

## May 23, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

### Week 2 | Esther 1:10-22 | “Law Governed by Whim”

Last week we kicked off a new study through the book of Esther.

The events in the Book of Esther take place roughly 100ish years after the Babylonian conquest of Israel in 605 BCE. The Jews, at this time, were a **fractured** people. While a call to return to Israel had come, most Jews decided to stay in foreign lands. This great desperation of the Jews came to be known as the “Diaspora.”

Genre – Esther is a historical short story given a comedic flair. One could even say it has elements of a dark comedy. And, although there is some debate about the specifics of the genre, one thing is abundantly clear: this book is meant to be enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> This takes nothing away from the historical elements. What occurs in the pages of Esther **really** happened. While the characterization of Xerxes and Haman may be embellished for comedic effect, there is no make-believe about the narrative itself. How the story is told is clearly meant to not only inform but entertain.<sup>2</sup>

There are five main characters:

**Ahasuerus** – Also known as Xerxes, was the leader of the Persian Empire from 486-465 BCE.<sup>3</sup> When Xerxes took the throne, the Persian's dominion stretched from Egypt in the West to India's borders in the East. And while his predecessors were conquerors, Xerxes himself is known more for his losses than his wins. Most notably when he lost against the Spartans in Thermopylae, which consequently stalled his conquest of Greece. Particularly, in Esther, Xerxes is portrayed as a drunk. He put into practice the theory that the best way to avoid a hangover is to stay drunk.<sup>4</sup>

**Haman** – The villain of our story. And ironically, he was a descendent of Agag (“Agagite”), the King of the Amalekites who lived half a millennia ago (cf. 1 Sam. 15). Like all the men in this story, except Mordecai, Haman is a man driven by pride and ego. He is irrational evil personified.<sup>5</sup> He is the classic case of an individual who cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> Firth, David G., *The Message of Esther*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, ILL; Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2010), p. 21-25.

<sup>2</sup> Bush, Frederic, *Ruth-Esther*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1996), p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Huot, Jean-Louis. "Xerxes I." Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xerxes-I>, [accessed 14 May 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Firth (2010), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Bush (1996), p. 317.

protected from himself. Where Mordecai and Esther represent the wise of Proverbs, Haman represents all the Bible has to say about the fool and his folly.<sup>6</sup>

**Mordecai** – Is a faithful Jew living in service to a foreign king. Interestingly, he is a Benjamite, the tribe from which Saul hailed, making Mordecai a descendant of King Saul. This genealogy sparks the beef between him and Haman. Mordecai is what all Jews, dispersed throughout the world, ought to aspire to be. Throughout the story, Mordecai is known more for his Jewishness than his own name. He near-perfectly balances what it means to be a follower of God as a minority in a hostile world.

**Esther** – Out of the characters just mentioned, Esther is the only one to experience growth.<sup>7</sup> Xerxes, Haman, and even Mordecai are all static characters who, more or less, play their role. But Esther, on the other hand, goes from a character who's only recognized for her beauty to one who ends up being recognized for her courage. She goes from a quiet and subservient character to one who wields her wit and intellect like a sword. And though she begins the story by taking orders, the story ends with her giving orders, not only to Mordecai but Xerxes as well.

**God** – While Mordecai and Esther are our two human agents in the story, they are really playing off of the lead actor: God. And God is primarily seen in two ways: the preponderance of unlikely **coincidences** (Haman the Agagite vs. Mordecai the Benjamite) and the long list of **reversals** (at least 10-Haman builds a stake to impale Mordecai, but he is the one impaled).<sup>8</sup> God is a God of coincidences and reversals. There is no such thing as a chance encounter when God directs our paths. And if God can reverse the wicked plans of evil men to destroy the Jews, and if, through his Son Jesus Christ, He can reverse the effects of sin and death, then indeed, He can reverse any situation in our lives and turn something bad into good (cf. Rom. 8:28).

