

Esther: Born to Rule

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I will go to the king, even though it is against the law.

And if I perish, I perish. (Esther 4:16)

Queen Esther is such a lauded character in scripture that she even has a herald in Queen Vashti, just as John the Baptist heralded Jesus. Vashti's tale is one of bravery and the price one may pay within a misogynistically unjust system, highlighting the hardships Esther will have to navigate and overcome.

Queen Vashti: Leading Lady

The opening scene is exorbitantly indulgent, bordering on the hedonistic. The King of the Medes and Persians, Artaxerxes,¹ identified as son of Darius the Mede,² is throwing a six-month long party for his staff at the Persian capital, Susa. To use modern terminology, there's an open bar. Every man is as drunk as he wants to be, which, noting eternal prerogatives, suggests there is little restraint. As this slosh-fest progresses, the king, drunk, summons Vashti to be paraded before their revelry. Queen Vashti staunchly refuses the king's lecherous demands.

Artaxerxes is enraged. He feels publicly snubbed and humiliated by his wife's refusal to his demand that she be displayed before his drunken comrades, and he assembles his legislators to advise on retaliation. One advisor, Memucan, suggests Queen Vashti be banished and replaced, and for a very interesting reason. He argues that if stern punishment is not enforced, then the authority that all husbands enjoyed over their wives across the Empire – the societal norm – will

¹ 'Ahasuerus' (Hebrew) and 'Artaxerxes' (Greek) are both common names for this king, and both are effectively titular (i.e. meaning "King."). I use 'Artaxerxes' to emphasize the foreignness of the environment in which the Jewish Queen Esther found herself, and in which she was isolated

² Johnny Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine: Persian Banquets, Ethnic Cleansing, and Identity Crisis," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2015, 45, 3, p133

be jeopardized.³ It's this insecurity, not any sense that Vashti has committed a crime, that prompts his proposal. If the verdict of banishment and replacement seems harsh, the reasoning behind it is spine-chillingly insightful.

King Artaxerxes embraces the plan, and Queen Vashti is deposed and banished. This is followed by the crudity of a beauty pageant to determine her successor. After months of preparation, with the king sampling a different potential consort each night, God maneuvers Esther to be quickly elevated. She had already won the favour of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of preparing the women; in fact she had won the favour of all who set eyes on her, and in the same vein she wins the king's heart absolutely.⁴ Four years after the king was piqued by Vashti's resolve, Esther is enthroned, seemingly immediately after Artaxerxes meets her. She is crowned and feted with a royal feast and a nationwide tax remission, to ensure that joy spreads throughout the kingdom.

Mordecai and Haman

At this point we're introduced to the dueling narrative of Mordecai and Haman. Mordecai is Esther's uncle/cousin, and also her guardian after she was orphaned. Mordecai has already played a key role in Esther's protection: sensing her vulnerability as an immigrant, he counseled her not to reveal her Jewish nationality. Her name (*'Estēr*) means 'Hidden' in Hebrew, even though it means 'star' in the local language, which is either irony, or a deliberately attributed biblical name. Her Jewish name Hadassah (*Hādāṣṣāh*), meaning 'Myrtle tree,' hides another beautiful truth we see later.

Enter Haman the Agagite. Haman has recently been promoted by Artaxerxes to second in command. A royal edict has been issued that everyone must bow before Haman; and it's almost certain Haman designed the edict himself, given his narcissism and the king's spineless leadership. Mordecai, sensing Haman is an ungodly man, resolutely refuses to bow. This infuriates Haman so intensely that he resolves to destroy not just Mordecai, but also his entire people! Haman approaches the king and, to be blunt, requests an order for genocide, offering

³ Esther 1:16-20

⁴ Esther 2:9, 2:15, 2:17, 2:18

10,000 talents of silver to the royal coffers for his evil request: a staggering sum.⁵ The king, in blasé fashion, waives the offer of payment and, seemingly equally casually, grants the genocide. In fact, he panders even further to Haman, offering his signet ring for Haman to seal his decree with the king’s authority. This has special meaning in Medo-Persia: any law sealed by the king was established so concretely it could not be repealed.⁶

Haman writes his edict: on the 13th of Adar all peoples were instructed to annihilate the Jews: men, women and children, and plunder their goods. The citizens of Susa had the decency to be stunned into despair by Haman’s evil injunction, while Haman and the clueless king sat down to drink and celebrate.⁷

