

Esther 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 4. When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. And he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting.

And many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.

Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, and command her to go to the king to beg his favour and plead with him on behalf of her people. And Hathak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then Esther spoke to Hathak and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law, to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days. And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

[2 : 3 6] Esther chapter 4 opens with Mordecai's anguished response to the news of Haman's decree. He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes, goes out into the midst of the city, and cries with a loud and bitter cry. Rabbi David Forman notes that this reference to the loud and bitter cry recalls Esau's cry in Genesis chapter 27 verse 34. As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father. We have already observed allusions to the rivalry between Esau and Jacob in the character of Haman the Agagite. Haman the Agagite is the descendant of Agag the Amalekite.

King Saul, Israel's first Benjaminite king, had failed to wipe out the Amalekites as he was instructed to do, and was rejected from the throne as a result. The rivalry with the Amalekites went long back in Israel's history, all the way back to the story of Esau and Jacob. Esau's response to having lost both the birthright and the blessing was this great and bitter cry. We also see parallels between Esau's response when he later lifts up his voice and weeps, and King Saul's response in 1 Samuel chapter 24 verse 16 when he lifts up his voice and weeps, as he acknowledges that David is the true heir of the kingdom, and that the Lord will bless him and deliver the kingdom into his hand. This great history, the history of the rivalry between Esau and Jacob, and the tragic history of the tribe of Benjamin, can be heard in the background of this episode and in much of the rest of the book. Indeed, it can shed some light upon what has happened to this point. In Genesis chapter 27 verse 29, we can see the blessing that was given to Jacob over his brother Esau.

Let people serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

Haman's fury against Mordecai was provoked by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, the very blessing that Jacob had taken from Esau. Esau's response to the loss of the blessing to Jacob was a murderous anger. We read of this in verses 41 to 42 of that chapter. Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him. And Esau said to himself, The days of mourning for my father are approaching. Then I will kill my brother Jacob. But the words of Esau, her older son, were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. In Haman the Agagite, his descendant, Esau's murderous rage against Jacob, his brother, has blown up into a genocidal rage against an entire people, provoked by the failure of one man to bow. As we hear this story in the background, perhaps we can also recognise connections between different details. We might think about the relationship between Rebekah and Jacob, and the relationship between Esther and Mordecai.

The two competing brothers, Esau and Jacob, are here, Haman, and Mordecai. Perhaps we might also see ways in which King Ahasuerus is like Isaac. Mordecai is not alone in this mourning. There is a more general despair among the Jews in every province. Separated from the commoners and the regular life of the city and the palace, Esther does not seem to be aware of Haman's decree. Her impression at this point might simply be that Mordecai is destitute. He has fallen into extreme poverty, and so she will send out clothes to assist him. Perhaps in this gift of clothes from Esther to Mordecai, we might hear some element of an echo of the story of Genesis chapter 27, where Rebekah gave clothes to Jacob so that he might go before his father, in disguise as Esau. When Esther inquires further, Mordecai informs her about the decree and asks her to plead with the king on behalf of the people. We must remember that to this point, Esther had not disclosed her identity or her people of origin to the king. She was the radiant, beautiful queen chosen from the common people. As Rabbi Foreman notes, this would enable her to stand for the whole nation of Persia as a common person of the realm. If she were to out herself as belonging to this hated national group, her symbolic role as the queen of all Persia would be thrown into jeopardy. Besides, she informs Mordecai, one cannot simply enter into the king's presence. He has to summon you, and if you enter his presence when not summoned, you do so in jeopardy of your life. Esther had not been summoned at any point in the last month. The question of approach to King Ahasuerus has been won throughout the book to this point. Vashti had failed to approach the king when she had been summoned. Bigthan and Teresh, two guardians of the king's threshold, had sought to transgress the threshold and lay hands upon the king. The king's presence and approach to the king, as

[7 : 26] James Jordan has observed, is similar to approach to the throne of God. Those who enter unsummoned can be destroyed. Bigthan and Teresh could be compared to Nadab and Abihu. A similar thing is going on in Genesis chapter 27 with the blessing of Isaac. In verses 11 and 12 of that chapter, Jacob expresses a similar hesitancy to Esther. But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse upon myself, and not a blessing. Jacob had ended up approaching his father with food and wine, but in a disguise as his brother. Esther's approach to the king will have to be one in which she removes the disguise, in which she unveils herself as a member of the Jewish people. Mordecai responds by warning Esther, but his warning is a surprising one. The concern that he expresses is not for the Jewish people, but for Esther and her father's house. If she fails to act, it will be her that loses out.

