

MAKING A DIFFICULT STORY MAKE SENSE

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

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Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God's name, however throughout the story God's presence is strongly acknowledged.

Reading Esther, you may wonder why it's included in the Bible because at the end of the book the Jews turn on their oppressors with a vengeance.

Since you probably never read the Book of Esther, I'll spend most of the sermon retelling the story, but in a nutshell, it's primarily a story about the exiled Jews in Persia averting genocide. We may cringe when the Jews, at the end of the story annihilated their enemies before they could annihilate them. On the other hand we might wonder if the Jews in Germany followed the example set in Esther and defended themselves with deadly force, instead of being compliant when the Nazis hauled them off to the Death Camps, things would've turned out differently.

The post World War II refrain, "Never Again," the official policy of modern Israel, is the consequence of the Holocaust. Never again will they be compliant and go quietly to their deaths.

However, even before the Holocaust, Esther has always been a helpful resource for the Jews, especially during time of persecution.

The main players in this historical novella are Esther, the heroine of the story, her cousin Mordecai who despite being a Jew was an official in the royal court, Haman, Mordecai's evil rival and a rabid anti Semite, King Xerxes an excessively impulsive and self-indulgent man-child and finally his first wife Queen Vashti, a strong-willed woman who refused to be cowed by her chauvinistic husband.

Here now, is a summary of the story: Xerxes declared a week of feasting to celebrate his power and wealth. "Merry with wine" (or as drunk as a skunk) Xerxes commanded his wife Vashti to parade her beauty before his equally intoxicated male guests. Refusing to be put on display as a trophy wife Vashti defied her husband. Embarrassed and angry, Xerxes quickly divorced Vashti as a warning to all the other wives in his court to never defy their husbands. So, Vashti was exiled from the king's court, but left with her head held high.

Needing a new wife, Xerxes let it be known that he was looking for a new bride so all the beautiful young women in the kingdom were rounded up for a beauty pageant, but it was suddenly cancelled when the king spotted Esther in the preliminary lineup and impulsively decided to make her his new Queen.

Poor Esther was woefully unprepared for the burdens of her new role, but even more worrisome than being in over her head was that she was a Jew. Her cousin Mordecai advised her to keep it a secret. Then, shortly after that, Mordecai uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, causing Xerxes to be forever grateful and indebted to Mordecai.

Mordecai's newfound favor caused Xerxes's grand vizier and right hand man, Haman, to be threatened and jealous of Mordecai especially since Mordecai was a Jew and Haman was a raging anti Semite. When Haman was himself honored by the king with a proclamation that all the people were to bow down and worship him, Mordecai, being a faithful Jew who'd never bow down and worship any man, especially Haman, gave Haman the excuse he needed to destroy his rival and kill all the Jews in Persia at the same time.

Haman complained to Xerxes, arguing it was a terrible mistake elevating Mordecai. What's more, letting the Jews live in Persia was an even bigger mistake. Better to kill them all now before they breed like rats and take over.

Esther heard about Haman's plot to kill off the Jews, but felt powerless to do anything until Mordecai convinced her if she did nothing, someone else would have to be raised up to save the Jews and that maybe Esther becoming the Queen when she did was part of a greater plan.

Embolden by Mordecai, Esther changed her mind and said, "I will go to the king, and if I perish, I perish."

Finally, this young inexperienced woman started to act like a queen. She instructed Mordecai to gather the Jews together for a period of prayer and fasting. Then, thinking like a shrewd politician, Esther organized a private dinner with both Xerxes and Haman as her honored guests.

Being too smart for his own good, Haman saw this intimate dinner as the opportunity to denounce Mordecai and call for his execution. But his scheme backfired at the dinner when Xerxes, touched by his new wife's gracious hospitality, granted Esther a favor for whatever she requested. With tears in her eyes, she fell at her husband's feet and after confessed to being a Jew and accused Haman of plotting to massacre her people. Being characteristically impulsive and hot tempered, and forgetting he himself approved Haman's genocidal plot, Xerxes condemned Haman to be hanged, ironically on the same gallows Haman had built for Mordecai. What's more, Xerxes reversed himself and granted the Jews permission to defend themselves, if necessary with deadly force, if and when they were attacked. Taking advantage of the situation, Esther and Mordecai ordered the Jews to make a preemptive strike that went beyond self defense by massacring their would be assassins by the thousands.

To this day the Jews celebrate the Feast of Purim to commemorate God's protection. It goes without saying that having survived pogroms and persecutions, culminating in the

Holocaust just 70 years ago, this feast has taken on an added significance and reinforces their Jewish identity as God's chosen people.