Ref	Decision	Decision maker
1:19	Vashti to be deposed & exiled	Memucan
2:2-4	Beauty contest for new queen	Attendants
3:1	Elevate Haman the Agagite	Artaxerxes
3:8	Ethnic genocide against Jews	Haman – as <i>king</i>
5:4	Banquet for King & Haman	Esther
5:8	Second banquet for King & Haman	Esther
6:7-9	Parade honored man around Susa	Haman
7:9	Hang Haman on his own pole	Harbona
8:3	Repeal law of Jewish genocide	Esther – as <i>king</i>
8:9	Grant Purim; Jews can kill enemies	Mordecai
9:13	Further days of Purim	Esther
9:13	Display bodies of Haman’s ten sons	Esther

Decisions made during the reign of King Artaxerxes

Artaxerxes was inept at making decisions, he always turned to others for guidance. It might be argued that genuine democracy requires humble acknowledgement of the need for counselors,⁸ but the context suggests it’s his weak and lazy abdication of leadership which is in play.

⁵ A talent is a relatively huge quantity. Calculations vary, but in this era and cultural setting, it’s likely that a talent was at least 30 kg (66 lbs) of the specified metal, and quite possibly more. Haman is offering at least 3,000 tons (3,300 tonnes) of silver to Artaxerxes. Whatever financial value that may hold, either then or now, that is a colossal amount.

⁶ Daniel 6:15

⁷ Esther 3:15

⁸ Proverbs 11:14, 15:22

The table shows the twelve decisions made in the book of Esther. Eleven are made by people other than the king; two are even made by others with the king's authority, as he willingly hands over his signet ring. Artaxerxes wants to be respected as a king, yet he is repeatedly manipulated by those around him, both the evil and the good. In truth, he is a pawn who would be a king.

Artaxerxes makes only one decision himself: the elevation of Haman. This is the most calamitous decision of all, so perhaps it's best he didn't make too many of the others. Queen Esther, our Leading Lady, makes five of the twelve decisions, with no-one else making more than two. She is born to rule.

Queen Esther: Leading Lady

Mordecai hears of Haman's genocide and, devoid of ego, dons sackcloth and ashes, traversing the city with loud, mournful tears. Mordecai requests Esther plead to the king for clemency, but Esther explains how dangerous that would be for her: the king is in seclusion and has not called for her in thirty days. Anyone who approaches the king without his summons earns an immediate death penalty, except the king should reprieve their life by extending a golden scepter. Mordecai offers both encouragement and sternness: he darkly intones that Esther, as a Jew herself, would never survive the pogrom despite her high rank; but follows up with a more inspiring message:

Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Est 4:14)

This is the crux. Esther has been thrown into the furnace, almost as literally as the three friends of Daniel, and this will be the making or breaking of her. Her response is uncompromising, and where she earns her spurs as a Leading Lady.

Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. (Est 4:16)

This is the pinnacle of courage, and sacrifice. It's one thing to *speak* bravely about sacrificing oneself for a given cause or people, as many bombastically have. But Esther knows her words will play out in reality: her life is very literally in jeopardy. Her commitment to fasting also proves she believes in God. There's no point in fasting unless one is appealing to a higher power,

and fasting was a protocol to dedicate oneself to God.⁹ Esther fasts to appeal for God's help and protection against the death sentence she may incur.

Esther steps into the role of Messiah, laying down her life for God's people. It's a limited Messianic move because even if she dies she can't guarantee the lives of those she seeks to preserve. But her dedication is total: she has nothing more to give than her life; and God is witness. Her courage is especially praiseworthy because her life was very likely safe without this risk. Mordecai's didactic threat that she would not survive the genocide if she stayed quiet is probably wrong: many a king would make an exception for a beautiful and beloved bride, and from what we've learned of Artaxerxes' haphazard ruling style, Esther would very likely survive the Jewish genocide even if the king knew her ethnicity. She is living at the pinnacle of opulent luxury and privilege, yet is prepared to lose all that, and her life, to defend God's people. She claims Messiah's most exalted, and most dreadful, role.

