

Using Power for Good

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

²¹ So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² On 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." ³ Then 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. ⁴ For 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." ⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶ Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen....

⁹ Then 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." ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated....

^{9:20} Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²² as 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.

The house of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is not the righteous family of Proverbs 31:10-31. After six month of feasting, which may have been the king's inauguration, the king who only prized his wife Queen Vashti's fleeting beauty and charm (Esth. 1:10-11, cf. Prov. 31:30), calls her to his presence to show her beauty and jewels. She refuses and her rebellion sets back not only her own cause but women's freedoms throughout Persia (Esth. 1:12-21, cf. Prov. 31:31). A law is made that she is striped of her title and position, never to see her husband again and she is to be replaced by the fairest in the land. Royal intrigue and ethnic pride lead to murderous plots (2:21-23) and counterplots (3:2-6). Can a good woman find a fruitful place in this depraved, conniving, and confining world? Indeed she can.

We first meet Esther as an orphaned cousin of an exiled people in a far-flung province of a shaken empire. Esther lives in the most secular and least holy of locales, Susa, in the far eastern sector of the Persian Empire. The people of God are fully immersed in the surrounding culture and its values and assumptions. Esther, by heritage a Jew, is now fully assimilated into a nonreligious culture, at the mercy of a male-dominated political system. She is a great distance from tent, temple, and synagogue. They had adapted to their new world, when she is snatched away from her former life to be a pagan emperor's sexual plaything. Her uncle Mordecai asked her not to reveal her heritage. A beautiful woman in a man's world, she rises in royal favor by her beauty and kindness, becomes queen, and saves the king's life (Esth. 2:15-23), by revealing a plot about which her uncle Mordecai had told her.

Our passage relates the turning point in her life and reign. She maneuvers through treacherous court rules and unexpected circumstances to eliminate a mortal threat to her own people (7:3-6). She asks the entire community to join her in prayer for safety and acceptance. She knows the law is that she can be killed for coming to see the king without being summoned; and she has not been called by her husband for an entire month. Only if he will extend to her the royal scepter, can she be spared from execution. The king possesses human power, in the form of unilateral political decisions.

Esther takes a bold stand at the urging of her uncle Mordecai, going against the rulers to appear before her husband, the Persian King Ahasuerus. The Persian Empire has ridiculous, rigid, and unalterable law. The king is a weak ruler, blind to the moral character of others and ignorant of his people, and he has come under the sway of the "wicked Haman," one of his courtiers. Because Uncle Mordecai has refused to bow to him, Haman decides to murder all the Jews and to do it legally by persuading the king of an imagined threat to him personally.

She is determined to expose Haman to the king. She chooses to do it at a festive meal. Her brave visit to the king in the court wins his favor, so she invites him and the wicked

Haman to dine with her. Haman is so happy to be included with the royals that he brags about it to his family. But at this feast, the king presses Esther to reveal her request and promises to give her anything, even half of his kingdom (7:2).

An opening has come to Esther. She had been prepared for this moment in the warning of her uncle Mordecai: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). And here she is, in the presence of the king, with the power to change the course of events for the common good.

Then Esther reveals Haman's plot to the king. With language depicting the excess of Haman's evil plan, she says to the king, "We have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated" (7:4). But clever Esther does not leave the matter as a threat to the Jews alone; she tells the self-centered king that she would not speak if it were only about her and her people, but this plot will cause "damage to the king." She teaches him that the safety and well-being of his subjects also concerns his own well-being.

Astonished by this revelation, the king demands to know who is behind the plot. Esther answers, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" (7:6). The king is outraged and when Haman is appealing to Esther for his life the king thinks he is trying to assault her. Now, the seventy-five-foot high (fifty cubits) gallows that Haman has prepared to execute Mordecai will become the gallows for Haman's own execution. Mordecai replaces Haman as the king's chief courtier and prevents the genocide.

The courage of Esther to use her power shapes the destiny of both Haman and Mordecai. Haman is motivated by evil and plans to use his power to have Mordecai hanged (5:9-14). Esther's word brings about a great reversal: Mordecai is saved, and Haman is killed (7:10). Thus, the proud are humbled, and the humble are exalted. In the relationship between Haman and Mordecai we sense the providence of God, who works through historical events, and the faithfulness of God, who preserves the righteous.

