

# ESTHER

## ESTHER 5.1-14; 7.1-10

Women in the Bible Series

### OPENING PRAYER

‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46. 10) Spend a few minutes quietly becoming aware of God’s presence within and all around you. Then when you’re ready, pray that God will give you light to see by as you read and reflect on the text.

### EXEGESIS

The writer is skilled in dramatic suspense, describing Esther’s approach to the king in detail uncommon in the bible. We are prepared for power to shift. Esther (in the Hebrew) ‘puts on royalty’, not only looking pleasing but assuming queenly authority. And she is repeatedly named, whereas now the king becomes nameless. She well knows the king’s proclivities, so prepares her approach strategically, and is rewarded with his habitual extravagance. She continues throughout to flatter and thus to please him, especially with two invitations to further drinking! The irony here is obvious: he comes at her bidding to her space, where Vashti refused his command to his space.

In the interlude between the two parties, we learn more of Haman’s character and unusually his inner thoughts and emotions. He is flattered by his favoured position and the honour it grants him, but is insecure and rules by fear as his reaction to Mordecai reveals. Zeresh’s complicit support and advice contrasts strikingly with the behaviour of Ahasuerus’ consecutive wives, and furthers the height of Haman’s eventual downfall – although after a series of ironic coincidences in chapter 6, she now speaks wisely, sensing the impending disaster. Wine flows at the second feast: Haman is blinded by his good fortune, and Ahasuerus besotted with his queen. Esther chooses her moment to unmask both the villain and her true identity. She negotiates carefully her divided loyalties: she demonstrates concern for the king’s endangered welfare and reputation, as well as aligning herself with the danger to her Jewish kin. It is a moment as risky as her initial approach to the king, but she has calculated well his response. In asking angrily ‘who presumed to do this?’ Ahasuerus unknowingly echoes the words used of Pharaoh, intent on destroying the Israelites escaping from Egypt (Exodus 15.9): for our author, this outcome is a new and defining act of divine liberation.

All that is left now is the wrapping up of the tale, with exegetical difficulties beyond the scope of this study. The destructive edict cannot be revoked but can be countered so that in due time those who expected to kill the Jews were themselves slain. Thus the story closes. As at the outset a feast is called, but of a very different quality, one more fitting for the people whom God has rescued.

## REFLECTION

In translation, we often lose the subtlety of the original language. Translators can't convey the meaning of every word, so we approach the text in our own language with a questioning spirit. To cite another example from today's passage, you may have noticed a discrepancy between Esther's presentation of the danger facing the Jews and Haman's request for their annihilation in chapter 3; this makes no mention of slavery which to Esther is an alternative fate. She has read the edict, and because the words for 'enslave' and 'destroy' sound virtually identical in Hebrew, cleverly assuages Ahasuerus' pride by suggesting that he might have mistaken Haman's meaning, and could thus be exonerated!

In your wider study of the Bible, what other examples have you found where explanation of the original language has given you new insight?

Esther has been controversial throughout its history. Can you suggest some reasons? Unsurprisingly God's hiding is one, and when Esther was translated into Greek, sections were added to make it 'religious.' You can find these in the Apocrypha. Martin Luther condemned it for impropriety and 'too much Judaizing'. Some modern scholars complain of its gratuitous violence, others its objectification of women. What do you think?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How is Esther 'the word of the Lord?' Looked at from a Christian standpoint, what does it say to us as followers of Jesus?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you God for our scriptures, for those who selected and preserved the texts, and translate them. Thank you for the variety within it, its enigmas as well as its clear teaching, Stay with us as we continue to learn of you and your purpose for our lives through its pages.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Linda M. Day, Esther (Abingdon Press, 2005)
- Carol M. Bechtel, Esther: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox Press, 2002)
- Kathleen M. O'Connor Humour, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther in Athalya Brenner ed Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds (T&T Clark, 2003)

*Written by Anne Phillips, a Baptist minister now living in beautiful Derbyshire after spending many years working as an educator in churches and theological college.*