

ESTHER

Esther 1

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This year we have been exploring “Fifty Old Testament Stories that Every Christian Should Know” and, today, we land on the penultimate story in the series, the story of Esther.

Our final three stories in the series – Job, Esther, and Jonah – are all considered by scholars to be fiction, hero legends that have survived for nearly three thousand years because they tell us something significant about human beings and our relationships with each other and God.

I hope that doesn't shock or dismay you, to discover that there are fictitious stories in the Bible. I don't know why it should. Why wouldn't the great and foundational literature of our religious faith contain some tall tales, some hero legends and campfire sagas? Is it not so with every other religious and cultural tradition? Why should ours be different?

The Old Testament – or, what scholars refer to as the Hebrew Bible – has been preserved to show us how our understanding of God has evolved and that evolution has grown through the medium of story.

So, last week we heard of Job and next week we will hear the story of Jonah. Today, Esther.

First, a few fun facts: Esther is considered by most scholars to be a novella or a short novel. It is the only book of the Bible in which God takes no overt action and, for that matter, isn't even mentioned. It tells the story of a series of events that never really happened or, at least, for which there is not an iota of historic evidence. (You would think that a massive Jewish uprising, led by a Jewish queen and a Jewish court official, that resulted in the deaths of more than 10,000 people in Persia during the time of Xerxes would have rated at least a mention in the historic chronicles of that time. But the history of Persia contains not a single word about such an event.)

The author of the story seems to be familiar with the geography in which the story takes place. Sousa was one of the four capital cities of Persia, the other three being Babylon, Persepolis, and Ecbatana. The Persian Empire was a vast and inclusive one and it was not uncommon for people of various ethnic and geographic origins to become successful and powerful and even achieve levels of high rank in the royal court – cf. Nehemiah.

That's where historical accuracy ends, however. There are, in fact, some pretty glaring historical errors in the story. Most notably is the one wherein Xerxes is identified as having a large harem, the head wife of which was the queen named Vashti, who is replaced by the Jewish girl, Esther. In fact, the historical record shows that Xerxes was monogamous and married for his entire adult life to one woman named Amestris.

Probably, the story of Esther arose among Jews living in or around Persia as a way of explaining the festival of Purim, a Persian festival of Spring that was adopted and adapted by the Jews as a Jewish freedom festival. The Esther story gave religious meaning to a secular festival that was already being celebrated.

The story takes place during what is referred to as the first Jewish diaspora – a Greek word that means dispersion or scattering. Jewish history is usually marked by two diasporas: One in 586 BCE, when thousands of Hebrews were forced to leave Palestine and live in Babylon. Seventy years later, when they were allowed to return to their home, only about 30 percent actually did. The others chose to stay in the countries of Babylon, Media, and Persia where they had made homes. The second diaspora occurred after the Jewish war of 70 CE when the Palestinian Jews revolted against Rome. The revolt was crushed, the temple destroyed, and a vast part of the Jewish population fled from Roman persecution in Palestine to find new homes in Europe and the Middle East.

Today, the consensus of Biblical scholars is that the story of Esther was probably written during the Maccabean revolution in Palestine around 160 BCE but the story takes place shortly after the first diaspora and among those Jews living in Persia in around 475 BCE.

So, this morning, we travel to Persia (today, Iran) where Xerxes is the emperor.

BUT FIRST, THIS

Before we go to Persia, however, as we travel back in history I'd like for us to make a brief stop in Europe in 1945.

Last week I was watching a movie about that time and place – World War II – a movie that was conceived and directed by one of my favorite movie directors, Quentin Tarantino. The title of the movie is rather indelicate but let us be content to know that it was, I was led to understand, based on a true story about a group of British Jewish Commandos who fought behind enemy lines during the war.

Their orders were simple: Support the French and other resistance movements and kill as many Nazis as they could. I rented and prepared to watch the movie with the hope of learning a little more about this commando unit and how they operated and being entertained by a good World War II yarn.

Well, it didn't take long for me to realize that, as I should have known, I was watching a typical, self-indulgent, hyper-violent Quentin Tarantino movie and, to call it “based on a true story” was going to be a stretch. It may have used a true story as a jumping off point but when it jumped off it, clearly, jumped way off.

