

A game of queens

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[0 : 00] So, Esther. As I said, a curious book. I put a couple of quotes up there. First one you may have heard of quite well known. Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable, the art of the next best.

It was Otto von Bismarck who said that, who I believe was one of the German chancellors. I think one of the, in the music of Evita, actually makes a song from that. Politics is the art of the possible. The other quotation you probably are familiar with, when Jesus says that all things are possible with God, Jesus answers that in answer to the question, who could be saved?

Esther is a strange book, but as we look at it, I think we find it illustrates both these quotations. In a sense, Esther and Mordecai were doing the best they could in the situation they had.

Making use of what they had to hand and living probably with some compromises, which they may well not have liked. And yet at the same time, it is the hand of God that stops all this collapsing in a heap, all going disastrously wrong.

[1 : 27] And as we go through the book, you see that on several occasions, that at crucial times, how God intervenes. And coincidences, we might put them, might think of them.

And yet, they're not really coincidences, because this is God's providence at work. So, what can we say about the book of Esther? A few things about the book generally.

It sits physically in our Bibles, between the historical books and the wisdom books, before the book of Job. And stylistically, and in a sense, even spiritually, it also sits there, between the historical books and the wisdom books.

Its style, in many ways, is very different from the other historical books. The text we have is based on the Hebrew Masoretic text, and it makes no explicit mention of God at all.

That's one of the things, you know, that everybody knows about, I suppose, about the book of Esther. There is no explicit mention of God at all in the book of Esther. Not in the Masoretic text version, anyway.

[2 : 45] And yet, we clearly see God is at work. There are issues with the text and the canon of the book of Esther, because the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, when the Hebrews were translated into Greek by ancient scholars, includes some additional material that is not in the Hebrew text.

And in particular, it includes some prayers of Mordecai and Esther. And those do address God. These were rejected as being canonical by various scholars, largely, interestingly enough, by Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, the Latin translation.

So it's slightly ironical that some Catholics would like to take these passages as canonical, because it was Jerome, really, who particularly maintained that they were not.

But generally, these passages from the Septuagint are regarded by Protestants, at least, as not part of the canonical text.

Now, unfortunately, while most disputed passages of scriptural books make little real difference to the overall message, if you include these controverted prayers, it actually changes the whole character of the book, because these prayers imply that Esther and Mordecai were much less willing players in all this history than the story in the Hebrew text suggests.

[4 : 22] But as such, these passages do seem to be out of tune with the overall message of the book. So although in some ways you might think, oh, well, if these were in it, it would make it easier, it would make it read more like Ezra or Nehemiah, one might also say that stylistically, they don't really fit in with the rest of the book of Esther.

And so probably they are best ignored. We will touch on this again later as we get into the text. So what sort of book is it? Is it a work of history? Is it a work of historical fiction?

Something like Wolf Hall, where there is some history, but a lot of the detail is filled in. The historical references seem to point to historical authenticity, and yet certainly the story is told very much in a dramatic form.

The Jews must have instigated the Feast of Purim for some reason, and this is an account of the origins of the Feast of Purim. The word picture that we get painted of the workings of the Persian court is compelling, even in that section that Martin read to us.

It gives us a real picture, doesn't it, in our mind's eye of what was going on in that court. It tells of numerous feasts and banquets. As we move on in the text, it tells us of plots and counterplots, of words whispered in people's ears, and words shouted and announced to the whole empire.

[5 : 57] It tells us of a society that's absolutely obsessed with honour and show, of an indecisive king, and of courtiers struggling for advancement in power.

So I think as evangelicals we would take this as a historical text, and yet we must also give some account of the way it's told, the style in which it's told, the genre, as people talk about nowadays. And the text actually is littered with narrative tricks. The main theme of the book is about an attempted genocide, the elimination of the Jews throughout the empire.

And yet, almost the style seems inappropriate. It's light. It's even faintly humorous. It pokes fun at a vain, ineffective king and a pompous bully who is the real villain of the piece.

It's a fast-paced story in some ways, and yet it gets interrupted by these lists of names. And it gets interrupted by lots of large numbers. On the whole, these numbers are not directly relevant to the plot.

[7 : 15] Does it really help us to know that there were 127 provinces? And yet, they serve to enhance the sort of fevered atmosphere of the Persian court.

They serve to describe the complexity of court life. And these overblown feasts and banquets provide the opportunities for political maneuvering.

Esther turns out to be quite adept at that herself. Most of the characters really are caricatures. They're just sketches. They're not in some ways developed.

The exception to this, of course, is the character of Esther herself. As we go through the book, we watch her transformation from a young orphan girl to an effective politician and ruler.

