Notes on Quiz #3

Women in Antiquity • Spring 2023

1. How does Esther save her people? What about her character or actions do you think helps make this possible?

Not knowing she is a Jew, the Persian king, Ahasuerus, has fallen for Esther and marries her; she keeps her heritage secret from him at the urging of Mordecai, her cousin and adoptive father. Meanwhile the king's vizier, Haman, is angered that Mordecai will not bow to him, and in his hubrus orders that all Jews in the kingdom be slaughtered and that Mordecai be hanged—despite Mordecai's role in exposing a conspiracy to kill the king by two of his eunuchs.

Esther hears about the planned genocide, but there is a law that says she cannot present herself before the king unless called. So Esther offers a "banquet of wine" to the king and Haman, followed by another the next night. At the second banquet, the besotted king offers to grant any petition of hers, even if it is half the kingdom. Esther tells him that someone plans to murder her people—the very Haman sitting at his side. Enraged, the king orders Haman hanged on the scaffold that had been reserved for Mordecai. Haman's lands are given to Esther, and the Jews are protected and given the property of their abusers.

Throuighout the story Esther shows both humility and determination, and is intelligent enough to find a way to assert herself within the restrictions of a woman at court. In the end, the story makes clear that the responsibility to ensure the safety and future of the Jewish people falls on all Jews regardless of gender, not just male authority figures like Mordecai.

2. In the story of Ruth, what does Ruth decide to do after her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law die in Moab? What about her actions do you think made the story of a foreign woman like Ruth important enough to include in scripture?

Ruth, though Moabite, remains loyal to her husband's family and goes with her heartbroken mother-in-law, Naomi, and her sister-in-law to Naomi's homeland, Bethlehem, in Judah, forsaking her own heritage and gods. She tells Naomi, "your people is my people, and your god is my god." This loyalty to her bereaved mother-in-law is eventually rewarded by Yahweh. She gains a new family, and her son becomes the father of King David.

Part of what's being emphasized here is that in Judah (as generally in the ancient world) on becoming married a woman's duties to her father's family are transferred to her husband's. These duties include religious obligations to the god or gods of the husband's family. The flip side of this is that the covenant with Yahweh does not fall only on men; Ruth's own relationship with god is at the heart of the story. Also relevant is the fact that Ruth clearly stays with Naomi because she loves her and because Naomi needs her; to Ruth, compassion is more important than the suffering she'll experience from leaving her homeland and people.

EC1. In Esther, the threat to the Persian Jewish community is sparked by

(a) Mordecai's refusal to bow to the king's vizier, Haman

EC2. How is the behavior of Vashti, the previous queen, contrasted with Esther's? What do you think the author might have been getting at by including Vashti as a precursor to Esther?

On the seventh day of a festival of food and wine, the king orders Vashti to appear and show her beauty to the assembled attendees; Vashti refuses the summons. The king is advised that her actions are an insult to the king and that word of her disobedience will spread to wives throughout the land, inspiring them to show contempt for their husbands, too. So the king announces to all of Persia that Vashti has lost her position as queen on account of her disobedience.

Esther, on the other hand, is shown as dutiful and respectful to the king and the rules of the palace, implicitly making Vashti look willful and self-sabotaging by her assertiveness. Both Vashti and Esther are shown as being strong women, but only Esther was able to achieve her own goals by engaging with the king rather than counterproductively asserting her own agency.