This became abundantly and ultimately clear near the end of the film when the Jewish commandos managed to assassinate Adolph Hitler, Martin Bormann, Herman Goering, Joseph Goebbels and most of the Nazi high command in a Parisian movie theater as it was burning down.

So, I said to myself as the credits rolled, what we have here is a hero legend - a story that takes the essence of the real story and real people and then inflates them to larger than life status without regard to historical accuracy.

And that is also, pretty much, what we have with the story of Esther.

TROUBLE IN THE PALACE

The story opens in the court of Xerxes just outside Sousa, one of the four capital cities.

Xerxes has thrown a party for all of his foreign ambassadors, nobles, and military leaders and that party has gone on for six months. (Whew!) The last seven days of the party he invited anyone who happened to be in the citadel, the palace, to join the party and he gave word to his wine stewards that everyone was to be served whatever and as much as they wanted, including and especially wine.

And, at the same time, his wife, Vashti was giving a similar banquet for the women.

As the party begins to wind down, on the last day, Xerxes is drunk and happy and he tells his eunuchs, the guys whose job it is to guard the harem, to go get the queen and bring her out here in her crown so he can show her off to all his male guests. And, we are told that he wants to do this because she is very beautiful to behold.

Vashti's response is both bold and modern: She says, "No."

"Why?" we ask. Why did she not come? Historians offer that it may have been because the king was obviously drunk and, in Persian culture, commands made when the one making them was drunk did not have to be obeyed. He was, after all, obviously irrational.

The ancient Rabbis inferred from how the story was told that by saying that she was to come in her crown, the king meant that she was to come wearing *only* her crown. He had already, we are told, displayed his wealth and his military power before his guests. The only thing left that he could do to impress them was to show them how beautiful his wife was and how better to make this point than to display her naked.

At the end of the day, though, after all the speculation is finished, we don't really know why she said, "No." The important thing is that she did.

At this, Xerxes is shown to be something of a dufus, which history says he was not, but it makes for a better story if he is. He goes to his advisors and says, "The queen won't obey me. What should I do?"

Any wise advisor would have said "Apologize and try to get back in her good graces. She is beautiful, after all." But these guys are as clueless as their boss and their advice is this: "If you let her defy and disobey you, word will get out and the next thing you know, wives will be defying and disobeying their husbands all over the country and it'll be anarchy! Anarchy and chaos!"

We can almost see Xerxes nodding stupidly, knitting his eyebrows in drunken concentration.

"Here's what we suggest," say the advisors. "Banish Vashti and replace her with a newer, younger model that will be selected by way of an empire-wide beauty contest. The three hundred and sixty-five finalists will each spend the night with you and then you will choose one to be the next queen."

Xerxes can't see a downside to this proposal so he agrees and the beauty contest is announced throughout the empire.

MORDECAI HATCHES A PLAN

Now, there was in those days a Jew named Mordecai living in the city of Sousa, a minor functionary in the court of the king, and he had a cousin who was an orphan that he had raised since she was a little girl. By this time in our story, she was a beautiful, young lady and her name was Esther.

Mordecai went to Esther and encouraged her to enter the beauty contest because he just knew that, beautiful as she was, she was sure to be a contender.

And she was. She made it through the preliminaries and was declared one of the finalists and put under the care of the head eunuch, a guy named Shaashgaz, who was so impressed with her poise and beauty that he put her in the care of seven maids and put her at the bottom of the list so she would get nearly a year of beauty treatments and boudoir training before she spent her night with the king.

Finally, her night came and, according to the rules, she was allowed to take with her any one thing she chose, into the king's chambers. Wisely, she chose to take only what Shaashgaz advised, which, apparently, was her beauty and the knowledge of the boudoir that he had taught her because that's all she took into the king's chambers.

Now let us step back as we close the door and wait quietly and patiently in the hall. The way this thing worked was that, the next morning the girl who spent the night with the king would return to the harem. If she pleased the king and was chosen as the one to replace Vashti, she would be notified after all of them had had their turn. If she wasn't chosen she would go home happy in the knowledge that she was, at least, one of the finalists.

But that was not how it worked out for Esther.

