

FASTING IN ESTHER 4:12-25

Camino

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Outline

Esther 4:12-16 demonstrates the power and divine intervention released through fasting to break through the customs, traditions, and decrees of the reign of the 5th-century, Persian king, Xerxes I (reigned 486–465 BCE).

Passage:

When Esther's words were relayed to Mordecai, he sent back to her this reply: "Do not imagine that because you are in the king's palace you alone will escape the fate of all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: Go and assemble all the Jews who can be found in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I and my maidens will fast as you do. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish!" Esther 4:12-25.

- (The warning of Mordecai) is believed by some scholars to not only be a warning but a threat.
- (For if you remain silent at this time) you and your father's house will perish is the explanation of the threat.
- (Relief and deliverance for the Jews) God will fulfill His promise with you or another.

- (Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time) suggesting that the discretion of her Jewish identity was all a part of a divine narrative.
- (I will go to the king) Taking a risk in the cultural context.
- (Fast for me) Esther uses the power of decree.
- (Do not eat or drink for three days) The Queen emphasized fasting both food and drinking.
- (Night or day) The description as a dry fast is made clear.

Introduction

Esther is identified as the daughter of Avihail, (Esth 2:15) from the tribe of Benjamin and the cousin of Mordecai who also adopts her (Esth 2:5–7). The book of Esther is around the time of the Persian/early Hellenistic period (fourth century B.C.E.). After Esther becomes queen, Mordecai gets into a situation with the grand vizier Haman the Agagite, a descendant of an Amalekite. The Amalekites were known to be an enemy of Israel during the time of King Saul (1 Sam 15:32). Mordecai would not obey Haman, and Haman then decided to not kill Mordecai, but also to kill his people. Haman requested from the king his permission to do this, on the date of Adar 13.(Esth 4:1–3)¹

Esther's parents had died, and Mordecai was raising her as his daughter. Two points are made in regard to their introduction. First, Esther's Hebrew name is Hadassah, However, for the next part of the story, she and Mordecai choose to use her Persian name, Esther. This phenomenon may expose their steps taken toward assimilation even before the recording of this

¹ Seidler, Ayelet. Source: *Vetus testamentum*, 69 no 1 2019, p 117-134.

book took place, or it may have been part of their plan to hide Hadassah's Jewishness at the time of the contest for the queen's throne. Second, one might notice that many Jewish people, including Esther and Mordecai, continue to live in Susa more than fifty years after the return to Jerusalem was made by Cyrus for exiles to rebuild their homeland. This is especially noteworthy since Mordecai's and Esther's families were taken from the city of Jerusalem itself (2:6).²

Furthermore,

Even after the exile had run its course of seventy years, the practice of interfaith marriage continued to meet the rebuke of the religious leadership in Jerusalem (Ezra 10:9- 19).

(Pierce 84)

It is suggesting that Esther maintaining secrecy about her identity was life or death.

CONTEXT

The book of Esther was regarded as canonical by the Jewish community in Palestine as early as the mid-second century BC, and that; Among the church Fathers, its canonical view for Christians was confirmed by the Council of Carthage in 397 AD.³

The methodology and framework used in this paper were not only from a canonical point of view but happen to maintain a literary criticism as well. When referring to a literary context of a particular to text, it is an attempt to understand how it relates to what surrounds it.

One can observe Mordecai's (crying loudly and bitterly) relates to the weeping of his people, the Jews; both Mordecai and the people wear ashes and sackcloth. To refrain specifically from drinking and eating was mentioned in only a few instances in the Old Testament (Esth.

