

## **Esther: Beauty and the Beast**

### **Esther 2**

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Last week, in Esther 1, we saw that the Persian Empire, and its Emperor, Xerxes, were both, deadly serious, and preposterous, at the same time. The king, merry with wine, commands Queen Vashti to appear – she refuses, and the King is enraged. The king then consults his rather compliant council of legal advisors, and they declare that Vashti must be deposed, and her position given to another, who, the text says, “is better than she.” *That is, to one, more compliant, and obedient. Then, a ridiculous Empire-wide decree is issued, making sure every man is ruler of his house.*

That brings us to this morning’s text, from Esther 2. We will make three points. The Pageant in vv. 1-7, the promotion in vv. 8-20, and the plot in vv. 21-23.

#### **I. The Pageant**

First, then, the pageant. Sometime later, after deposing Vashti, the king’s fury had subsided. This is a guy who stays angry a LONG time. He’s petulant, and has a long memory of sleights. We’ve seen that he’s enslaved to his anger, and to his advisors. In this text, we’ll see that he’s enslaved to women. To live under this man, is to live under an emotional child. He remembers – uneasily, it seems – Vashti, and what she did (not what he did), and what was decreed about her. Perhaps he even misses the queen on some level. But its not like the King has been sleeping alone – he has, as we’ll see- a haram. There can’t be much room for regret, of course, because the decree banishing Vashti, once issued, cannot be changed. And Memukan, his advisor, urged the selecting of a new Queen.

So, his personal attendants propose a plan. Again, an over-the-top, preposterous plan. (proportion and order) “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.” They have to be young, they have to be beautiful, and they have to be virgins. (no pretention of character ala Miss America – not going to be asked about world peace or treating AIDS) “Let the king appoint commissioners in every province, to bring all the most beautiful young women into the haram.”

So, they have to be the most beautiful from across the vast Empire. Winners – if we can call them that – of some local selection process. If you want to be Miss

Persia, you have to first be Miss Province of India, or wherever. Of course, this is not merely a beauty contest. Though the text is discreet, it is a beauty AND sex contest. For that is what going into, and pleasing the king, will mean. Josephus, the first c. Jewish historian, says 400 virgins were selected in this process. We don't know the number, but presumably, it is high.

Now, this, while not unusual for ancient monarchs, is an appalling abuse of power. These women will be taken from their homes and families and futures, and from any other young men that they might marry. They will not be asked, they are *brought*, don't volunteer, they will be conscripted, and they will basically be incarcerated – in luxury to be sure, in the citadel, the royal center city, of Susa. The Empire owns you. Including your body. Male or female. If the king wants virgins, he gets virgins. If he wants eunuchs, he gets eunuchs. Herodotus says, 500 boys per year, were castrated to serve as eunuchs to the King. No: my body, my choice.

Here, Hegai, is the king's eunuch in charge of these new women. He's to give them beauty treatments, and then the young woman who pleases the king, will become queen. It's basically institutionalized sexual coercion (rape). With a long lead time. Though no doubt, some women, may have thought the glamour and the opportunity to be Queen – even if a long-shot – to be worth it. (people have done more for a shot at fame)

Shocking to no one, the advice appealed to the King, and he followed it. In v.5 we are told that, in the citadel was a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai. That he's in the citadel means he's a civil servant of some kind. That he's a Jew, reminds us that this is a Jewish book, about the covenant people of God (now appear for first time) and their preservation. Mordecai is also, note, of Saul's tribe of Benjamin, and his genealogy has names connected to Saul and his house. This will be important later – for now, we just note it.

V.6 is important because Mordecai is an exile (nobility, 597BC). The word for exile is actually used four times in v.6. He and his people are permanently in exile. Why they did not return when they had the opportunity, we don't know. (can't justify it) But a nice civil service gig in Persia (perks, capitol city) probably beats rebuilding a poor decimated homeland. Even his name, Mordecai, is probably taken from the Babylonian god Marduk. He is Jewish and Persian at this point. But, as exiles, he, and Esther, are vulnerable and marginalized, as helpless as the virgins and eunuchs.

