

Esther 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 5. On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's quarters while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favour in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter, and the king said to her, What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom. And Esther said, If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king. Then the king said, Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked. So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared, and as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom it shall be fulfilled.

Then Esther answered, My wish and my request is, If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it pleased the king to grant my wish and fulfil my request, 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.

And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.

Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. And Haman recounted to them the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. Then Haman said, Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared, and tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast. This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made. Having been charged by Mordecai to speak to the king concerning the plan of Haman to destroy her people, in chapter 5 Esther faces a very difficult situation. She and her women, along with the Jews and Mordecai, had fasted for three days and nights in preparation for this. We can presume that she also gave a lot of time to planning and to prayer. When reading familiar biblical narratives like that of Esther, our ability to interpret the text well is often compromised by the fact that we know how the story goes.

As we know that everything worked out well in the end, we don't give enough thought to the cards that Esther held at this point in the story, and the way that she would have had to plan accordingly. In our reading of the text, our focus is on the question of whether King Ahasuerus will accept her coming near. As a result, we probably don't give enough consideration to the question of what she will say when she is invited to approach. Esther's power is not directly a political power. It is a power that lies largely in her beauty. While such a power could be used for political ends, it would take considerable skill to convert the power that she has into a political power. She has not been summoned by the king for over a month, and now she has to go toe-to-toe against the king's most trusted advisor and right-hand man. Yoram Hazoni speculates about the sort of deliberations Esther would have had. He writes,

From the information she has, it is apparent that the scheme is the vizier's, and that Ahasuerus' acquiescence comes of his desire to promote Haman and permit him to consolidate his control over the empire. And if the king considers it crucial at this stage to rely on Haman's judgment, then there will be no point in arguing with him about a policy whose actual content probably matters little to him.

[3 : 59] What is needed is to damage Haman's favour with the king, so that Ahasuerus feels he has something to lose in so quickly accepting Haman's goals as his own. Only then will it be possible for another voice to be heard. Why then did Esther invite the king to the feast? Hazoni writes, The reason is that she does not believe he will grant the request. Esther is well liked by the king, and he may be willing to hear her out, but a direct assault on the decree means pitting her own untried credibility in matters of policy against the settled opinion of the vizier, whom the king has appointed after all to conduct policy. Moreover, such an attack would force Ahasuerus to choose between Haman's policy and a different one proposed by Esther, precisely the kind of politics of conflicting interests he has sought to avoid. Having staked his kingdom on the belief that Haman's advice is preferable to hearing out such competing claims, the chances are excellent that the criticism of a young queen, whom he calls to visit him only sporadically, will just anger the king and result in her being discredited in his eyes.

King Ahasuerus can presumably see that Esther is deeply distressed, and his favour towards her can be seen in his extravagant offer of up to half his kingdom at her request. Queen Esther, who is presumably showing the signs of having fasted for three days and three nights, and not slept very well, makes a strange request. She invites the king and Haman to a feast that she has prepared for him.

While this is not clear in every translation, as many of them have the king, Esther's question in verse 4 ends with, For him. Who is him? Is it Haman, or is it the king? One can imagine King Ahasuerus being puzzled at this point, and wondering what is going on. As Hazoni writes, Behind a superficial innocence, Esther's intention is to make a highly unusual, even disturbing request. For why should the queen, who has not had the benefit of seeing her husband for a month, wish to organise an intimate, romantic dinner for three? And the ambiguity that she raises about the person for whom the feast is prepared, makes matters even worse. Is Queen Esther, King Ahasuerus might wonder, preparing this great banquet for Haman? Why would she single him out for such attention? Likely puzzling in this way about what is going on, the king summons Haman to bring him to the feast. The king recognises that Esther's request is not just to have this banquet, there is something more bothering her, and she still hasn't told him. During the celebration of this intimate banquet, he turns to Esther and asks what her request is. Once again, however, he does not get the true answer. He is invited once more, again with Haman, to a feast the next day that Esther will prepare for them, for the king and Haman together. If the former invitation had raised the question of the person for whom the feast was prepared, a question which the king, presumably after a period of puzzling about it, settled in his own favour, in this invitation the king and Haman seem to be treated as guests of equal honour. Besides, it's one thing to invite a person for an intimate banquet one night. This is a sign of great honour, but to do it two nights in a row raises all sorts of questions. Something strange is going on here. It is important to notice what Esther is doing. She is sowing seeds of distrust and doubt in the mind of the king concerning Haman. She is also tempting Haman to overplay his hand of ambition, to reveal what is really driving him. By puffing him up with such favours and honours and giving him lots of wine, Esther is getting Haman to drop his defences, tempting him into some sort of unguarded action. She recognises that Haman is a shrewd political operator. Indeed, if he is the same person as Memucan in chapter 1, an identification that several

Jewish commentators have made, then he has already proved successful in dismissing one queen before her. However, she also knows, likely from Mordecai, that Haman is a proud and vain man. He is easily flattered and he also has ambitions far above his present station, even as the second most powerful man in the land. If Rabbi David Foreman is correct in his speculations concerning the reasons for which Mordecai did not bow to Haman, then Mordecai knows that Haman is not in fact a faithful servant of the king, but someone who has ambitions on the throne. He has removed obstacles, potentially including Queen Bashti, and he has also advanced himself over others, so that rather than the king relying upon a number of different officials, he relies upon Haman alone. Esther has to be very shrewd in the way that she plays her cards. Giving enough time for the seeds of doubt and distrust to germinate in the mind of the king is important, and she likely also hopes that Haman will make a misstep very soon. Indeed, she doesn't have to wait for long. Haman, puffed up by the great favour that he has been shown by the queen, leaves the feast, and as he goes out at the king's gate, he sees Mordecai, and yet Mordecai shows him no honour. Haman's pride having been puffed up and then wounded, he goes home to his wife and his family and puts on a pitiful