God respects Esther's appeal and grants her victory. As she approaches the king, he is reminded of his love for her and grants her clemency. In fact, he seems so affected that she has risked her life to approach him, he pre-emptively offers her up to half his kingdom even before she has made her request!¹⁰

Esther's plan is opaque, and she requests a private feast for just the king and Haman. We don't know why she plans this way, but it's plausible her emotions include rage toward Haman, and she wants to reveal her appeal to save her people before their intended destroyer, to highlight the Jews' distress in the sharpest relief. It also cleverly pressurizes the king to act immediately, preventing him from deferring Esther's request so he can later connive with his favourite Grand Vizier in Esther's absence. The dramatic, face-to-face confrontation reveals Esther's intelligent management of circumstances, like a chess grandmaster at work.

Achieving the Impossible

The feast day comes. Artaxerxes, Esther and Haman are drinking wine and Esther passionately describes her plight: "We have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated." The king is equally impassioned: "Who is he, and where is he, who

⁹ Leviticus 23:26-32

¹⁰ Esther 5:6

has dared to do this?” Esther times her *coup de grâce* to perfection: “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”¹¹

Artaxerxes “arose in his wrath” and walked away into the garden. I may be overly cynical, but I can’t help wondering if he realized he needed a moment to prepare his own potential defence in case it comes out that he thoroughly approved of Haman’s wicked plan.

Haman is finished. He can’t deny his authorship of the genocidal pogrom. Pointing out that the king was in favour of his edict and gave him his ring to sign it, while true, would also be futile. It would almost certainly enrage the king further, by co-indicting him before his beloved bride, and bring further calamity on his own head. Haman is wise enough to know the wicked world of men grants immunity from responsibility to anyone highly placed enough to escape it (and still does to this day). He prostrates himself before Esther on her chaise longue, all egotistical posturing swept away, urgently aware that he needs to beg for his life.

Events take a turn for the bizarre. Artaxerxes returns from his bucolic interlude and, seeing Haman lying on Esther’s couch, wrongly believes Haman is attempting to sexually assault her. “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” he thunders. The attendants respond rapidly by covering Haman’s face, indicating he is marked for execution. One of the eunuchs reveals that Haman, in his hatred, has prepared an extravagantly tall gallows, thirty metres high, on which he planned to hang Mordecai. (Interestingly this was Zeresh his wife’s suggestion, further perpetuating the female leadership we see in the book of Esther.) Cultural considerations suggest that this is more likely to be an impalement pole,¹² or crucifixion pole,¹³ rather than the noose-dependent gallows familiar to Western culture. Artaxerxes immediately directs that Haman be executed with this very pole with which he intended to kill Mordecai. If it’s an impalement pole, Haman is hoist by his own petard in ways both metaphorical and brutally literal.

One detail must not escape us: the king’s exact words of outrage. He said

Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” (Est 7:8)

¹¹ Esther 7:4-6

¹² Herodotus, “The Histories,” 5C BC, Tr. George Rawlinson, 2013, 1.128 & 3.132 & 4.43 & 6.30

¹³ Ibid., 3.159 & 7.194 & 9.78

Why these qualifiers (underlined)? Doesn't the statement "Will he even assault the queen?" cover the whole offence? Apparently not, which reveals the hideous cultural backdrop. A sexual assault on Queen Esther would enrage the king, obviously. Yet what the king says is the heart of the offence is that the assault was attempted in his presence. What is closest to the king's heart is not his bride, but his ego; the need for his person and presence to be respected. Ergo, to sexually assault his bride is bad, but to sexually assault her in his presence constitutes disrespecting him, and this, apparently, is far worse. This is the hostile androcentric environment in which Esther finds herself; and yet one in which she not only survives, but leads.

King Artaxerxes is a difficult man to gauge. We're not focusing on him, but understanding him helps us appreciate our protagonist Queen Esther's circumstances more clearly, so we will invest effort. Artaxerxes is easy to depict as caricature, yet the evidence suggests a more complex pattern of strengths and weaknesses. With Vashti, we see Artaxerxes' vanity and vulgarity, demanding to parade her like his toy, and throwing a tantrum when he gets denied. Johnny Miles denounces Artaxerxes as "an unsteady despot who cares nothing for justice."¹⁴ Josephus' record humanizes him a little, recording that he was initially reluctant to banish Vashti because he genuinely loved her.¹⁵ This battle between good-heartedness and self-absorption is visible in a variety of his scenes, alas often with the latter proving more impactful than the former.

