

Esther 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Esther chapter 8. On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her.

And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet, and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?

Then king Ahasuerus said to queen Esther, and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring. For an edict written in the name of the king, and sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked. The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors, and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to each province in its own script, and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language.

And he wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers, riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, on one day throughout all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honour, and in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them. Esther chapter 8 begins at the point where many readers of the book presume that matters must all be over. All that we are left with now is the mopping up operation. Haman, the enemy of the Jews, has been hung upon his own tree. Esther's plan has been stunningly successful, hasn't it? However, in chapter 8 we see that there is a huge problem. Haman may be dead, but his decree is still very much alive. What's worse, a law of the Medes and the Persians cannot be revoked. Esther's position was a difficult one. To get the king to respond to Haman's genocidal decree, she had to present the decree as being one against his own queen, making it personal for him, a direct threat to him by his disloyal vizier. This way of framing things depended upon some measure of misapprehension on the king's part. Haman's intent, of course, had never been to attack

Queen Esther. He didn't even know that she was a Jew. Now, with Haman dead and the king's anger abated, the queen is safe. No one would be powerful enough to enact the law against Esther now Haman is removed.

[4 : 22] Yet the law remains, and Esther's leverage is much diminished. There was always a danger for Esther in identifying herself too strongly with the Jewish people as the new queen of Persia, the one who is supposed to be the beautiful woman of the people, rather than the representative of a particular faction or ethnic group within it. When she had presented her argument to Ahasuerus earlier, the threat to the people had been framed first as a threat to her, as Ahasuerus' beloved queen, and second as a swindling of the king and of Persia by killing a large number of inconvenient people for a very small bribe relative to the handsome amount that such a great population would receive on the slave market. This is clearly not much of a moral argument, nor does it seem to have weighed very heavily with Ahasuerus. As evidenced by his lavish parties and generous gifts, Ahasuerus never seemed to be that bothered with the state of his treasuries. Esther still needs to convert the personal favour that she has with the king into meaningful power to act against Haman's decree.

A new plan is needed, and urgently. Out of his love for his queen, whom King Ahasuerus had protected from the man seemingly threatening her life, Ahasuerus gave Esther the house of Haman, his former vizier, whose property had been confiscated. The king had made Haman his second in command, granting him extreme authorisation by giving him his own signet ring. Esther establishes Mordecai in Haman's former office, setting him over Haman's former property and giving him the authorisation of the signet that Haman formerly enjoyed. In chapter 6, Haman had to perform the peculiar honours for Mordecai that he had once presumed to be his own. In chapter 7, he was hung upon the tree that he had prepared for Mordecai, and now his property and his office are given into Mordecai's hands. This is indeed a remarkable and poetic reversal of fortunes.

In scripture, as Eurom Hazoni has argued, one of the ways in which the text's moral judgements on its characters and events are revealed is in the consequences or the aftermath of actions.

Earlier on in the story of Esther, we might have wondered whether Mordecai was sinful in his refusal to bow to Haman. Indeed, James Jordan and Louis Bales Paton are among those who see Mordecai's action as rebellious and inexcusable. However, the reversal here seems to be a divine vindication of Mordecai, apart from any repentance on his part. This greatly weakens that theory. As Rabbi David Foreman argues, Queen Esther loses her composure at this point because, while many readers might think that she has completely triumphed. In fact, it appears as though the most important part of the plan has failed. The king's anger has subsided, and while she is safe, her people very clearly are not. The king even seems to be prepared to shrug his shoulders and just count the great economic loss that he would sustain with the destruction of the Jews as a write-off. Much as Haman had fallen down begging for his life in the preceding chapter, now Esther is in anguish, begging for the life of her people. There's no more ace in the hole remaining for Esther to play. She has already made her decisive move, and now with growing horror she realises that it might not have been enough. Throughout the book of Esther, the story of Eden and the fall is playing behind the text in all sorts of ways.

We have already seen ways in which Haman was like Adam, desiring the one thing that he had not been granted, the forbidden fruit that spoiled his enjoyment of everything else. Ahasuerus was in some respects like Adam earlier, choosing Esther as a suitable partner and calling her by name after the parade of different potential queens. Later, after walking in the garden, he delivered his wife from the serpent Haman. Zeresh, the wife of Haman, and Esther are also contrasted as two Eve-like figures.

[8 : 10] Eve wielded a powerful influence with her husband Adam, so that her husband rejected the word of the lord at her invitation to eat of the fruit. In the book of Esther, we see both Zeresh and Esther using the power of their influence with their husbands. Zeresh flatters Haman by pandering to his desires, offering him the body of the insubordinate Mordecai, the forbidden fruit, upon the tree of the gallows.

Esther, however, takes a very different approach. She uses her beauty and attractiveness and seeks to wield it as a force of properly moral persuasion. She seeks to achieve her purpose by giving food to her husband in the two banquets. She is the Eve to Ahasuerus' Adam, giving him the fruit of the vine.

