

Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

Sidekicks of the Bible 4: Esther, For Such a Time as This

Esther 3:7-11; 4:1-2, 10-7; 5:9-14

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Next in our series on Bible sidekicks is Esther, and my guess is that she's one you are familiar with. It's a short book and very readable, probably about as close to our modern sense of storytelling as any in the Bible, and of course it features a girl hero, a princess to rival any of Disney's pantheon. It was one of my favorite books in the Bible from when I was a very young child. I read it as avidly and often as I did the Paddington bear books or *Little House on the Prairie*.

But then, I'm kind of weird that way. Maybe you don't know Esther. I was surprised to discover in my research that the book has not been very popular in Christian circles. It almost didn't make it into the Bible because it never mentions God by name and is almost devoid of any religious content. On the other hand, later Christians deemed it to be too Jewish, not because of religion but because it portrays Jews as an ethnic group, and one that is subject to persecution. In fact, the central story is about an event that would later become a very popular pastime in Christian Europe: the pogrom, in which gentiles periodically massacre Jewish men, women and children, and plunder their property.

And the oddities of the book continue. It is the basis of a Jewish holiday, Purim, which is sort of like the Jewish equivalent of Halloween. Popular among the kiddies, but for some more serious grown-ups it's a bit of an embarrassment. Then there's Esther herself. Is she a proto-feminist model of empowerment, or is she just another pretty face, a tool of the patriarchal machine who uses sex to get her way? Ah yes, I can see that you're intrigued now! For such an odd book, there's a lot to get into.

It's also unfortunately a hard book to condense because it's such a coherent story. One of these days I ought to teach the book of Esther by actually celebrating Purim, but in the meantime, I'm going to sum it up. We've followed the story from Joshua leading the Hebrews into Canaan, the period of the judges, and the era of kings and prophets. But the nation was destroyed by the Persian Empire that sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and carried the brightest and best away into exile. Jews, who had previously been bound to the land and to worship in only one temple, now found themselves scattered to the corners of the known world, struggling to find a balance between adapting to their new surroundings and hanging on to their unique traditions. The story of Esther represents the assimilationists, which is why religion is so downplayed in it.

The story begins with the mighty King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) throwing a huge party. It's lasted for a full week, and by now everyone is drunk and rowdy. He decides to show off his beautiful Queen Vashti and orders her to appear before the party going men, but Vashti refuses. More power to her, say I! And let us pause to salute Vashti for refusing to be treated like a plaything by her husband.

But this was long before feminism, and the king is displeased by her behavior. He banishes Vashti and issues a silly law saying that all women should honor their husbands, and further declaring that all the beautiful virgins in the empire should be rounded up and put through a 12-month spa program, and then the king will pick a new favorite. The winner of this dubious Cinderella lottery is Esther, a young Jewish orphan who is being raised by her cousin Mordecai, an official in the king's court. Mordecai had once done the king a great service by exposing a plot against him. However – and this is partly why the book is so problematic – neither Mordecai nor Esther ever tell anyone they are Jewish. They keep it a secret.

In the third chapter, our story's villain now enters the picture, Haman the Vizier. There's an obscure bit of trivia here. Mordecai is a descendent of King Saul, and Haman is the descendant of a rival king whom Saul defeated. So there's a hint of a family feud here. Haman hates Mordecai because Mordecai refuses to bow down before

him. We aren't told why Mordecai refuses, but at any rate, this not bowing down thing sets up a rivalry between the two men, establishing Haman's ego and Mordecai's pride. Somehow Haman finds out that Mordecai is Jewish, and this sets the plot in motion. (3:7-11)

The thing to notice here is the complaint Haman presents before the king. He doesn't even name them as Jews. There is no reference at all to any religious practice or identity. They are simply, "different from all other people, and they do not keep the king's laws." That's about as generic an accusation as you can get. And yet that is precisely the accusation that has been made against Jews all the way up to the present time. They are different. They speak a different language. They eat different foods. They wear different clothes. But these differences are seen as sinister, setting them apart from everyone else, and so even more hideous differences are fantasized and passed around as truth. That they kidnap and eat Christian children, that they poison wells, and they control all the banks. Right up to the present day rumor that Jews were warned in advance to stay away from the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Haman doesn't mention religion, but what we see here is a bald prejudice in all its nakedness. Jews have faced it for millennia, and it is as unjustified now as it was when Haman first brought his accusation to the king. For his part, the king approves of Haman's plan, and the way it is to work is chilling. On a certain day, everyone throughout the empire is called upon to kill all Jews of any age and to plunder their property. Ordinary citizens will do this. Not the army, because it wasn't big enough. And not the police because there weren't any. In order for the Jews to be wiped out, every citizen had to participate. Every citizen had to become a murderer. It is a technique that oppressive regimes use to this day: get citizens to do the dirty work of persecuting each other. Share the responsibility, and also share the blame. It makes later punishment of the crime almost impossible.

