

Authority and Power

Esther and Mordecai

Text: The Book of Esther

The story of Esther is set in the Persian capital Susa around 486-465 BCE. During the reign of King Ahasuerus. The book is recognised as a work of fiction written by an unknown Jew. It reads like a novel where a beautiful orphan girl rises from obscurity to power. In many ways this is a secular book. God is a sensed presence in the story. The celebration of the Festival of Purim is the reason for the inclusion of the Book in the Old Testament.

The book of Esther follows the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament which record the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. The rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple takes place during this period. Jews were a captive minority in the Persian kingdom.

Who were Esther and Mordicai?

No historical evidence has been found for Esther and Mordecai and their roles in the court of King Ahasuerus. The narrative states that Mordecai was a Jew who was the son of Jair and that his ancestry takes him back to the time of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Esther was the cousin of Mordecai. She was adopted by Mordecai when her father and mother died (2:5-7)

Retelling Esther's story: What follows is a retelling based on the biblical narrative. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

Esther reflects: As I look back on my life I marvel that I survived. Tonight I am thankful for the Festival of Purim that celebrates the victory of my people, the Jews. I am proud of my uncle Mordecai who worked with me to save my people from being killed by an army led by Haman. I am content that as the Queen I was able to persuade my husband, the King, to listen to my warning. He took me seriously, believed Haman was guilty and ordered him to be killed.

I am proud that Mordecai is now second in rank to the king. (2:17-18).

I shut my eyes and let memories flood my mind. I think of my early days when I was adopted by Mordecai. We were one of the Jewish families that came to live in Susa (2:5). Many stories of King Ahasuerus' extravagant parties were told in the market place. Then came the shocking news that Queen Vashti had defied the King's orders to dance at a banquet (1:12). As a result the Queen was banished from the kingdom. A ripple of fear spread through the city as we heard that the King was angry and believed that Queen Vashti's disobedience would encourage wives to disobey their husbands. (1:11-20). I remember how the King sent letters to all the provinces that every man should be master in his own home (1:21-22). It was a confusing time.

Not long after that the King ordered all beautiful young women in the kingdom to be brought into the palace. I was among them. Many of us were frightened wondering what was before us. We were housed in the King's harem. Each night a few of us would be taken before a Royal banquet. The night when it was my turn the eunuchs helped me dress. I was terrified. A few of the girls who had become my friends gave me courage. That evening is still etched in my mind. Before the night ended we got the news that the King had chosen me to be his Queen. I was filled with excitement. It was like a dream. Me. Queen Esther. Living in the Palace after I married the King! I would have power. I would be obeyed. My uncle Mordecai brought me back to reality. He reminded me that I would be a Jew in a Persian court and would be at risk. He advised me to keep my Jewish identity a secret so that I would be safe (2:20-21). I heeded his advice as I got used to my status and role as Queen.

PAUSE. Reflect. Queen Vashti defies the King and loses her power.

Esther rises from powerlessness to power by playing by the rules.

Does gender influence the use or abuse of power?

Life began to change when Mordecai overheard two men plotting to kill the King. Thankfully he passed on the information to me so that I could alert the King. The King was saved thanks to Mordecai. His name was recorded in the Palace as a person who had gained favour with the King (2:19-23). Mordecai continued to look out for me. He kept me informed of events in the city. The day came when he informed me that the King had promoted Haman to a seat above all other officials (3:1). Haman was a powerful man. People honoured and bowed before him by order of the King.

Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, who had heard that he was a Jew. Haman decided to kill all Jews and labelled them as "Mordecai's people" (3:1-6).

I am tired and should retire to my chamber. But the events that followed Haman's rise to power occupy my thoughts. It was a dreadful time. He manipulated the King to give him the authority to destroy my people. Mordecai came to me and insisted that I use my position as Queen to save our people. I spent hours trying to devise a plan that would work. Mordecai's words that I was perhaps Queen for such a time as this challenged me (4:14). I made a decision. I would go before the King and plead for my people. If I perish, I perish (4:15-16). I ordered a fast to be held among my people before I went before the King.

My strategy was to plan two banquets to which I would invite the King and Haman. We would dine alone. I would reveal my Jewish identity to the King (5:1-4). My strategy worked. After the meal I invited them to a second meal. Haman was delighted to receive the second invitation. He left without realising that I was a Jew.

A strange event occurred that night. I heard about it later. The King had had a restless night. He had asked for the Book of Records to be read to him. He had then realised that he had not honoured Mordecai for saving his life (6:1-4). It transpired that Haman had entered the Palace to seek permission to carry out his plan to kill Mordecai and the Jews. Without revealing any identity, the King ordered Haman to honour a certain person by placing robes on him. Haman was then to take him on horseback through the city. When Haman finally realised that the man being honoured was Mordecai he was humiliated (ch. 6). He hurried home and confided in his wife Zeresh who gave him advice on how to punish Mordecai.

My second banquet for the King and Haman took place. The King asked me what it was that I wanted to ask of him. It was the opening that I needed. I appealed to his emotions and I pleaded for the life of my people. That they be spared from Haman's plans to kill every man, woman and child (7:3). I can still picture the anger in the King's face and the fear in Haman's eyes. It had been a eunuch who was present who had pointed out that Haman had built a gallows from which to hang Mordecai. The King had then ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai (ch.7).

PAUSE. Reflect on Esther's strategies to save her people.

Was she justified in using her influence with the King to have Haman killed?

How close are the dividing lines between influence, authority and power?

The lights have dimmed in the Palace. The Festival of Purim celebration is over. Mordecai has been honoured by the King. The Jews celebrated his leadership and his actions that saved them. Mordecai and I were honoured by the King. Together we gave

written authority for the Festival of Purim to be remembered and celebrated each year. It would be a celebration of the peace and security that we, as Jews, had won (chs. 9 and 10).

I rise to retire to my chamber and stop. I can hear the sound of weeping in the distance. The voices of children and women raised in fear. I wonder if my people are continuing to use the violence we had unleashed against Persians still in the city. As Queen I know that I am still at the height of my power. Should I intervene? I hesitate. It is time for my people who had been oppressed for so long to claim their victory at last. I will go to sleep now.

REFLECTION.

The use and abuse of power is a strong theme in the Book of Esther. Esther risked her position of power to save her people. Doing nothing was not an option. Staying silent was not acceptable. Saving only herself would have meant death to her people. The rise to power by those who are powerless can bring its own abusive uses.

Exercising power involves choice and risk. It can be a choice between good and evil; between right and wrong; between death and life.

At such a time as today when we are faced with choices that have implications for the survival of masses of people who remain powerless, how should we respond as people of God?

God of wisdom and power
empower me so that I may empower others.