



POWER & PROVIDENCE

STUDIES ON THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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The Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland

The vision of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland is to see the Christian community in Ireland nurture a radical biblical faith in God, who in Jesus Christ reconciles the world, restores human relationships and is concerned for all of life and creation.

We are committed to the development of both the knowledge and the personal skills needed among Christians and churches to serve their communities at critical points of cultural contention, communal conflict and social change. The Centre offers biblical resources and practical support for the development of biblical faith for a changing world.

Introduction

This introduction aims to provide pointers for using this resource and some background information to the Book of Esther which you may find useful.

The Book of Esther is a good story well told. So the first step is to read it. The story has all the twists and turns of a soap opera or piece of theatre and it is worth reading the book as you would a short story or piece of fiction. Allow yourself to be gripped by the drama. It may help to ignore the verse numbers and headings contained in the Bible text. (If you can access an electronic version you can edit these out yourself.) Unfortunately, for reasons of space and because we are dealing with the whole book of Esther it has not been possible for us to reprint the full text here. The biblical quotes we have used are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). You can access it on line at: <http://bible.oremus.org>.

At the beginning of the 6th century BCE the Temple of Solomon was destroyed and the people of Judah were taken into exile by the Babylonians. Later on in that century, Cyrus, king of the Persia overturned Babylon. He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. While some did (e.g. Ezra and Nehemiah), a substantial number remained, for whatever reason, as the Jewish Diaspora in the vast Persian Empire. Set in the early 5th century BCE (480s-460s) the events detailed in the Book of Esther take place primarily in Susa, one of the capitals of this empire in what is modern-day Iran during the reign of King Ahasuerus, a successor to Cyrus. Ahasuerus, the Hebrew version of the king's name, is used by the NRSV. Other translations assume this to be Xerxes I and refer to the king by that Greek version of his name. The Book of Esther probably emerged in the early 4th century BCE. Obviously we come to the text as readers in a very different time and place. Originally the Book of Esther was written with the purpose of acquainting Jews in the Diaspora with the story of how they attained security and status in a foreign culture. It celebrates Esther and Mordecai, two national heroes remembered in the Jewish festival of Purim.

The text also draws our attention to the historical dimension of the rivalry between Haman and Mordecai. Haman is a descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites who were bitter enemies of the Israelites (see Ex. 17:8-16; 1 Sam. 15). The struggle of power and pride is therefore more than just personal – it has national implications. Promoted to king's vizier, Haman demands that everyone should bow before him but Mordecai refuses. It is this historical enmity that fuels Haman's plot to destroy not just Mordecai, but all the Jews in the empire.

The Book of Esther is one of the most 'secular' books of the Hebrew Bible, without any explicit mention of God, reference to either law or covenant or inclusion of any prayers. Esther's perceived lack of religious observance and almost total assimilation in a Gentile environment may indicate that, for the audience for which it was written, being a Jew was primarily an ethnic designation rather than a religious one. How, then, should we read this book as 21st century western Christians?

The Book of Esther has sat uncomfortably with some commentators, perhaps due to its pervasively secular nature and seeming indifference to religious practices, the dubious sexual ethics, or the female heroine. Some have even been tempted to assert Mordecai as the real hero, but this is to miss the point. This is the story of Queen Esther and how, through her, the Jews are saved from destruction.

To connect with the character of Esther we need to understand the milieu in which she finds herself. Esther has no choice but to obey the king's command as she and all other virginal women are gathered into the king's harem for the selection of a new queen. As a woman, she was basically powerless in a Persian culture and as such, she is the paradigm of the Diaspora Jew who was also powerless in the Persian Empire. At the critical moment, with her people under sentence of death, Esther is fully aware that if she goes unsummoned to the king there is a good chance that both she and Mordecai will be put to death. Even if she is allowed to address Ahasuerus, she may also wonder what possible influence she might have. However, since becoming queen, Esther has successfully negotiated the power structures from within, winning favour with those she meets and she attains her goal – the salvation of her people. Ultimately, she assumes control of wealth, court appointment and access to the king. Hence, Esther has become an example for those of marginal status in an alien culture.

Each study aims to help unpack the biblical text, identify some of the key issues and look at the meaning of this book for today, in particular, how should we engage in the often morally ambivalent world of politics and power? We have divided the Book of Esther into four sections for study. Each has a comment followed by suggested questions for individual or group use. The questions are offered as a jumping off point for discussion, so do not feel bound by them if other issues arise. If you are leading group study the 'Epilogue' at the back picks up on some of the main themes and looks at their relevance for us today. A look at this after your initial reading of the text and the studies may help as you think about facilitating discussion. We hope that your engagement with the story of Esther is, as it has been for us, a rewarding experience.

