

Esther 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 7. 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 favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted 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, and the king arose in his wrath from the wine drinking, and went into the palace garden. But Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was.

And the king said, Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, Moreover the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high. 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.

In Esther chapter 7, Haman has his downfall. The story of Esther is a story in many respects of feasts. There are six great feasts within the book. There are the two feasts at the beginning of the book. There are the two feasts in the middle, and then there are the two feasts at the end.

[2 : 0 1] The two feasts at the beginning are the feasts of King Ahasuerus. The feasts in the middle are the banquets that Queen Esther gives for King Ahasuerus and Haman. And the feasts at the end are the two feasts of the Jews. In the progression of these feasts, the whole movement of the book can be traced.

Esther chapter 7 tells the story of Esther's second feast, the feast at which she will finally reveal her identity and make her great move. Haman was already thrown off his balance at the end of chapter 6. He was snatched away from the conversation with his faction by the king's eunuchs, bringing him to this feast. Matters have already been slipping out of his control. This shrewd political operator, once the one who dominated the entire court of Ahasuerus, no longer feels as though he has the mastery of the situation. King Ahasuerus, at the second feast, makes his third request of Esther. On two previous occasions he asked her what she wanted, and on both occasions he was invited to a feast. Now finally she is going to give him the answer. To this point she has been biding her time. She needed to sow seeds of doubt and suspicion in the mind of King Ahasuerus concerning Haman. In the previous chapter we saw that these seeds were already starting to germinate. The king had just purposefully humiliated Haman, and to rub as much salt as possible into his wounded ego, had used him to elevate his great rival, Mordecai the Jew. By identifying Mordecai as the Jew in his instruction to Haman, the king may also have raised doubts in Haman's mind concerning his standing relative to the decree. Perhaps Haman wonders whether the king thinks that he is motivated by self-advancement in the decree, whether he is driven by the desire to remove rival factions. Esther's plan to sow distrust is clearly having its effect. Esther's response to the king could not be more shocking. What is her request? Her own life, and the life of her people. One can imagine the shock of Haman as he hears the words of his own decree being quoted back to him. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Back

in chapter 3 verse 13, when the decree was first promulgated, it was described as follows. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. We should note how carefully Esther frames the news that she is a Jew. She begins not by saying that she is a Jew, but by saying that her own life is being threatened. She concludes her statement by suggesting that if it were merely a matter of the Jews being sold into slavery, she would not make that much of an issue of it. She is a Persian queen, after all. She is standing by his side as the representative of all Persia, not the representative of a particular ethnic group.

As Rabbi Dave Foreman has argued, one of the failures of Queen Vashti was to stand for the whole nation, to represent the glory of Persia when she was called in before the king. For a king who is deeply wary of factional interests, one of the things that is desired of Queen Esther as Queen Vashti's replacement is that she can stand for the whole people. Instead of marrying another member of the aristocracy, King Ahasuerus married the beautiful woman next door. The moment, however, that Esther identifies with a particular ethnic group, rather than the general Persian people, she puts her position in jeopardy. Consequently, she approaches matters very carefully. She leads with the fact that her life is threatened, and then concludes by suggesting that the king is being swindled by Haman.

[5 : 42] Beyond her entirely natural concern for her own life, she would not be making such a deal about the threat to the Jews, were it not for the fact that in this matter the interests of Haman were so clearly contrary to the interests of the king and the Persian nation. Antony Tomasino writes, If there were a million Jews in the Persian Empire, or if the narrator thought there were, their value on the slave market would have far exceeded Haman's bribe. Haman offered the king 36 million shekels of silver for the destruction of the Jews. Slaves in the Persian era sold for about 60 to 90 shekels, so the Jews' market value would have far exceeded the value of the bribe. As Esther presents the issue, Haman appeared to be swindling King Xerxes out of a huge sum of money. Tomasino writes further, Another cunning aspect of Esther's plea is that it invites the king to consider the question of whether the Jews really deserved to be enslaved. According to Herodotus, rebellious vassals could indeed be sold as slaves. But how could Xerxes brand the Jews as rebels on the very day when he had ordered Mordecai to be honored for saving the king's life? If the Jews could not reasonably be painted as insurrectionists and sold as slaves, then they would surely not be deserving of the much harsher penalty of genocide. By framing matters in terms of a threat upon her life, Queen Esther is also very mindful of the way that King Ahasuerus sees things. She tries to get into his shoes and speak to him from his perspective, a perspective that seems to be fairly insensitive to the charges of conscience, the genocide of the Jews being described as if it were merely economically imprudent rather than morally abhorrent. If her plan has been successful, Queen Esther also knows that King Ahasuerus has been pondering and worrying over his relationship with Haman over the last few days. The pressing ethical question of how he is to treat the