Divine action is the indispensable theme of this story (Ps. 124:1-5). It takes shape subtly and anonymously, in the "butterfly effects" of a predatory beauty contest (Esth. 2:1-4) and a sleepless royal night (6:1-3), when the king discovered that Mordecai has not been properly rewarded for reporting the plot against his life, and Haman discovered he has made a mistake in plotting to kill Mordecai. These cascade into deliverance and holy war on Israel's "Agagite" (3:1, cf. 1 Sam 15:4-9) enemies. This is not the forceful interventionism of a suddenly existing universe, angelic plagues, fire from heaven, and other deeds of power (Mark 9:38-39); what the science-and-theology dialogue calls "noninterventionist objective special divine action." God heals his groaning creation through both styles. So, we can pray for and celebrate both ordinary and extraordinary signs of God's redeeming and perfecting providence (cf. Jas. 5:13-18).

The queen used her power and actions do save that day. Esther's request that her people be spared (7:7) yields no lasting peace; countering an irrevocable royal death warrant (3:13) with another irrevocable royal right of Jewish self-defense (8:11) only kindles a civil war in which Israel survives by killing its enemies (9:1-10). Even in victory its life remains precarious, tied to its access to conventional power.

By story's end she is "Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail" (9:29-32), as proudly Jewish as she is proudly regal, feared by all under the king, immortalized in the canon of Scripture, and celebrated by Jews for millennia.

Her story and the feast of Purim, the most joyous festival of the Jewish year, are signs of God's kingdom that is worth celebrating. The occasion of the survival and salvation of God's people was one of feasting and celebration; God's people had gained "relief from their enemies," transforming "sorrow into gladness" and "mourning into a holiday." They were commanded to send food to one another and to gather presents for the poor (9:22).

This celebration is a remembrance of attempted genocide, their escape from it, and their continued life together in community. The escape occurred because of Mordecai's resistance to the arrogance of Haman and because of Esther's recognition of her identity

as a member of the persecuted Jewish community under the Persian Empire. Hence the story, with all its charm and its excesses and its deep pain, stands as a critique of the ways of empire, of governments that benefit only a few and harm others. The story is about the less powerful as they seek to gain security and a life of dignity.

The text tells of the downfall of one member of a governing and powerful class, driven by shallow self-concern and by hatred for everyone who threatens his sense of privilege. His conniving wickedness fails him. God's presence is seen from the loyalty, goodness, and triumph of the weak; from the reversals of fortune where the good triumph over the wicked, despite all expectation to the contrary; food is shared, community strengthened, and the poor invited to the table. **Kathleen M. O'Connor**

Queen Esther and viceroy Mordecai (Esth. 9:29-10:3) are heroes who use their power to save their people; helps set the stage for the Messiah's coming; but the Father (God) answers Esther's implicit prayer with a Son whose name stands forever above heaven and earth, who grants not just a reprieve from the latest generation of Agagites, but a Passover that delivers from sin and death. Jesus is targeted and does not escape; he is delivered and does not avenge. The wine at Purim flows until celebrants can no longer tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai," but the wine at Communion flows to cover victims and perpetrators together (Mark 14:24).

Esther's story can inspire us to pray confidently for wisdom (Jas. 1:5-7) so that we will face our own trials with joy and endurance (Jas. 1:2-4). It can encourage us to support agents of providence the way Mordecai does (Esth. 4:1-14), for Esther could not have won the Jews' freedom alone. It can remind us to distinguish carefully between the Lord, who alone is our help (Ps. 124:8), and the lesser powers through which our help may sometimes arrive. Above all, it can spur us to gratitude to the Father of lights who sometimes works wonders and sometimes works behind the scenes, and whose every perfect gift fulfills his ultimate purpose (Jas. 1:17-18), not of overwhelming personal adversaries but being "at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). **Telford Work**

When President Barack Obama was still a member of the United States Congress, he remembered being moved by a sermon entitled "The Audacity of Hope." In the sermon the preacher recalled someone who described going to an art museum and seeing a painting entitled *Hope*. The painting was of a harpist, "a woman who at first glance appears to be sitting atop a great mountain. Until you take a closer look and see that the woman is bruised and bloodied, dressed in tattered rags, the harp reduced to a single frayed string. Your eye is then drawn to the scene below, down to the valley below, where everywhere are the ravages of famine, the drumbeat of war, a world groaning under strife and depravation... And yet... the harpist is looking upwards, a few faint notes floating upwards to the heavens. She dares to hope... She has the audacity... to make music... and praise God... on the one string... she has left!"

The hope that stirred President Obama is the hope expressed in Esther's story. A young woman in the court of a mighty king, a young woman valued more for her beauty than her brains, a young woman willing to risk her own safety and security for the well-being of her people calls attention to a desperate situation. She has only a little power and a few words at her disposal, words that must be very well chosen. She speaks. History is changed. Esther gives us an opportunity to nurture the embers of hope and use the little influence we have for the common good of all. **H. James Hopkins**

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