More copies of this resource are available from Centre for Contemporary Christianity or online at www.contemporarychristianity.org. We encourage you to feedback your learning and responses to this resource either via our website or by contacting us at the Centre. If you would like to take the issue of Christian engagement in the public square further, facilitated discussions on this theme can be arranged. Please contact us for further details.

Read: Esther chapters 1-3.

1 Power games.

'This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia.' Esther 1:1

It may be tempting to read these first chapters of Esther as the benign introduction to a fairytale. But Ahasuerus is no dashing young ruler, wrongfully scorned by his wife and in search of his perfect and complementary queen.

Ahasuerus presides over a court of vast extravagance. A capricious ruler, he is in the habit of making decisions influenced by alcohol, suspect advisers, sexual attraction, bribery or sycophantic appeal to his best interests. He is a man able to enjoy a casual drink with Haman while the edict of genocide is sent out.

Ahasuerus commanded 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia but could not merit the respect of his own wife. We see Queen Vashti subjected to the drunken demands of her husband as she is summoned to appear for a great gathering of men, to be displayed as an object of desire and a trophy of his power. His burning anger at her no-show highlights the fragility of his male ego. Vashti, stripped of her title, is coldly discarded. Both the king and his male advisers fear her actions will cause revolt among the noblewomen of Persia and Media and that all women will now look upon their husbands with contempt. In a desperate bid to shore up their masculinity and prevent widespread rebellion they farcically issue a decree that each household be subject to male rule. This zero-tolerance approach serves only to compound the king's humiliation, which they had vainly sought to limit, and does little to foster genuine respect between women and men.

Things are no different for Vashti's successor. Esther surfaces as the result of an imperial search for beautiful young virgins. There is no indication that this is a voluntary competition and we should be wary of likening the whole process to a teenage girl's makeover party. We can only imagine the procedures Esther and the others undergo on the conveyor belt of a beauty process designed by and for men, the sole aim of which is the king's pleasure. Esther may have found favour with people for reasons other than her looks alone, but this society as a whole did nothing to credit women beyond their superficial image. We are not given Esther's perspective on all of this. Was it a dream come true or little more than the systematic abuse and degradation of an alien young girl for the gratification of a powerful man?

The leading figures in the political power game 'spin' for position, favour, and individual power. Ambition and personal vindication are paramount, and not even Mordecai is completely immune. Seemingly, he is an official at the king's gate and refuses to bow to Haman, but an honest reading leaves us wondering if he is motivated by nationalism as much as anything else. Ironically, his court involvement almost ends in his nation's demise.

In an empire of great diversity the king indulges his people's distinctive customs, languages and cultures. Yet one group is singled out for destruction on the basis of their 'distinctiveness'. The rest of society is induced to turn against them also. Just as the action of one woman brings judgment upon all women, the action of one man brings judgment against his entire people.

This is a shady world. The author uses satirical devices to show the reader the world and its ways for what they really are. In a society that prizes legislation over interpersonal relationship, it seems ridiculous to credit law and government with such primacy when it is enforced by those of such a capricious disposition. Can anything good come from within such a system?

Yet it does not justify any smug superiority on the part of God's people. Their place in this kingdom is a direct result of their utter failure to live righteous lives in the land given to them by God.

Our focus rests on Mordecai, inwardly a proud Jew, but one who is outwardly guarded. He has successfully assimilated into the culture, works for Ahasuerus and protects the king's interests. And on Esther, or Hadassah, the girl taken from what remaining family she has to be a foreign king's queen. With her new royal identity Esther heeds her cousin's advice and keeps her nationality under wraps.

We know nothing of the religious devotion or spiritual commitment of this pair. Their absorption into Persian culture seems substantial, be it chosen or enforced. We know little of their general motivations, feelings or inclination to set forth publicly what faith they may have or how or why, in human terms, they arrived in these positions. Shrouded in uncertainty and ambiguity, God's people are in the thick of it. But without their presence in the middle of this morally murky, pagan world, one increasingly hostile towards the Jews, the rest of the story couldn't happen. More than this, only when we see *that* they are there do we even get a hint of *why* they might be there.

The author of the Book of Esther is eager to show us a society that is clearly not *what* God's people are meant to be, but this is nevertheless *where* God's people are meant to be.

