

Esther 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 6. On that night the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on king Ahasuerus. And the king said, What honour or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this? The king's young men who attended him said, Nothing has been done for him. And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. And the king's young men told him, Haman is here, standing in the court.

And the king said, Let him come in. So Haman came in, and the king said to him, What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour? And Haman said to himself, Whom would the king delight to honour more than me? And Haman said to the king, For the man whom the king delights to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honour, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour. Then the king said to Haman, Hurry, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned. So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai, and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour. Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house mourning, and with his head covered. And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him. While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived, and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared. Esther chapter 6 is the turning point within the story. Esther is up against a stronger opponent in Haman. While Esther has certain advantages, Haman has several advantages over her. She needs to fight a political battle against the most powerful political operator in the land. While the king is well disposed towards her, she wasn't invited into the king's presence for over a month. Haman, on the other hand, is so in favour with the king that he has been exalted over all of the other officials. He is the one elevated official that has taken the place of a number of high officials of equal status. This was likely provoked by the rebellion of Bigthan and Teresh, after which the king has started to distrust his closest and highest officials, and to single out this one man Haman as the one man that he could trust over everyone else. Esther, however, has the advantage of the fact that Haman does not know that she is a Jew, nor does he know that she is seeking to undermine his genocidal plan. To make her appeal to the king, she first has to sow some doubt and distrust in the mind of Ahasuerus concerning his closest and highest advisor, his very right-hand man.

She also likely hopes to tempt Haman into imprudent action by aiming for his weakest spot, his exalted ego. The king starts this chapter with an unsettled mind, struggling to sleep, one can imagine why. He doesn't yet know what is troubling Esther, and he is likely ruminating over why the queen would specifically single out Haman for an invitation to join them in an intimate banquet, two evenings in succession. Even if no suspicion has yet grown towards Haman, one can imagine at least some measure of irritation in Ahasuerus' mind. If even his own queen regards Haman as so elevated as to deserve such special treatment, perhaps Haman needs to be taken down a peg or two, to be reminded that, although he is the second most powerful man in the land, Ahasuerus is still the king. As Eurom Hazoni observes, one can well imagine the king starting to become troubled about the scale of the authority that he had handed over into the hands of Haman, recognising that by granting Haman authority over all of the other officials, and by unreservedly authorising him to act according to his wishes in all sorts of matters, he was greatly weakening his own position, and putting Haman in a position to usurp his own power as the king. Haman has also just been scheming with his family and friends concerning the destruction of Mordecai, planning to hang or impale him upon his tree the next day. Both Esther and Haman are on the brink of making their decisive moves, moves for which they have been preparing. Everything hangs upon how these moves play out, and then there comes an unforeseen twist, which neither side had anticipated. As the troubled mind of the king prevents him from sleeping, he gives orders for the book of memorable deeds, the Chronicles, to be read to him. Perhaps he regards it as the sort of boring book that could cure insomnia. There is however the possibility that his mind is weighed down with thoughts concerning the failed coup that had led to the rise of Haman in the first place. Perhaps he wants to revisit and reconsider the events surrounding Bigthan and Teresh's coup, perhaps intending to focus especially upon

Haman's manoeuvring at the time. Whatever the king's motives, as the Chronicles are read, he hears of the actions of Mordecai in foiling the coup, and cannot recall whether Mordecai was rewarded for his actions.

When he discovers that he was not rewarded, he asks who is in the court. Haman, so eager to get to the king to get him to sign off on his plan to hang Mordecai on his great gallows, was already in the court, earlier than anyone else. Ahasuerus likely was not the only sleepless man that night.

[5 : 58] Informed that Haman was already there, the king summoned him. The king takes this opportunity to ask Haman a question that might tempt him out into the open, that might reveal some of his ambitions.

