

## **Esther: The Emperor's Clothes**

**Esther 1**

**By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)**

Pascal (17<sup>th</sup> c Fr. Mathematician and Theologian) said: Any religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true; any religion which does not offer the reason of it is not instructive. Well, today we begin a book where we will affirm that God's hand is hidden, and we will be attempting to account – throughout this series – for that hiddenness.

The Book of Esther is a book in which God is not mentioned. He doesn't speak, and he is not spoken to. And no one speaks on his behalf. There are no prayers (though a fast is mentioned). There is no mention of the Law, or the Covenant, or the promises, the priesthood, the temple, or Jerusalem, or the land. The book is not cited in the NT, and no Christian commentary was written on it for 700 years after Christ. The narrator makes no explicit judgments and he interjects no pious commentary.

The noble Jewish actors in the book have remained (for reasons unknown) in Persia, long after the Jews were freed by Cyrus (conquered the Babylonians) to return to the land in 536 BC or so. These characters show little in the way of outward piety, and even engage in some questionable practices: repressing their Jewish identity, and, in Esther's case, marrying a pagan king.

Yet, the book has been beloved to Christians and Jews (backstory for feast of Purim). It is useful for many reasons, but let me state three up front. First, they live in a world of global Empire, and the Empire controls everything. And to the extent, that we now live in a globalized, centralized, heavily bureaucratized, seductive pagan world – The book speaks to us – subjects of massive national and international forces. (overlap with Revelation)

Second, this is not simply about a people in temporary exile, for a few decades. It is about a people, in a more or less permanent state of exile. What we call, even now, the Diaspora. They are scattered throughout the world, they are settled in it, and they are not going back to the land. And there is no reasonable chance of Jewish institutions and Jewish culture doing little more than surviving outside of Palestine under Persian rule. How one lives in that kind of world -perched tenuously like a Fiddler on the Roof (fragile existence of 20<sup>th</sup> c Russian Jews),

how one strategizes, how one uses one's opportunities and resources, is a big part of what the book is about.

Third, they live in a world where God seems hidden and far away. Not just that he's working behind the scenes, but that he is absent. He does not make an appearance. And miracles have seemed to have ceased. The kind of stuff that saved Daniel, and his friends in Babylon, in the previous generation, does not seem to be on offer, or even expected, by the Jews here. Miracles decline in number and in frequency, as the OT progresses, and we are here, near the very end of the OT era. We live very much in THIS world. A world dominated by secular Empire. A world where God seems painfully absent, a world where miracles are few and far between. With that, we will make three points. The King in vv. 1-8, the Queen in vv. 9-12, and the Edict in vv. 13-22.

## I. The King

First, the king. The story occurs during the reign of Xerxes (Greek form of his name). Some Bibles call him Ahasuerus (Heb. Form of his name -same person). He was the Persian emperor from 486-465 BC. We know a good deal about him from the famous Greek historian Herodotus. Cyrus, who conquered Babylon in 537 BC, and let the Jews return from exile, was his grandfather.

The Empire is vast. It is inescapable. 127 Provinces from India to Cush (Sudan). Including, note, the Jews who returned from exile, in Palestine. Virtually the whole known world is under his authority. The notion of royal, kingly rule is piled up in the text as a way of impressing us. He is in many ways, god in this world. His throne is in the citadel of Susa.

One of the four capital cities of the empire, a city about 150 miles from the Persian Gulf, in modern day Iran. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign, that is 483 BC, he gives a banquet (Heb. Drinking closely related). And it's a parody of all the nations streaming into Zion, the throne-city of Yahweh. All the nobles, officials, military leaders, princes, from all the provinces, are present.

Now, there is a lot of satire in this book, its subtle, but it is definitely present. Already the feeling is conveyed that we have an overblown, bloated, pompous self-important Empire/Emperor. And the banquet he hosts lasts for 180 days. How dumb is that? How fun could that possibly be? You can actually turn heavenly things into hellish things this way. By insisting that they last virtually forever. We are a realm of power w/o much wisdom. But the purpose was to show off his VAST (notice) wealth. His splendor, his glory, his majesty. The wealth of the nations has become his.