The next morning the doors to the king's chamber burst open and out he came. "No more girls please. We have a winner!" And the winner was Esther.

Esther was declared the new queen, given Vashti's crown, Vashti was sent off to another city and given a comfortable pension and some servants, and Xerxes declared a feast and gave everyone gifts. All this time, Mordecai and Esther kept her Jewish ethnicity and her relationship with Mordecai a secret.

THE PLOT TO KILL THE KING

One day, some months later, Mordecai was going about his duties as a minor functionary of the palace when he overheard two of the king's trusted servants talking.

They were angry over some slight or imagined insult they had received from the king and they had decided to kill him. Mordecai told Esther, who told the king and gave the credit to Mordecai. Both of the servants were caught, tried, and hanged on the gallows, and the whole incident was recorded in the annals of the empire.

MORDECAI AND HAMAN

About this same time the king decided to honor one of his advisors, a man named Haman, by elevating him to the position of Chief of Staff, second in command, and right hand man to the king. And, along with this elevation in rank, he gave an order that all of the other palace staff were to bow to Haman whenever he passed by, which they did.

All but Mordecai. Mordecai, being a Jew, refused to bow to any man, preferring to reserve his bows for the Lord and only the Lord. His friends and colleagues tried to change his mind but he was unyielding in this. He simply refused to bow before Haman. When Haman asked his people why Mordecai refused to bow they said, "Well, he's a Jew."

Haman was furious but his wrath was not limited to Haman alone. He just assumed that because Haman disrespected him that all Jews would do the same. So he hatched a plot to kill every single Jew in the Persian Empire.

He went to the king when Xerxes was in a good mood and said something like this: "You know, your highness, there is a group of people living spread out through your kingdom who have this strange religion with strange customs and they refuse to obey your orders. Not a good precedent, if you know what I mean. Why don't I just deal with them for you?"

Xerxes says, "Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

And Haman says, "Okay, then, just sign here and here and initial there and we're good to go."

And here is what the order that Xerxes signed, said: "On or about the 13th of March, anyone who wants to can kill any Jews they know and confiscate their property as their own as long as they kill every Jew – man, woman, child – associated with that property."

Mordecai learns of the plot and he goes nuts. He sends messengers to tell Esther what's going on. "You have to go to the king and tell him you're a Jew; convince him to save us," he says.

Esther isn't too wild about the idea. See, the king has been so busy that he hasn't called her to his chamber in nearly a year. And the law says that no one goes to the king's chamber unbidden, under penalty of death. Only if the king points at you with the royal scepter are you forgiven and not taken away and immediately killed. It's a big gamble.

Mordecai responds with the second most famous line of the entire book: "Don't think that just because you're all cozy in the palace you will avoid what happens to the rest of the Jews. You're still a Jewess, you know. And who knows? Maybe you have been elevated to this high position for a time just such as this."

Finally, Esther relents with the most famous line of the story. She tells the messenger, "Go tell Mordecai, 'Alright, you win. Have the Jews fast for two days and pray for me, as I will. And then I will go before the king unbidden even though it is against the law. And, if I die, I die.'"

They do as she says and she goes, once again, to the eunuch, Shaashgaz for advice. He dresses her and perfumes her and tries to talk her out of this but she goes anyway and, when the king sees her, there, standing in the door, hesitating and then stepping across the threshold, he waits only a moment before throwing down his scepter and running to her and taking her into his arms.

"What can I do for you, my love?" he asks. "Name anything, even up to half of my kingdom and it's yours."

"All I ask," she says, "Is that you let me fix dinner for you and Haman."

Well, that's not so much. So the king agrees and that night he and Haman go to her place for dinner and there he asks her, again, what she wants. She answers that her only desire is to do this again, tomorrow night.

Haman goes home in high spirits. The king has invited him to be the only guest at the queen's dinner party. But he sees Mordecai who, once again, refuses to bow to him and it ruins his good mood. His wife and friends suggest that one way to repair his mood would be to build the gallows upon which he intends to hang Mordecai, a really big one. So that's what he does, planning that, the next morning he'll ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai, forthwith.

But, that night the king can't sleep so he gets out the annals of his kingdom for some bedtime reading and he comes to that place where Mordecai saves his life by uncovering the murder plot. He calls his servants and asks them if anything was ever done to reward Mordecai and they say, no, not to their knowledge.

