

BIBLE STUDY ON ESTHER

January 30, 2019

Esther 3:1-6

We are introduced to the fourth main character in the story, Haman, the Agagite. In the Hebrew Bible, Agag was also known as the king of Amalek. In 1 Samuel 15, Agag was defeated by King Saul (who followed a decree from God). However, Saul failed to execute Agag and allowed the people to keep some of the spoil. It resulted in Samuel's pronouncement that God would reject Saul as king. Agag was then executed by Samuel and the Amalekites became enemies of the Jewish nation.

It is now the 12th year of Ahasuerus' reign and 5 years have passed since Esther became queen. Mordecai was unrewarded for his good deed in Chapter 2. Haman was given a higher office but there is no rationale for why this promotion took place. Another twist to the story is that the descendant of Haman was defeated by Saul and ... Mordecai is a descendant of Saul. It sets them up to be natural enemies. No good will come to the Jews once Haman received his promotion.

King ordered all members of the court to bow down before Haman but Mordecai refused. Vashti refused to appear before the king and now Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. Historically Jews in similar situations bowed to their superiors (sons of Jacob to Joseph). There was no Jewish law against it. Mordecai could not have functioned as a royal courtier had he made a general refusal to bow. It appears that Mordecai refused to bow to Haman in particular. His actions put himself and his people in grave danger.

Other servants may have seen this as a contest of wills between Haman and Mordecai. They pitted the two against each other to see who would prevail but for now Haman was furious! Last time the Hebrew word for *anger* appeared was when the king banished Vashti. Personal revenge was not enough for Haman and he wanted to destroy all the Jews in the empire.

Esther 3:7-11

Opening verse presents an explanation for the origin of the *Festival of Purim*. Nisan is the month of the Passover and the Exodus, the festival of salvation for the Jews. Here in the story it will foreshadow the destruction of the people and not their salvation. Stones were thrown to determine an auspicious day to slaughter the Jews. Section might be a later addition intended to tie the *Festival of Purim* to the book of *Esther*.

Haman constructs a story made up of truths, half-truths, and outright lies. It was true the Jews were scattered and separated among all the peoples of the empire. However, the Persian Empire historically was extremely tolerant of multi-ethnic diversity. It was a half-truth that their laws were different from those of other people. Jews kept the Torah but they also obeyed the laws of whatever country they lived in. It was a lie that they did not keep the laws of the king. But the king acquiesced to the policy of *don't ask, don't tell*.

Esther 4:1-3

Edict was published in Susa but Mordecai knew all that Haman had done.
He enacted the typical gestures of mourning (reserved for mourning over the dead).
Mordecai was mourning in advance over his own death and the deaths of his people.
His gestures were mirrored by all the Jews when word of the decree reached them.
Motive to petition God to act on their behalf is blatantly absent in the story.

Esther 4:4-17

Esther now returns as the central character of the story.
Her response to Mordecai's mourning is to writhe in anguish as in childbirth.
She does not know about the decree sent out by Haman although it was posted.
Indicates the kind of sheltered life Esther was leading inside the harem.

Mordecai has a plan of action which he does not hesitate to communicate to Esther.
Remember that in 2:20 we read that Esther obeyed Mordecai all the time.
He assumed that she would obey him now and repair immediately the damage done by Haman.
But her first response was something of a shock because she refused to fall in with his plan.
Esther had been queen for five years and was now steeped in palace etiquette.
Everyone knew that to appear before the king without being summoned could lead to her death.
Fact that Esther had not been summoned for thirty days indicates that she had little influence.

Mordecai was not ready to excuse Esther so quickly.
He reminded her that she was Jewish and the decree applied to her as well.
She was not safe in the palace for it was from the palace that the danger emanated.
In Verse 14 Mordecai threatened Esther.
If she did not act then the Jews would receive help elsewhere but she and her family would die.

It is this interaction that helped the book of *Esther* to be canonized.
God was working in the background and through human action.
Mordecai implied that Esther's ascent to the throne was providential, to save the Jews.
If she did not act it was assumed she would be disobeying the unspoken plan of God.
Loyalty of Esther must lie with her people.

Now that Esther had been persuaded to act on behalf of the Jews she devised her own plan.
Now she gave the commands and she expected to be obeyed.
All the Jews in Susa were to gather and observe a three-day fast (along with Esther and maids).
Fasting is the only overt religious act in this story.
If the fast did take place it would have coincided with the beginning of Passover.
Irony is that it would have been in direct violation of Jewish law.

Fasting also stands in sharp contrast to the banquets mentioned throughout the story.
After the fast, Esther would go to the king although she again reminded Mordecai of the danger.
Her status remained precarious and her relationship with her husband was still uncertain.
However, Esther was transformed as she no longer obeyed orders but gave them.
She was active, a risk-taker, and not passively compliant.

Esther 5:1-8

Section is carefully crafted to create maximum suspense to the reader.
In contrast to Vashti, Esther made sure she was adorned with all the proper paraphernalia.
When the king saw her she immediately won his approval and extended the scepter to her.
When the king asked for her request she responded with an invitation to a banquet.
By getting Ahasuerus to accept her hospitality Esther obligated him to her.
It made it more likely that he would grant her next, larger request.

She would also have Haman in her own territory and under obligation to her.
At the banquet Ahasuerus once more asked Esther for her request.
She invited them to a second banquet.

Esther was being very careful to make it impossible for the king not to grant her request.
By coming to the second banquet the king promised to do whatever she asked.
She successfully backed him into a corner and he allowed it to happen.
Haman is noticeably silent.

Esther 5:9-14

Haman has reached the pinnacle of his glory and he knows it.
Again his reaction to Mordecai's refusal to honor him is out of proportion to the slight.
Haman is ruled by his emotions and shares his tale with his family and friends.
He boasts and recalls his wealth, his many sons, and his honor before the king.
He alone dines privately with the king and queen.
Haman has no idea that Esther is Jewish or that she is related to Mordecai.
Esther has successfully fooled Haman and that will prove to be his undoing.

Everything he recounts should make Haman ecstatic.
However, he gets no pleasure from any of it so long as Mordecai continues to be in the palace.
Like the other female characters in the book, his wife takes center stage.
She leads the weaker Haman into action in response to her suggestions.
His other male advisers merely acquiesce to her suggestions.
Another irony based on the decree in 1:22 which stated every man should be master in his house.

Haman was busy plotting his grandiose revenge on all Jews.
He failed to find a solution to his immediate problem – Mordecai.
Size of the gallows is another exaggeration because fifty cubits high is about 75 feet.

In spite of Esther's recent success, things continue to look grim for Mordecai and the Jews.
Haman still has the power to act against them.

Assignment for January 30

Read Esther 6 and 7