² Pierce, Ronald W. Source: Bulletin for Biblical Research, 2 1992, p 75-89. Publication Type

³ Webb, Barry. Source: The Reformed Theological Review, 52 no 1 Jan - Apr 1993, p 23-35

4:15). The only other instance of a prohibition on drinking in the Bible is the prohibition of consuming wine.⁴

Much later, at 9:30-31, we learn that letters were sent to Jews in all the provinces, instructing them to keep the holiday of Purim in future years, as Mordecai and Esther had commanded them, “and as they had accepted upon themselves and zar ‘am the matters of the fasts and their outcry.’” (Mitchell 310)

CONTENT

Go and assemble all the Jews

Esther appears before King Ahasuerus without being summoned. The king does not kill her but promises to grant her a request (Esth 5:4). The Book of Esther brings to question how to live as a Jew in the diaspora. According to some scholars, Mordecai's comment to Esther, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter (Esth. 4:14). Meaning that the decree can be repealed. Esther is ordered to rescue all of the Jews on a certain day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (Esth. 3:12-15).

In Esther 4:1 the text suggests that Mordecai accessed knowledge about Haman's decree because of his connection to the palace. The Jews within the kingdom discover the information from the document, which was made known throughout the kingdom (Esth. 4:3). The verbal combination describing the information to the king of Nineveh and the Jews of Persia is uncommon, seen only in these books, and no where else in the Bible.(Esth. 4:1). Esther orders the Jews to fast for three days (Esth. 4:16). The Jews' response includes fasting, weeping, sackcloth, and ashes (Esth. 4:3).”

⁴ Seidler, Ayelet. Source: Vetus testamentum, 69 no 1 2019, p 117-134.

Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time

Esther, upon her entrance into the royal family of Persia, keeps her identity as a Jew a secret; yet not without purpose. The secrecy of her identity would be vital to her fulfilling her preordained role:

Who knows, perhaps it is for just such a crisis as this that you have attained to royal estate' (4.14).⁵

A strong interpretation suggests the purim was a disguise of the substitute king ritual as it was practiced as part of a New Year celebration in that region. Perhaps Purim is a Jewish appropriation of a non-Jewish New Year celebration. Another expression of a Purim is linked to the New Year of Babylonian traditions.⁶

If you remain silent at this time

The writer comes from a literary style perspective. Mordecai's said some powerful words and at times they have been overshadowed by the fact that he actually threatens Esther's life, regardless of the outcome, unless she goes to Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people. It is fair to say that Esther would have had to take into account the thought about deliverance arising for the Jews from another place. Most people would find it discouraging to hear about the possibility of perishing in the kings house.

Three days of fasting

Esther accepts the challenge to intercede for her people, but not before summoning all the Jews of Susa to join her in three days of fasting (4.16), an implicit appeal for divine help. Even the wife of Haman is aware that her husband is fated to fall before Mordecai the

⁵ Polish , Daniel F. Source: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 24 no 85 Sep 1999, p88

⁶ Polish , Daniel F. Source: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 24 no 85 Sep 1999-p103

Jew (6.13), and the story as a whole is replete with too many instances of exquisite timings and ironic reversals for us to be left in any doubt about the presence of an unseen hand guiding events to a predetermined end. (Webb 30)

The warning of Mordecai

That is when Mordecai speaks of deliverance coming from another place (Esther4:14), perhaps she is not displaying an unfailing trust in God's providential care. Therefore confronted Esther with the proposition: If you do not help you will die. It seems that he needed to emphasize the severity of her role and responsibility. Mordecai was in encouraging Esther by the means of a valid threat.⁷

Night and day

In the book of Esther, there is distress by the people in the face of a decree imposed upon them: Haman's decree in Esther, and the decree issued by God. The people demonstrate repentance by fasting night and day. Similar descriptions of mourning can appear in a different form, as a response to impending future prophecies and judgments. These demonstrations of lamentations often reflect an attempt to change impending judgment by imploring God, what has been named petitionary mourning.⁸

Fast for me

Despite the fact already held throughout the kingdom, Esther again asks that all the Jews in Shushan fast, this time with specific focus, “on my behalf” and emphasizing that the

⁷ Polish, Daniel F. Source: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 24 no 85 Sep 1999-p103

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Webb, Barry. Source: The Reformed Theological Review, 52 no 1 Jan - Apr 1993, p 23-35

fast should include abstention from drinking. Moreover, she sets the duration of the fast, “do not eat or drink for three days”(Esth. 4:16). (Seidler 124)

For divine intervention in this case requires a human initiative to abstain from food and water.

