

Esther: Hoist with His Own Petard

Esther 7

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

"Hoist with his own petard" is a phrase from Shakespeare's play, Hamlet. It has become a proverb, a common saying. A petard is a small explosive device, and so the phrase means, literally, that a bomb-maker is blown up (hoisted off the ground) by his own bomb. So, it's a phrase about what we call poetic justice, or an ironic reversal. And in our text today (spoiler alert), Haman will be hoist with his own petard – that is, hung, impaled, on the very gallows, he had prepared for Mordecai.

You'll recall that last week, in chapter 6, after that extraordinary sleepless night for the King, Haman, was seeking to have Mordecai executed early the next morning. But ended up having to parade him around the city, and declaring him as "the man the king delights to honor." This happens on the day of our text here in chapter 7. It's the day after Esther's first banquet with the King and Haman, and the day of her second banquet with them. Haman goes home in great distress, and his wife – strangely – tells him that if Mordecai is a Jew, he won't be able to stand against him, and that his fall has already been set in motion. The king's eunuchs come, and they whisk Haman away, to the (second) exclusive banquet at the opening of our text. He's had a humiliating day, but he is still the prime minister, and surely, he is hoping, somehow, to restore his dignity and to retain his power. Though, he must be disoriented by the elevation of Mordecai, and by his wife's prophetic counsel.

Esther, of course, has no idea what ALMOST happened to Mordecai. Whether she knows about his being paraded around the city, in honor, we don't know. We will make two points. The request (vv. 1-6) and the reversal (vv. 7-10). First, the request.

I. The Request

So, the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet. She's in charge. She's exercising authority. And they are drinking wine, as surely, Esther planned. She wants some alcohol in the King, for the request she's about to make. Remember, she has made him basically commit – in public -twice – to giving her what she wants. And here comes the third time: "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It

will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.” This is the moment. Surely, Esther is terrified. She has to have practiced this a thousand times.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells of an incident where one, Pythius, who had shown hospitality to Xerxes, and contributed to his war chest. Pythius asks Xerxes, if he would release the oldest of his five sons from military service. And the King is so angered he has the boy cut in two. *These are deep, erratic, dangerous waters. Esther wades in:* “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you.....

Now, before we get to the request, notice: This looks like introductory, court protocol, boilerplate language. But it is not. In many ways, it is the heart of her appeal. She switches from third person language, which she used previously with the king, to the intimate second person. If I have found favor with you, if it pleases you.

The very heart of her argument, is the closeness, the bond, the favor with which he views her (cooled some). And, thinly veiled, is the attraction of her beauty. She cannot, and does not, make a high moral argument here against genocide. It would be futile. The king is not opposed to it. In the Empire, you sometimes argue on the Empire’s terms.

In the world of sight, in the sensual culture of the court, where the King wants beautiful things to look at, Esther relies on the King’s bond with her, which is, in large part, his desire for her. His favor for her is not because they sit around reading Homer together. Esther knows the power she’s wielding here. She’s playing every card she has. She’s made him pre-commit in public, she’s got him very inquisitive and anxious at this second banquet, she has him drinking. And she now appeals to their personal bond.

Notice also: The King asked: what is your petition? What is your request? He meant it as one question; she takes it as an opportunity to make two requests, which are bound together. Grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. Esther’s fate and the people’s fate are now fused.

The king has to be reeling here. Esther AND her people are in mortal danger? She continues: For I and my people. She is like Moses, interceding for Israel before God, in Exodus 33, who pleads with the Lord, in the words: I & your people. For I and my people have been sold – probably a reference to the money Haman offered the King for the plan to kill the Jews.

Here – though it’s not even explicit here – she is probably revealing her Jewishness for the first time. For *I and my people*, have been sold, and then she quotes from the written decree: to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. Imagine being Haman sitting there, listening to this, thinking: Oh, I inadvertently have

threatened to kill the King's wife! Haman now knows – Esther is Jewish. She continues – in what is a less than true, self-effacing, exaggeration – if we had merely been sold as slaves, I would have kept quiet. It wouldn't have been worth bothering you over.

Again, this is psychologically sophisticated. She's got a lot of leverage, but she closes with: *I'm so helpless, and I hate to even bother you with this, but.....this is all about your honor, and your interest, I hate to even disturb you.*

She is trying – her whole goal – has been to drive a wedge, between the King and his Prime Minister, and to direct his unruly anger away from herself, toward Haman. She knows that he could probably care less about her people, but she knows that an attack on her, is an attack on his honor and majesty, and she knows – or hopes anyway – that it will provoke him to anger. And it has.

Verse 5: King Xerxes asked Queen Esther. They are together now, King and Queen. Majesties, over against a diminished Haman. Who is he? Where is he the man who has dared to do such a thing? Now there is a good deal that's puzzling here – as throughout the book. Has the king forgotten the decree? It appears so. It's perhaps understandable. He didn't ask any questions about the people involved, when it was proposed. He took off his signet ring, gave to Haman, and apparently moved on. He does a lot of business; issues a lot of edicts.

But, seriously? "Who is he?" You're the only one who could do this, even if you delegate it. You're the edict-maker. Did he think it was only an edict about enslavement, and not destruction? Does he know about it, but not the fact that Esther would be targeted? Is just he just trying to save face? Its probably best to say he forgot the details, and he wants to know whose idea it was, and who is carrying it out.