The king is starting to get something of the measure of Haman, and we can already imagine that he intends to knock Haman down a few notches at this point. He recognises Haman's pride and ambition, and he asks him a question calculated to catch him in it. What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour? Whether the narrator is all-seeing, or whether Haman's internal thinking is patently obvious upon his countenance, we are told that Haman said to himself, whom would the king delight to honour more than me? Given the suspicions and concerns that have been developing in his mind, suspicions and concerns sown by Esther, Ahasuerus, as Rabbi David Foreman suggests, is probably registering with mounting concern the repeated references to king in Haman's response.

Haman says, For the man whom the king delights to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, on whose head a royal crown is set, and let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Haman is essentially suggesting that the man the king delights to honour play dress up as the king. And as we, and presumably Ahasuerus also at this point know, Haman thought this man was him. Unbeknownst to him, Haman had fallen into a trap.

He had outed himself to the suspicious king Ahasuerus, revealing himself as one who fancied himself as a king. Haman does not seem to realise the danger that he is putting himself in. While the king might earlier have wanted to take Haman down a notch or two, now he really wants to humiliate him.

Mordecai's reasons for not bowing to Haman, mysterious earlier, might become a little clearer at this point. Mordecai, as we saw, was in a position to discover and disclose the plots of the highest officials, Bigthan and Teresh, a fact we are reminded of at the beginning of this chapter, as the story of the coup is retold. The advancement of Haman had probably resulted from the king's suspicions concerning the other high officials. In treating the question of why Mordecai didn't bow, we observe the parallel between the way that Mordecai's refusal to bow is described, and the way that Joseph's refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife is described in Genesis chapter 39.

[8 : 19] In the case of Potiphar's wife, she was the second in command in the household, and was acting unfaithfully towards her husband. Haman might be acting in a similarly unfaithful manner towards Ahasuerus. The honour suggested here is similar to the honour that Pharaoh gives to Joseph in Genesis chapter 41 verses 41 to 43.

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck.

And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, Bow the knee. Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Haman and Mordecai are rivals. We earlier saw that Mordecai refused to bow to Haman when he was receiving the honoured treatment of the second in the realm. Now the tables are going to be radically turned. Haman now has to lead in honour the man who refused to bow to him. And Mordecai is being elevated in a manner that is reminiscent of Joseph by Pharaoh. Furthermore, there is a pointedness in the king's statement in verse 10. Do so to Mordecai the Jew. This statement probably has a chilling effect upon Haman. He has been conspiring against the Jews, specifically provoked by his anger towards Mordecai. And now the king is very pointedly singling out a Jew for honour, identifying him as a Jew. And what's more, he's dishonouring Haman by making him perform this act. Even before the second feast and Esther's decisive action against him, Haman's fortunes have dramatically turned. As the identified Jew at the king's gate, Mordecai probably stands already for much of the Jewish community.

This honouring of Mordecai is not just the honouring of an individual person, it's the honouring of a representative figure, someone who stands for a wider people. We can see the reversals taking place at this point. The rivalry between Haman and Mordecai began with Haman enjoying great honours at the king's command, and with Mordecai's mourning as a result of Haman's plot. Now Mordecai is the one who is being honoured at the king's command, and Haman is the one who is mourning. Haman's faction, his wise men and his wife, see what is happening. For them, the triumph of Mordecai at this point is very ominous for what's going to happen in the future. If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him. They see all of this as an unsettling, foreshadowing of what is to come. Haman is then hastened away to the second and decisive feast.

Perhaps in the statement of Haman's faction, we can perceive some indication of their knowledge of divine sovereignty working in these events. There have been several coincidences. The king not sleeping, that specific passage of the chronicles being read at that precise time, the fact that Mordecai was not earlier rewarded. Haman turning up at just that moment. While Esther had been using great prudence in making her moves, by themselves her moves may not have been sufficient to displace Haman. It is the hand of divine providence that decisively turns things. Man proposes, but the Lord disposes. The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. The Lord is never mentioned in this book of Esther, yet he is clearly the principal actor. Behind all of the human agencies, it is the Lord who is working out his purposes and his promises. A question to consider. The story of the book of Esther is a story of reversals. This is perhaps one of the greatest points of reversal in the book. Can you think of some others?