Questions

- 1 What do you find the most striking about these introductory chapters?
- 2 What is the significance of the role and position of women in these chapters?
- 3 How appropriate is Esther's and Mordecai's involvement in this society?
- 4 What issues do we face in getting involved with society?

Read: Esther chapter 4.

2 Faith in the public square: finding our voice.

'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.' Esther 4:13-14

Many have rightfully focused on the final words of verse 14. But in the high drama of this chapter two subtle shifts occur which are crucial to the message of the Book of Esther and should not be overlooked – particularly by people of faith in cultures where they do not occupy seats of power. Both shifts come in response to Haman's genocidal edict. Concern about preserving Jewish identity in exile escalates into desperation about preserving existence.

The first notable shift is from concealed religious identity to public identification. In a visceral reaction to the edict, Jews throughout the empire openly wail and weep, putting on sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai moves 'out into the city wailing loudly and bitterly,' and is later found 'in the open square of the city.' These are not private expressions behind closed doors, but conspicuous public displays of corporate grief.

Mordecai's advice to Esther is a more intentional and strategic example of this shift. During the contest to become queen he had 'forbidden' her to reveal her nationality and family background but Mordecai now exhorts Esther to 'go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.' The time for concealment is past. Ironically, Esther has all-too-successfully heeded Mordecai's initial advice and is living a cloistered palace existence unaware of her people's plight. A fact rather embarrassingly revealed in her awkward offer of a change of clothing to the mourning Mordecai. Has assimilation meant that she no longer thinks of herself as a Jew or links herself to their fate?

Mordecai's response shatters her illusion and reframes the situation. For Esther, approaching the king unsummoned can no longer be regarded as an unnecessary flirtation with death – it may be her, and her family's, only shot at survival. Mordecai's urgent appeal balances survival concerns with the possibility that Esther has been providentially positioned, calling her forward to obedience and identification with her people. The variety of possible motives makes interpreting Esther's response difficult. She is changed, but is this resignation to duty or a courageous response to divine calling?

Whichever it is, her words and action underscore the second shift: she draws on explicitly 'spiritual' resources. Throughout the narrative, Mordecai and Esther plan, strategise, and show cunning as they negotiate Persian culture. But only now, at this most critical juncture, do they appeal to God. Esther instructs Mordecai to gather the Jews of Susa to fast, a practice usually accompanied by prayer expressing grief, humility, and openness before God. Here, at the moment of deepest personal and corporate

crisis, is a 'cry' to an unnamed God.

These two shifts provide us with important reminders as we work towards a theology of public engagement. They are correctives to two common pitfalls in living our faith in public.

For the time being, Mordecai and Esther avoid a politics of self-advancement though in early chapters they do little to set themselves apart from common political climbers, wading through the moral murk, relying solely on tactical shrewdness, always running the risk of drowning in a self-serving, community-forgetting world of power and privilege. The crisis reorientates them towards the community of faith and throws them back on the one who holds the nations in his hand. Political power is not the only power.

However, this new spiritual vision does not translate into the disengaged, pietistic quietism characteristic of many churches and people of faith. For them (and for us) the spiritual practices of fasting and prayer are no substitute for public action. Rather, they are an essential precursor that reminds the faith community of who they are and sets the tone for engagement. After three days of fasting, Mordecai and Esther begin working out their deliverance in fear and trembling, continuing to utilise their relational and political savvy in negotiating the limits imposed by court protocol. They do not gather Jews for an uprising. The sceptre must still be extended.

Esther and Mordecai demonstrate an unusual confidence that God can work from within the system, that his ends can be accomplished even in a corrupt capital. In choosing to identify with the community of faith, prostrate before God, the formerly reticent Esther finds her voice and confidence to speak up as a Jew and the chapter closes with Mordecai – to this point her adviser – leaving to carry out *her* instructions.

We, no more than Esther, cannot afford to remain silent in our time. Neither should we rely on the threat of impending demise to clear our vision or galvanise us for action. We must, in humility, reckon with our dependence on God and wade deep into the resources of our faith communities. Only then can we emerge with a clear sense of identity and mission and confidence that God will work out his purposes *despite* the corruption that pervades our hearts and communities and perhaps even *through* our small efforts and offerings.

Questions

- 1 Why do you think Mordecai advises Esther to keep her identity hidden?
- 2 Under what circumstances might we consider 'keeping a low profile' in terms of either our national identity or our faith? Why?
- 3 What spiritual resources from our faith communities do we have to draw on?
- 4 How might we best engage our faith in public for the good of all in our society?