**READ: Esther 1:10-22 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, <sup>11</sup> to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. <sup>12</sup> But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command

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<sup>6</sup> Firth (2010), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Bush (1996), p. 308.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 34-37.

delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Briefly, let's talk about Vashti, or, as she's known in our history books, Amestris.

- Amestris was queen alongside Xerxes and bore him a son by the name of Artaxerxes.
- She was known for her jealousy. Most notably, as a way to get back at a woman who slept with Xerxes, Amestris had the woman's mother mutilated and set back home totally disfigured.<sup>9</sup> As reported by a Greek Historian by the name of Herodotus, Amestris cut off the woman's breasts, nose, ears, lips, and tongue and then fed the pieces to dogs.<sup>10</sup> Considering the fact that the woman Xerxes slept with his own niece, making the woman Amestris maimed her own sister-in-law, and you'll realize the Xerxes family was more than a little messed up. In fact, to retaliate for his wife's disfigurement, Masistes (Xerxes' brother) led a failed revolt which effectively ended his line.
- Why did she refuse to appear before Xerxes? Well, what woman would want to be paraded in front of a bunch of drunk men? What's more, some interpreters take the mention of how the queen was supposed to appear in the "royal crown" to mean that she was only supposed to wear the crown.<sup>11</sup> And, again, I ask, what woman wants to be displayed naked in front of a bunch of intoxicated men?

Why bring this up? As we'll soon see, Vashti will be so carelessly tossed away that you'd think she had no real power or influence when the reality is quite to the contrary. She was a formidable woman who harbored ill-intent close to her heart. Yet, in our story, Vashti was quickly dismissed as if she was nothing more than a stranger. This tells us two things: 1.) women, even the queen of the largest empire the world had ever known, were seen as property and not people. Vashti was not a wife well-loved by her husband but nothing more than the most attractive of his possessions.<sup>12</sup> 2.) If a woman like Vashti could so easily be shelved and disregarded, what hope is there for her successor, Esther?

<sup>13</sup> Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, <sup>14</sup> the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the

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<sup>9</sup> Mark, Joshua J., "Xerxes I," March 14, 2018, *The World History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.worldhistory.org/Xerxes\\_I/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Xerxes_I/), [accessed, May 21, 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Reid (2008), p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Firth (2010), p. 41.

kingdom): <sup>15</sup> “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”

<sup>16</sup> Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup> For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ <sup>18</sup> This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. <sup>19</sup> If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. <sup>20</sup> So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”

This is one of the largest speeches in Esther. Isn't it funny that a tirade of such length is dedicated to upholding the honor of men...in their own homes? I can't help be reminded of the word from Ecclesiastes 5:3, “many words mark the speech of a fool.” “The thought of female jokes and gossip at male expense provided sufficient incentive for a new royal decree, though how it could be enforced is not considered.”<sup>13</sup> Nothing reveals insecurity quite like the inability to take a joke. This is a classic case of overcompensation. A power that needs to constantly remind people that it is powerful is proof that power resides elsewhere. Is strength that is so fragile as to need defending in this way really strength at all?

<sup>21</sup> This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. <sup>22</sup> He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

I'd like to highlight five instances of irony in this passage before giving you the takeaway for today.

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<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, Joyce G., *Esther: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 62.