Phil gave me a book by Barry Webb called Five Festal Garments, and that has a very interesting article on the book of Esther in it, about a discussion of the book.

[8 : 22] It's worth reading, but I have to disagree with him on one point. He says that the main character of the book is Mordecai. I don't think so.

I think the main character of the book is Esther herself. It may or may not be a coincidence or an interesting fact. There have been two Tindale commentaries in the Tindale series written on the book of Esther, and interestingly, they're both written by women, one by Jane Baldwin and one by Deborah Reid.

But be that as it may, I would suggest to you that the main character in the book is not Mordecai, not Xerxes the king, not the villain, but Esther herself.

The theme is the salvation of the Jews in exile, but the heroine of the book is Esther, and how she transforms, as I say, from a young orphan girl to an effective politician.

So I'd suggest to you that Esther is in fact a book about politics, and it's written in a wisdom style.

[9 : 38] How can the people of God operate in an ambivalent society, a society that sometimes offers adulation and flattery, and sometimes offers hatred and persecution?

I need to read this book and think and learn to become wise. But if it's a book about politics, written two and a half millennia ago in a despotic empire, half a world away, can it really be relevant to us today, we might ask?

Well, perhaps look a little deeper into the story. It's a book, isn't it, about a woman who takes charge in a political crisis. It's about decisions, political decisions, that once taken are rather difficult to unravel.

The law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed. It's about the law of unintended consequences. How some decision we take may have consequences that we don't expect.

And it's about the resulting confusion among the political elite. If you look at chapter 3, verse 15, it says there was confusion in the city of Susa. That all makes it sound rather topical, doesn't it?

[11 : 05] Problems in one sense that Esther faced exactly the same problems that our politicians and the politicians and the people of God living in society face today.

And this book is the story of Esther. And as Mordecai tells us in chapter 4, verse 14, Esther is the right woman in the right place at the right time.

Esther, for such a time as this. So we'll look at this part of the text, this introductory section, before the plot really gets going. It tells us about most of the characters.

We haven't met Haim and the villain yet, but most of the characters we meet here. And we could describe the text and just look at the text in perhaps three sections.

It's quite a long text, but we can look at it in these three sections. First of all, we meet this tricky questions of gender politics in this first chapter.

[12:11] And then we have this curious game, this curious competition, through which Esther gets to be queen. And then just at the end, we'll look at this different party.

It's one thing that Xerxes liked to do, it's to throw parties. But this party at the end here is slightly different to the parties at the beginning. Excuse me.

So what should we make of these first two chapters?

The narrative itself is clear enough, as I say. We learn of a vain and ineffective king. He's called Hazor Eris in the Hebrew text.

If you have an ESV rather than the NIV, you'll find his name is given as Ahasuerus. But it's generally accepted that this is King Xerxes.

[13:16] And so the NIV gives his name as Xerxes. He's the son of Darius I. He reigned from 486 to 465 BC, which makes this banquet therefore around 483 BC.

This is the same Xerxes who pops up in the book of Ezra, who's actually delaying things. He's a very indecisive king, it seems.

And he's a king who's obsessed with appearances. The description here tallies with the archaeological evidence of the royal citadel.

The citadel was a kind of fortified palace in the city of Susa, which was one of the four capitals of the empire. And in the centre of Susa was this great citadel, a sort of fortified palace.

And we read of this party, this celebration that apparently went on for half a year. Commentaries point out that we can't really have had all these officials removed, relieved of duties for six months or the empire would have degenerated into chaos.

[14:35] So presumably this was something that they did along with their day job, as it were. But nothing that Xerxes liked to do more than celebrate and show off his wealth and liberality.

And this sort of floating six-month party ends with these seven days that we're told about of particular celebration when all the menfolk got together and got drunk.

Rather, the narrator rather labours that point, doesn't he? He says, every man could have as much drink as he liked to display the king's liberality. And it was served in gold goblets.

Gold goblets are not particularly useful, really, ways of drinking wine, but they show off the, over the top, the extravagance of this.

And the wine, as we say, flowed like water. The decoration is lavish. And the menfolk had got together to get drunk while the women held their own party.

[15:41] If all is not sweetness at light, at least it's merriment and festivity. But suddenly, there's a crisis. The king himself gets a little too drunk, perhaps.

And he calls for the queen to appear before his equally drunk menfolk. And rather than just send a polite request, he sends, as it were, almost a heavy mob.

He sends his seven eunuchs to go and fetch her. The display of the queen's beauty is to be the crowning glory of this celebration.