Read: Esther chapters 5-7.

3 God at work in the world.

'On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne inside the palace opposite the entrance to the palace. As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court...' Esther 5:1-2

The tension has reached soap-opera heights. What will happen when Esther approaches the king unsummoned? Can the Jews be saved from annihilation or will Haman have his wicked way? If chapter 4 is the spiritual turning point of the book, the following chapters are the climax of the drama. Having drawn on the spiritual resources of her faith community, Esther now steps forward to act. In royal dress, she enters the presence of King Ahasuerus. We hold our breath...

The sceptre is extended. Indeed, Ahasuerus is so pleased to see her that he offers her half his kingdom. Maybe it is her demeanour or choice of dress. Maybe there is a greater power at work here, given that she has been out of favour with the fickle king for a month.

Esther sees the urgency, but does not act in fearful haste. There is no disclosure yet. Deferentially she invites Haman and the king to a banquet, allowing Haman to draw his own self-important conclusions. For the time being, Esther has done her piece. She does not reappear until the next evening at the second banquet. But as she has responded to providence, so providence responds.

Gradually events begin to unfold. Such is Haman's sense of his own importance, that when Mordecai refuses to bow to him he flies into a rage and begins planning his enemy's demise. Chapter 6 is the centrepiece of the dramatic turnaround in the fortunes of Haman and Mordecai. Unable to sleep, Ahasuerus desires to hear the record of his reign read aloud. There and then he resolves to honour the as yet unrewarded Mordecai. Haman then enters seeking a warrant for Mordecai's death. However, the king speaks first. Haman's pride tells him the king wishes to honour him. On the basis of this false assumption he is forced to give to Mordecai the reward he has constructed for himself. Brought down by his own arrogance, Haman heads to the second banquet with his wife's prophecy of doom ringing in his ears.

A timely, if not miraculous, event has occurred – through human action, yet at the same time beyond human control. It has allowed Haman to engineer his own downfall. He has thought, spoken and acted freely, yet even his wife acknowledges the providential power that assures his ruin. Esther and Mordecai contribute little in this process, yet much is achieved on their behalf.

Esther re-emerges as chapter 7 begins and, unlike the reader, is probably unaware of the intervening events. She has prepared carefully, to this point her diplomacy and tact have served her well. Now however, she must stand boldly before King Ahasuerus and speak out against Haman on behalf of her own people. Having placed her faith

on the table, a greater power behind proceedings arises.

Uncertain what to do on hearing this revelation, Ahasuerus leaves the room and Haman begs Esther for his life. With heart-stopping theatrics, the king returns to find that Haman has thrown himself on Queen Esther. Haman's destiny is sealed. With a grim twist of irony, he is hanged on the gallows he had erected for Mordecai. As chapter 8 begins the reversal of fortune is complete, Mordecai receives Haman's possessions – including the infamous signet ring, the emblem of power.

Once again, auspicious events have followed faithful action. There is, as before, no miracle, but an event of providential timing. Providence ensures our 'heroes' triumph while the 'villain' is hoisted on his own petard.

The events assuring the continuity of God's people have been the task, all in all, of God. The power of God as deliverer is clear even without direct reference to him. Indeed, this silence makes a powerful statement in itself about the presence and action of God in a world where he seems to be absent. The Book of Esther makes clear that there is a more powerful cause than human will underpinning and guiding history. Whatever is achieved it is not by humans for God, but by God through humans. How much Esther and Mordecai appreciate this at the time is not clear. But as we look back on events, the author is emphatic that despite his invisibility God is visibly sovereign, allowing each one to choose freely their own ends whilst furthering his.

However, it is also clear that divine sovereignty is intertwined with human activity. Through human actions we see God at work. This is a call to God's people to act. Esther responds with faithful action and God moves as Esther moves, however imperfect her motives. Action, inaction, opposition or co-operation: the choice is ours. The question we are called to answer is: if God's will is to be done, will it be done through us, or not.

God is working for his purposes in our world. Are we?

Questions

- 1 Does each person get his or her just deserts? What are your thoughts and reactions?
- 2 Esther's approach to others is to 'find favour'. How can we learn from her approach and what are the limits to this?
- 3 What does it mean to say that God is 'sovereign'? Is there a difference between God being 'in charge' and God being 'in control' of events?
- 4 What risks do we take for the sake of God's purposes?

