

Esther 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Esther chapter 2. After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Then the king's young men who attended him said, Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king, and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel under the custody of Hegai the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them, and let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. This pleased the king, and he did so. Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jeah, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem. Among the captives carried away were Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure, and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favour, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known, and every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to king Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women, when the young woman went into the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Sheashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her, and she was summoned by name. When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abahail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai, the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favour in the eyes of all who saw her, and when Esther was taken to king Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants. It was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal generosity. Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time,

Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, but Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on king Ahasuerus, and this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows, and it was recorded in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.

In Esther chapter 2, after the removal of Queen Vashti in chapter 1, we are finally introduced to the main characters of the book, Esther and Mordecai. The events of chapter 2 likely open two or three years after the events of chapter 1. Vashti, who was demoted from her queenly status in chapter 1, now needs to be replaced, and King Ahasuerus seems to be prepared to look for her replacement in a rather unorthodox way. It is the king's young male attendants who first give him the suggestion. They propose a kingdom-wide beauty contest to select the new queen. Perhaps this proposal has the added advantage for King Ahasuerus of putting the powerful families and Persia in their place, of discouraging his new queen from getting ideas above her station, as Vashti had done, and also of presenting the queen as a woman of the people. The beautiful Vashti had failed to stand as a symbol of his power and might and glory in the previous chapter. Perhaps now Ahasuerus hopes that a woman chosen from the commoners would be able to do the job instead. Suitable candidates were to be chosen for their beauty, youth and virginity. While the text does not belabor the fact, the selection of the replacement for Vashti also seems to have involved an evening of sexual relations with the king. The purpose of all of this was probably not merely the king's immediate sexual pleasure.

[5 : 20] The women in question were not sexually experienced. However, it would be a symbol of his dominance that he would be the one to deflower the most beautiful women of the land. Ahasuerus' seeming sense of entitlement to the bodies of his subjects would not have been considered completely out of the ordinary for a Persian king. Persian kings were known for taking large numbers of young men and making them eunuchs, or women and making them concubines. We should also consider that in a society of arranged marriages, the prospect of one's daughter entering the royal harem, and perhaps even marrying the great king Ahasuerus himself and becoming his queen, would likely have been regarded very positively by many.

The typical woman being brought to Ahasuerus was likely not brought to him by force. The text does not airbrush the character of Ahasuerus. We see enough to know that he was not a particularly righteous man, but on the other hand it does not present him as a real monster. He is a Persian king of his time, with all that goes with that, much of it bad but not egregiously so. In verse 5 we are introduced to one of the main characters of the book. Indeed, David Dauber has made the provocative suggestion that Mordecai has a reasonable claim to be the main character of the book rather than Esther.

He is the first to be introduced, and it is with Mordecai that the book also ends. He is introduced to us as a Jew, one of the Judahite exiles, but his name, which is similar to other names recorded from the period, is one that probably is a pagan origin, perhaps derived from the god Marjuk.

Elements of his genealogy are filled out for us. He is the son of Jeah, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Those names evoke a history that is important background for this book.

Shimei was the name of a man in 2 Samuel who was of the household of Saul, and Kish was Saul's father, and the tribe of Benjamin was the tribe of Saul, the first king of Israel. Verse 6 raises some difficult chronological questions. The most natural reading of the text is that Mordecai himself was carried away from Jerusalem with the captives with Jeconiah. Jeconiah being another version of the name Jehoiakim.

[7 : 24] If Mordecai was brought away with the captives, he would be at least 80 at this point, and that is if we're presuming a very early dating of the book. It may start to stretch credulity that he would have a cousin at least 60 years his junior. Recognising this, some have argued that the person who was carried away into captivity was not Mordecai but was rather Kish. This may not be the most likely reading of the text in the abstract, but it is a possible one and may be contextually determined. The fact that either Mordecai or his ancestor had been carried away with Jehoiakim in 597 BC suggests that the family was of noble stock. Commoners were not taken away until about 10 years later. Mordecai is bringing up his first cousin Esther. Esther has two names, Hadassah meaning myrtle, or Esther which might come from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar or might relate to the word for star. Jewish commentators have also seen hints in the way that her name in Hebrew could be understood as let me hide. The story of Esther is in many ways a story about hiding, a story about Esther's hidden identity and of God's hidden presence and activity in the book.