This catastrophic feast showcases this weakness. Esther has finally voiced her plea to save her people to the king, but when Artaxerxes mistakenly thought Haman was about to sexually assault Esther ("in his presence"), the offence to his ego was so intense that he completely forgot about Esther's appeal for the Jews. This is a disaster for Queen Esther. She has literally laid her life on the line, preparing herself with three days and nights of anxiety-ridden prayer and fasting to take on this Messianic role. Yet because Artaxerxes has become distracted, all her efforts are for naught.

She's going to have to do it all again.

It's seldom seen, but Esther bravely puts her life on the line a second time. Once again she sees the golden scepter extended and her life can continue. And finally, Esther's petition to save

¹⁴ Johnny Miles, *Op. cit.*, p134

¹⁵ Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," AD 93, 6.6.2

her people is granted.¹⁶ More than that, Artaxerxes hands over his signet ring to Esther, as he had done to Haman. Esther writes a directive that reverses Haman's murderous genocide: the Jews will not only be spared destruction by their surrounding enemies, but they are authorized to launch pre-emptive strikes against those same foes.

This is an enormous cultural conquest. Haman's order to kill the Jews on the 13th of Adar was established according to the law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be repealed. Esther has just repealed it. She has done that which cannot be done: she has reversed the law which cannot be reversed.

Curiously, many seem reluctant to accept this, even though it appears plainly in the text; many aren't comfortable with the idea of a woman reversing an irreversible system of an Empire. Miles claims: "Haman's imperial decree cannot be rescinded,"¹⁷ even though that is plainly what happens, and argues Esther's edict has vanquished Haman's without repealing it, which is semantic wrangling at best. In truth, Haman's ordered genocide is totally repealed by Esther's edict. Let's be clear about this. Here is the principle of the Medes and Persians' law:

It is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed. (Dan 6:15)

The edict of Haman to destroy the Jews was sealed with the king's signet ring. Esther explicitly requested that Haman's irrevocable order be revoked, and the king agreed, again handing over his signet ring for Esther to overturn Haman's pogrom. It was foolish of Artaxerxes to try to reassure Esther that her law would become irrevocable by being sealed with the king's ring, because her law overturns Haman's law, which was created exactly the same way. Esther's law came into effect and was enacted: the Jews killed those plotting to kill them.¹⁸

Esther has achieved the impossible.

Queen Esther also institutes a religious ceremony: Purim.¹⁹ This is quite the throw-away line! Purim is celebrated to this day. I'm unable to name another female in history who instituted a religious ceremony which is still in observance 2,500 years later! And Jewish Purim, where the

¹⁶ Esther 8:3-4, 8:7-8

¹⁷ Johnny Miles, Op. cit., p138

¹⁸ Esther 3:9-11, 8:5-8, 9:1

¹⁹ Esther 8:9-17

excellent Mordecai legislated giving food parcels to the poor is, as others note,²⁰ set in sharp contrast to the opulent Persian banquets, where limitless wine is poured into the king's favourites.

In sum, Esther has demonstrated a literally unique level of power. She is a Leading Lady like no other. How commensurate, therefore, that the Messianic role she adopts is similarly the ultimate one. She foreshadows the one who will willingly lay down his life to save God's people.

Esther in Susa foreshadows Jesus in Gethsemane.

Redeeming Benjamin

Esther achieves even more. Beyond everything we've seen, Esther has a hidden ('Estēr) agenda, to redeem the tribe of Benjamin, as others notice,²¹ and remove the disgrace from the house of Saul. Why? Esther is from the tribe of Benjamin – specifically from the house of Saul! – and she's had to hide her Jewish nationality, which likely bonds her to it all the more strongly. Benjamin has considerable baggage: from the days of the Judges they had been shamed and nearly annihilated over the repugnant rape and murder of the concubine at Gibeah – King Saul's home city! Benjamin was honoured to yield the first King of Israel, but the honour was short-lived: Saul was a perpetual failure. The fatal nadir of his reign was disobedience to God's explicit commands to execute Agag, king of Amalek, and not to take the spoils of the battle. Saul failed in both.²²

One might think Esther's plate is completely full, and she would be overwhelmed by the tasks already confronting her. She is a displaced Jewish immigrant orphan who is suddenly catapulted into royalty. She had to survive and defeat the Empire's second-in-command, Haman, who wanted to exterminate her entire race, and specifically Mordecai, her cousin, all while keeping her true identity hidden. To save her people, she has had to repeal a law which legally could not be repealed – and all by making requests to a highly unstable king whom she was not permitted to approach under penalty of death! Yet, astonishingly, above and beyond that huge and dangerous workload, Esther has a hidden agenda of her own, all based around her loyalty to, and identity as, a member of the house of Saul, of Benjamin. Esther steels herself, in typically

²⁰ Ibid., p137

²¹ Yitzhak Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," J. Bib. Lit. 2010, 129, 4, p625

²² Esther 2:5-7, Judges 19, 1 Samuel 15:1-9

quiet, almost invisible manner, to achieve her campaign in three specific conquests. She succeeds, of course, being born to rule.

