

The Part We are Not Supposed to Read

Hespeler, September 29, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[Esther 9:1-17 \(Compare Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22\)](#), Psalm 124, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

The Book of Esther tells a story that is set during a time when some Jewish people are living in exile in the Persian Empire. It seems they have many enemies there, people who want to destroy them. But their greatest enemy is a powerful man in the king's court named Haman. Haman goes to the king and persuades him to make a decree calling for the extermination of the Jews as enemies of the state.

But the book tells the story of how a young woman named Esther and her older cousin, Mordecai, foil Haman's plot. Esther won a beauty contest and became, as a result, the principal wife and queen to the Persian king. So, the book tells the story of how she, guided by her wise cousin, uses her power and influence to save her people from destruction.

The Happy Ending

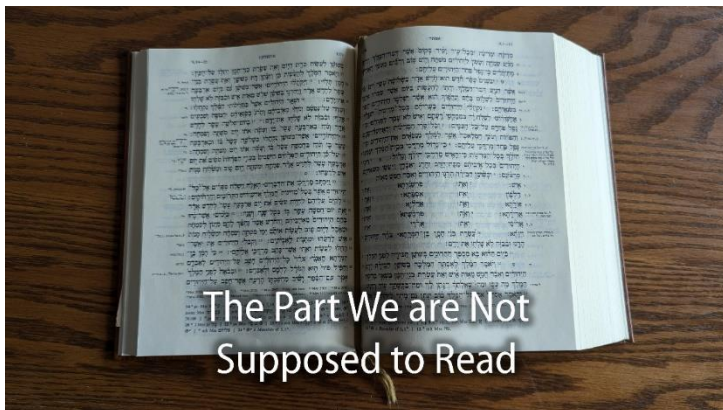
It is a great story full of palace intrigue, tension and strategy – a wonderful read. But it is a story that comes up only once in the lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings that usually guides what we read in church each Sunday. The solitary reading from Esther comes on this Sunday and the reading that has been assigned is basically the happy ending of the story. Thanks to Esther's wisdom and bravery, the Jewish people are saved, their enemy, Haman, is impaled on the pole that he himself built in order to impale Mordecai in what appears to be perfectly balanced justice. The people rejoice in their salvation. Just a wonderful happy ending.

But I have a bit of a problem with the specific text that is assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary. According to it, we are supposed to read Esther 7:1-6, and then we are supposed to skip several verses and pick up the passage at verses 9-10. Then we are supposed to skip over an entire chapter and a half to continue to read at chapter 9, verses 20-22.

Why Skip So Much?

But surely that is not a big deal, right? I mean, we must skip those verses because they don't have anything important in them and because otherwise the reading would just be too long, not to mention filled with all manner of weird names like: **“Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha.”** But there can't any other reason to skip over all those verses, can there? Can there?

Well, it turns out that maybe there is another reason. I chose this morning not to read the assigned text from Esther and instead to read some of the verses that we are supposed to skip. And you may have noticed something in what we read. It turns out that the salvation of the Jews from the persecution of their enemies did not end with the equally measured retributive justice of Haman being hanged on the scaffold he built for Mordecai.



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The Massacre

It turns out that their salvation required them to go on a two-day murderous rampage during which they killed five hundred people in the capital and seventy-five thousand in the provinces! We are also told that their salvation required that Mordecai become so powerful that he inspired terror in his enemies throughout the land. It was not enough for the evil Haman to be eliminated, he had to be replaced by someone just as powerful and feared by the enemies of the Jews.

Now, I think I understand, to a certain extent, why the folks on the Lectionary committee don't want us to read that part of the story. The Jews are supposed to be the heroes of this book, and we hardly want good Christians to take them as examples by setting out to engage in wholesale slaughter of their enemies! There are unfortunately already too many examples of that kind of thing in the history of the church. So, we don't want to encourage that, but is the only alternative just to pretend that that part of the story isn't there at all? That doesn't seem right to me. Surely, we need to come to terms with this very objectionable part of the book.

God is Not Named

So, I want to come to terms with it. But, before we do that, I feel I need to bring up one other important thing about the Book of Esther. Of all the books in the Bible, Esther is the only one in which the name of God does not appear. The Jews in the story, including Esther, do various religious things like fasting and holding festivals, but God and God's action never really come into the story. The closest we get to God doing something, is when Mordecai says, while trying to persuade Esther to speak up, **"if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish."** That is often taken as meaning that, if Esther doesn't save the people, God will. But, of course, since Esther does speak up in the end, apparently that means that God doesn't need to step in to save the people.

So, God is curiously absent from this story. Does that mean that God is not involved? No, many have taken this as a story of how God sometimes works behind the scenes and through the actions of people to bring about salvation even when nobody asks God to do it. And I tend to agree. But it does make me wonder how that lack of an acknowledgement of God in the story may have contributed to the massacre that they came to see as necessary to their salvation.

Esther is Not Satisfied

Esther was pleased. She and her cousin had successfully navigated the intricate power structure of the court. They had managed to bring down the second most powerful man in the entire kingdom by skillfully maneuvering him into a compromising position. He and his plot to destroy her people had come to nothing and he himself had been impaled in a gruesome public execution.

She should have felt happy. She should have felt as if she and her people were safe. Her enemies had been thwarted. Surely, with Haman gone and Mordecai officially taking his place, no one would dare to follow through on his plan to slaughter the Jewish communities. They had won; their enemies had lost. That should have been enough.

