

Esther: “For Such a Time as This”

Part Two

Park Street Church Christian Formation – Fall 2017

Review

- Historical Contexts
 - Jews in the diaspora after the second Temple had been rebuilt in the Land
 - Specifically, the Persian empire - Xerxes (Ahasuerus) as king (586-465 BC)
- Challenges and Responses to the Book of Esther – presumed lapses of major characters
- Echoes of Scripture / Narrative Structure
- Cultural Contexts
 - Honor and shame / inside and outside
 - Living on the margins – Esther’s name (Ishtar [Babylonian goddess] or istar – hidden)

Catching Up - Sober side of honor/shame in this narrative

- Mordecai’s refusal to “bend and prostrate” – these two verbal forms together used elsewhere only of obeisance to God; note the court “informants”
- Haman Threatens the Existence of Mordecai and His People (3:7-15)
 - Haman’s description of the Jews (vs 8)
 - Suggested decree (“to destroy”) and payoff (vs 9) – From where would Haman get 375 tons of silver?
 - The power of Haman, “the oppressor of the Jews” (vss 10-11)
 - The empire-wide edict (vss 12-14) - sealed with the king’s ring; “destroy, kill, annihilate” all Jews and plunder their property
- Initial responses (vs 15)

Mordecai in Mourning/Shame (4:1-5) – How would you characterize Esther’s initial response?

Mordecai and Esther Cross Boundaries (4:6-17) – mediating presence of Hatach

First exchange (vss 6-12):

- Esther received a copy of the edict
- Mordecai urged her to intervene
- Response: “everyone knows . . .”; the prospect of death

The second exchange:

- Mordecai’s grim warning against silence in the circumstances
 - Being the queen will not save you; and your father’s family will perish
 - Help may (or may not) arise from another place
 - “For such a time as this”
- Esther – fasting and despair (“When (If) I perish, I perish”)
- Mordecai obeys Esther

The Beginning of Haman’s Descent

- Haman Set Up by Esther (5:1-8)
 - Rhetoric—“petition . . . request”—and suspense
 - Why invite Haman?
- Haman’s “Mood Swings” (5:9-14)
 - joy and “a good heart” - changed to fury
 - restrained himself - gathered audience at home for expansive boasting
 - bitterness of wounded pride
 - his wife (Zeresh) provides the solution – get king’s permission to hang Mordecai

Whose Honor? Haman Set Up by the King (6:1-11) – the hinge of the narrative

- Help from the “other place” – God’s sovereignty in the king’s insomnia
- King’s intent to correct Mordecai’s neglected honor – because it reflected badly on him
- Haman’s expected honor turned to unexpected and utter humiliation
 - King did not name Mordecai—a test?
 - The street scene was watched by all who had been at the gate
 - Reversal of Mordecai’s sackcloth (ch 4)

Haman’s Descent from Honor to Shame (6:12-7:10)

- Signs of shame – “head covered” (6:12); “fall” used three times (6:13)
- Haman “in Court” (7:1-10)
 - King’s rhetorical question (plea? request?) → Esther identified herself with her people
 - “if only sold as slaves . . . would not have troubled the king,” but “sold for destruction, killing, annihilation”
 - Esther identified Haman as the enemy; king stormed out, but returned just as Haman was “falling” on Esther’s couch, pleading for his life
 - Haman’s face was “covered” and he was hung on the tree prepared for Mordecai

Beginning the Processes of Justice (8:1-8)

- King gave Mordecai Haman’s place and property [which was substantial]
- The king’s basic disregard for the well-being of the Jews (they were not safe yet) until pressed

The irony of writing - its (im)permanence (8:8) – writing and over-writing irrevocable decrees

The New Edict and the Rejuvenated Jewish Community (8:9-17)

- In what ways was this decree similar to the preceding one? How was it different?
- Does this decree raise ethical questions?
- Mordecai’s stature
- What might it mean to identify with the Jews (or become Jewish) out of dread?

Jewish Self-Defense (9:1-16)

- Continued intentional hatred and aggression against Jews throughout the empire – following the first decree in spite of dire implications of the second
- Dramatic political reversal and the “effectiveness” of dread
- Note Jews did not take plunder
- Remember the implications of being hung on a tree (Esth 9:13; cf. Deut 21:22-23)

A New Festival: Purim (9:17-32)

Just notice the emphasis on reversals—from sorrow to joy and mourning to celebration

Why does this section appear to be redundant and over-emphatic?

Epilogue(s) – in the text and in lessons we might draw

- Questions: Faith and cultural compromise? What kinds of decisions are necessitated when we live in a “messy” place?
- The text of Esther prepared God’s people for life in every diaspora that would follow this one. God’s providential orchestrating of critical events “behind the scenes” is paradigmatic. These providential “coincidences” are lodged in contexts that demand responsible and faithful human choices and action.