Read: Esther chapters 8-10

4 Mordecai and Esther: worthy heroes?

'Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them... All the officials of the provinces, the satraps and the governors, and the royal officials were supporting the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. For Mordecai was powerful in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces as the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.' Esther 8:17; 9:2-4

In chapter 8 the sweeping reversals are completed and Esther and Mordecai find themselves in enhanced positions of power. Mordecai's feud with Haman has not cost him his life or career; rather it has set in motion events leading to an unlikely ascent and increase in his share of royal privilege and authority. But what are we to make of our heroes' use of their newfound power?

The difficulties begin with the seemingly harsh and overreaching language of Mordecai's counter-edict, which appears to grant Jews permission to kill women and children and plunder their enemies' property. While some commentators argue such language was necessary to fully neutralise the initial edict, the subsequent restraint the Jewish community shows in killing only men and taking no plunder can easily be read as a statement against Mordecai's vengeful excess. Others have used grammatical arguments to assert that these troublesome bits were not even in Mordecai's edict, but are not convincing. In fact, the only thing we *can* safely say is that the author has not chosen to clearly exonerate Mordecai from the charge of moral ruthlessness. He is a participant in, if not a perpetrator of, morally questionable actions. An ethically ambiguous hero come to power.

A second difficulty is Esther's request for an additional day of killing in the city of Susa. Why the need for this appeal for extended protection? The original edict gave Jewish adversaries only one day of genocide. At best, this is a pre-emptive strike against future threat, with Esther taking advantage of the favour she now possesses to assure the position of the Jews in the capital. A wise tactical move? Maybe. But it is just as easily understood as unrelenting 'overkill', an interpretation supported by her request for the intimidating public display of the fallen sons of Haman. Again, we are left with a tarnished image of our hero.

These portraits are further clouded by the consistent use of the language of power and fear to describe Mordecai's position and public reaction. This is most obvious in 9:2-4, which describes everyone in the empire as afraid of the Jews, particularly Mordecai, whose reputation spread as he 'became more and more powerful.' There is no hint anywhere in these chapters that this reputation is based on respect, justice or anything besides domination. He is cast not as virtuous leader, but as powerful and triumphant ethno-religious nationalist.

Such admittedly unflattering portraits should only bother us if we think the author's purpose is to lift up Mordecai and Esther as role models. But this is not his purpose.

The accent here is not on our 'heroes' at all but on Yahweh, the unseen hero, who keeps his promise to the people of Israel. The excessive detail regarding Mordecai's power is a means of underscoring the fullness of Yahweh's covenant fidelity, not of affirming Mordecai's worthiness. Here is the God who is outmanoeuvred neither by the genocidal plans of his enemies nor the moral ambiguity of his protagonists.

Nevertheless, readers continue to champion Mordecai and Esther as heroes. One reason for this is the common human tendency to interpret earthly blessings as a divine seal of approval on the actions and attitudes of the beneficiaries. We mistake favour for approval.

But there is a second, more disconcerting reason why we insist on reading them as heroes. We instinctively view them as one of us, as the 'good guys'. In our reading of Scripture, history and our communities, we tend to locate sin – or at least the worst sins – outside of 'our' group, with people other than ourselves. Our ease of identifying sin with 'them' is mirrored by an inability, or unwillingness, to see the sin of those we see as 'one of us,' whether that affiliation be biological, religious, political or social. The consequence of our group blindness is the exaltation of those we view as our own. This is why we want to explain away some of the apparent difficulties with our heroes in this story and elsewhere.

However, sin is one commodity that is universally distributed. Every government, every group, every church and every person must come to terms with the murkiness of human society. Allowing the attributes of our group – many of which are accidents of history or geography, or products of our socialisation – to take on a supreme moral status results in a polarised view of the world. Sinners and saints, heroes and villains, are clearly identified and set apart from the flat actors upon the stage of human history.

But God is not so blinkered. His vision is not clouded. He's personally familiar with the sin of his people. He waded through the moral murk and continues to do so. The cross is our evidence that God is a moral realist. Sin is not unique to particular groups or communities. None evade its mess. Such is the world with which we have to reckon.

Questions

- 1 Are Mordecai and Esther heroes? In what ways do we demonise some and hero-worship others? How can we seek to avoid this?
- 2 What are the positive and negative aspects of being in positions of power or responsibility (e.g. in the family, in church, in the workplace, in society)? How might this affect how we treat or view others?
- 3 Is being in a minority necessarily negative? What minorities exist in our churches or our wider society and what can we learn from them?

