

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Marion: Marion Taylor, I teach the Old Testament at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto. I love the book of Esther, it's a book that I've taught, and written about, and the character of Esther inspires me, as does the character of Vashti.

Anne: Can you give a brief overview of what happens in the book of Esther?

Marion: So, I think the first thing I have to say is, which book of Esther? Because we have the Book of Esther that is found in Protestant Bibles, that is based on the Hebrew version of Esther, that is ten chapters long, and then we have the Greek version of Esther, and it's a different story. It's longer, and answers a number of the questions that the story of Esther raises, like: where are God, and prayer, and things like that. Because in the Greek version, we've got a dream sequence, we've got Esther praying, Mordecai praying, so it's a different story, and even the character of Esther is a little different.

So I encourage everyone who has the shorter version of Esther in their Bible to find a Bible that has the apocryphal version of Esther, or listen online to the fuller story, just to get a sense of, you know, wow this story has a little bit of a different feel! I mean, the main themes are the same but it has a different feel. The story we're going to be talking about today is the shorter version, the Hebrew version of Esther that's found in most Bibles.

So, the Book of Esther has everything in it. The story of Esther has everything our culture loves in the binge-worthy show. It's got Gatsby-level opulence, rebellion, debauchery, plot twists, revenge, and a stellar heroine, right. So we've got everything in a story that takes ten chapters, so it's not that long of a book and you can really get into the story.

So the first chapter invites us into this grandiose world of the most powerful King Xerxes, he's the king of Persia. He's powerful, ostensibly, but even in the first chapter we meet this king who's very inept, he doesn't know how to make decisions, he wants to impress everyone, he drinks a lot, and he's a womanizer. So that's the king we meet in chapter one, and chapter one tells us that he has these incredibly large banquets, a hundred and eighty days of drinking and eating, which is an incredibly long time end, and there's another banquet after that of seven days where he invites all these people, these men, to drink as much as they want. So you think, what kind of a kingdom is this?

And then we get these beautiful descriptions of where they're having this seven day banquet in this courtyard with beautiful floors and curtains, and you get all the details that call you into this amazing world of the Persian empire. And then you have the king on the seventh day of drinking, with all his buddies, saying, "I want to show you one more of my treasures: my wife, Vashti."

And so he sends his servants out to call Vashti, and she says no, and there is the problem. What do you do when the wife of the king says no, she won't come to a banquet to be shown off as a treasure. And so that creates the crisis for the king, who was inebriated. And one of his advisors - he has seven men around him - says, "Oh well, you've got to do something about this, if all our wives hear that your wife has disobeyed you, they'll become disobedient, so you should make a law that all wives should obey their husbands, and you need to get rid

of your wife, just depose of her.” Whether she's just put in the harem, or killed, we don't know.

So that's how the story is set up, and it's like, whoa, this is so interesting. So, in terms of the narrative, the problem is now the king doesn't have a wife. We've got to find another one. So, he misses his wife and his attendants say, “Oh well, let's find you a new wife. Let's have the equivalent of this competition to search the kingdom's hundred and twenty seven provinces, and find the most beautiful woman, bring her in.”

So they do that, they essentially herd all these young women. It's not a beauty contest like we would talk about today, it's a herding of women into the harem, and then these women get prepared with a year long beauty spa, with exfoliation, and perfume, and all this to prep, for their, essentially, one night with the king. And if he didn't like you that night, you would be put into the harem, never to be seen again.

But the woman he chose happened, just happened, to be a young Jewish woman, an orphan woman who was, I would argue, kind of sex trafficked into the harem. And she pleases the king, and becomes the queen, so then you have a banqueting scene, and that's how Queen Esther, the Jewish queen, becomes queen as a replacement for Vashti.

So, then there are more complex things that go on. Esther's uncle is Mordecai the Jew, who works for the king. And he gets himself in trouble because he refuses to bow down before the king's right-hand man, Haman. The reason for his refusal to bow down is not explicitly given, but in the way Haman and Mordecai are introduced in this story, they give a long genealogy that links them to ancestral enemies, so these two men hate each other, though they don't know each other.

And Haman, who's the wicked character in this story, is so angry that he not only wants to kill Mordecai, but kill all the Jews. So, this is the problem, is Haman's become antisemitic, and he he wants to kill all the Jews, and manipulates the king into agreeing to sign off on a genocidal edict, to kill all the Jews. And ironically the king doesn't even ask, well, who are these people you want to have me kill? He doesn't even ask, so he agrees to kill, you know, the people, group, that his wife Esther belongs to.

So as the plot goes on. Mordecai knows we're in trouble here, and so he mourns, he puts sackcloth on, and he tries to communicate with Esther, because he believes that Esther is in a position of power and influence and is the only hope in reversing this genocidal edict. And so he communicates by messenger, and Esther finds out this awful plan to kill the Jews. And when Mordecai says, basically, it's time for you to step up to the plate, she says, “I can't just ask the king a question, I have to be invited even as the queen into his presence.”