The decree goes out, and now at last Mordecai and Esther spring into action. (4:1-2, 10-17)

Now they can no longer keep their ethnicity secret. The time has come to reveal it, and Esther finds herself in a bind. If she does nothing, she runs the risk of being killed along with all the Jews. If she acts, she runs the risk of the king's displeasure and being killed anyway. Commentators have interpreted her reluctance to act in a number of ways, from cowardice, to prudence, to a simple statement of fact. Her situation now reverses Vashti's. The first queen refused to come when called. The replacement queen now would come when she has not been bidden. Ironic, isn't it? And there's a hint that Esther may be losing her status with the king as he hasn't called her in a month. Could she even get an audience? At any rate, it's not just cowardice that causes Esther to hesitate.

I found it interesting, though, that the commentators I read were perplexed by Mordecai's statement that if Esther keeps silent, help will rise from a different quarter. The ones I read didn't know what to make of it. But the reason seems obvious to me. Remember the story of Deborah and Jael? Barak hesitated to act, so God raised up a woman to get the job done. I interpret Mordecai's statement to mean that God will act to save the Jews. God will not abandon them. So the choice Esther is faced with is whether to be part of the program or get out of the way and let that glory pass to someone else. Let me repeat what Mordecai tells her: If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

I believe that speech is the key to the whole story. It could even be seen as key to the whole Bible. It is the choice that each and every one of us is presented with when we hear the story of the God who sets slaves free. It's the choice Joshua presented to the people: which God will you serve? It's what we saw in the story of Deborah and Jael: If we keep silent and refuse to act, it's not like God can't find someone else to work with. So do we want to be part of God's saving plan, or do we want to stand to the side and let the glory pass to others? Indeed, Mordecai's words are echoed in that famous quote from a much later pogrom: First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me, and by then there was no one left to speak up.

Of course, Esther does choose to speak up. She goes to the king, and he does receive her. The plot she cooks up to save her people is sort of complicated, involving dinner parties and strange twists. I'll let you read the book for yourself. Suffice it to say, she succeeds. But I want to pause for a moment on a subplot about the rivalry between Haman and Mordecai. Haman's star seems to be rising. He thinks his plan is a success, and yet something is still stuck in his craw: 5:9-14.

If you know how stories go, then you can guess that the gallows Haman built for Mordecai will end up being used on Haman himself. It's a classic role reversal: the king asks Haman how a loyal servant should be rewarded. Haman thinks he is the recipient, so he suggests wealth and honor for himself, and humiliation and punishment for Mordecai. But surprise! It's Mordecai who gets the honors and Haman who is humiliated. When Esther tells the king that Haman's plan would have killed her own people, Haman is hung on his own gallows.

I pause here because this is where we see that what motivates Haman all along is jealousy. More than that: a jealousy that can't stand to see anyone else do well. Here the king has bestowed all kinds of honor and attention on Haman, but he can't enjoy it because he sees Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. And for this petty, stupid, selfishness, he would have exterminated an entire group of people. That's prejudice in a nutshell.

So critics of the book have a point: there is almost no religious element in this book. Indeed, Mordecai's pivotal statement to Esther does not even mention God. Jewishness appears to have been reduced to a mere cultural marker, an ethnicity. And yet when we place this book within the context of the Bible, then the faith that underlies it becomes apparent. The Jews' relationship with God has been so deeply internalized that they may conceal it from others, but it is still there. God does not forget. God will save the oppressed even when they are imperiled by prejudice and petty jealousy. God will raise up leaders to redeem them, but if we keep silent, that glory will pass to another. So let us have faith. Let us trust in God's power. Let us have hope for our future. For no matter where we are, in the Promised Land or in exile, in wealth or in poverty, in prosperity or in peril – who knows whether we have been placed here for just such a time as this?

For God, every time is the right time.