tell a truth that goes beyond historical accuracy.

WHO ARE THE GOOD GUYS?

In the OT, heroes are usually presented as complex, morally ambiguous personalities. There are usually signals that direct the reader to discern the one who acts in accord with the voice of God.

Esther lacks those signals, and God does not appear in the story at all. At the beginning, we are thus placed in the royal court of an imperial ruler, in an unfamiliar foreign land. In the first episode, we are confronted with a Persian domestic crisis, which becomes a national emergency.

THE SPLENDOUR AND POMP OF HIS MAJESTY (1:1-9)

The story begins:

“This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers.” (1:1-3)

This is clearly an exaggeration, to hyperinflate an account of royal pomp. The following verses continue in the same vein as the king’s name is invoked several times, and descriptions of his regal nature are repeated. The king is displaying to all those gathered the splendour and pomp of his majesty.

The next several verses then go on to describe the king’s banqueting hall – the ingredients of his pomp. For many Jewish readers this lavishness would be completely foreign to their own more frugal experience, and that would be interpreted by them that the king is morally suspect.

There is no such description with the announcement of Queen Vashti’s party – it is barely mentioned. This could be that it was either just as lavish as the king’s, so not worth repeating, or lacks it. We must not jump to conclusions.

THE REFUSAL OF THE QUEEN (1:10-22)

On the final day of the king’s second feast, he orders a procession of seven eunuchs to fetch his beautiful queen – the greatest of his possessions. Alas, she does not comply – we are not given a reason, no explanation given by Vashti. Did she refuse out of impudence, modesty or anger? Was she ill, busy, apologetic, or incensed? Did she understand what the consequences might be?

The king is furious, and turns what might have been private embarrassment, into a national crisis. He calls seven of his wisest sages in order to find a solution.

Memucan, like a modern-day spin-doctor, declares Vashti’s refusal to be nothing short of a national emergency. If she is not

punished severely, every woman in Persia will be out of control. So, combining flattery, gender profiling, and the most foolish solutions possible, Memucan suggests that the queen be banned from the very place she didn't want to be. (That'll show her!) An edict should be sent declaring what has happened. This advice pleases the king, and so an edict legislating morality in every household is sent out.

It is as if the storyteller, it would seem, is a master of irony. We can imagine him trying to keep a straight face as he composes the tale, as if composing a political cartoon.

THE ROUNDUP OF THE CONTESTANTS (2:1-4)

Vashti is banished, so the king needs a new queen. The king's advisers come up with a flattering and overblown solution; the king will send out commissioners to every province to seek all the beautiful young virgins in the land and gather them in to the king's palace – not just a few, but all of them. They will then be brought one by one, night after night, to the king's chamber. One will be chosen as queen, the rest will fill his harem. This is where Esther will appear, as one of the many beautiful young virgins conscripted to live in the palace.

Seeing this to be like a modern-day beauty pageant is misleading since admission is not voluntary. The king controls both the winner and the losers. It is more akin to girls being kidnapped into sexual slavery by the false promises of a respectable employer. We may smile at the colossal imperial machinery that is used to mollify the whims of a world ruler, who is a slave both to his passions and his advisers. However, we also recoil in horror at the buffoonery of the raw power that is so abusive.

At this point we should note a variety of themes and motifs that appear in the story's opening, which will be carried throughout the book of Esther.

Banquets – the Hebrew word often translated as 'banquet' or 'feast' is *mishteh*, which derives from the verb 'to drink'. A more apt translation, therefore, might be 'drinking party.'

Outlandish royal laws and far-flung edicts – most of which are suggested by the king's advisers.

Excessive and violent solutions to chaotic public relations events – eunuchs will continue to serve as messengers, minions and sycophants.

Appearing before the king – will become an issue for the new queen as well; a queen, who like Vashti, will keep her feelings and responses private, veiled in modesty. By contrast the king and his henchmen become those who will experience the reader's scrutiny.

The beginning of Esther teaches us nothing about God. It does, however, broaden our view of what is contained in Scripture. Here though, the frivolous abuse of power is funny only to those not affected by it. The author of Esther attacks this abuse by satire and exaggeration.

We are also shown the constricted world of women, not only in ancient Persia, but today – reflecting a way that God never intended for any woman – be it Vashti or the other possible brides.