Deliverance will arise from another quarter. Esther's name, if we were to render it in Hebrew, suggests the sense of hiding. The story of Esther is in many respects a story of hiding. We might initially think of Esther hiding her identity when she goes into the king's house. However, the greater act of hiding can be seen in the Lord's hand. The Lord is never mentioned by name in the book of Esther, yet his presence and action is everywhere. The book of Esther is a book in which we see the work of the Lord in acts of seeming chance. God's providence rules throughout. The book is packed full of seeming coincidences that advance the Lord's purpose and deliver his people. Mordecai here expresses his confidence that the Lord's providence will achieve his purposes for his people. The Lord's promises concerning the Jews are an assurance that they will not finally be wiped out. Whatever Haman's decree, deliverance will arise for them from some quarter. And Esther at this point seems to be the best situated. The big picture is certain. The Lord will deliver his people. How Esther and her family will stand relative to this is what is really in the balance at this point. If she fails to act, she will bring disaster upon herself and her kindred, but the Jews will be saved. Mordecai invites her to look at her situation differently. Knowing that the Lord is in control of history and that the Jews will be delivered, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether she has been put in the position that she has as a divinely appointed means to deliver them. By pursuing the Lord's purposes where she is placed, she might prove to be a decisive instrument of the Lord's providence. Rabbi Foreman suggests that we ought to read these verses against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 30, which concerns the making of vows and also their annulment. In verses 10 to 16, it speaks of the situation of a young woman who marries a husband. And if she vowed in her husband's house or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard of it and said nothing to her and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows or concerning her pledge of herself shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the Lord will forgive her. Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself her husband may establish, or her husband may make void. But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them. But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity. These are the statutes that the Lord commanded Moses about a man and his wife and about a father and his daughter while she is in her youth within her father's house. As Rabbi Foreman recognises, several of the details of this passage in Numbers chapter 30 are mentioned in Esther chapter 4. There's the young woman who marries, there are instructions concerning the relationship with a spouse and their word, there's the reference to the father's house, silence is presented as assent and affirmation, and there's the urgency of speech.

If she does not speak, she will be seen to affirm. Foreman notes that the vowelisation of her husband in verse 14 is not original. Vowels are not found in the original and pointed Hebrew text, and there is a different way of vowelising the text, which, while clearly not the original meaning, is a play and mirror image of it. The word rendered her husband could be rendered a woman. This would yield something like the meaning, but if a woman says nothing to her husband from day to day, then she establishes all his vows or all his pledges that are upon him. She has established them, because she said nothing to her husband on the day that she heard of them. Now this is clearly not the original meaning of the text, but Mordecai seems to be playing upon it. He is inviting Esther to see herself as the person that stands in the place of being able to annul the word of her spouse.

If she speaks up at this time, she will be able to negate his word, but if she does not, her silence will count as assent and she will be judged. Esther responds positively to Mordecai's charge. She will undertake this great and dangerous act of disclosing herself. However, before she does so, she asks for Mordecai to gather all the Jews together in Susa and to carry out a fast for her, and she will do the same with her young women. This fast for three days and three nights from the time of the Passover should make us think of the story of Christ. Esther's life will hang in the balance for this period of time, and when the king raises her scepter, she will be, as it were, raised up. Her words at the end of her response, if I perish, I perish, should also remind us of the words of Jacob, as Judah pledged that he would bring Benjamin back safely from Egypt, as Joseph in disguise had instructed Jacob's sons to bring back their youngest brother with them.

In Genesis chapter 43 verses 13 to 14, When we hear such linguistic parallels in scripture, our concern should be to discover whether they belong to a greater cluster of parallels that connect stories and their themes, not merely turns of phrase. In the story of Joseph, it is Judah who intercedes for Benjamin. In the story of Esther, however, it is Benjaminites, Mordecai and Esther, who intercede on behalf of the Jews, the Judahites.

[14 : 01] The troubled story of Benjamin is woven throughout the background of the story of Esther. Mordecai and Esther remind us of Joseph, the older brother of Benjamin. Mordecai and Esther seemingly arise from the line of King Saul. Like Saul, they are facing the thread of an Agagite. Formerly, Judah had interceded for Benjamin, and now the Benjaminites will intercede for the Judahites. In the story of Esther, troubled legacies are being laid to rest, good deeds once received are being repaid, and tragically unfinished tasks are being completed. A question to consider, how many unlikely or coincidental events in the book of Esther can you think of in which we can see the hand of God's providence in action?