

ESTHER AGREES TO INTERCEDE

ESTHER 4:1-17

+ ADDITIONS C & D PRAYERS

[Vulgate 13:8 - 14:19]

Mordecai tells Esther to intercede with the king

4¹When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry;

2 he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

5Then Esther called for Hatak, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. 6Hatak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

We are left to imagine the motives for Mordecai's actions. In his commentary in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday 1971, page 47), Carey Moore writes:

Were Mordecai's actions an expression of self-reproach for bringing all this misfortune on the people for not bowing down to Haman, or a natural expression of grief over the fate of his people, or a quick and certain way of getting the queen's attention?

In verse 3 we might have expected mention of God and/or prayer – neither feature explicitly anywhere in the Hebrew text.

Esther tries to persuade Mordecai to 'take off his sackcloth' (verse 4). When this failed she sent her personal assistant, Hatak, to find out why her cousin was behaving in this way.

Mordecai tells him of the enormous amount of money promised by Haman and gives him a copy of the decree issued to effect 'the destruction of the Jews' (verse 7). He tells Esther she must intercede for her people with the king. The Septuagint adds:

Remembering your humble station when you were supported by my hand because Haman, who is second to the king, has sentenced us to death. Call upon the Lord, and speak to the king concerning us, and save us from death.

As is normal in the Greek Additions, this includes an explicit reference to 'the Lord'.

Esther explains that to go uninvited to the king could mean death. She adds that she has not been invited for thirty days. This adds to the tension: perhaps she is no longer in the king's favour – which makes it all the more likely that she will suffer the death required by the law.

Mordecai warns Esther that she is not safe. He then suggests that 'perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this' (verse 12).

Esther resolves to take the risk. She tells Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa for a public fast. Once again there is no explicit mention of God or of prayer. The author has introduced a fast into the scene to provide a basis for the fast that was to be part of the Purim ritual.

⁹Hatak went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

¹⁰Then Esther spoke to Hatak and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

¹²When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

¹⁵Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

¹⁷Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

⁸*Then Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord. ⁹He said, "O Lord, Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel,*

¹⁰*for you have made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven. ¹¹You are Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist you, the Lord.*

¹²*You know all things; you know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman; ¹³for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel! ¹⁴But I did this so that I might not set human glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride.*

¹⁵*And now, O Lord God and King, God of Abraham, spare your people; for the eyes of our foes are upon us to annihilate us, and they desire to destroy the inheritance that has been yours from the beginning. ¹⁶Do not neglect your portion, which you redeemed for yourself out of the land of Egypt.*

¹⁷*Hear my prayer, and have mercy upon your inheritance; turn our mourning into feasting that we may live and sing praise to your name, O Lord; do not destroy the lips of those who praise you."*

¹⁸*And all Israel cried out mightily, for their death was before their eyes.*

Addition C in the Septuagint includes a prayer offer to God by Mordecai followed by a prayer offered by Esther. 'The Lord' is found eight times in Mordecai's prayer (verses 9-17) and twice in the introduction (verse 8). As has already been noted several times, a feature of the Hebrew text is that God is never explicitly mentioned. The author does not doubt the providence of God. He wants to focus the reader's attention on the truth that divine intervention is mediated through the decisions made by people who live the covenant in the way they live for others.

Here, too, we find the word ‘Lord’ repeated: twice in the introduction (verses 1-3) and seven times in Esther’s prayer (verses 3-19). She knows that only YHWH is the king of the Jews (verse 3).

The Old Latin Version adds 134 words to verse 5, giving examples from the Scriptures of YHWH’s support.

Verse 7 picks up Jeremiah’s criticism of pre-exilic Judah. Instead of the people looking to YHWH they ‘played the whore’ looking to the ‘gods’ of Egypt and Babylon. It is for this that ‘they were handed over to our enemies’.

A likely period for the composition of this prayer is at the time of the persecution instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-164BC) – the period of the Book of Daniel and the Maccabees. There are similarities in spirit and in theology between Esther’s prayer and that found in Daniel 9:3-19.

Verse 11 is a strong statement in regard to pagan so-called ‘gods’. They have ‘no being’.

¹Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord.

²She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair.

³She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: “O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, ⁴for my danger is in my hand.

⁵Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised.

⁶And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies ⁷because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord!

⁸And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery, but they have covenanted with their idols ⁹to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance, to stop the mouths of those who praise you and to quench your altar and the glory of your house, ¹⁰to open the mouths of the nations for the praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king.

¹¹“O Lord, do not surrender your sceptre to what has no being; and do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us.

¹²Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion!

¹³Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him.

¹⁴But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord. ¹⁵You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien.

¹⁶You know my necessity – that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. ¹⁷And your servant has not eaten at Haman's table, and I have not honoured the king's feast or drunk the wine of libations. ¹⁸Your servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord God of Abraham. ¹⁹O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evildoers. And save me from my fear!"

To this point Esther has been praying for her people. Now her focus moves to her personal predicament.

Verse 16 appears to be a justification for Esther having gone against Judah's rejection of mixed marriages (see Ezra 10:2; Nehemiah 13:23-27). This does not appear to trouble the author of the Hebrew text.