

AUTUMN BIBLE STUDY

Esther 7:1-8:17

Counterplots and Counter-edicts



FEASTING ONCE AGAIN (7:1-4)

The king's eunuchs have gathered Haman for Esther's second (the book's seventh) banquet – an ominous sign, given what happened to Vashti, the last person to be summoned by the eunuchs to a feast. When all three are assembled, they get right down to the drinking.

The king asks once again what Esther wants. Perhaps he has spent the night thinking about his extravagant gift.

Esther is ready, and she is patient in implementing her plan of attack. She has understood the enemy's methods and is just as able to use her power to persuade. In repeated conversations, she circles round and round the king's repeated promise as her prospects gently rise. The king simply repeats himself over and over again, each time more formally and elaborately. First, she extended hospitality. Second, she promised to tell him what she wanted if he would commit to coming to her second party. Finally, she unveils her shocking request.

She mirrors the king's vocabulary of petition and request, but then breaks this pattern to repeat the language of Haman's edict. The last sentence of vs. 4 is ambiguous – so much so, that nearly every Bible translation renders it differently. For example:

NRSV: *"but no enemy can compensate for the damage to the king."*

NIV: *"because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."*

CEB: *"But no enemy can compensate the king for this kind of damage."*

She claims that if there had been a lesser evil, if enslavement rather than murder had been the danger, she wouldn't have spoken up.

FALLING ONCE AGAIN (7:5-10)

Ahasuerus, who had no idea of either his wife's lineage, or her endangerment, is not at all prepared for her speech. His response sputters with indignation – *who is he, where is he, who has presumed to do this?* She tells him it is Haman, and in doing so has positioned herself with the king, over and against her enemy. Haman is terrified for his life.

The king storms from the room – is he trying to calm down, seek advice, avoid a decision between his two closest subjects? Whatever the reason, it sets the stage for what happens next.

Now it is Haman's turn to plead for his life – not with the king, but with the woman he has so recklessly endangered. When the king returns to the room he is just in time to see Haman fall down on Esther's couch. Is his misapprehension deliberate? We don't know – but the act of usurping the king's bed is treason. In the end, the man who attempted to kill a people for a crime they did not commit will, ironically, die himself for a crime he did not commit.

Harbona, the eunuch, who was one of those called to fetch Queen Vashti, knows something that the king does not. He directs the king's attention to the damning evidence towering over the city – the 75' high scaffold, to which the king orders Haman to, "Hang him on that!" and that is that.

PLEADING ONCE AGAIN (8:1-17)

We may be tempted to think that the danger is now passed, and the rest of the story will be about sorting out rewards. Esther is given the domicile of the one who had tried to destroy the Jews, and

Mordecai takes his rightful place in the king's court. He is given the king's signet ring - the one previously worn by Haman.

The one thing the king seems to have conveniently forgotten is the promise he made to Esther, at least three times! Although they are heaped with rewards, Esther and Mordecai are still in danger. Esther goes before the king again, falling at his feet weeping to plead before he can react. He repeats the earlier gesture with the sceptre, and we see how much more confident Esther is now. This time there was no fasting, no reservation, no dressing up – she is much more courageous. She stands and after four deferential introductions gets to the point – to revoke the edict of death. This time she did not base her argument on the king's advantage or pleasure but on her own distress. This is the first time that the king hears an argument founded not on his own gain, but on the good of his subjects.

He first states, in answer, what he has already done. He then asks Mordecai what more he could do. As Bechtel says:

“More striking even than Ahasuerus's lack of imagination is his lack of power. One cannot help but compare this ‘Mighty Man’ of the book's introduction with the weak ineffectual monarch pictured here . . . One thing is clear, Mordecai and Esther cannot rely on Ahasuerus for much help. The words of a dead traitor have proven more powerful than the commands of the living king. Their only option seems to be to fight fire with fire – edict with edict.”

We see that Ahasuerus is quite free when it comes to who wears his ring - especially when he, himself cannot undo what has been done. It would seem that neither the king nor his subjects are able to question the edict's wisdom or finality.

Mordecai gets to work and plans a counter-edict. We would have thought that an edict revoking the previous edict would be sufficient. The Jews are allowed to nullify Haman's edict by defending themselves. They are allowed *“to destroy, to kill and annihilate any*

armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women and to plunder their goods.

It reminds us of the horror that Haman intended. We see that the Jews are given permission to take the plunder. However, as repeated three times, they decline to do so thus demonstrating their aim is self-defence, not greed.

Following Haman's edict, Haman sat down to drink with the king in isolation while the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. Mordecai leaves the king to emerge from the palace to the street, where the city of Susa rings with joy not distress. He wears royal robes and a crown, and now has a royalty of his own – a long way from his once previous attire of sackcloth.

Reflecting on this turn of events, Bechtel says:

“Modern Christians may read this ‘good news’ with mixed emotions. We neither can nor should forget Jesus' words about turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. Yet we must also try to read this story on its own terms even as we read it with its broader Old Testament context. Crucial to the latter is the recognition that violence was not Esther and Mordecai's first choice . . . Believers in every age must make such choices.”

The story could have ended here at the end of chapter eight, with one edict nullified by another. What follows in the next two chapters occurs many months later. It explains both the festival of Purim and, for many, raises questions about how such a story so full of horror and humour, so delicately balanced, should end.