And he has a cousin named Hadassah (myrtle). She also has two identities (two worlds to navigate). Hadassah is her Jewish name. Her Persian name, Esther, means star, and is probably derived from the goddess Ishtar. She's not only an exile, but she's an orphan whose been brought up by Mordecai. She had, we are told, a lovely figure and was beautiful to look at. Just the things the Empire values.

## II. The Promotion

Our second point then is the promotion. The edict went out, many young women are brought to the citadel, and put under Hegai's care. Esther also was taken to the king's palace. Was taken. She's depicted as passive. Reluctant – surely, she did not go willingly. And Mordecai certainly didn't put her forth, but he shows no opposition either.

There is certainly no Daniel-like resistance here. No drawing a line in the sand. No protest against the regime. (like exile who can resist?) And let's be clear. "Going," here – even going passively – entails violating the food laws (the palace wasn't kosher) – and unlike Daniel, and his friends, in a foreign court – she will not protest.

In addition to violating the dietary laws, Esther – at Mordecai's command – and this is mentioned twice for emphasis – represses and hides her Jewish identity. Which would entail – among other things – no Sabbath observance.

And, finally, "going" entails the absurdly extended vanity -- of 12 months of beauty treatments – oils and ointments and perfuming – which terminates in a night of fornication with the pagan Gentile king. If one is chosen – and this is the best case -and you have long odds – if one is chosen, one ends up MARRIED to the King, again breaking the Torah's commands. If one is not chosen, after the one-night "audition," and you see this in v.14, one would return to the concubine section of the haram. No going home. Return to haram to live out a comfortable, but long and lonely kind of widowhood, waiting, perhaps, for a summons from the king on some future night. They were probably not allowed to leave, for sleeping with the king's concubine would be an act of treason or desecration. Absalom slept with David's concubines to make just that point.

Those are the options. Everyone in Persia would know this. Yet, neither Esther, or her guardian, Mordecai, utter a word. At this point no one would write a hymn titled: Dare to be an Esther. So, troubling is this to history, that there are (Gr.) additions to the (Heb.) original text, which try to exonerate Esther's choice. They have her pray a long pious prayer to God, about how she hates sharing the bed of an uncircumcised Gentile. They are the kinds of things we feel piety requires. Yet, note well, there is no condemnation, there is no comment at all in the text, on Esther's choice, or Mordecai's at this point. The narrator does not feel inclined to moralize. Neither does he approve. Though it is clear, that the book paints her and Mordecai, in a very favorable light overall.

It appears – at this point - they think resistance is futile. Sure, you can protest. If you don't mind being executed by morning. They will choose other tactics of political resistance. And all their decisions – all of them – under the hidden hand

of God, will be used to advance the purpose of God – and that is what the narrator cares most about.

Passively taken, Esther shows cunning, winsomeness, wisdom and charm – all active qualities – once inside the haram. She pleased the head eunuch – and won – active word – won his favor. She's a pleaser, but she's shrewd. She gets her special food, her own detail of seven female attendants, and is moved to the best place in the haram. She's now Hegai's choice, it appears. We are told in v.10 and again in v.20 that she had not revealed her Jewishness because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. She's obedient to him. She's discreet. And this repeated comment indicates an atmosphere of threat and danger. Again, the text invites us to probe the boundary between discretion and compromise. Again, the narrator is silent.

Mordecai is clearly concerned to figure out what was going on. EVERY DAY he walks back and forth, near the courtyard of the haram. Note: With Mordecai being a civil servant in the citadel – who, as we will see – did not feel constrained to hide his own Jewishness - it is (nearly) certain then that Esther would need a fake backstory (lie) to preserve her Jewish identity.

After the comical 12 months of preparation, we're told, that a young woman could take whatever she wanted from the haram, when it was her night to go to the king. This would reveal something about the prospective Queen's judgment. Unlike Vashti, Esther does not resist, she goes to the king when summoned. And Esther, wisely, asked to take nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch, suggested. This is another shrewd move. Not only would Hegai know what's best – what the king might like – ending this contest – which could have taken hundreds of nights – is in Hegai's best interest as well. For this is an impatient and juvenile king.

