

Did it Really Happen?

The Book of Esther is a great story, of incompetent government, attempted genocide, personal intrigue, salvation, and celebration. A clash of cultures between a drunken, self-indulgent, material regime, and a pious, God-fearing, restrained alternative. Goodies versus baddies. Neither Jewish nor Persian evidence sheds any light on the historicity. Was it true and does that matter?

Given that rabbinic sources were written perhaps a thousand years after the events it is hardly surprising if names changed or were mixed up and events recorded inaccurately. Even so, both the language, the use of Persian titles and names, geographical details place the text in Achaemenid Persia, but closer to the Greek era. Except that Jews did very well under Persian rule, Mordechai after all was a senior member of the government and there are no records of persecution or Jew-hatred.

The story opens with a king's delusion that scattering wealth and throwing massive parties to guarantee popularity, support. In his drunken stupor, he demands that queen Vashti display herself before his boozy cronies. In what might have been the first #metoo crisis, she refuses and loses her throne. Then, changeable as ever he regrets it and that's when the search for a replacement produces a sweet, kind Esther.

All is not well in the regime. The king's safety is threatened by an assassination attempt that Mordechai thwarts. But the incompetent king doesn't learn about it until much later, during a sleepless night. Achashverosh appoints Haman, the strong man to sort things out, and Haman, to ingratiate himself comes up with the plan to kill the Jews and confiscate their property. Politics is universal, power, money, rivalry, and usually very bad short-term decisions.

The evil Haman is overconfident after his initial success. When asked by the king how to reward a favorite, he assumes the king wants to reward him and so he suggests dressing him up in the King's clothes, wearing his crown, and having a rival lead him on the king's horse through the city singing his praises. This stupid idea surely must have shown that he really coveted the top job. Pride and ambition come before the fall. He and his poor family pay for it in true despotic tradition. Bribery and ambition can misfire. Arrogance and overconfidence bring about Haman's fall. The Jews are saved thanks to Esther's clever, tactical intervention.

But wait! Thanks to a very stupid rule the original decree to kill the Jews and confiscate their property could not be voided. The Jews were given the right to defend themselves. The result was that only diehard anti-Jews took the opportunity to attack, and they were completely routed. Notice the Jews did not take advantage and refused to loot or confiscate their property. Only Achashverosh took Haman's property and handed it to Mordechai, so the ethical behavior of the Jews is emphasized and underlies the good relationship the Jews had with most of the empire.

We are introduced to the old Zoroastrian concept of good and evil. Haman represents evil and Mordechai good. Even though the Jews were well established and Mordechai a senior advisor, he must have suspected that danger lurking beneath the surface. Which was one reason he told Esther not to tell anyone she was Jewish. Mordechai refusing to bow down to Haman, might not have been a religious issue so much as a strategy to get him to reveal his true colors.

The celebration after their triumph was not an orgy of revenge. Instead, the religious obligation was to feed the poor and reinforce friendship and support by giving gifts. In addition, the Fast of Esther was instituted to balance the joy of deliverance with an appreciation that the outcome could just as well have been tragic. In the way, we break a glass at a wedding to remember that life is not always joyful and painless.

The political message is that there are different ways of dealing with problems. Vashti took a hard tactless line in dealing with royal crassness. Zeresh, Haman's aggressive Lady Macbeth of a wife pushed him into going too far. Only Esther, initially passive plays a more cautious role, taking instruction, advice, and rises to the occasion by getting the community rally around, planning her campaign with restraint and wisdom instead of confrontation.

So why did this improbable story find its way into the bible? And why is it so important? Was it just a concession to the dominant Persian Jewish community of that era? I suggest it is because its themes resonated then and still do. Life is a constant challenge whether in Israel or the Diaspora. Human nature is attracted to material pleasures, greed, excessive wealth, political power, authority, fear of the other, domination, sexual oppression, and the alternative values of spirituality, kindness, and charity.

One of the important features of the text is the absence of God's name. Which is usually explained as indicating that God works in hidden ways behind the scenes. The Hebrew name Esther is the same as *Hester*, hidden, in Hebrew. Of course, her name could equally be from Ishtar or Astarte as Mordechai could be Marduk. They might have been named after those Persian gods that hint at a degree of assimilation. But the Septuagint, the Greek translation in the third century BCE, does indeed mention God a great deal. Why then was this intentionally left out when the text was canonized? Did they want to imply that God was only concerned with the Land of Israel? Or was it a subtle way of discriminating against Diaspora Jewry?

For hundreds of years, we have dressed up in disguise on Purim as a symbol of the ambiguity of life, where so much is hidden and disguised, and dissemblance and falsehood co-exist with honesty, kindness, and sanity. We gamble with dreidels and cards because life is often a lottery, which is where Purim gets its name from. We drink not to forget or sink into oblivion, but to appreciate our good fortune and determine to spread goodness and good cheer rather than aggression and violence.

But as we are painfully aware now thanks to Putin, if we are attacked, we

must take the necessary steps to protect and defend ourselves. Preferably in advance and by not being as naïve and credulous as the US leadership is. We cannot rely on treaties or promises despite their fine words. Politics is all about cupidity and deception. and they will make the same mistake again with Iran. Back full circle to Persia, except this time it is the Mullahs.

Without a foundation of morality and humanity, life becomes unbearable. Violence takes over and it is the innocents who suffer most. So Happy Purim. Let us thank God for our good fortune and drink to life, LeChayim and let us pray for the poor Ukrainians.