Be that as it may after hearing the story of Esther, maybe for the first time, you may be wondering, as a Christian, how does the ending Book of Esther fit in with Christ's teachings concerning peace, justice and loving even your enemies? Doesn't Esther's and Mordecai's command to "to do unto others before they do it unto you" contradicts Christ teaching, "Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you?"

Before trying to answer this question let's first consider several of the more obvious lessons we can take from Esther. First we can look at the cast of characters and study their strengths and weaknesses and then consider whether or not they mirror our own behaviors and attitudes at one time or another.

Haman is the personification of pettiness, bigotry and violence and maybe even self-loathing. Consumed by his hatred for others not like him and driven by his own feelings of inadequacy, Haman targeted the Jews perhaps to keep himself from facing himself. That combination is the formula for evil: the willingness to destroy others in order to protect yourself.

Xerxes is the poster boy for self-indulgent, impulsive behavior. He comes across as an empty suit, with no guiding principles. He expects to be obeyed, to be the center of attention and unfortunately he had the power to do it. Xerxes' attitudes and behaviors should sound the alarm whenever you and I are tempted to play the spoiled brat, the control freak, or the angry hot head.

Vashti's place in the story is small, but significant. She's a strong woman who refused to take abuse from her chauvinistic husband. She may have lost her crown but she kept her dignity and wins our respect.

Mordecai is discerning, and wise, a good mentor and advisor. He's a defender of his people and even though he never names God, is aware of the divine plan that drives and redeems human events. Except for his call for violent revenge (which, in his favor is not proven to be historically accurate and was perhaps overblown by the storyteller) Mordecai comes across as a good role model for seeing hidden meanings, giving wise counsel and bravery.

Finally we have Esther, a portrait of a young woman who though initially in over her head and unsure of herself in her new role as Queen of Persia, quickly grew into the job and proved herself to be a risk taker, willing to sacrifice her life to save her people. Encouraged by Mordecai she called upon the Jews to fast and pray as she prepared herself to act on their behalf. Esther reminds us that God usually uses the most unlikely people to further his divine will.

These are the obvious lessons we can learn from reading Esther. Now the harder lesson, or maybe a better way to put it a less obvious but more satisfying interpretation of

the violent ending of this story that reveals how it's so easy to confuse God's will for our own.

As the story progresses it becomes evident it was God's will to save his people from genocide. Even so, it may be true that God saved them from annihilation, but it doesn't necessarily mean God condoned their excessive preemptive strike, which wasn't actually historical as much as it was the author's wishful thinking. Really would any king allow exiled aliens to commit the crime of mass murder against his own people? Certainly not. Still it was the storyteller's intention to embellish his claim and make the point "don't mess with God's people."

But even if there isn't any historical evidence to verify this massacre, the fact that it's included in the scriptures still needs to be dealt with, so it isn't used today to justify mindless violence. Then, how should Esther be interpreted? The short answer: within the context of the entire scriptures, especially the New Testament. Just because the story ends with the Jews annihilating their enemies doesn't mean God orchestrated this event moving his people like pawns on a chess board. At the same time it's a known fact that human beings are very capable of confusing our desires with God's will when it suits us. The truth is God never manipulates people to do horrible acts just to make things break his way, but be honest, don't we sometimes justify our actions and then try to baptize and make them Christian to make it seem like God's will? If we can do it, being only human, the author of Esther could do it too.

That explains why, if we interpret the stories in the Old Testament with all its blunders, excesses and self-justifications from a strictly human point of view, whether we're the stories authors or readers we'll always miss the point.

But when we view the history of the Old Testament, as the story of God working out his purposes by circumventing our sinful ways, then we can come closer to understanding the primary objective of God's will, to save us from ourselves through Christ, who spent much of his ministry reinterpreting the Hebrew scriptures, giving them new meaning and then going to the cross to die for our sins so all the people of the world, friends and enemies alike, can be invited to enter into his kingdom.

So when you read these stories with violent acts being committed by God's people that seem to be justified simply because they're included in the Bible, keep in mind these stories need to be interpreted carefully through the lens of Christ and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit so we aren't left thinking that what they did back then can be justified and then repeated today. Instead, see it this way: God enters human events, both the good and the bad, as they happen in order to make it possible for even the terrible things we do to become enfolded into God's salvation for the world he loves. We may give God our worst, but leave it to God to turn it into what's best for us all.

In short, God's will can be confused with our desires but God's will can never be thwarted. Isn't that the Good News we need to hear?