

“Saved to Stay”

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Fourth in a series on the Book of Esther

Esther 7-10

January 31, 2016

Read [Esther 7.1 – 8.3](#)

Stop there for a bit.

Do you see how Esther makes it happen? She is a woman, chosen for her beauty, a sexual plaything, that's it. She hasn't come across as a bright bulb of brilliance, or a woman of action.

But now, she shows her true self. And she is brilliant.¹

She hosts this second dinner. The King is grateful. She has a secret desire. The King is curious. She's kept him hanging for a few days. “*Can I ask you for something?*” “*Anything my love, even half of my kingdom!*” “*Okay . . . I'll ask you later*” She gets power over him! But she is smart. She doesn't let him realize it. She continues to act helpless and weak. The King likes her that way, which lets her get her way.

Then she exposes Haman's plot. She acts like the King had nothing to do with it! The decree of genocide against the Jews was the King's order, of course! Blaming him, though, would make him defensive. He'd resist losing face. Esther is too smart! Who will be the victims of Haman's plot? The Jews, including Esther. But she makes the King feel like he is Haman's target. An attack on his Queen and Jews is really an attack on the King! Nonsense. Brilliant!

Haman begs for his life. That's ironic. This mess started when Mordecai the Jew would not bow down to Haman. It ends with Haman bowing down to Esther the Jews. Once again, the King gets it all wrong, and that finishes this antisemite. Haman gets only what he was plotting to give.

II

Who is Esther like? Moses.²

Both were Jews living within the great power of their time: Moses in Egypt, Esther in

¹ For an analysis of Esther's strategy, see Samuel Wells “Esther” in Samuel Wells & George Sumner, [Esther & Daniel](#) (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013). Susan Zeske observes that “rhetoric of exile and empowerment that, for millennia, has notably shaped the discourse of marginalized peoples such as Jews, women, African Americans.” “Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric”. [Philosophy and Rhetoric](#) 33.3 (2003), 194. Referenced in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther#Esther_as_rhetorical_model

² Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “Ruth and the New Abraham, Esther the New Moses” [The Christian Century](#) (December 7, 1983), 1130-1134. Accessed from www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1674.

Persia. Both were brought into the royal family: Moses raised by Pharaoh's daughter, Esther married to the King. Both kept their Jewishness secret. Both times, the Jews were threatened with destruction. Both Moses and Esther could have tried to escape the fate of their people. Instead, God used them to save God's people. Both Moses and Esther wrote laws. Both began one of our great festivals: Moses started Passover, Esther started Purim (you'll do that next week).

Big difference, though. With Moses, the Lord is all over the place, can't be missed. Burning bush—God! Plagues—God! Death for Egyptian first-borns—God! The Jews, God's first-born, are passed-over—God! The sea splits and Israel escapes—God!

But there's nothing like that in Esther. If you want to see God in her story, you have to look very carefully. And you can never quite be sure. Maybe God. Maybe not. Who knows?

We love Exodus. But Esther is about liberation when God is not obvious. We need her too.

Okay, you can read some more.

Read [Esther 8.9 – 9.5](#)

III

So what do you think? Is this a good ending?

Everything switches around.³

- Haman the antisemite was the King's main guy. Now it's Mordecai the Jew.
- Mordecai was in sackcloth and ashes. Now he is cleaned-up real nice!
- Orders were sent to kill us. Now orders are sent to let us save ourselves.
- Jews were weeping and lamenting. Now we have light and gladness and joy and honour.
- We were fasting in prayer for help. Now we're having a feast.
- We were afraid. Now everyone's afraid of us.
- Our attackers were going to destroy, kill, and annihilate us. Now we are able to destroy, kill, and annihilate them.
- The whole city was in a kaffuffle when we were condemned. Now it is shouting and rejoicing because we are saved.

Is this a good ending? Yes! As it says, on the same day when our enemies planned to destroy us, the reverse happened, and we destroyed them.⁴

³ For the following, compare Esther 3:1,13,15; 4:1,3 with with 8:11,15-17; 10:3.

⁴ Esther 9.1.

IV

Later on, it says we destroyed 75,000 of our enemies. Huh. Is that good?

It's like the mouse killing the cat that's been waiting outside his little hole. No one expects that ending. Sad for the cat. But do you blame the mouse?⁵

And these were not cute little kitties. They were murderers planning genocide. Haman was the worst. But without his gangs he would have been harmless, and without him they were still dangerous.

Wednesday was Holocaust Remembrance day.⁶ Here's something that happened. The Nazis forced Jews into ghettos. Warsaw, Poland had a big one. By 1943, hundreds of thousands had already been sent to the death camps. Those left decided to fight. Just a few hundred resistance fighters against ten times as many well-armed SS. For two weeks they fought. It ended with 13,000 Jews killed and 50,000 sent to the camps.

Maybe 200 Nazis died.⁷ But what if it was like in the days of Esther, and 75,000 of our attackers, we killed. Would we rejoice? Would we feel bad for the Nazis? Should we?⁸

Such things are messy.

V

That's the story of Esther. It's about following God when things are messy.

You could say a faithful Jew should not be in the King's palace, should not be feasting on food that is not kosher, should not be married to a gentile, should not be part of the King's harem. Okay. But Esther was. It's messy.

You could say that these Jews should have gone home. They could have, and many did move back to Israel. But others, like Mordecai, stayed in the Diaspora, dispersed among the nations. Jews ask this today. Should we make *aliyah* and move to Israel?⁹ We don't all agree with each other. It's messy.

That's one big difference between Esther and Moses. Moses brought the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Esther did not take anyone anywhere. She saved the people so they could stay, in Persia.

⁵ Wells, 84.

⁶ The United Nation's International Holocaust Remembrance Day is on January 27.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Holocaust_Remembrance_Day

⁷ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Ghetto_Uprising

⁸ The idea for comparing Esther with the Warsaw uprising came from Jon D. Levenson, Esther (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 121. He cites André LaCocque, "[t]he Jewish victory in Susa is equivalent to a successful insurrection in the World War II-era Warsaw ghetto with the result of 75,000 S.S. troops being slaughtered."

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aliyah>

What about you? You are not Jews, so the history, and struggles, and questions are different. But ask, How God is saving you so you can be faithful where you are? You say, "If only things were different, then it would be easier to follow God!" No, where you are now!

It's going to be messy. Not clear. God won't be obvious, like in the book of Esther.

Be like her. Use whatever you have, wherever you are. Be wise. Have courage. For the people of God.

It's been a pleasure. You are even better than your minister said!

Shalom.