And so he challenges her, “For such a time as this, risk your life.”

And so she does, she puts her life on the line and dares to approach the king. So, before she does that, she and her maids fast, and then three days later she puts on her gown and approaches the king, who sees her from afar and he's taken with her. He reaches out his sceptre and invites her into his court, and says, “What can I do for you, Esther?” And he promises up to half the kingdom.

And she doesn't answer the question as we would think she would, but she begins this, I would say a manipulative plot to kind of get the king and Mordecai kind of in the palm of her hand. And she invites them to a series of two banquets, and at the banquet, they again ask, what would you like? And she says, just come tomorrow night for another banquet. So, I mean, the tension is rising in this story.

In the meantime, the king is troubled because he doesn't know what's going on, and he can't sleep. So, he has his servant read him the most boring thing you could read: the chronicles, the book that records all the things that have happened in the kingdom. And so he remembers through this that Mordecai, Esther's uncle, was involved with a plot to kill the king. And he said what has been done to honour that guy, and the servant said, well, nothing. And that was a very shaming moment for the king, so he was very annoyed that he had not honoured this man who saved his life.

At that very time, when he's trying to think, what should I do, Haman enters into the court, another one of these surprising coincidences. And the king says, what should be done to a person that I want to honour? And Haman, he's so egocentric, he thinks the king is wanting to honour him. So he comes up with a plan of everything he would like to have the king do to him - I'd like to ride the king's horse, and wear the king's clothes. Then the king says, of course the man that I want to honour is Mordecai - you know, the guy Haman wants to kill - and not you.

So in the middle of the book, in chapter six, is this turning point where Haman has to lead his enemy on the horse, dressed in the king's clothes. So there is the reversal. It happens that as the plot unfolds, Mordecai will become the Haman character, the second in charge in the kingdom, and the edict of genocide will be reversed, and the Jews will win.

And so as it turns out, they have this day set aside where the Jews will be killed, and the Jews have time to get ready for this battle. And at the end of the book, the Jews are successful, and the genocide is overturned. And then - and this is the troublesome part for most modern readers - at the end of the book in chapter nine, the king says, "Esther, what would you like?" And she asks for another day of killing.

And you think, wow, already seventy five thousand people have been killed, plus Haman's sons, and she asks for a second day of killing, to which the king says yes. And so that is successful, and then at the end of the book, the Jews celebrate that. They celebrate in a festival called Purim. They celebrate reversal of the edict of death, because life has come, so it's joyous and celebrative. And that is the festival that, really, is the reason the book was written, to explain why we have this festival of Purim.

And so then, in our second last chapter, nine, Esther and Mordecai write the Purim as a law, that the Jews should celebrate this every year.

And then Esther disappears, and then the final chapter of the book focuses on the men, Mordecai and Xerxes. And you wonder what happened to Esther, but she had done her job, and she's back in her queenly role. Nothing changes in terms of the structure of the Persian empire, it's still very patriarchal, but Esther has been the heroine who was part of the

orchestration of the reversal of this genocidal edict of all the Jews. And sometimes we don't appreciate that meant all the Jews of the Persian empire, which included present-day Israel, so all Jews everywhere would have been annihilated. So it's a remarkable change as the genocidal edict was overturned, and they were allowed to live. So it becomes an important book in the story of God in the Bible, because this is a late story in the Persian period, but the Jews were saved.

Anne: In your intro to your commentary, you talk a little bit about looking at this story in the Me Too era. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to that.

Marion: Sure. When I was writing the book, the global Me Too movement - this is in 2017 - was emerging, and brought attention to many of the issues raised in Esther related to abuse of power, the objectification of women, and sex trafficking. And so I think all those things are talked about in the book of Esther. These are not the issues that, historically, interpreters would have raised, but I think because we're very sensitive to these issues of power, and abuse of power, and the objectification, commodification of women in the sex trade, this story, especially in chapter two, where you talk about how they would have scoured the country for all these beautiful, probably eleven, twelve year old girls, right, then they bring them into the harem, they never go back, they never see their families again.

So it's not the bachelorette, it's not the dating game, it's not who wants to be the king's wife. These are girls, young girls, and there they have them in the harem, and for a whole year they trained these girls as to how to please the king sexually. I mean, it's really a horrible story in that way, right? And then you think about, well, who is this guy that they're going to sleep with for one night. And in the first chapter of the book, we've been introduced to this very powerful king who loves to show off, who loves to drink, and can't make good decisions, and who didn't treat his first wife very well.

