

Esther 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Esther chapter 10. King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea, and all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him. Are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews, and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people, and spoke peace to all his people.

Besides the fact that it is exceedingly short, the final chapter of the book of Esther seems rather anticlimactic. After all of the personal and political drama of the book, it begins with King Ahasuerus imposing a tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. Why on earth would the drama of the book be arrested for this description of the king's tax policy? Besides being exceedingly boring, it seems rather irrelevant. David Alba has written a very perceptive article on this chapter and on this verse in particular. He points out that behind the whole story of the book of Esther, there is this subplot of how the king is going to raise revenue. Haman the Agagite, he argues, proposes that the king raise his revenue by plunder. In chapter 3 verse 9, The financial character of the transaction is also raised by Esther in her appeal to the king, in chapter 7 verse 4.

Esther there raises the point that even selling the population of the Jews into slavery would be a financial transaction than trying to raise money from them through genocide and plunder. In the preceding chapter, even though the Jews had been given the right by the decree of Mordecai to take plunder from their enemies, they did not avail themselves of it. Presumably all of that money went to the king. What verse 1 represents then is an alternative way for King Ahasuerus to raise his revenue, not by genocide and plunder, not by selling whole populations into slavery, but by imposing a tax.

By imposing a tax upon the Jews living within the land and its various provinces, and by taxing the Jews in the Mediterranean trading cities, he would have a reliable but also a just source of revenue. In this verse we see how the particular interests of Jews and their Gentile rulers can align. They do not have to be at odds with each other. This would not be the last time that Jews appeal to this sort of principle. It is reasonable to believe that this policy was suggested to King Ahasuerus by Mordecai.

[2 : 51] Mordecai is like the wise Joseph in Ahasuerus' court, the second in command, and the one who has administration over all of the affairs of the kingdom. By Mordecai's prudent regulation, the chaos of the realm of Ahasuerus under the oversight of his vizier Haman is overcome. Like the hero Joseph, Mordecai achieves this by prudent tax policy. This all seems very pedestrian and boring, but it brings peace to the people. There is a deep partnership established between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai, King Ahasuerus is praised for his acts of power and might, but also for his elevation of Mordecai, which enables him to achieve these things. As Gentiles elevate and bless and show hospitality to Jews in their midst, they too will be blessed. Earlier in the book we noted resemblances between the characters of Mordecai and Esther and the characters of Abraham and Sarah. The numbers 127 and 180 at the beginning of the book drew our minds back to Sarah, another woman hidden in a pagan king's court, and to Isaac, the threatened seed. In Joseph, a story of the great uncovering of identities, as Joseph reveals himself to people he had formerly hidden himself from. We find themes from the story of Abraham and Sarah coming to a full expression, whereas the mistreatment of Abraham and Sarah had brought judgment upon Gentile rulers and their peoples. Through Joseph and his prudent tax policies, many Gentiles were blessed and their lives preserved. Mordecai is a new Joseph, a man who is joined with a Gentile king, who elevates a Gentile king by his wise counsel, and through his elevation blesses his brothers. John Levinson writes,

Levenson also notes that in contrast to the story of Joseph, where a pharaoh could arise that had forgotten Joseph, the deeds of Mordecai were not merely commemorated in the feast of Purim, but were also written down so as not to be forgotten in the book of the Chronicles.

Levenson also notes that in contrast to the story of Joseph, where a pharaoh could arise that had forgotten Joseph, the deeds of Mordecai were not merely commemorated in the feast of Purim, but were also written down so as not to be forgotten in the book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia.

The figure of Mordecai reminds us of Joseph. He is also contrasted with the figure of Haman and his policies. In this chapter then, we can see that the book of Esther is not merely concerned with recording a special deliverance that the Jews experienced, or even just with instituting its commemoration.

It also has a political vision to propound to people within the diaspora, both Jews and Gentiles, a vision of how both parties can act in their own best interests, and also for the interests of the other. [5 : 36] The book of Esther is shot through with themes of wisdom, with the wisdom of the plan of Esther and of Mordecai's plan. Those plans were exercised from a position of weakness and vulnerability, but now there is a plan exercised from a position of rule and authority, and it is no less wise.

As in the story of Joseph, one of the greatest gifts that the Jews can give their Gentile rulers is the gift of their wisdom, not functioning as opponents, but as trustworthy and loyal counsellors.

The theme of loyalty pervades the story of Joseph, and the theme of loyalty is playing throughout the book of Esther too. Throughout the book, Ahasuerus is troubled with a crisis of loyalty.

Can he trust his closest servants when Bigthan and Teresh have risen against him? How can he find a queen to trust when his queen Vashti refuses to obey his command? What are the dangers of trusting too much in a man of questionable loyalties, as in the case of Haman?

Like Joseph in Genesis chapter 39, where he seemed to be guilty of adultery with his master's wife, Mordecai initially appears to be guilty in his failure to bow to Haman at the king's command.

However, as the story works out, it is proven that he is the true loyal servant.

[6 : 45] He is the one that the king can depend upon, whereas Haman is proven to be untrustworthy, largely revealed as such by Esther's scheme. Along with their wisdom, in their unimpeachable loyalty, the Jews will build up the authority of anyone who elevates them.

All of this, then, is a fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, that in his seed, all of the nations of the earth would be blessed. A question to consider.

David Dalber has argued that Mordecai is the primary hero of the book of Esther. Do you believe that he is justified in making this claim? If so, how? If we were to read the story of Esther as focused upon the character of Mordecai, what elements and themes of the book would come more to the surface?