Epilogue

The Book of Esther is great drama but it is more than just a fine retelling of events. Its powerful message and the issues it raises are as pertinent for us today as for the audience for whom it was first written.

Big issues are highlighted: how we understand and use power, particularly in the context of female/male relationships and in leadership; how we view and participate in culture and society; our sense of primary allegiance and identity, especially in terms of faith and nationality; the sense of threat linked to minority status; the role of faith in the public square; personal risk in serving others; the interplay of God's providence and human behaviour – all of these themes strike a chord with us today.

The book is largely satirical, holding up to ridicule the folly of human self-interested action and pointing to the power and providence of God. The practical reason for the writing of the Book of Esther was to explain the background of Purim and encourage the Jews to observe this festival of public remembrance. The act of remembering, even in the very existence of the book, continues to this day – the continuing witness of the faithful, remembering community who, in the midst of a pagan society, point to the power and providence of God.

Samuel Wells writes, 'Christian faith in the sovereignty of God is an ironic statement about all other allegiances.'ⁱ All earthly kingdoms rise and fall. The Book of Esther urges us, the people of God, to be a living satire for the sake of the world in which we live, by being a faithful, remembering community in full view of the world. It means being in the world, but finding our identity in our faith communities. It requires us to demonstrate our trust in the one who has faithfully worked out his promises through his people and continues to do so, despite seeming absent. As a community we must point to the one whose hand underpins all history and existence, following the values of his kingdom in the middle of our murky world and acting as humble servants of God when entrusted with power and responsibility. The Book of Esther calls us to trust in the power and providence of God who acts in and redeems history. God never fails in his promise to keep his people, no matter the situation, and uses engaged and committed human action, an active reflection of our faith in him, to bring about his purposes for his world.

At a time when Christianity is no longer the governing ethos of our Western societies and is regarded as one value system in a market place of many, where public life seems diverse and morally ambiguous, what can we do? Will it make any difference? Where a sense of discomfort, threat or powerlessness could lead us to retreat into ourselves our strategy should not be one of separation, capitulation or dreaming of 'the old days'. Biblical faith has a place not just *in* the world, but *for* the world. Following Christ, we are not here just for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. This is mission.

Satire takes place in the company of the satirized. It is the voice of the group who are obliged to borrow their clothes, their time, their space of performance from those who usually 'run the show'. And this is the condition of the Church. Its actions very often look very much like the actions of others; it does not always 'look redeemed'; it can claim no superiority of power or goodness. And yet in the midst of a performance that it is instantly identifiable, lie practices that hint at a story that exposes the emptiness of that world's longings.ⁱⁱ

Mordecai and Esther, thrust into the middle of a murky society with annihilation looming, found their identity in their foundational commitment as the people of God. Esther and Mordecai had public relevance just by being in the world. Where it is, so does the church. What Mordecai and Esther were forced to appreciate was the role their distinctive faith had to play in society. As they did so, they saw God act to save his people. And so the church must find its identity in the very core of its being – Christ. Vitality is not ultimately found in putting certain individuals into positions of power or through culturally relevant strategies. Only as it seeks to be what it is meant to be – the body of Christ in the world – will the church survive to fulfil its mission. In the midst of the murkiness, we are called to question whether we reflect it or Christ. The people of God need to reflect the principles of his kingdom – justice, equality, truth, relationship, love – in contradistinction to the principles of worldly kingdoms (Esther 1-3) and even of those seemingly 'on our side' (Esther 8-10).

Ultimately, the action of God is fundamental to mission. No matter how God-forsaken we consider a place to be, God's Spirit is at work to fulfil his promises through his people and despite all antagonism. This means that we can act in our society from faith not fear, self-giving and confident that God can act through us – something highlighted in Esther and exemplified in Christ.

The Book of Esther is a dramatic tale portraying the seedier side of Persian court life, in the 4th Century BCE in all its rather murky glory. The authority of King Ahasuerus is called into question in a court beset by bitter rivalry, chaos and ancient hatreds. A royal edict is issued which condemns to death all Jews living in exile in Persia. What can be done in the face of this threatened genocide?

It is decision time for the Jews close to the king and, in particular, for the young Queen Esther. It is time to stand up and be counted.

One of the few Bible books in which God is not overtly mentioned, what has the Book of Esther to say to us today? How should we engage in the often morally ambivalent world of politics and power? How are we, as Christians, called to live in the public square?

This booklet of four studies is suitable for either personal reflection or group discussion and is offered as part of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity's ongoing commitment to providing relevant and accessible biblical resources.



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