Jews, weighs far less heavily upon his mind at this time than the more personal and immediate questions of how he stands relative to his wife the queen and to his vizier Haman, to whom Esther has seemingly shown particular favour. Shocked and angered at the revelation, Ahasuerus asks Queen Esther who this person might be.

What man would have the audacity to attack his queen? And now Esther springs her trap. She identifies Haman as the man. Haman, cornered, is terrified. However, the king's immediate response is not quite what Esther might have hoped. The king responds by leaving the room and going into the palace garden.

Queen Esther does not really want the king to reflect upon matters too closely. As Rabbi Foreman notes, if the king started to reflect too closely upon Esther's statements, he might start to see some of the cracks in her argument. Was the queen's life really threatened in such a way? Had Haman known that she was a Jew? Or for that matter, why had she not revealed to him that she was a Jew earlier?

She had framed her appeal to him in a way that might distract him from these facts, but if he thought too carefully about it, he might start to have some troubling questions for her. He might even start to recognise that she has purposefully been sowing distrust in his mind concerning his closest and highest subordinate. However, once again we can see the lord's hand in the way that

things work out, the king, returning from his walk in the palace garden, sees Haman falling on the couch where Esther was. The words come out of his mouth, will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? The king may have wondered to this point about the loyalties of Esther, whether she was aligned with Haman in some way, especially after she had twice invited Haman to an intimate banquet. More recently he had started to distrust Haman and to wonder about his motives and ambitions, and now after he had heard that the life of his queen was threatened, he sees Haman seemingly lunging at her. While he mistakes what's occurring, some pieces seem to fall into place in his mind.

[9 : 35] Perhaps we can recognise here some reference back to the story of the fall. Ahasuerus was just walking in the garden, and now he sees the serpent figure attacking the woman. At this point everyone around recognises that the tide has turned, that Haman is a dead man walking. The attendants immediately cover Haman's face, and one of the chief eunuchs now sees his opportunity to speak out.

Harbona, mentioned back in chapter 1, has been silent to this point, but he knows what has been taking place and has presumably been following the actions of Haman. Recognising that Haman is now completely out of favour, he informs the king that Haman has prepared gallows for Mordecai. In an act of poetic justice, Haman's violence comes back upon his own head. He is hanged upon his own gallows. However, the chapter ends on a troubling note. The wrath of the king abated. Again, this might not be what Esther wants. With Haman out of the way, her life has been spared, but perhaps her bluff has been called, as it is by no means clear that the king will act against the decree, which is still on the books. A question to consider. Anthony Tomasino writes of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 of Acts. Several elements of the story parallel that of Haman. Both are stories of ambition gone awry. Haman was attempting to exalt himself in Persia. Ananias and Sapphira were attempting to look good before the church. A couple, Haman and Zeresh versus Ananias and Sapphira, linked in conspiracy.

Both conspiracies involved selling. An attempt to financially cheat those in power. A heart filled with an evil plan. The crooks fall down before their accuser. The conspirator is covered. As he writes, the author of Acts has apparently subtly crafted his account of Ananias and Sapphira with an eye on the story of Haman's downfall. Can you think of another story in the New Testament with parallels with the story of Esther, in which a king offers someone up to half of his kingdom? What might we learn as we compare and contrast that story with the story of Esther?