So we see right through the book, it's not just the king, but the issue of abuse of power is very strong in the book. Because, like many ancient rulers, the king surrounded himself by eunuchs. So who are these eunuchs? These would be young boys who were traded after a war, or part of your tribute every year was to give fifty beautiful-looking guys, little boys. And then they would castrate them, and put them into positions of power, because ancient rulers thought, well, if they're castrated, they don't have a lot of testosterone, so they're safer to be surrounded with. They probably won't take over the kingdom.

So, abuse of power, not just young girls but young boys. And what we know about the Persian empire is that more than half of the population were slaves, so the whole system is quite abusive. You know, he's so rich and wealthy because of the taxation, and because other people are being abused. So, it's the abuse of power, and for me, it's the objectification of women, and that is so clear in the verbs that are used. There are all these passive words. They *were* taken. Esther *was* brought to the citadel, she *was* placed under this guy's care, and *was* brought to the king. And so that's how I think that text asks to be heard.

And that's not how some modern preachers have read the text. This very a famous preacher - Mark Driscoll, mega church preacher - had a series on Esther where he says that Esther allows the men to tend to her needs, and make her decisions, including her sinful behaviour of spending around a year in the spa, getting dolled up, only to lose her virginity with the

pagan king. And he says she's simply a person without any character until her own neck is on the line, and we see her rise up to save the people when she's converted to a real faith in God. And that's not what the story is about. I mean, she's not that at all.

And one of the wonderful new tools we have for reading the Bible is to use what we know about trauma to open up the context. So if we think about what it means to be an orphan child, and then to be taken away from your only relative, and put into a harem, that would be a traumatized child. So what do trauma victims do? They do anything to survive and thrive, and that's exactly what Esther does. She plays the game as a young girl, she finds favour. She's beautiful, and so she finds favour with everyone around her. And so that, I think, opens up the character of Esther in a very helpful way. And so I don't see her as a Disney princess, or a contestant playing the bachelor game, as some would do, but I think she is a young woman who does what she can to survive.

Anne: It's wild to think, through that reading of the text of, that he's auditioning these young girls by sleeping with all of them

Marion: That's right, and then he disposes of them, and it's terrible. One night with the king.

Anne: I was wondering if you could speak a bit to kind of the dynamic where Vashti and Esther are pitted against each other as the bad wife and the good wife?

Marion: I think the storyteller wants us to compare Esther and Vashti. Like any good story, you've got a foil - good guy, bad guy right? And Esther comes on to the scene after Vashti is deposed. And Vashti dared to say no, and then you see this portrait of this young girl who finds favour with everyone. So I think the narrator's inviting you to compare these women.

But the question is, what does the comparison look like? The history of the interpretation of the book of Esther is mixed, in a way, but most people were sympathetic to Vashti. The rabbis certainly were, and later interpreters, because what woman would want to come and display her body before a group of drunken men, right? That's not something anybody would want to do, and now that we know the ancient context, that's exactly what women weren't supposed to do.

We know that women could go to a banquet, but when the drinking started, the women went home, and then the men invited the dancing girls and prostitutes in. So instead of dancing girls and prostitutes, the king says, "I'm bringing my wife in." The Bible itself does not give the reason for her no, so readers throughout history have filled in that blank, they'd say, oh maybe she was pregnant or something. We don't know.

But in the rest of chapter one, when the men are afraid that all women are going to rebel against their husbands and say no, then they come up with this idea of, "Let's reinforce patriarchy." They come up with a decree that says all women will give honour to their husbands high and low alike. And then they send out letters right across the Empire, to everybody in every language, reinstating the power of husbands over wives.

So if you take that piece of the chapter seriously, and link it to traditional Christian teachings on marriage and the submission of the wife to the husband, then you can imagine what

some early interpreters did with this story. That Vashti was a bad wife, she disobeyed, and wives should be submissive. And there are lots of examples of women and men saying just that. However, modern interpreters, for the for the most part, don't read the text that way because if you analyze chapter one, you realize the narrator is presenting the king kind of as a buffoon. He's a fool, and all the men are foolish if they think the rebellion of one woman is going to mean all wives everywhere are going to say no to everything.

So people have said, no she wasn't so bad, and maybe she actually can be a model for women and others who are put in a situation of compromise. When I was doing my research on Vashti, I found these amazing nineteenth century women's interpretations of Vashti that were influenced by the early feminist movement in the United States and globally.

And I thought maybe I would just give you two examples. We have an African American social justice advocate writing a poem on Vashti in 1871. So she expands on the Biblical text, she explains why the king invited her, and she she calls Vashti, in the words of the king, "my beautiful, my own" - she was owned, right. And then in response, Vashti says in her poem, "Go tell the king," she proudly said, "That I am Persia's queen, and by his crowds of merry men, I will never be seen. I'll take the crown from off my head, and tread it 'neath my feet, before their rude and careless gaze, my shrinking eyes shall meet." And then at the end of the poem Harper's Vashti says no. At the end of the poem, Harper's Vashti is described as having grief in her eye when she sadly said, "Go tell the king that I would rather die."