At the end of the 180 days, he throws another week-long (Seven's: perfection, Sabbath culmination) banquet. *There are 10 banquets in the book – 3 in this*

*chapter alone – and they form something of the spine of the story.* This banquet is in an enclosed garden – the empire is an alternative Eden. Its for all the people (prob. all the males), from the greatest to the least. Including the Jews – who have a place in this world. Then we get a detailed picture of the garden's extravagance. Gold, silver, marble pillars, couches of gold and silver, mosaic pavement, costly stones.

Nothing in Scripture outside of the tabernacle or the temple, has this level of detailed description. Its an alternative holy of holies, to provoke the worship of the god Xerxes. The wine is served in unique goblets of gold No two of which are alike. The royal wine was abundant, we are told, in keeping with the kings liberality. He's rich, powerful, and generous – and like the display of wealth and power, the generosity here (as often from States) is a form of control w/o apparent coercion.

In v.8 there is a command: Law is what rules this Empire. And excessive laws and decrees, go hand in hand with, social corruption and permissiveness. Here there is a law to allow all to drink without restrictions, whatever each man wished. As if you needed a law for that, at a party with abundant wine. It's a dumb command, humorous perhaps, but there will be commands and decrees much worse. This scene, in this world, is here so we know what the Jews in Persia, the permanent exiles, are up against.

## **II. The Queen**

The second point is the queen. Queen Vashti, v.9 tells us, also has a banquet for the women in the royal place. All the men are at the other drinking party. An on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Xerxes' week-long party, at the climactic moment of this 6+ month long celebration – the king is drunk. In high spirits from the liberal wine flow. Already, he is turning himself into a fool. He issues his second command of the chapter – to the seven (again) eunuchs who served him. And, to draw out the comedy here, the names of all seven eunuchs are given.

The eunuchs, of course, serve in the palace, because they pose no threat as liaisons, between the king and his haram. But again, there is parody. A god-like, all-powerful king, worried about securing his power and status – itself a kind of impotence – surrounds himself with impotent men (seven, a potent number of impotence), to make himself feel potent. He commands the eunuchs to bring Vashti, wearing her royal crown, so she can be gawked at by the people and the nobility, for she was, we are told, lovely to look at. And shockingly – given this world – she refuses! The text doesn't tell us why, and her motive is not important – though it's a safe guess that she was not going to be used as a prop, a thing, a concubine, in a drunken spectacle.

Here we have another piece of irony. A 6-month long display of omnipotence-- leads to the king's humiliation. The king of the world cannot govern his own wife. Her refusal makes a farce out of his court, his nobles, his wealth and power. And, like all men who need to reassert control, he becomes furious and burns with anger. His impotence makes him impatient, and the combination leads to rage.

### III. The Decree

Our third point is the decree. The king – hapless again – doesn't know what to do when his own Queen defies him. He has to consult some experts (seven again) in matters of law and justice. The firm hand of the law is everywhere, yet the law is ridiculous. Among other things, we are told later, the law cannot be repealed. Which is bad when the laws are foolish, disastrous when the laws are evil.

So, the seven wise men – again named, for effect, so you can feel the idiocy – probably embarrassed for the king's sake – are summoned. One commentator called this scene Xerxes and the 7 dwarfs. They are asked by the KING: According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti? Again, the impotence. He needs to check with his lawyers, when his Queen defies him. And he starts with: "According to law." To some people with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Another opportunity for a rule to be promulgated. So, he thinks of this as a process and procedure problem. Not a people problem. Not the Queen, my wife. But what law can rectify my offended honor? This is making the personal political.

A matter that could have been handled in the palace, is now a matter of state/law, for, in his mind, in this world, the whole Empire is insulted by Vashti's disobedience to his merry-with-wine-command. His drunken idiocy, of course, is not a matter of State, but her non-compliance is. Then an advisor named Memukan, speaks for 5 verses – much longer than anyone, and we might reasonably deduce, that this guy is really the chief of staff, or the chief justice.

