

“Mourning into a Holiday”

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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

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Come back with me, back a hop, skip, and jump to 500 years before Jesus. Men hold the power. Behaving badly is fully expected and never challenged. Our story is a tale of sex, and gender dynamics, a saga about what happens when the future falls to a single woman with a choice to make.

I call it our story, but really, it is Esther’s story. So come, meet Esther. But before you meet our Jewish heroine, a few historical details will set the stage.

Historical note one: the Persian Empire in Esther’s time was the largest empire the world had ever known. It stretched from the Balkans and Eastern Europe to China, India, and Pakistan. The Persians built a realm quite unlike anything the world had seen.

Historical note two: the Empire had four capitals, including Susa, where Esther’s story is set.

Historical note three: Esther’s monarch is King Ahasuerus. That’s what the Bible labels him. The Persians called him Xerxes. Xerxes. That’s a fun name because two Xs appear in the same word, and there are only 8 English words that contain two Xs, and five of them are brand names: Exxon, Xanax, Xbox, Xerox, and Ex-Lax, which is wholly unrelated to the contraction Tex-Mex.

So Xerxes is the most powerful man in the world, ruling from Susa. He displays his wealth and power over a 180-day holiday – sort of a North Korean style parade kind of thing – and concludes this display of pecuniary prowess with a seven-day feast. “On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine” – that’s a direct quote – Xerxes commanded his queen to put on the royal crown and to appear before him, to “show her beauty to the peoples and the officials, for she was fair to behold.”

You can’t make this stuff up.

The queen – she had a name: Vashti – Vashti refused to come. The King was aflutter. What to do? He gathered those who were “versed in law and custom” for their advice. There were fourteen men in this court of judges. They publicly issued their response to the King and to his court.

“Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king,” they began, “but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands. ... There will be no end of contempt of wrath.”

“The advice pleased the king,” the Bible says, and Xerxes did what any self-respecting king of the era would do. He issued letters to “every province that “every man should be master in his own house.” (Xerxes had nothing on Archie Bunker.)

And Xerxes did one more thing. He appointed “commissioners in all the provinces to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem under the king’s eunuch.” Furthermore, Xerxes “let their cosmetic treatments be given them.” (Apparently, L’Oréal got the Persian contract.) Furthermore, and you already see this coming, “the girl who pleases the king [will] be queen instead of Vashti.” It was sort of like the Miss USA Contest only the winner served longer than a year. Some queens reigned a lifetime. Others, not so long. Ask Vashti.

Historical note four: years before, the Jews in Jerusalem had been conquered and marched to far away Babylon, in Persia. Later, they had been allowed to return to Jerusalem. But some chose to stay behind. They had made their lives in Persia and wanted to plant roots.

One of the Jews who stayed behind was Mordecai. Though a foreigner, Mordecai had become chief minister to Xerxes. One day, Mordecai overheard a plot to assassinate the King. Mordecai foiled the plot. The conspirators were executed.

Now you would think that this loyalty would guarantee Mordecai’s standing with Xerxes, but Esther’s story has the sort of plot twists you’d expect in an unbelievable Hollywood movie, or a long Russian novel. In another subplot, Mordecai angered Haman the Agagite. Mordecai refused to prostrate himself before Haman. Haman, offended that a foreigner did not know his place, promised a

kickback to Xerxes if only Xerxes would allow him to kill Mordecai. (Apparently, there were no regulations on political contributions.)

Oh, and Haman wanted to kill more than Mordecai. He wanted to kill all the Jews in Susa. And to confiscate their property. Oh, and to exterminate all the Jews in the entire Persian Empire.

Finally, enter our heroine, Esther. She's in the king's harem as you likely already supposed. What, you might wonder, is a good Jewish girl doing in a Persian harem?

Well, first, she was drop-dead gorgeous. She was so beautiful, apparently, and she so "pleased the king" – that's how the Bible puts it – that Xerxes names Esther his Queen.

Did I mention that Esther is an orphan? And did I mention that Esther has been raised by a loving uncle? That's uncle's name: Mordecai. And did I share that Mordecai secretly informs Esther that Haman has cut a deal to kill them all?

What's a woman to do, embroiled in a tale of gender politics, and sex, and men behaving badly?

Esther breaks the rules to get the King's notice. She invites Xerxes to a banquet, and Haman the Agagite. Emboldened by the Queen's attention, Haman proceeds with his plans. He builds gallows upon which Mordecai will be hanged. At this banquet they accept an invite to yet another one, the following day.

Apparently, Xerxes is an absent minded king, or forgetful, or a flip-flopper. No matter how you explain it, he orders that the nation's chronicles be read to him and when it comes to the story of Mordecai, he remembers that, Hey, that's the guy who foiled that assassination attempt and what in the world am I doing allowing him to be hanged tomorrow?

So, at the second dinner party, Esther comes clean. She admits to Xerxes that she is Jewish. Xerxes now understands his predicament. He has a Jewish queen yet he is about to exterminate the Jewish people. He stands to execute a foreigner, but a loyal foreigner who has saved his life. Impulsive yet decisive, Xerxes stands and reverses himself. The gallows intended for Mordecai – they will be used instead to execute Haman. Haman's wealth is confiscated and given to Mordecai. Xerxes names Mordecai his prime minister. The extermination order is rescinded, and, in fact, Xerxes permits the Jews to attack their enemies. (Hey, this is the Old Testament: eye for an eye.)

Now if it has been awhile since you have heard the story of Esther, it is not hard to summarize.

It is a story about one people subjugating another people and the powerlessness that such racist subjugation begets.

It is a story about how subjugated people must learn to go along if they are to get along, and the compromises they must make simply to stay alive, compromises like entering a harem to save their skin.

This is a story about the machinations required when men behave badly.

This is story about what happens when sex, and sexual desire, and sexual control, are allowed to sway political decision making.

This is a cautionary tale about the dangers of feckless leadership, about amoral politics which celebrates wealth and power, and access to power, at the expense of ethical standards and shared humanity.

And it is in the Bible. That's the weird part. It took the Jewish people 300 years after Jesus to include the book of Esther in the Jewish canon. Martin Luther wished it had never been written. The Persian king Xerxes is mentioned 190 times and the God of Israel is not mentioned. Not once.

Perhaps the Book of Esther didn't end up on the cutting room floor because of Esther herself. In a holy book whose heroes are mostly men, maybe Esther's deeds explain how the book makes the Biblical cut. She begins a powerless orphan, a voiceless girl singled out because of her beauty and her obedience. The story ends because with her bravery. When push comes to shove, she risks it all to save her people.

Remember that Haman had cut a deal to execute Mordecai. The deal included killing all the Jews in Susa. But it hadn't stopped there. Haman had secured Xerxes' permission to exterminate all the Jews in the empire.

Jerusalem was in the empire. If Haman had won the day, there would have been no more Jews. Not in Susa. Not in Jerusalem. There would have been no Jesus. There would have been no 20th century Holocaust.

It didn't unfold that way. Because of Esther. Esther, a lone woman who defied convention and spoke up when context demanded it.

Oh, what a story. It is a tale for the ages, for yesterday, and for today.

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¹So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.'

³Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me — that is my petition — and the lives of my people — that is my request. ⁴For 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 held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.'

⁵Then King Ahasuerus (a-HAS-er-us) said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?'

⁶Esther said, 'A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!'

Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁹Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, 'Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.'

And the king said, 'Hang him on that.' ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

²⁰ Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.