So, you think, where is that coming from for an African American woman in the 1870s? As a Black woman, you are treated badly, and you need to take pride in who you are, and now you don't put up with this kind of shaming of women.

And I wanted to share one other example of another poem I found written by a Canadian poet in 1884. Her name is Kate Douglas Ramage, she was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister in Lake Megantic, Quebec. And I think, how did a Canadian woman get fixated on Vashti and publish a poem on her? I have no idea, but she called Vashti "the beautiful star, a queen" and then at the end of her poem, she too says, "I" - like these are the words of Vashti - "I will not go. The crown Ahasueras placed upon my head is his, he can remove it. The crown of pure fair womanhood is mine, I will keep it, although I lose the battle, and life besides." And so she's left at the end, Vashti, the beautiful, uncrowned, but still a queen.

So it's like, for me, that was amazing that a Canadian woman in the nineteenth century would write a poem like that, to say: this is not how women are to be treated. So for me, those were very exciting early readings, feminist, woman-empowering readings of the book of Esther, that sound very modern, but they're not.

So, at the same time, some women love Esther, and certainly in the Jewish tradition, at Purim, every little girl used to want to dress up like Esther and be beautiful. There are songs about Esther, beautiful Esther. But then Jewish feminists were saying, do you really want your daughter to be like Esther and play the game, use her sexuality, use her beauty, and get what they want in a man's world? Or do you want your daughter to be like Vashti, and say no.

And in my own life, when I was first working on Esther, I had three little kids. And one of them always wanted to get his way. And I felt Vashti empowered me as a mother to say no, I will not give into this temper tantrum. So Vashti and Esther, they are pitted against one another, certainly. For women, it's not always Esther that wins, but there's many biblical scholars that are now saying, it's not one or the other. Esther and Vashti model two ways of surviving and thriving in an empire. So if you say no, like Vashti, you may lose it all, but sometimes maybe that's okay, right. But maybe there are times when you need to play the game to get a seat at the table, to have a voice, where you can make a change in the world.

And so a lot of women are still saying, no, Esther was wise, she played the game, she used all her techniques, including her sexuality, to get what she wanted. So it's not - now, I don't want to pit them against each other, in fact, there is a woman who said maybe they knew each other. Maybe if Vashti wasn't killed, but just put in the harem, she would have met Esther and given her tips on how to survive and thrive, which is kind of a cool thing. And we have no evidence that happened, probably didn't, but it's a nice little story.

Anne: I was wondering if you could just speak a bit about why this story has been kind of so disregarded in Christian theology for so long?

Marion: Yeah, that's a complicated question. So, the longer version of Esther was the version that the Church used until the time of the Reformation. And even in the longer version that includes prayer and God, people were uncomfortable with some of the aspects of the story, like where does it fit in salvation history.

So, the first commentary written on Esther wasn't until the ninth century, although there are lots of examples of men in their sermons referencing Esther, because her speech was a model for a good speech writer. And actually, she became so popular, English scholars talk about the topos of Esther, she's a type, right. So she's a woman who uses her position of power to influence. Though the book of Esther was never commented on like Genesis, or Jeremiah, or the Psalms, or the Gospels, because it was a different kind of a story.

At the time of the Reformation, the decision was made that the books in the canon there in the Old Testament had to have been written in Hebrew, not just Greek, and so they decided to go with the shorter version of Esther. And all of a sudden, all the problems about - what do you do with a book that doesn't mention God? What about the violence? What about all these questions?

So then we had a response by people like Luther, who said terrible things about Esther. He didn't like the book of Esther at all. He said it Judaizes too much. And he didn't see the Gospel at all in the book of Esther. And so he didn't write a commentary on it, and neither did Calvin. So you can see why it wasn't as popular, it's because it didn't lend itself easily to preaching.

And because of the violence - like, there's a lot of killing, all these people are killed. And then Esther asks for more. And so that made people uncomfortable. So when people did interpret the book of Esther for the use of the Church, they often resorted to what we call typology or allegory - a figural reading of the text. So they would say, Xerxes is like God, because he's powerful and kingly, and Esther is like the church, and Haman is the wicked guy.

But I have trouble reading the book that way, because Xerxes is not like God, you know, and I don't see the parallel between God and Xerxes except that one scene where Esther comes and pleads, can I come before you? And Xerxes puts out the golden rod, and people see that as a symbolic moment of her acceptance. And see Esther kind of as a Christ figure, sometimes. And so, I mean, you can say, well, Esther, in a sense, reminds us of Jesus, she was willing to lay down her life for her people. Jesus did do that, so maybe you can say the story of Esther points or whispers to the story of Jesus. But I don't want to go too much further than that in finding all these hidden spiritualizing meanings. I don't think that's the way to go on this one.