Esther were told – just before she's taken to the king – won the favor of everyone who saw her. Much like Joseph, the hand of God – again hidden – is upon her. She is taken to the king, v.16 says, in the seventh year of his reign. That means 4 years have gone by, since Vashti was deposed. And now the fate of the Jewish nation, and the salvation of the world, hang on one young Jewish girl's immoral night with a pagan king.

Remarkably, she wins the King's favor above any other virgins. She's not sent to the concubines, and the King wants no more auditions. And, without delay, Esther is crowned and made Queen. Vashti is replaced. The king gives a big banquet, the fourth in the book. For the nobles and officials. And it's an anticipation of the feast of Purim established at the end of this book, and celebrated by the Jews to this day. There's a holiday proclaimed, probably a tax holiday, and there is the distribution of gifts – probably food for the poor - so that, by the royal liberality, all could celebrate. Notice: the blessing of the Jews, as the promise to Abraham stated, leads to blessing throughout the world.

### III. The Plot

Finally, the plot. Mordecai, who is now spoken of as a judge in the administration, sitting in the king's gate (a position some think Esther secured for him), uncovers an assassination plot hatched by two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the door to the royal apartment (another just so happened). He tells Esther, she tells the king, giving credit to Mordecai (unafraid her Jewishness will be uncovered by doing so). Sometimes, you not only submit to a regime, but, like Mordecai, you actively support it, because the alternative – here the coup – would be worse.

The incident is investigated, found to be true, and the two officials were impaled on poles – a Persian mode of (post)execution. Again, the vulnerable Jews - here without thanks or acknowledgment – bring blessing to the Empire. All this gets recorded in the book of the annals (chronicle) in the presence of the king. And it sits there, like Mordecai's connection to Saul's genealogy, it sits there, as a ticking time bomb in the story.

Let us conclude. I do not believe there is any way to extricate Mordecai and Esther from unfaithfulness at this point in the story. Attempts to do so border on the ridiculous (slept with a spirit of Esther) They are clearly disobeying the Torah for tactical reasons. But I am cautioned by the narrator's silence. He goes very gently with them. It appears Esther & Mordecai feel there is no reasonable choice here – that resistance would be useless, and counterproductive. In one sense, they sort of “find themselves” in this position. (if willing to suffer consequences, full obedience is always an option) Nevertheless, the narrator doesn't care/judge about their inner choices on the way. He cares about God's hidden hand, and what Esther and Mordecai do to save the Jews.

We learn, I think, a few things. Not the least of which, is to not moralize and judge other people's situations from a distance. Our narrator is not a hovering moral censor – and neither should we be. Also, God draws straight lines with crooked sticks, as they say. His invisible, provident hand, chooses weak, foolish and even morally compromised instruments. In this case, people who made tactical, political choices that they genuinely thought were wise. *Whatever compromises/tactical choices Esther & Mordecai have engaged in, it does not determine the future script God is writing with, and through, them.*

And that should be a comfort to us. For we are moral compromisers who God has not given up on – and continues to use to advance his cause. Maybe, like Esther, you married the wrong person, married an unbeliever-- had a broken marriage. Wrong career? Maybe you've hid your Christian identity when you shouldn't have – or maybe you've unveiled it, when it would have been wiser to conceal it. Maybe you didn't throw the dietary laws under the bus, but some other

portion of God's commandments has been neglected, or cast aside. Or – opposite – tactically insisted on things that were really optional.

Our lives are full of moral and tactical failures. Yet, virtue can still be cultivated, and can still carry the day. The narratives of our lives are not over until they're over. God can, and is, using you, broken situations of our own making and all, to advance righteousness and truth in the earth. Unlike the parody Esther undergoes, God has undertaken, in Christ, a long-term (painful) project, of making us – and our compromised ugliness - beautiful, fit for our King. He who was beautiful (glorious), for our sakes was made ugly, so that, through his ugliness, we might become beautiful.

Do not lose heart over your station in life. Over your past choices. The script isn't over. Like Esther, we have a king's banquet to attend. Praise God for his mercy, and for his inscrutable, invisible, overriding, beautifying hand. Amen.

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