Not just all these hangings and these gold cups. Thus, the display of the queen's beauty is to be paraded publicly for the men to leer at, it seems.

One can't avoid some sympathy, I think, with Vashti. There is a rabbinical tradition, actually, that the meaning of verse 11, which says she's to appear wearing the royal crown, was that she was to appear wearing the royal crown and nothing else.

[16:51] Whether that's true or not, it's certainly clear that the king's intentions here are not very wholesome. Vashti is to be presented as an object of lust, a possession of the king, to be envied, not as an important person as the queen in her own right.

So one must have some sympathy with Vashti. But a cleverer woman might have finessed it somehow, find some way to have preserved her dignity and her dignity as queen.

She was the queen, after all, and it was her duty to uphold the honour of the state. And ruining the king's party by a calculated insult was not really going to help.

So while we must, as I say, have some sympathy with Vashti, we must think that perhaps she could have handled it better. Anyway, she refuses to come and the king is not at all pleased.

The king at least has the sense to consult his political advisors before he acts too precipitously.

Once again, we get a list of seven names and one of them, Mamukin, comes to the fore and he spots an opportunity.

[18:11] He can gain some political advantage. He can contribute to the suppression of women generally and he can remove this troublesome queen all in one fell swoop. A personal spat between Xerxes and Vashti has expanded into a political crisis affecting the whole empire.

And of course, as in all the best spin, there is a smidgen of truth in it, isn't there? The Bible does indeed say that wives should respect their husbands. But there's a lot of difference between respect and slavery.

There's a lot of difference between respecting your wife as a helper and asking her to respect your judgment and displaying her as an object of lust and a possession to be presented to the world as a possession.

Women are not possessions to be displayed. So, while there is, say, a smidgen of truth in this spin, I don't think we're at all obliged to go along with Mamukin's policy here.

Women are not possessions. The authority of the law is invoked in verse 19, according to the law of Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed.

[19:29] And that lays the sense for what comes later. Because much of the plot later on revolves around this idea of trying to unravel a decision that's once been taken and cannot be easily unraveled.

Why could the law of Medes and Persians not have been changed? Perhaps because the authority of the king, in a sense, would be demeaned by that.

The law comes from the king, in this view. And therefore, once the king is pronounced, that pronouncement should stand. And if it turns out he had to make a mistake, you have to get round it somehow.

It's rather like, yeah, I have to be careful what I say here, but the Catholics, of course, claim that the Pope is infallible when he speaks ex cathedra.

And if it turns out that something was not quite right, you have to think of a way round it rather than unravel it. But the authority of the law cannot be invoked.

[20:45] We might say again that, well, it doesn't apply to us to it, does it, in a democracy? Well, maybe it does. Brexit is Brexit. The democracy is spoken.

It can't be unraveled. Anyway, Memekan's plan is to hold a beauty contest.

Doesn't sound totally appropriate, does it, really? It seems to be going to find somewhere even more beautiful than Vashti. But Memekan's plan, nevertheless, meets with general approval.

But, of course, what even wise Memekan cannot realise is that he's opening the door to a far more formidable queen than Vashti ever was.

There's going to be Queen Esther. But anyway, Vashti is set aside and this policy is put into place. Tells us at least King Xerxes waited and his anger has subsided and presumably he was a bit more sober.

[21:57] Before he put this policy in place but that's what he did. He got the civil service together. Got them to organise the thing.

A new queen is required and this is how we're going to find one. And so the thing gets underway. And again, it's all rather ridiculously over the top, isn't it?

Who needs 12 months of beauty treatment? That was what each girl was given. Chapter 2, verse 12. The whole thing smacks of an empire that just had money to burn that was just completely over the top.

And then each girl gets one night with the king. And after that she was put out to grass in the harem verse 14. Chapter 2.

Well I suppose at least after that she'd enjoy a comfortable if rather pointless life. Hardly a good way to choose a queen really but that's what happens and that's what Xerxes and his advisors decided to do.

[23 : 14] And so it's at this point we were introduced to Esther a Jewish girl an orphan. Her parents having died she's taken into care by a cousin Mordecai who presumably is considerably older than she is.