"Well, go wake up Haman," he says. "Tell him to get over here because I need his advice."

A few minutes later Haman comes stumbling in in his bathrobe and the king says, "Haman, what should I do for someone I want to honor? Someone who is really important to me and to whom I owe a great deal?"

Of course, Haman thinks the king is talking about him so he says, "Well, I'd put him on your favorite white stallion and put your purple robe on him and have someone lead him through the city telling everyone that this is a person who is important to the king and they should revere and respect him."

The king says he likes that idea a lot. "So I want you to do that for Mordecai, tomorrow."

And, the next day Haman is humiliated as he leads Mordecai through town singing his praises. He comes home with steam coming out of his ears. He is furious but his wife and his advisors tell him that he needs to back away from his plan to kill the Jews, and Mordecai in particular. This Mordecai seems to be living a charmed life and you can only end up in trouble if you cross him.

Haman refuses to back down. He orders work on the gallows to be doubled and prepares to go back to Esther's house for the second banquet with the king.

That night the little three-some finishes the wine course and the king asks again, "What do you want, Esther? Anything, up to half my kingdom, and it's yours."

She responds with a sob. She confesses that she is a Jewess and she, along with all her people, is in great danger of being killed by his order which he gave because Haman tricked him. Please, she begs, please save us.

The king is outraged. He is aware that he has been duped but there is a problem. The code of Hammurabi says that once a thing is signed into law, even the King must obey it. The king can't undo a law that he has duly signed and put in place. So, vexed, he turns and storms off into the garden to think.

While he is gone Haman realizes that the wheels have come off his plan and it's about to come crashing down on his head. He begs to queen to speak to the king on his behalf, to forgive his racist, bigoted behavior. So violently does he plead with her that he falls at her feet to beg for his life.

And that is when the king reenters the room. "Is it not enough that you have manipulated and tricked me, now you would molest my wife the moment my back is turned?"

The guards are called and Haman is taken away in chains. The accusation is, of course, absurd. What kind of fool would try to molest the king's wife with the king in the garden only a few feet away. But Xerxes can hardly punish Haman for the plot against the Jews, which he, himself, approved. He can punish him, however, for attempted rape.

THE STORY CONCLUDES

The next day Esther helps the king draft a new law. The Jews will be allowed to keep weapons and, on March 12, they will be allowed to attack anyone who was plotting to kill or hurt them in any way on March 13.

We are told that the Jews took full advantage of the decree and killed some 10-12,000 of their enemies that day. Haman was hanged along with all his sons on the very scaffold that he had erected for Mordecai and his house burned down and Mordecai was elevated to Haman's position as head advisor to the king.

And now, every year, in March, the Jews celebrate the holiday of Purim with potato pancakes, and pastries, and candies and by reading the story of Esther and acting out the plot with toy swords.

EPILOGUE

And not just the Jews, it turns out.

In the Feldmeyer house we used to celebrate Purim every March around the 15th. We would eat latkes and corned beef and donuts for dessert and we would read the story of Esther.

And after a few years, when we got to the part where Mordecai asks Esther to go to the king I would read it in a very serious voice – "Who knows? Maybe you have been elevated to this high position for a time just such as this." And then I would read Esther's response: "Even though it is against the law, I will go before the king, and..." And there I would pause and look up and we would all say, together: **"If I die, I die."**

And, to this day, I will, from time to time, hear my kids or Jean say that phrase when faced with a difficult choice.

It's a good phrase to have in your arsenal. When you're afraid of being criticized or ridiculed for doing the right thing... When you're afraid of failing and being humiliated by the failure, even though trying was the right thing to do... When you are about to fight a battle you know you can't win but a battle worth fighting nevertheless... When you know that someone is going to blame you for something you didn't do or couldn't prevent but there's no way to defend yourself... When you know that what you are about to do is going to make someone mad but it's still the right thing to do...

It's a good thing, at times like that, to be able to look into the eyes of Esther, our sister and our grandmother in the faith and know that she knows exactly what you are going through and then to say with her and with each other:

"Okay, I will go. And if I die, I die."

AMEN