Conquest 1:

Haman is identified as a descendant of Agag. So not only does the book of Esther contain a descendant of Saul (Esther), but also a descendant of Agag! (Haman). Esther versus Haman is Saul versus Agag, take two! Esther succeeds in killing “the Agagite”, which was specifically what Saul failed to do. Esther has righted the ancient wrong, and compensated for Saul’s failure.²³

Conquest 2:

Saul failed by seizing the Amalekite spoils of war, which were specifically forbidden to him. This angered God.

Esther institutes the days of Purim, in which the Jews are permitted to avenge themselves against their enemies and plunder the spoils of war.²⁴ How curious, then, that in the space of just a few verses, the text points out three times:

...but they laid no hand on the plunder. (Est 9:10)

...but they laid no hands on the plunder. (Est 9:15)

...but they laid no hands on the plunder. (Est 9:16)

The threefold repetition demands our attention and clamours an echo from the life of Saul. I suspect we’re seeing Esther’s attempt to redress Saul’s other principal misdeed. She foregoes possession of the plunder that was permissible to take, to compensate for Saul taking of plunder which was forbidden. Once again, she redeems Benjamin’s former failure. She is systematically redeeming Saul, and removing the disgrace from his legacy.

Conquest 3:

Esther’s final conquest is of a much more personal and intimate nature. It’s ensconced in what appears to be an extraordinarily vicious and bloodthirsty request.

*If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day’s edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.
(Est 9:13)*

²³ Esther 3:1, 7:10

²⁴ Esther 8:11-12

Perhaps I always read this book too clumsily, but what I never before realized was that the ten sons of Haman were *already dead* when Esther asked for this. They had been killed on the first day of Purim.²⁵ Esther isn't asking for the public execution of Haman's ten sons; she's asking for the public display of their already-lifeless bodies! Why?

Esther has already twice pointed us to the life of Saul, so we are drawn to look there a third time to find an answer.

After Saul's death in battle on Gilboa, the Philistines abused the bodies of Saul and three of his sons by publicly displaying them nailed to the walls of Beth-Shan. Years later, seven more of his sons were slaughtered (technically five were grandsons) in the Gibeonite vengeance, and also left publicly exposed to the elements. This totals ten 'sons' in all.²⁶

Esther is avenging the indignity visited upon King Saul and his ten sons. She identifies with her Benjamite heritage so strongly that she avenges Saul's house on the Amalekites by publicly displaying the ten sons of Haman on impalement poles; perhaps even extinguishing the Agagite line that Saul erroneously spared those many years before.

But doesn't vengeance belong only to God?²⁷ Why is Esther permitted to do this? Perhaps because her work is not vengeance, but actually one of love: she's not driven by desire to kill Amalekites *per se*, but to help a fallen brother from 500 years before, by clearing the disgrace and indignity from his name.

"Esther" means "hidden." And what is hidden in Esther is Hadassah bat-Abihail of Kish, of Benjamin: recompenser of failures, righter of wrongs, avenger of enemies. The woman who overturned history, as well as an edict. The Jew who remained hidden (*Estēr*) until the time was right to unleash the angel zealous for Jerusalem – the angel being her own ruling power, which had been concealed in the myrtle tree (*Hădaççâh*).

The tribe of Benjamin has a peculiar presence in the line of the kings of Judah. There are 22 consecutive kings of David's line, all of the tribe of Judah, yet they are book-ended by Benjamite monarchs: King Saul being Israel's first, and Queen Esther (long after King Zedekiah) being Israel's last. Benjamin finally produced a godly monarch in Queen Esther; perhaps even

²⁵ Esther 9:7-10

²⁶ 1 Samuel 31:8-10, 2 Samuel 21:1-9

²⁷ Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19

two, if Esther's work of love has succeeded in restoring the honour of Saul. Saul fell on Gilboa, but Esther raised him up again.

The last King of Israel was a Queen. And after all was done, the last became first.