It's probably not possible in this shame and honor culture to say: why don't you sleep it off, and walk over and talk to her tomorrow. So, he just follows the king's lead, elaborating - ludicrously – that she's done wrong NOT just against the king, but against the nobles, and the peoples of ALL the provinces.

To the legalist cast of mind, the Memukan mind, the logic is impeccable: She's a public person, she sinned publicly, therefore she's offended every last person in the Empire. You cannot talk people like this out of this logic – it's both airtight and idiotic. As Emerson said: A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. And this is a foolish consistency. Never mind the fact that – even with an active rumor mill – 99.9999% or more of the Empire would never know or hear of the offense. Yet, Memukan the decree maker continues: the queen's conduct will

become known by all the women, they will despise their husbands – they will cite Vashti's example of disobedience.

Even this VERY DAY, the noble women will respond to the king's nobles like Vashi, and there will be NO END to the disrespect and discord. Of course. Of course, the women will do this. Because they can't think for themselves, and they're not people with agency, they just mechanically follow bad examples, like day follows night. From Ethiopia to India to Greece. They are all the same. They're just waiting on an excuse for an Empire-wide women's rebellion. It is not mentioned, of course, that men would have to imitate Xerxes, for women to imitate Vashti. The whole speech is preposterously unlikely (verbose – satirizing it). And all out of proportion to the act, and the threat it holds to others. It anticipates Haman's later wanting to kill ALL the Jews, for Mordecai's refusal to bow to him.

That's the preamble. The written decree itself – irrevocable – banishes Vashti (no longer called Queen) permanently, from the presence of the king. Irony again – she doesn't want to come into the presence of the king, and we now have a decree, banning her from the presence of the king. And of course, we don't want people following her bad example – so why not a universal decree that makes her bad example, and the sleight to the king's honor, known to everybody?

And, the decree continues, the king is to give her royal position, to someone else who is better than she. Vashti exits. The door opens for another queen. Preferably someone more compliant.

Then, we are told, when this wise and judicious edict is proclaimed throughout ALL his VAST realm, ALL the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest. Sure. That will work. The king could not control ONE woman with a decree, so he figures, with his genius advisors, lets control ALL women with a decree. Let's create a LAW to enforce respect. What could go wrong?

At the end of the chapter, the whole kingdom of scribes, and the whole elaborate Persian postal system, is put to work on the breathtakingly dumb decree. Proclaiming, in every language, that everyman should be ruler over his own household. Again, satirically, unlike the king's household. So, Xerxes annihilates the challenges from Vashti, reasserts control, and cements his global power. But an astute onlooker now sees the Emperor has no clothes. His regime is both frightening and funny/scorn. Satire is a start, but it isn't a long-term strategy. And Esther and Mordecai – watching this - learn a valuable lesson.

Vashti's approach of simple defiance. Of principled refusal, is not likely to work in this environment. Esther (w/ Mordecai) will not merely refuse, she will direct, control, strategize and scheme. Much like Christians trying to survive in the Soviet era, it will take more moral imagination, than simply saying: here I stand, I can do no other. That will get you jailed or executed or banished. And the Jews

are (soon to be) poised like fiddlers on the roof, Vashti's example means resistance will need to be creative/circumspect subtle/defuse danger.

Meanwhile the hidden hand of God already makes an appearance. The long string of coincidences, of *it just so happened*, is already visible to us. The king happened to be drunk at the climactic moment. He happened to issue a foolish command. Vashti happened to refuse. The lawyers happened to issue a ridiculous decree. The decree happened to call for a new Queen.

In a world where miracles seem far way, where the secular reigns supreme, the hidden hand of God, mysterious, in the mundane and absurd theater of Empire, is invisibly, yet invincibly at work. Trust that it is so in your world's silence, Impotence, absurdities, conundrums and mysteries. For the ineffable, invisible, all wise-God is with us. Even to the end of the age. Amen.

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