David J. A. Clines concludes that a primary element in the theology of Esther is the complementary nature of "divine action and human initiative." (Pierce 88)

Relief and deliverance

In addition to the general context, (Jon. 3:9, NJPS throughout except when noted) reflects the belief that the acts of mourning, together with remorse, have the potential to change the divine decree. Unlike the story in Jonah, the assumption that the mourning in Esther is an expression of petitionary mourning is problematic because the object of the petition, God, is not mentioned anywhere in the book. According to some scholars, Mordecai's comments to Esther stating

Go and assemble all of the Jews

relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter (Esth. 4:14).

This reflects that the decree can indeed be repealed. Therefore, mourning in Esther should also be considered petitionary mourning despite the lack of an explicit address to God. The desperate call of Esther to gather the people in a corporal fast.⁹ Although these sources record the 13th of Adar as a festive day, they do not record a prohibition of fasting on this day. One can find this information in the Megillat ta’anit,¹³ a list of thirty-six Jewish holidays, mostly from Hasmonean and Roman times. According to the Megillat, Tasting was prohibited on these holidays.¹⁰

⁹ Seidler, Ayelet. Source: *Vetus testamentum*, 69 no 1 2019, p 117-134.

¹⁰Mitchell. Source: *AJS Review*, 34 no 2 Nov 2010. P 309-351

Application

Fasting is considered one of the essential practices for God's people up to the time of Jesus and thereafter. Fasting was included in rituals, as well as the ceremonial life of God's people (Leviticus 16:29; 23:29). It was a response taken out of a variety of situations, including desperation. Jesus even instructed on fasting and treated fasting as a commission (Matthew 6:16). It is considered a duty that as a part of the Christian calling.

It is almost certain that the Palestinian custom of fasting for three days in Adar was established to commemorate the three days of fasting initiated by Esther. With regard to the antiquity of this custom, there is documentation showing that it was a practice among many Jews in Palestine.¹¹ (Mitchell 336)

Fasting from food and water was specifically noted by Esther and should be taken in to account when fasting in today's context. Delegating communal fasting within one ministry has biblical basis found in Esther. Applying fasting to your individual life and or communal has demonstrated to be beneficial from the biblical standpoint. Some of the benefits of fasting with the support of a variety of scripture are listed below.

- Seek God's guidance (Judges 20:26)
- Seek deliverance or Protection (2 Chronicles 20:3-4)
- Helps to express repentance and a return to God (1 Samuel 7:6)
- Helps to humble oneself before God (1 Kings 21:27-29)
- Helps to express love and worship for God (Luke 2:37)

¹¹Mitchell. Source: AJS Review, 34 no 2 Nov 2010, p 326

It is apparent that the Bible supports current Christians to continue in fasting and benefit from a 3 day fast.

Conclusion

In summary, there is a clear discernible sense of divine dependency on Yahweh in the book of Esther, brought about by the careful compilation of the motifs of, fasting, mourning, and loyalty.

One of the central questions occupying scholars and interpreters considering the book of Esther is God's absence. The assumption that God is present behind the scenes is accepted by many scholars, although they disagree on where God's covert presence might be detected. (Seidler 132)

The author connected links between the descriptions of mourning in the book of Esther and Jonah to bring clarity of the intimacy with God by mourning.¹² Therefore even though God appears not present in the narrative of Esther, it is through fasting and mourning that the desire to be intimate with God was made clear. Demonstrated the power of God through fasting and mourning to break through customs, traditions, and decrees of the reign of the 5th-century, Persian king, Xerxes I (reigned 486–465 BCE).

The successful outcome of Esther's fasting demonstrates the power and divine intervention released through fasting by breaking through the customs, traditions, and decrees of the reign of the 5th-century, Persian king, Xerxes I (reigned 486–465 BCE).

¹² Seidler, Ayelet. Source: *Vetus testamentum*, 69 no 1 2019, p 117-134.

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