As Rabbi Foreman observes, the language of her appeals gradually moves from what is desirable to the king, the language of what is good to one's appetites and desires, to a focus upon what is morally fitting and right. What is good in a more moral sense? She is training an ethically insensitive man in the true knowledge of good and evil. We should consider the way that her appeal in this chapter is a progression beyond her earlier ones. Her first appeal was in chapter 5 verse 4, and Esther said, If it pleased the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king. In verses 7 and 8 of that chapter, 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. Even in the preceding chapter, as she was disclosing herself to the king, she made the appeal primarily on the grounds of his desires and what was expedient for him.

Chapter 7 verses 3 and 4. Then Queen Esther answered, If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it pleased the king, let my life be granted me 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. Now, however, the grounds of the appeal shift.

[10 : 22] In Esther chapter 8 verses 5 to 6, the original grounds of the appeals are still there, but crucial elements have been added. And she said, If it pleads the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, to this point everything is familiar from the preceding requests, but she proceeds, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hamadathah, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?

Hazoni notes that Esther's petition here contains three lines of persuasion, the king's interest in those things that he desires, his presumed interest in the cause of justice, and his fear of losing her.

It's the second category here, the king's presumed interest in the cause of justice, bound up with the questions of what seemed right, and the worthiness of Esther herself, that are the new elements here.

Esther is now, for the first time, appealing to the king on the objective grounds of what is right or wrong, not merely on the basis of his desires, or on grounds of expediency.

Esther also raises her own personal interest against the king's. If he goes ahead with Haman's decree, she won't be able to bear it. Ahasuerus has already been resisted, and his command rejected by one queen.

[11 : 47] Esther is taking a potentially risky tack here. She is calling upon Ahasuerus the king to recognise the legitimacy and the importance of another person's desires besides his, even though that person's desires may go against his at points, and fulfilling those desires might not be expedient for him. Esther then is seeking to wield love as a sort of moral force. By Esther's use of love as a moral force, playing off the archetypal story of the Garden of Eden and Eve and Adam, Esther is demonstrating something about the relationship between her wife and her husband, and the way that that relationship can be used as a power of good. The king's response to Esther's new petition has a degree of ambivalence. It's as if he begins by saying, What more can I do? I've given you the house of Haman. Haman has been hanged. What more do you want?

Verse 8 seems simultaneously both to give and to take away. Esther and Mordecai are on the one hand being given the right to make whatever decree they want. On the other hand, however, the statement of the king that an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked refers not just to any decree that they might write, but also to the original decree of Haman.

How are they going to deal with the decree of Haman when it cannot be revoked? They need to devise a plan that overcomes the decree without revoking it. They come up with an ingenious solution. They summon the king's scribes on the 23rd day of the third month of Sivan, and Mordecai instructs them what to write. This is 70 days after the original decree. 70 days, the 10th Sabbath, but also reminiscent of the time of exile, 70 years. The Jews have been under a death sentence for 70 days.

And now they are going to enjoy relief. The new decree is almost exactly the same as the original one, and allows for a seemingly insane situation, a sort of civil war permitted by the law. The Jews are permitted to defend themselves and to apply lethal force against their adversaries without any fear of reprisal from the government. While their enemies can act with impunity, they can also do so.

Rabbi Foreman asks some important questions here. Why does it say that the Jews were allowed to kill children and women and to plunder their goods? First of all, it does not seem that they carried these things out when they actually enacted the decree in chapter 9. And for that matter, hadn't King Saul been rejected from the throne for taking plunder from the Amalekites? Surely, Mordecai, a descendant of the family of Saul, should have known this. However, this is to fail to realise the true purpose of the decree. The true purpose of the decree is not merely to allow the Jews to fight back against their enemies. It's to go toe-to-toe with the original decree of Haman, to throw the weight of the Persian government visibly behind Mordecai and the Jews, over Haman and the Jews' enemies. As officials in the various provinces receive these two decrees, they are going to have to decide how to enact and enforce them. Is the second decree merely a minor mitigation of the first one, or is the second decree intended completely to counteract the first? This is why it's important that Mordecai's decree be so severe. His decree must be at least as severe as the decree of Haman, if it's to be effective against it. While Mordecai's decree cannot overturn the decree of Haman, it can send out a strong signal that the weight of the government of Persia is completely against any of those who would seek to enact it. To drive this point home, Mordecai and the Jews arrange a great spectacle. Mordecai plays the sort of royal dress-up that Haman had wanted to play. He is sent out from the presence of the king wearing royal robes, and the Jews have a great feast and holiday. Haman's law is still on the books. Why are they partying? They have not yet been delivered. They are celebrating because the celebration itself is a signal that's being sent out to all of the provinces that the king's power and force and authorisation now decisively and completely lies with the Jews, over against Haman and his faction. Anyone seeking to enact the original decree should recognise that they are in a dangerous position. The decree has not been revoked, but it has been successfully counteracted. A question to consider. The decrees of Haman and of Mordecai are central elements of the story of the Book of Esther. We have already seen the way that the Book of Esther explores themes of chance and providence. In what ways, and perhaps in relationship to those two themes of chance and providence, is it exploring and developing the theme of law?