

“Finding Mrs. Persia”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

First in a series on the Book of Esther

Esther 1-2 (focus: Esther 2.5-11)

January 10, 2016

[An old man shuffles out with a cane. He's wearing a cap, and a sports jacket that's two sizes too big and four decades out of fashion. He speaks with a gruff voice, slightly accented.]

My cousin Morris says to me, “Zeph, let me tell you a story.” He calls me “Zeph” because that’s my name. “Zeph, let me tell you a story.” Here it is.

I

It’s a long time ago, in Persia. The Persian Empire . . . huge!

Persia has a king, Ahasuerus. I’m just going to call him, The King. He’s a king, so he likes to show off. He invites all the muckety-mucks from all over his empire to a party. They have great time. For 180 days! (You thought your neighbours were bad!) For six months, they party!

He sends them home. Then he has another party. Short one, just a week. He invites all the men in his capital city. He shows off his best stuff – best table cloths, best china, best wine, as much as they want.

Meanwhile, the ladies are having a party too. His queen, Queen Vashti, throws one for all the women in the city.

For a week, the King shows off how great he is. But he’s not finished. As the final touch, calls for his wife to be brought in. Queen Vashti! He’s gonna show her off! “Bring her in,” he orders.

She says, “No!” To the King of all Persia, she says No! That’s chutzpah! Why does she say No. Maybe she didn’t want to be paraded around. She’s the queen! Whatever her reason, she says No!

You know the song, “You can’t always get what you want. . . .” The King does not know that song. He gets what he wants! But not this time.

Kaboom!

They have an emergency cabinet meeting. All the king’s muckety-mucks. The empire is in crisis! All these guys are worried. “What if word gets out? What if our wives hear what happened? They’ll think they can say no to us! Because the queen said no to the King! Then we’re all in trouble!”

(I'm not saying this is right. I'm just telling the story. Do you think my Ruthie does what I tell her to do? She'd say, "Zeph, who do you think you are? The King of Persia?")

So they make this law. It says, "Every wife has to do what her husband says!" (Oy vavoy! Do you think that's going to work out well?)

Here's the thing. Once the King makes a law, no one can change it. Not even the King. Makes no sense, I know. I guess kings don't like to admit they're wrong. Who does? Anyhow, this "not even the King can change the law" thing, it gets important later in the story.

Then, the King says to Vashti his queen, "You're fired!" Like that guy on tv used to say, "Your fired!" (What kind of guy likes to fire people?)

Now the King has lots of women – a whole harem full – but no queen.

II

A few years it takes, then he stops being angry. (You know how it is, sometimes things stick with you for a long time.) He starts remembering the good things about having not just a bunch of women, but a wife. It's great!

So his muckety-mucks say, "Let's have a beauty contest. Get all the beautiful single women in the empire and bring them to the palace. Give them all year-long makeovers. Then, the King will try out each one of them for a night. (You know what I mean, right?) Whichever he likes best becomes his queen. The rest, he keeps in his harem, because he is the King with lots of women." (Don't get mad at me. I'm just telling the story.)

The King thinks, "Great idea!" So they start collecting the women.

Now, why I am telling you this story? What has it got to do with us? Good question. Listen to this.

Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, and his name was Mordecai. He was the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were

brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem.

She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Esther 2.5-11
New International Version

III

There's a Jew! One of us! (Well, one of me. But he might do you some good too. We Jews have great stories.)

Mordecai. Not a good Jewish name, but he's a good Jew.¹ A mensch! (That means a stand-up guy.)

Why are there Jews in Persia? Because of the exile. The Babylonians came in, pushed us around, killed lots of people, and took some away. Then they came back, wiped out Jerusalem, the Temple, killed a lot more, and took more away. The exile.

Then, the Babylonians got theirs. The Persians came in, wiped them out. Cyrus was the Persian king. Not a Jew, but a good guy. He told the Jews they could go home, rebuild Jerusalem, and make a new Temple to God. Many went back, because it is home, the land the Lord gave us.

But many stayed behind. We'd been in exile for a whole generation. It became our home. Persia wasn't so bad. Jews did pretty good there. Like this Mordecai. God blessed us in Persia, and God blessed Persia because it was good to His people.

(By the way, now we call Persia, "Iran." There are still Jews there, more than 2,500 years later. It's not so good for them, but they are still there.)²

¹ "The name Mordecai almost certainly derives from the name Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon." Anthony Tomasino, "Esther" in John H. Walton, ed., Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 481.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_Jews

IV

So, back to the story. There's a lot more to tell, but for today I'm almost done.

Esther's in the harem, getting ready for her night with the King. Twelve months, servants are getting her ready. All sorts of perfumes and oils. . . . I don't much about that stuff, but it must have cost a bundle!

Everyone loves Esther. (I love my Ruthie. But if Esther walked by, I might sneak a peek too. She's a looker! Beautiful!)

Then, her big night comes with the King. (I'm not going to say anything about that.)

Esther wins! The King makes her his queen. He has another big party! Even better, the King cuts the tax rate as a gift for everybody. Not bad!

Here's the thing. Her real name, her Jewish name, is Hadassah. But everyone calls her Esther, a Persian name.³ No one knows she's Jewish. Mordecai tells her to keep it a secret, and she does.

V

Esther has it made! She's living in the palace, has all sorts of servants, the best food and wine. She's the Queen of Persia.

But I don't think things are so good. Remember, she had no parents. Sad. Maybe she didn't want to be in the beauty contest. Maybe she had no say. Maybe Mordecai had no say. The King is the king!

She's in the palace, and the food there is not kosher. We Jews are supposed to eat kosher. That's not good. She's married to someone who is not a Jew. We're not supposed to do that. That's not good. Her job is to share the King's bed.

It doesn't seem right to me. What's a good Jewish girl doing in a place like that? Can she be Esther who belongs to the King of Persia *and* be Hadassah who belongs to the God of Israel?⁴

What about you? Things happen to you. Sometimes they're good. Sometimes they're sad. You might be in a job, or a family, or whatever, that's not so good. You're having a hard time following God's ways, because everyone else thinks they own you.

Sure, it's about Esther, the Jewish Queen of Persia, a long time ago. But maybe her story

³ "The Babylonian name 'Esther' derives from Ishtar, the name of the most widely honored pagan goddesses." Tomasino, 482.

⁴ Samuel Wells "Esther" in Samuel Wells & George Sumner, Esther & Daniel (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 14.

is for you? We'll have to find out.

VI

Oh, one more thing. Sometime later, Mordecai's by the city gate. And he hears two of the King's muckety-mucks making a plan to kill the King. He tells Queen Esther, who tells the King what her cousin Mordecai said. The King sends out his guys to check it out, and has the two scoundrels strung up. It gets written down in a special book they keep for important things that happen, what Mordecai did to save the King. Remember this, when I come back next week to tell more of the story.