

ESTHER & RUTH

INTRODUCTION

While a number of women are mentioned throughout the bible, only two have books named after them - Esther & Ruth.

Both books are also associated with Jewish religious festivals. Ruth is read during the festival of booths or Pentecost, which celebrates not only the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, but also the grain harvest. Esther is read during the festival of Purim, which is also mentioned at the end of the book (as we shall see).

Both women are living in alien countries. Esther is a Jew living in Persia and Ruth is a Moabite who moves to Israel. Both books then, deal with themes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the limitations of living as women in a male dominated world.

In regard to the latter issue, we will see how Ruth and Esther must use clever strategies to navigate the waters of working toward outcomes through the decisions of men, outcomes that will have benefit and blessing for the Jewish people as a whole. In Ruth's case, she will be the mother of Obed, who will be the grandfather of King David, the most celebrated King in Israel. In Esther's case, she saves the Jewish people from potential genocidal extinction.

In both books, God is not mentioned directly (Esther) or favourably (Ruth). Even though this may seem odd, it helps if we relate this to our own world, where divine providence is a reality behind the scenes, not something recognized or spoken about openly. We can speak about it in the church, but we wouldn't necessarily express it with our neighbours unless they are also believers.

Esther is a story that takes place when Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is emperor of Persia (5th century B.C). Ruth is a story that takes place in the time of Judges (before the time Israel has kings), hundreds of years earlier than Esther.

ESTHER CHAPTER 1:1 – 2:4

Even though there are various versions of the story of Esther, the version we have in our bibles is the version most familiar to Jews and Protestants. It is also the version where God is never mentioned... directly, at any rate.

The story takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire (modern day Iraq). There are many Jews living in Susa and throughout the Persian empire. Their ancestors had been exiled from their Jewish homeland about a century earlier, by the Babylonians, the empire at the time.

Who is good and who is bad? Even though the Jews are clearly favoured as the good ones, they are not unambiguously so. And even though the Persians are the bad ones, they are not all equally bad.

The opening chapter is aimed at presenting the splendour and glory of the King of Persia. It is exaggerated on several counts. The 127 provinces credited to Persia and its king are about 100 more than historians give the kings of Persia credit for. The King's royal display of his pomp and splendour takes place over many days. 180 days is 6 months. Can this be possible? Probably not. However, this description functions at several levels. First it tells us that this king is greater than any other who has been before. But on a deeper level, from a Jewish point of view, such lavishness, luxury, and pomp is morally suspect. Only God deserves great glory, not some human king. As we shall see, Ahasuerus does not live up to his glory, and perhaps, is more a puppet pulled by the string of his childish emotions, anger being the greatest, as well as his advisors and counselors who play him like a violin string.

The other indictment of this King and his "glorious kingdom" is the vast inequality between men and women in his domain. In fact, the way it comes across in the first few chapters is kind of comical. Queen Vashti's refusal to come at the king's beckoning to be displayed as his greatest possession, is described as a threat for the status of all men throughout the empire. Imagine what would happen if every woman followed Vashti's lead and refused to do what their husbands ordered them to do. Ahasuerus is drunk and reacts angrily. How dare anyone disobey him?! Yet, Vashti is the only one with integrity in this first part of the story. She doesn't play the game like Ahasuerus' advisors do. She simply refuses and is punished. Vashti has been held up as an early feminist in a male dominated world. Clearly, she is a woman of courage and self-respect, someone totally different than the king and his advisors.

The king's advisors play on the king's anger and use it to make a wider attack on women's place in the kingdom. A decree is sent out throughout the kingdom condemning the actions of the queen and re-establishing the dominance of husbands over their wives.

Once the king's anger goes, he has a problem. He has no queen. What will he do? Well, his advisors have a plan for this also. Let young virgins be collected from far and wide in the empire. What young women would want this fate? They would be taken, given a night with the king, and at the end of it all, only one would be chosen to be queen. What happens to the rest of them? They are thrown into the king's harem. What will their fate be? They can't go back home. They can't have their own families now that they're no longer virgins. Who knows how they'll end up. Abduction of girls and women happens in our world today too, and sexual exploitation and enslavement also.

Anyhow, all of this sets the stage for the story of Esther.

ESTHER 2:5 – 3:15

1) Two new characters are introduced to the story - Mordecai and Esther. They are Jews, and their ancestors were taken from Israel 100 years or so earlier by the Babylonians. Now they are under the Persians. We are also told that Esther's parents are both dead and her cousin, Mordecai, the only surviving male family member, has taken it upon himself to adopt her and raise her.

As Jews in a foreign land, they are vulnerable. How do we know? First of all, Esther, like many other young, unmarried girls, is taken without Mordecai having any say about it. He doesn't have the money to pay off officials or the clout to keep Esther out of it. Second, he tells Esther not to reveal her racial background. Clearly, he believes that this can be held against them both.

Esther, like all the women collected, is given a long period of cosmetic treatment to beautify her for her one night with the king. After that night she, like the others, would be sent to the king's harem. They are now concubines, no longer virgins, no longer eligible for a good marriage.

Esther, however, pleases the king, so much so that she is chosen to replace Vashti. Unlike Vashti who stood her ground and resisted the king's whims, Esther seems to be comfortable in her role as a trophy wife, to be displayed to all. But appearances can be deceiving as we will see later in the story.

2) In the midst of the story a sub-plot is introduced. Mordecai happens to be at the right place at the right time. He overhears a plot on the king's life. He passes on the information to Esther, who passes it on to the king. An investigation takes place and the plot is confirmed. The criminals are hanged and Mordecai is honoured. He risks identifying himself and Esther openly. But the king is too aloof to show any interest in their racial background or history. At this point in the story, this is providential. But things will change.

At this point, things are looking rosy for Mordecai and Esther, although, given our admiration for Vashti, they seem by contrast compliant and interested solely in their own welfare and security in the kingdom.

3) Another character is now introduced, Haman, and he will serve the role of arch villain. We come to know early on that Haman has lots of money (he in effect bribes the king (3:9) to "encourage" him to support Haman's wish. And Haman is willing to spend a large sum of money in order to destroy a people, the Jews. Why? Because of one man, Mordecai, who does not show the right kind of respect. Now we get to see how the story of Vashti and the story of Mordecai come together. Mordecai refuses to comply with an arbitrary ruling of the king on behalf of Haman. Haman's servants and then Haman himself take note and threaten Mordecai. Mordecai will not budge. He will not bow down before Haman, as Vashti would not come at the king's beckoning to have herself displayed.

Why does Mordecai refuse to bow down? Is it because of his being a Jew and bowing down to none but God? We are not told.

But just like the King's advisors find Vashti's actions a threat to order and want to punish all women, so too does Haman get the king to support the idea that Mordecai's actions constitute a great threat necessitating a "final solution" for all Jews. Racism and Sexism come together and reveal the grand moral rot in Ahasuerus' kingdom.

The obscenity of Haman's determination to exterminate the Jews is only made worse as he chooses a day for this to happen. He chooses the day by a throw of the dice, so to speak (the actual practice was the casting of lots or *pur* in Hebrew from which "Purim" is derived). And so the day is chosen. This means that it's business as usual for all peoples of the empire living side by side with Jews until the appointed day when this all changes. On that day, everyone in the kingdom is enjoined to attack and kill all Jews and take all their goods. This is a recipe for chaos, as much as it is one for bloodshed. No wonder that while the king and Haman sit down to enjoy a good dinner after striking their bargain, Susa is "thrown into confusion." (3:15)