

INTERPRETATION
BIBLE STUDIES

Esther and Ruth

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Such a Time as This

The News Spreads: Esther 4:1–5

In this suspenseful segment of Esther, we learn how Mordecai and Esther respond to Haman's murderous decree. As chapter 3 ends and chapter 4 begins, several snapshots occur in quick succession. First, we see Haman and the king within the palace walls, privately celebrating their murder pact (3:15). This is the book's fifth banquet; the next two, very different in character, will follow soon. Next we see three "outside" snapshots. The first is a panorama of the population of Susa, where pandemonium reigns (3:15). The second is a close-up of Mordecai, who adds his own voice to the general outcry (4:1–2). The third broadens to a sweeping gaze at the Jews throughout the empire, who are fasting, lamenting, and lying in sackcloth and ashes (4:3).

Our gaze returns finally to the palace, where we discover that the decree announced in the far corners of the land has not reached the queen's own quarters (4:4). She knows neither what is happening to her people, nor what her own husband has done.

What exactly Esther's maids and eunuchs tell her is not spelled out. Though at first it sounds as if they have told her everything, her response indicates she may only know the most superficial element of the story: Mordecai is at the gate "woefully out of compliance with the palace dress code" (Bechtel, 44). The motif of Mordecai's clothing that begins here will prove to be an important one as time goes on.

Esther sends her cousin clothing. What exactly this delightfully ambiguous gesture is meant to communicate goes unstated. Is Esther trying to fix Mordecai's sorrow by fixing his attire? Is she summoning him inside the gate with proper dress so they can confer? Exhorting

him to show proper respect for the palace? Expressing the teenage cliché, "You are embarrassing me!"? Hoping to cover up his Jewish identity? Or is this just a gesture of panic, a denial of realities too frightening to allow?

"While Mordecai's grief is the focus of these two verses, the description is not so detailed as to probe into the specific reasons for his grief. While the main one is obvious—namely, the impending destruction of his people—we are left to wonder whether he feels any personal responsibility for their peril. . . . The text is resolutely silent about such ruminations, so interpreters must be content to leave such questions unanswered. (Part of the artistry of this book, however, is its knack for making us ask them!)" Bechtel, *Esther*, 45.

Evidently judging her response inadequate, Mordecai refuses the garments without comment. Esther becomes the story's third person to receive a refusal conveyed by messengers. But unlike King Ahasuerus with Vashti, and Haman with Mordecai, who both reacted without inquiring, Esther wants to know, to translate the Hebrew literally, "what is this and what is it about."

The Crucial Interchange: Esther 4:6-14

Esther sends one of the eunuchs, Hathach, to find out. Through his shuttling back and forth between her quarters and the outside world, Esther and Mordecai carry on an urgent and passionate conversation. Emphasis on the mediated nature of this conversation underscores the delicacy of her situation. All hope dangles from a tenuous thread. What if Hathach garbles the message? What if he is stopped? What if he betrays them?

This central conversation between Esther and her cousin Mordecai marks a turning point in their relationship. Until now, Mordecai has been Esther's protector. Everything he has told her to do has been for her protection. And Esther has indeed needed such protection. King Ahasuerus has not so far been merciful to either women or Jews, and Esther is both of these. But now Mordecai will reverse his protective role, and Esther is forced to grow up from childhood to adulthood.

Hathach finds Mordecai in the open square of the city. With relentless specificity, Mordecai conveys to Esther the exact sum of money Haman offered the king, demonstrating again his talent for uncovering the damning secrets of others. He gives Hathach a copy of the decree to show her, and unambiguous instructions to plead for "her people" before the king.

Esther seems poised to refuse. "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know," she begins (4:11). Everyone knows,

and he should too, the danger of approaching the king unbidden. She adds something Mordecai probably does not know: She hasn't been summoned by the king in a month, so odds are slim that she can wait for an invitation. As Bechtel points out (47), commentators have construed Esther's hesitation as cowardice or selfishness. Even Mordecai seems to construe it thus. But Esther has not refused yet. She has only clarified the probable consequences. Neither Vashti nor Mordecai should be blamed for occasioning harsh decrees by intemperate leaders. Still, after these results, Esther's pause to think before acting is worth noting.

Her words reveal yet another of the many arbitrary regulations in Esther's Persia. We have already seen several strange laws: laws of unrestrained drinking (1:8), queenly banishment and wifely obedience (1:22), virgin conscription and beautification (2:2-4, 12), subservient obeisance (3:2), legalized genocide (3:9-10), and palace dress codes (4:2). Now no one can come to the king unbidden. The plot will turn on more odd laws before it all ends.

Mordecai answers with his only direct speech of the whole book. He musters several arguments at once. Rather than deferring to her protest, he says that if she does not go she will die. He intertwines this warning with a confident prediction of salvation even without her help: "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish." Then, much more positively, he continues: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14).

The hedges in Mordecai's speech are as important as its assertions. As Michael Fox has said, "He raises the possibility that even before events began sliding toward disaster, some force was preparing the way for deliverance. . . . He is confident that the Jewish people will survive but uncertain about how this will come about" (245). His modesty on the subject of divine providence, along with his faith in the effectiveness of timely action, could be very instructive to any believer attempting to interpret the ways of God.

Getting Ready Again to Meet the King: Esther 4:16-17

Esther's answer displays both courage and leadership: "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and

neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (4:16). For the first time, Esther does not receive an order from Mordecai, but instead gives him an order, which he obeys.

"If there was any question about her courage before, surely her terse 'if I perish, I perish' put such questions to rest." Bechtel, *Esther*, 50.

From this moment on, Esther's relationship to the world around her changes. Relinquishing the passivity of youth, she takes charge. This is not something we might have expected from her. So far in the story all she has done is to please other people. Vashti had told the king "no," but Esther has appeared quite reasonably hesitant to say anything at all to him. Vashti had been banished for failing to appear when the king called her; now Esther must appear before the king when he has not called her, and convince him to reverse the decree of his highest official.

"Verse 16 reads like a battle plan, and she is clearly the general. Indeed, Mordecai seems to recognize this role reversal first of all. Verse 17 attests to this with its laconic conclusion: 'Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.'" Bechtel, *Esther*, 50.

This desperate situation calls for Esther to be "wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove" (Matt. 10:16). She takes three routes. First, she secures the support of the Jews in Susa, then she takes time to think it all through. Finally, she makes contrastive preparations: For

three days she fasts, preparing her heart, but she dresses festively for her encore performance at "pleasing the king" in the only way this particular king seems to understand.

Other Tales

It was mentioned in chapter 1 that the book of Esther has survived in three closely related but distinct versions. These are: (1) the Hebrew version that became scripture for Jews and Protestants; (2) the Greek Septuagint version, which was scripture for the early church and continues, with adaptations, among Catholics today; and (3) the Alpha Text (or A-Text), which is found in a few ancient Greek manuscripts but not in any religious group's canon. Interesting distinctions among these versions appear throughout the book. Some of the most intriguing differences occur here.