But it wasn't. For her side to win, the other side didn't just have to lose. Everything that they had even dreamed of doing and everything that Esther could imagine them wanting to do to be done to them. And so, Esther and Mordecai went into the king one more time.

Esther's Request

"Ah my dear," said Ahasuerus extending his scepter to her, "Your enemy is dead. Now what shall we do, celebrate? Mordecai can write to all of the people in all of the provinces and tell them that it is my will that no one follow through on Haman's plans to kill the Jews and all will be well."

But Esther did not agree. "No, my king, it is not enough. We as a people have been threatened with extermination. Sure, we have been saved today, but so long as we know that our enemies are alive, how can we possibly ever feel safe again. In order for us to win, they have to all die!

The king was taken aback, as well he should be! He might not agree with some of the racist attitudes of some of his people, but they were *his* people. Surely the king owed a duty to protect them as much as he did to protect the Jews under his jurisdiction. "Surely there has to be some other way," he insisted. "Surely the protection of the law is better than wholesale slaughter and retaliation!"

The Law of the Medes and Persians

Mordecai and Esther had expected this objection. And they had their response ready. "Ah, but you see, my lord, the law is precisely the problem. Haman passed a decree – using your signet I might add – that permitted the slaughter of the Jews. And everybody knows that, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, no royal decree can ever be changed or repealed."

"What?" cried the king, "That's not the law. Why does everyone keep telling me that is the law? How could a kingdom possibly last – much less manage to rule the known world – if it was never able to amend its own policies? And what king could ever be considered a great ruler if his own power was so limited that he couldn't even change his own mind? No, that's just crazy."

"Well, guess what, Ahasuerus," smiled Esther, "there may be no reference to any such law in all the libraries of ancient Persia or even in all the writings of the Greeks and the Egyptians, but we Jews are the ones who get to tell this story. And the way that we're going to tell it, that is the law. Therefore the only way to prevent what was planned against us is to do it to our enemies before they ever have the chance to do it to us. So, get out your signet ring and start decreeing.

Ahasuerus felt that he owed it to his beautiful young wife to do as she demanded.

A Persecuted Minority

The Book of Esther tells the story of a persecuted minority living in Persia. That, to me, sounds quite credible. Given what we know of human nature, the persecution of minorities is something that has a way of rearing its ugly head again and again throughout history. We also know that the Jews, in particular, have suffered through a long history of such persecution up to and including the Holocaust and beyond. So, I really do not doubt that the Jews in Persia lived in fear of their many enemies.

And whenever we see such terrible things unfolding throughout history, the question we are often inclined to ask is, where is God in the midst of this tragedy? Why does God permit this kind of thing to go on.

When God Doesn't Show Up

That is a good question, of course, and one worth delving into. But that's not where I want to go today. Instead, I would like to note that something curious often happens to those caught up in such persecution. At some point, it seems, you may decide that whatever God is up to, you are not going to wait around for it. You decide to move on as if God wasn't there, at least until God decides to show up.

That is, for example, what a great many Jews did during and after the Holocaust. When God didn't stop it, they decided to take matters into their own hands. In fact, the Zionist movement was, in its origins, a rejection of the idea that God might save God's chosen people. They couldn't wait for that and so decided to go ahead and protect themselves in the country that they built for themselves.

When You Don't See God at Work

And I can't help but think that the Book of Esther – with its total lack of even a mention of the name of God – might be a similar reaction to persecution. God may have saved them – I'm pretty sure that that is what is going on behind the scenes – but when they didn't see God at work, they decided that they must have saved themselves. I can see Esther coming to that conclusion.

And, as we see in the Book of Esther, when you start thinking like that, there seems to be a danger that you won't be satisfied just with stopping your enemies. You will decide that you will only be safe once you have had your vengeance and you have found a way to kill them all.

The explanation that is given in the story – that a decree of the king could not be changed – does not make any sense historically speaking or from a practical political point of view. But it functions as an excellent pretext for what the persecuted Jews want to do. It illustrates how we will use any excuse we can come up with to justify our extreme vengeance against those we perceive to be our enemies.

We Need to Leave Vengeance to God

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul says this quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy: **“Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.”** (Romans 12:19, cf. Deuteronomy 32:35) This seems to promise that we don't need to take revenge when we are oppressed, that God, who takes care of the forgotten of this world, will set things right and so we don't have to.

That is a very encouraging and comforting idea. But what if that message is not just meant to comfort us? What if there is a deep problem with humans taking vengeance. And what if the problem is that when we start taking vengeance, we just don't know when to stop and before you know it, there are seventy-five thousand dead in the provinces of the Persian Empire. Maybe we have a deep need for God to take on that vengeance because we can't handle it because we don't know when to quit.

It is just a thought. That is where my reflection on the disturbing end of the Book of Esther leads me today. Maybe as you struggle with this part of the story, your reflections will lead to you to another conclusion.

I think that is the point of a passage like this one. It is meant to disturb us, to force us to think critically about what seems to be a serious flaw in our human nature. That is why, though most churches will simply gloss over this part of the story today, it is important that it is there, and it is important that we don't ignore it. We need to be thinking about this part of our human nature because it definitely continues to shape human war and destiny to this very day.