Mordecai appears to have been a minor government official as we see from verse 11 or I don't mean verse 11 well sorry yes I didn't mean verse 11 he had some access to the court we can see in verse 11 in verse 19 verse 19 we read in the chapter 2 we read that Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate which probably suggests he was some minor official in the government whether he actively promoted Esther for this contest is not clear frankly but he certainly seems to have made no attempt to hide her or to remove her from the city of Susa and in the circumstances such a beautiful girl around the city is certainly not going to go unnoticed perhaps he felt that her was the safest place for her we don't know perhaps he saw a political opportunity and made use of what he had to hand his beautiful queen but whatever his own motivation we know that at least he didn't abandon Esther because in verse 11 we read that he went and listened to find out how she was getting on he had sufficient access to the court probably not to get into the harem but there seems to have been some place perhaps where they could sort of talk through the wall or over the hedge or something and Esther certainly didn't abandon

Mordecai certainly didn't abandon his ward Esther and Esther herself seems to have been a willing or at least a committed participant in this in all she does there must have involved some compromise with the detailed provisions of the Jewish law doubtless the possessions the pair did have questions of conscience but it seems that faith in the purposes of God took precedence over scrupulousness here and it is this point really that the ambiguity the question of the book of Esther the problems and questions it arises in our mind come to the fore where Mordecai and Esther write in what they did do you sometimes have to compromise over lesser things to achieve the greater Chris was reminding us this morning wasn't he that the word of God never guides us that we're never guided to do things contrary to the word of God and yet the book of Esther reminds us that it's also true that the word of God has to be interpreted with wisdom and insight you can't it's not just a set of simple rules to follow I mean just to take some examples let's perhaps take some examples think of the great pioneer missionary David Livingston who more or less disappeared into the jungle on his own you could have argued that in doing that he was disobeying the command to continue to meet with God's people because God's people there for him to meet with not initially the purpose of the rule was to establish that church of God and the mutual support and so in planting new churches

David Livingston was actually doing just that nobody would say he was disobeying that rule by obeying in a sense the greater rule to go to the ends of the earth in a sense the greater command overrode the lesser one there because they both had a common purpose which was the strengthening establishment of God's kingdom perhaps take an example that's more relevant to all of us Jesus told us didn't he not to lay up treasure on earth but we don't interpret that as a ban on savings account list I guess having savings account list I guess most of us wouldn't and yet it is true that godly men and women have understood that command in different ways so one might think for instance of C.T.

[28 : 15] Studd who believed that the right way was to give away all his wealth and in a sense Weck has made that policy ever since although they modified it a little bit was he right or not it's debatable to be honest you know when he went to India he didn't have the resources to do it and he had to go and find some other wealthy men to give him the money to do it but he made the decision according to his conscience but one might also think of the example of William Wilberforce again a man who was born into wealth and privilege but he made the opposite decision didn't he to maintain an effective politician he kept his wealth he had to maintain the lifestyle of a gentleman now of course he wasn't as extravagant as the other people in that society and he did indeed give much of his wealth away but he did keep some of it and he kept it why he kept it for the work of the kingdom because he wouldn't have been able to do the task that

God had given him if he hadn't maintained that lifestyle of a gentleman in London society and yet we do know even from his own writings that sometimes there were problems of conscience that he had over this the frivolity of that society that in the sense he was obliged to engage in but he did it not because he wanted that society not because he wanted that wealth but he did it for the sake of the kingdom and that of course is exactly what Jesus is talking about here when he says don't lay up treasure on earth but lay it up in heaven he's not saying that it's wrong necessarily to be wealthy

or even to accumulate wealth he's saying that when you make wealth your God when you set your heart and mind on wealth in this world then you will not set your heart and mind on the work of the kingdom kingdom and William

Wilberforce certainly set his heart and his mind on the kingdom to come he knew that his treasure that he had in this world was to be spent for the good of the kingdom to come and if C.T.

Studd and William Wilberforce did that in different ways they still had the same motivation to do it in one sense they were still obeying Jesus his command here you do need to consider the purpose of the law and very often we do find ourselves in these sort of situations don't we how do we live in this society in which we live without undermining the holiness of God's people and proclaiming his name and that does require wisdom you can't be spoon fed in this you've got to engage your mind you've got to acquire wisdom and that's why we have these wisdom books in the scripture the riddles of the why's as it says we have to think about they're not immediately obvious always what the correct decision is and Paul of course reminds us of that as well doesn't he as he writes in Romans 12 1 and 2 again another verse that

Chris quoted this morning what did he actually say I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God that is your spiritual act to worship so that seems in a sense clear enough of only your bodies holy and pleasing to God but how do you actually do that well he says you do it in this way do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good pleasing and perfect will you do have to go for the greater matters of the law not to eliminate the lesser but to rather so that the lesser can follow in the fullness of time if you do it the other way around you're in danger of landing up in pharisaism remember what Jesus said to them woe to you teachers of the law and pharisees you hypocrites you give a tenth of your spices mint dill and coming but you've neglected the more important matters of the law justice mercy and faithfulness you should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former