Finally, Esther, having led the king on, creating anger and suspicion about Haman (two banquets), drives the wedge deep into place: An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman. Now he's an adversary, not just of the Jews, but of the King as well. Then Haman was terrified before the team of the king and the queen. Terrified before a Jewess. That's the request.

II. The Reversal

The reversal – already in motion – begins with the King getting up in a rage, leaving his wine, and going out into the garden. There's been a lot of speculation as to what is going on here.

I think we can make a reasonably good guess. Xerxes must be thinking something like this: How can I condemn Haman for this threat to my Queen, and

thus my honor, IF I AM THE ONE whose signature is on the (irrevocable) decree? He did not walk outside to cool off, he walked out to figure a way to save face (and maybe his Queen). You would think, Haman should follow the King out, and explain that he didn't know Esther would be a target. After all, it is also the King's edict. But Haman, knows that his fate is already sealed. He knows that the anger he saw in Xerxes, cannot be placated.

Still, it's a tactical mistake to stay behind, alone, with Esther. There was a regulation that men were to keep 7 steps distance, from the unaccompanied women of the palace. But he stays behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. Earlier, he celebrated Mordecai the Jew, now he must plead with Esther the Jew. Tough day for an Anti-Semite. Esther ignores his plea. The text is silent. She won't show, or ask for mercy, from the King for Haman. Mercy is not hers to show. This is about the fate of her people, and this is a form of holy war against an Agagite enemy. She will succeed where Saul failed.

Just as the King comes back from the garden, he sees Haman falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. They reclined on couches to banquet in this culture. The word "falling," picks up key threads in the narrative, and signals the ironic reversal. Mordecai refused to FALL before Haman. The lot then FELL against the Jews. Haman's wife said he was beginning to FALL before Mordecai. And now, Haman FALLS in the couch where Esther is reclining. He is, of course, just pleading for mercy. The King sees it – and surely, he knows that Haman is not really – at this moment – making a pass at the Queen – but it provides him an excuse for judgment. A way to get rid of Haman, without reference to the decree he signed. In his moral calculus, molesting the queen with the King in the house, is worse than genocide anyway.

This is another irony. Xerxes, who did not care about the sexual honor or dignity of Vashti, now cares – or pretends to care – about the same for Esther. Using it as a pretext to charge Haman with rape/assault of the Queen, which would be a form of treason. He who falsely accused the Jews of treason, is now being falsely accused of treason himself. As soon as the word – about assaulting the queen – left the King's mouth, they covered Haman's face. He's now a condemned prisoner.

But the sentence – what the punishment is to be – shall we say -- is still up in the air. Then one Harbona, a eunuch, states that Haman has built a 75' pole near his house. He set it up for Mordecai – the same Mordecai, O King, who spoke up to help you, with the assassination plot. The Jews have created goodwill in the palace. People like Harbona, who haven't come to their aid, until now that they see the power shifting. One imagines Haman listening thinking: Thanks, Harbona! Very helpful. Bringing the pole to Xerxes's attention.

The king says: Impale him on it! They impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai, and the king's fury subsided. Ironically, Haman is executed for

crimes he did not commit. He did not sexually assault the Queen, and he did not willingly or knowingly target her life. Haman, Hoist with his own petard, is now, once again by the King's will, truly elevated above all the officials. The danger, however, is not over. Crisis not resolved. Machinery of extermination remains in place. But the reversal at the heart of the Empire is decisive and will issue in the rescue of the people of God.

Two things to distill here. We'll call them poetic justice and the petard.

First, poetic justice. This idea of poetic justice, a grand ironic reversal, is at the heart of God's providence. There's a kind of principle built into the world by God's design. We see it in Psalm 7, which says: ¹⁵ Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. ¹⁶ The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.

We rejoice when we see dictators and despots and malicious enemies fall, not because of malice or schadenfreude (taking pleasure in other's misfortune). But because we have a deep God-given thirst for justice. We rejoice in the overturning of evil. If we didn't, we would be morally jaded.

But poetic justice has two sides. Pride goes before the fall. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. But that means the humble will be exalted. God brings down Haman's, and lifts up the Esther's and Mordecai. Mary herself said her pregnancy meant: That God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

And we heard the gospel lesson this morning: Blessing on the weak and hungry, woes to the rich and powerful and satisfied. Though this may seem hidden, and far away to us – we only get an occasional glimpse of it - we must believe that God governs the moral order this way (even if it is largely deferred), or life will be unbearable for us. And this poetic justice is the key to the restoration of all things.

Which bring me to the petard. The cross is the devil's petard. The pole he built for Jesus, upon which he is impaled. The poetic justice at the heart of reality. Augustine says: "the devil was defeated by his own victorious achievement. He was exultant when Christ died, and by that very death was the devil conquered. It's as though he took the bait in a mousetrap. The mousetrap for the devil was the cross of the Lord, the bait he would be caught by, the death of the Lord."

In the words of our New Testament lesson: He shared in our humanity, so that by his death, he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil. Haman, like the devil, was a snake. He and all the Babylon's those like him administer, are doomed. They will be hoist on their own petards.

We are sure of this. Because it is built into God's providence. And because Christ was hoist – lifted up – on the Petard, ordained for him, by the Father, for drawing of all men to himself, for the salvation of the world. A salvation which is from the preserved and protected Jews. Glory be to God. The God of this deep comedy, the God of the last laugh. Amen.

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