

Nov 5 –Esther 1-2

Introduction

The book of Esther never once mentions “God,” which has led some to question why it is included in the Bible at all if God is not overtly present in the story. But, as we recall the story of Esther, we most certainly see a God at work “behind the scenes,” through the faithfulness of Esther and Mordecai, who –as children of the exile- were living in a foreign land and living out their Jewish faith and identity in very different ways than they would have had this story taken place in Jerusalem. This story never mentions Israel as the homeland, these diaspora Jews are at home in Suza (Persia), but some believe that perhaps the entire story of Esther is a parable about Israel herself. There are many historical inconsistencies with this story, and obvious hyperbole. Some scholars believe that Esther is outright historical fiction, others believe that the story of Esther has simply been lost to history outside of biblical sources, or perhaps it’s a myth rooted in true events whose details were garbled as the story was passed down orally.

The story of Esther printed in the Hebrew Bible is the shortest version known, from the Jewish Masoretic texts. The longer version from the Greek language Old Testament (the Septuagint) is included in the Apocrypha. In the Greek version of the story, the king is named “Artaxerxes,” leading many to connect the king in this story with the real Persian ruler, Xerxes, who ruled the Persian empire from 486BC- 465BC (when he was assassinated by his body guards). The name Ahasuerus may actually be a title “chief of rulers” to reflect an exaggerated sense of his global dominion. Is Ahasuerus really the “chief of rulers” or does God truly pull the strings on the workings of his kingdom through the least likely of means –a young woman!

To fully comprehend the story of Esther, we must understand the important dynamic of honor and shame in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Esther is in many ways a dramatic reversal of honor and shame within society. Since the time of the exile, the Jewish people found themselves in a place of dependence and submission to outside ruling authorities, this was particularly true for Jews living in diaspora. This position of submission and dependence, culturally speaking, placed Israel in a feminine position, which automatically meant “shame.” The counterpoint to Israel’s feminine position was the dominant culture’s autonomous, masculine power. In the story of Esther, God’s people, Israel, is personified in the person of Esther, the woman whose fortunes reversed from shame to honor. Similarly, the dominant culture is personified in the person of the King, who should be fully autonomous and all powerful, but is really the one who is shamed.

See attached lengthy quote on page 96 of *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* by Lillian R. Klein.

Chapter 1

Susa was one of three royal residences in the Persian empire. It was comprised of the citadel (the gated community part of the city), and the lower unfortified part of the city. In this first chapter, the king gives two lavish banquets to assert his power and autonomy, but things are not as they seem. His first banquet is made up of the aristocracy from all of his far flung kingdom, these are his elite peers, and he feasts with

them for 6 months straight to showcase his riches. After that banquet, he gave a smaller, shorter, more intimate banquet for the courtiers of his own city –those who had the privilege of living in the “Gated community” section of Susa. This banquet lasted for 7 days. But what’s interesting is that while it’s supposed to be a lavish “banquet,” and the luxurious décor is fully described, the food is never once mentioned. The guests are commanded to drink as much as they please –by the flagon full- and to do whatever they pleased. This event was more of a frat party than it was a royal banquet, and by ordering his courtiers to get drunk and do whatever they wanted the king gave up his own authority over their behavior. This was the first point at which the king, who should have held all of the honor, behaved in a way that shamed himself.

Though historically speaking, we know that men and women dined together in the Persian Empire, for some reason the queen is giving her own banquet for the women. On the 7th day, when the king is well and truly drunk, he summons Vashti to join him so that he can show her off like a trophy –yet another way to showcase his riches –he has the nicest stuff, the best wine, the hottest wife. But, he orders her to come to him wearing ONLY the royal crown! Vashti refused to be objectified in this way, and the king was enraged and called for his advisors to tell him what to do. Again, for a king, he seems awfully dependent on those around him to give him all of his ideas for ruling. And it is his advisors who fear what their wives will do if they hear that the queen has refused to be submissive to the king! So they recommend that she be sent away, and a new queen be found who will set a better example for all of their wives to follow.

Chapter 2

The beauty contest for replacing Vashti is announced, and Mordecai is introduced. Mordecai is the first fully honorable person described by the text. He is a great grandson of the exile, of the tribe of Benjamin, and he has been raising his relative (probably his niece) Esther since she was orphaned (this is his faith responsibility as next of kin). And, it seems that Mordecai has done a good job in raising Esther, as she still defers to him as her elder and obeys him by not revealing her ethnicity as a Jew. The story of Esther is also the story of how Diaspora Jews are expected to maintain a low profile for their own survival. Mordecai never suggests that she enter the beauty contest, but Esther seems to be doing what is appropriate to the situation by passively getting swept up into it. She doesn’t seek to enter, but she also doesn’t refuse when she is selected. She is being submissive to the dominant culture’s practices, but not in any way that overtly interferes with her faith. Like both Joseph and Daniel, Esther finds herself in the royal court of a foreign power and finds favor with those in charge. As a result of this favor, she is given special treatment. This contest is to decide who will be the next Queen, but those not chosen will not go back to their old lives, but instead become royal concubines –not suitable for marriage outside of the palace. There is no doubt that a sexual encounter is to take place. The elaborate beauty ritual portrays Esther’s chances as a “long shot,” but even so, with the help of some advice from Hegai (who presumably knew the king’s preferences), Esther pleased the king the most and was named queen, and the king threw yet another banquet to celebrate her as his new queen.

Moredecai is faithful to the king, and points out an assassination plot which he overheard, which turns out to be true and those found guilty of treason are condemned, and all of this is written down in the annals of Persian history.