[33 : 06] Jesus said not one jot or tittle from the law can disappear but we do have to imply it with wisdom and insight and yet ultimately the book of Esther doesn't actually answer this moral question it still remains were Mordecai and Esther justified in their actions and even if you do take the Septuagint's view that they did it under duress that doesn't really solve the moral dilemma does it there were plenty of God's people who would rather go to death than compromise their principles Daniel and his friends refused to compromise didn't they and even if Mordecai and Esther felt themselves to some extent constrained they did seem to be committed to this policy were they right or wrong

I don't think we've given a simple answer to that question but we are given a different question a different answer what we can say is that their faith in the purposes and providence of God is what really comes out in this book even though his name is never mentioned we can say that God chose to bless them for that we can remember that God uses different people God can use an Elisha or an Isaiah or a Jeremiah all very different people God can use a firebrand like John Knox one man is more fearful than 10,000 armed men sorry not being Phil I can't do the Scottish accent but it sounds better in a Scottish accent John Knox was a firebrand one of the reformers another reformer was Thomas Cranmer the careful politician the cautious one the one who in fact the first time was challenged did actually recant although he was his conscience didn't his conscience troubled him and eventually he was of course burnt at the stake with some of the other reformers but Cranmer was a very different person from Knox and yet God used both of them John Knox in the Scottish Reformation Thomas Cranmer in the English Reformation and right or wrong it is at least true that Esther and Mordecai did the best they could with the situation they found themselves in and so we see that at this stage Esther starts to show her abilities everyone it seems was pleased with her Hegai I remember was a eunuch so it's unlikely her beauty would have had much impact on him it must have been her intelligence and willingness that impressed him Esther was no sullen teenager she was a woman of wit and intelligence and skill and yet she wasn't proud she's willing to take advice from her uncle verses 10 and 11 she's willing to take advice from her Adai Hegai in verse 15 we see Esther has made a powerful ally in Hegai and Hegai has spotted a winner and both of them are going to benefit from it but Esther is patient she doesn't act precipitously she will wait for her opportunity and of course according to the rules of the game she had to wait a whole year but then she did have her night with Xerxes the die is cast there's a bit about lots and dice in Esther as well the die is cast metaphorically here Esther has entered the

game and which way will Xerxes jump that God has a purpose for Esther and so the king is hooked Esther is the right woman in the right place at the right time Esther is God's woman in God's place at God's time so we live as it were with this ambiguity but this is the beginning of the story not the end of it and we see how it works out in the weeks to come but let's finish by looking at Xerxes reaction well he's hooked isn't he he's entranced by that one night apparently with Esther and so Esther is chosen as the new queen and Xerxes true to his nature so is another party like the first ones there is a general holiday and amnesty and yet there is a difference already

[38 : 40] Esther apparently has become to have an influence on the policy of the king because do you notice that the earlier party was to honour the king Vashti was to be presented as a trophy Vashti was to be presented as the prized possession of the king the party in fact really was to dishonour Vashti but this party we told was to honour Esther said it's Esther's party it says that that's what it was called presumably that was recorded in the royal annals verse 18 the king gave a great banquet Esther's banquet this banquet was to honour Esther already Esther had begun to have an influence on the affairs of that kingdom she was presented as the new queen but she was presented in a different way to

Vashti was going to be presented Xerxes at least has made some progress in wisdom it seems he discovered that a queen is not a personal possession or an object of lust for himself and his friends but rather an asset to his kingdom so we'll stop there for this week but sadly Esther's troubles are far from over in fact they're only just beginning and as the story develops we find how Mordecai and Esther relate and operate to the in the intrigues and the plots in the king's court but a much more serious crisis looms but we'll leave that to next week so we'll leave Esther there for this week perhaps we leave her a little leave the book a little puzzled a little wondering what's going to happen next but I think that's alright

I think in a sense we should be puzzled by this because we are supposed to think about it and think what what would we have done in that situation we might even give different answers to that but we might we should be sure that when we give that answer we should do it for the good of God's people and God's kingdom and we should be sure that we're doing that and that it is not for our own benefit and action when we seek wisdom we seek wisdom by thinking about some of these questions which are not so simple so let's go away with that in our minds to think about this I've been puzzling over this book I have to say since I said I was going to do a series on it puzzling over the moral ambiguities in it but let's make that a positive thing if we go away puzzled let's go away puzzled but not perhaps confused let's go away thinking about raising these questions of how do we live as

God's people in a hostile society do do! I don't I I do I do