1. A king who controls the known world cannot control his own wife.<sup>14</sup> Xerxes' power is a charade that hints at a power greater than even the emperor of Persia.<sup>15</sup>
2. The most powerful man in the world cannot make a decision without first consulting his royal advisors. He was surrounded by a bunch of “yes-men.” As such, there is no one there with enough spine to stop him from bringing the fullest extent of the law down upon a domestic dispute.
3. In forbidding Vashti from ever appearing before him again, Xerxes grants his wife the very thing she wanted from the very beginning: i.e., not to appear before him.
4. While absolute and irrevocable, Persian law is enacted by the whimsy of childish men who are more concerned with their own egos than the betterment of their subjects (cf. vs. 8).<sup>16</sup> In this way, power is portrayed as a “grotesque parody of itself.”<sup>17</sup> This is, as we’ll soon see with Haman’s scheme, a *volatile* combination, to say the least. Laws are not governed by reason or the consensus of the people but by a few drunk and insecure men.
5. In trying to secure and protect his honor, Xerxes and his entourage actually embarrass themselves further. What was merely a marital dispute between a husband and wife turned into international news by the king’s own decree. This decree was not only propagated throughout the four corners of the largest empire the world had ever seen but it was also written in every known language. By declaring that all men should be honored as the king of their own castle, he broadcasts the very story that caused him embarrassment. Rumor would’ve stayed rumor if Xerxes himself hadn’t confirmed it.

### So, what’s the takeaway?

Pride is the bedrock for bad decisions.

It should be evident by now, but, if you hadn't noticed, the tender ego of prideful men is on full display in chapter one. With Vashti’s refusal to appear before a gaggle of blind-drunk men, the delicate balloon of Xerxes’ self-esteem is burst.<sup>18</sup> And while his overreaction is comical, there is a sinister tone to what happens. The society in which Mordecai and Esther find themselves is “...fraught with danger, for it is ruled by the pride and pomposity of buffoon whose tender egos can marshal the state’s legislative and administrative machinery for the furtherance of selfish

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<sup>14</sup> Bush (1996), p. 354.

<sup>15</sup> Firth (2010), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Bladwin (1984), p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Firth (2010), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Firth (2010), p. 40.

and childish causes.”<sup>19</sup> But before we start laughing and pointing our fingers at Xerxes and cronies, we would do well to remember that the same pride which turned Persian law into a parody lies close to the hearts of all human beings.

Like Xerxes, how many of us felt the pangs of insecurity? How many of us have made bad decisions due to substance abuse or because of the advice of bad friends? How many of us have overacted and made a bad situation even worse?

**READ:** Jeremiah 9:23-24 (ESV)

<sup>23</sup> Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, <sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”

True power—ultimate authority—lies elsewhere. It is not in kings or countries. It is not in our own hands or intellect. It is not in our strength or riches. God, and God alone, reigns. And the moment we forget where true power resides is the moment we begin our journey downward toward embarrassment, heartbreak, and even death.

**So, what’s the takeaway?**

**Pride is the bedrock for bad decisions.**

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<sup>19</sup> Bush (1996), p. 355.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Esther: Fractured People Flawless God | Week 2 | “Law Governed by Whim”

TEXT: Esther 1:10-22

The tender ego of prideful men is on full display in chapter one, with Vashti's refusal to appear before a gaggle of blind-drunk men, the delicate balloon of Xerxes' self-esteem burst. And while his overreaction is comical, there is a sinister tone to what happens. This is the society in which Mordecai and Esther find themselves. Laws were not governed by reason or the consensus of the people but by a few drunk and insecure men. Vast decrees were enacted by the whimsy of childish men who are more concerned with their own egos than the betterment of their subjects (cf. vs. 8). In this way, power is portrayed as a grotesque parody of itself. As we'll soon see with Haman's scheme, this is a volatile combination, to say the least.

But before we start laughing and pointing our fingers at Xerxes and his cronies, we would do well to remember that the same pride which turned Persian law into a parody lies close to the hearts of all human beings. Like Xerxes, how many of us felt the pangs of insecurity? How many of us have made bad decisions due to substance abuse or because of the advice of bad friends? How many of us have overacted and made a bad situation even worse?

**Pride is the bedrock for bad decisions.** And through humility that recognizes that true power—absolute authority—dwells elsewhere can a person avoid genuine sorrow. It is not in kings or countries. It is not in our own hands or intellect. It is not in our strength or riches. God, and God alone, reigns. And the moment we forget where true power resides is the moment we begin our journey downward toward embarrassment, heartbreak, and even death.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/sjASy07>