Historically, a number of Jewish commentators have also seen here a possibility that Mordecai is married to Esther, or perhaps that he has adopted her with the intention of marrying her when she comes of full age. Such readings are speculative, but they have likely drawn some of their strength from the parallels between Esther and the character of Sarah, whom Abraham instructs to hide her

identity when she is taken by pagan kings on account of her beauty. There are definite similarities to be seen between Abraham and Sarah and Mordecai and Esther. Sarah, whose name means princess, anticipates and prefigures in certain ways the character and the actions of this long distant descendant. The story of Abraham and Sarah is just one of many that can be heard in the background of this book. We don't hear Esther's name Hadassah again in this book, but as in the case of Daniel and his three friends, the fact that we know that she has another Hebrew name alerts us to her twofold identity, and her need to navigate between two worlds. Hidden behind the Persian queen is the daughter of Sarah,

Hadassah. As in the case of Sarah, who was taken into the house of Pharaoh and Abimelech, Esther seems to be rather passive as she is taken into the king's palace. While this probably would not have been seen as a particularly bad fate for many of the women selected, they would likely have little choice in the matter. In the book of Esther, the character of Joseph is most commonly seen behind the figure of Mordecai, but in these verses we might see the figure of Joseph behind the character of Esther as she progresses and finds favour in the sight of all of those around her. Esther brought into the king's palace is like Joseph in the house of Potiphar or in the prison. Like Joseph, she will later be raised up to one of the highest positions in the land. Esther is given favourable treatment over the other women in the harem and advanced ahead of them. That she is given the best position in the harem singles her out for likely further advancement in the future. Like Abraham commanded Sarah, Mordecai strictly charged Esther not to reveal her identity. We're not told exactly why Mordecai did this. Perhaps he was aware of and concerned about anti-Jewish sentiment in the court.

It's also possible that her chances of advancement would have been increased if her people of origin were not known. Mordecai keeps up communication with Esther during the time that she is in the harem.

We might presume that he uses discreet intermediaries that bring messages back and forth. When Esther is taken to King Ahasuerus, she wins great favour in his sight, much as she has with everyone else. Preferring her over all of the other virgins, Ahasuerus makes her his queen. Another great feast is thrown as Ahasuerus takes Esther as his wife and queen. Verse 19 is difficult to understand. The ESV translates the verse, now when the virgins were gathered together the second time.

[11:15] Michael Fox lists some of the possibilities. Perhaps the king is looking for a new concubine. Perhaps some of the courtiers are jealous of Esther and want the king to appoint a new favourite in her stead. Perhaps it refers to a time before Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus. Or perhaps, and this is his preferred understanding, second refers to the second harem to which the women are being taken.

Even after being chosen by Ahasuerus, Esther continues to keep the word of Mordecai. She is the bearer of a potentially dangerous secret. In different ways, both Rabbi David Foreman and James Jordan hear subtle allusions to the story of Genesis, Eden and the Fall. Chapter 1 involves something going wrong on the seventh day, when all was supposed to be at rest. In chapter 2, the king is going to enter into rest with his new queen in the seventh year of his reign. Both of them argued that we can recall the story of the creation of Eve in the beauty contest of this chapter. The women are all brought one by one to King Ahasuerus and he inspects them, and the one who is selected he will call by name. Esther is Ahasuerus' Eve. Rabbi Foreman suggests that there may be further subtle verbal allusions back to the story of Eden and the Fall. The description of Mordecai walking in front of the court of the harem is much the same as the description of the Lord walking in the garden in Genesis chapter 3 verse 8. In verse 10 of our chapter, Mordecai commands upon Esther. This is a stranger way of speaking that we also encounter in Genesis chapter 2 verse 16, as God commanded upon Adam. The case for a connection between the story of Esther and the story of Eden and the Fall is a cumulative one. It doesn't depend entirely upon any single strand of argumentation, but rather upon the gathered weight of many such arguments. These connections will be greatly filled out as we work through the book. The chapter ends with an important episode that sets up further events in the book. Mordecai becomes privy to information concerning a plot against the king's life. Two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, previously mentioned in chapter 1, conspire against the king, and Mordecai gets wind of this. He is presumably told by a third party, and does not merely overhear a conversation. He relays the information to Esther, and Esther informs

Ahasuerus, mentioning the name of Mordecai. The plot is foiled, and the event is recorded in the book of the chronicles of the king. Mordecai is not rewarded in any way at this point, however. A question to consider. When reading a text like this, it's important to consider some of the texts that lie in the background. These can be like the counter melodies that go with the melody of the text to produce harmony. I have mentioned already the story of Joseph, the story of Eden, and the fall, the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of the establishment of the tabernacle. I have also mentioned the character of Saul. Do you find these connections persuasive or unpersuasive? How would you rank these connections from the weakest to the strongest? Do you hear any connections that I have not mentioned?