

THE HIDDEN GOD OF ESTHER

SESSION 4

LAW IN ESTHER

- ◆ Word for law is Persian loan word - **דָּרַךְ**
- ◆ Can also mean decree, edict or commission
- ◆ Appears only in Esther with 2 exceptions
 - Deut 33:2 - a corrupt text that literally reads "fire was law to them"
 - Ezra 8:36 - in which it refers specifically to Persian edicts
- ◆ Used 19 times in Esther, a book with only 10 chapters

WHAT IS PERSIAN LAW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ESTHER'S AUTHOR?

- ◆ First used in connection with the law on drinking at the king's banquet (Esth 1:8) - each reveler is to drink as much as he desires (Note the absurdity of this - a law to enforce personal indulgence)
- ◆ At same banquet, king expects to find a law to deal with recalcitrant queens (Esth 1:15)
 - King's advisors propose a law to deal with this situation (Esth 1:19) - now Vashti's refusal to appear before the king is made law
 - Author informs us that this law is irreversible
 - Contrast between gravity of unchangeable law and the spontaneous, off-hand method of law-making by the king is ironic
- ◆ By law, the gathered virgins must undergo 12 months of beauty treatments (Esth 2:12) - the beauty of the most beautiful from India to Cush needs to be enhanced for this king
- ◆ Law of Haman is countenanced by the king's handing over of the signet ring
 - All citizens of Persia are called on to kill a specific ethnic group (Esth 3:14)
 - The law which is good in Haman's eyes is a command to kill the neighbor
- ◆ Esther and Mordecai's law
 - Also condoned by the giving of the signet ring and a command to write what is good in their eyes (Esth 8:8)
 - Though written in terms of self-defense, still results in a massive loss of life
 - This violence continues with Esther's request for a second day of fighting (Esth 9:13-14)

RESULTS OF PERSIAN LAW

- ◆ Kingdom is left without queen - even the king feels loss (Esth 2:1)
- ◆ Young women are gathered for the king's collection of beautiful women
- ◆ Confusion and anarchy result from the joint venture of the king and Haman - the entire city of Susa is perplexed (Esth 3:15)
 - Entire Jewish community can only grieve and mourn (Esth 4:3)
 - Haman and the king celebrate with a drink
- ◆ Death
 - Haman's edict commands the death of all Jews (Esth 4:8)
 - Esther risks death by approaching the king unbidden - this law has escape clause (Esth 4:11)

- Hope for survival of Jewish community means death for the enemies of the Jews (Esth 8:13)
- Inflexibility of Persian law contributes to this outcome

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE IN ESTHER

- ◆ Esther's request is that the king write to revoke or reverse the edict of Haman (Esth 8:5)
- ◆ King replies that Esther should be happy to write her own edict which cannot be reversed (Esth 8:8)
- ◆ Demonstrates the actual powerlessness of King Ahasuerus - bound in the straitjacket of laws that were pleasing in someone's eyes
- ◆ King's refusal to seize the opportunity which Esther presents to him is really what dooms his citizens
 - King reaction to the violence and mayhem even in his capitol city is curiously low-key (Esth 9:12)
- ◆ Esther's author may also be saying something about the consequences of evil which, once set in motion cannot be entirely reversed, at least not without great cost
- ◆ Traditional explanations of the violence in Esther
 - The violence is in line with the exaggeration which lends the book its cartoon-like character
 - Simple acceptance of the Persian law as unchangeable
 - Contrast the violence of the non-historical tale of Esther and the actual historical violence of the holocaust

A DIFFERENT LAW

- ◆ Haman states the truth - "their law is different from all of the people and the law of the king" (Esth 3:8)
- ◆ Jewish **הורה** or instruction is different from Persian **הך**
- ◆ Citizens of Susa demonstrate better judgement than the king
 - They express dismay over Haman's law
 - They rejoice at Mordecai's rise to power
- ◆ Persian law is based on power - as exemplified by horses
- ◆ Esther's author may have been presenting a case for the observance of Deuteronomic law

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ESTHER AND DEUTERONOMIC LAW

- ◆ Passover is the foundation for God's law (Deut 6:20-25)
- ◆ Can Israel have a king? (Deut 17:14-20) Compare this with Judges 21:25.
- ◆ How is government to be run? (Deut 16:18-20)
- ◆ How are the outcasts (the widow, orphan, alien) of society to be treated? (Deut 24:14-15, 17-22, Deut 26:4-15)

RELIGIOUS THEMES IN ESTHER

- ◆ No references to the usual names of God: Yahweh, Elohim
- ◆ Contrasts starkly with 2 major characters named after Babylonian deities
- ◆ Wouldn't any Persian or Babylonian names have underscored the assimilation of the exiles?
- ◆ Esther does have a Jewish name, Hadassah (myrtle), which is referred to once
- ◆ Humorous intent? "The Babylonian gods are really Jewish."
- ◆ Could Esther and Mordecai be a stand-in for the apparently absent Yahweh? (It takes 2 Babylonian gods to approximate the activity of Yahweh.)

MARDUK AND MORDECAI

- ◆ Marduk created the world and humans by doing battle with Tiamat the chaos monster. Haman's name is based on same root as a verb which means to rage or be turbulent (Ezek 5:7)
- ◆ Commands of Tiamat are irrevocable just like the laws of Persia
 - "Powerful are her decrees, irresistible are they." Enuma Elish
- ◆ Tiamat gives this same power to her husband Kingu
 - "As for thee, thy command shall not be changed, the word of thy mouth shall be dependable!" Enuma Elish
- ◆ Marduk contests this power of Tiamat
 - "The command of my lips shall not return void, it shall not be changed." Enuma Elish
 - "Reliable is his word, unalterable is his command." Enuma Elish
 - Compare with Isaiah 55:11
- ◆ Other biblical authors, especially of Exodus have exploited this ancient story of Marduk vs. Chaos
 - Egyptians perish in the tehomot (Tiamat)
 - Yahweh makes a path through the sea using wind, just as Marduk uses wind to slay the monster Tiamat
 - Yahweh splits the sea; Marduk splits Tiamat
 - Battle takes place at Baal-zephon (Exod 14:2), the local place of worship of Baal who vanquished the chaos monster Yamm (the sea) (from McCurley, Ancient Myths and Biblical Faith)
- ◆ Given the strong relationship of Esther to Passover, is Esther's author saying that Yahweh is once again acting like Marduk?
- ◆ Marduk is the god who controls the fates in Babylon (Note: Ancient audiences must have howled when Haman cast the pur in order to determine the best possible date for the defeat of Mordecai and his people.)
- ◆ Marduk is honored at beginning of each year with processional which culminates in a boat ride, during which the *Enuma Elish* is recited
 - Haman casts the pur in the first month of the year
 - Mordecai is led through the streets in procession fit for a king, or a god
- ◆ Tale of Zu (p. 46)
 - Haman covets the power of the king
 - Haman thinks of the king's clothing as synonymous with honor
 - Haman approaches the king in the morning
 - Other pagan hymns speak of Marduk as the god "who crushed the skull of Zu"
 - Other versions of the story say that Shara, the eldest child of Ishtar, recovers the possessions of Enlil

ISHTAR AND ESTHER

- ◆ Ishtar has other names: Inanna (Sumeria), Anath, Astarte (Canaan)
- ◆ Associated with fertility, war, and the suffering of humanity
- ◆ The goddess of whores and the evening and morning stars
- ◆ If Esther does mean star in Persian, it doesn't eliminate the further association with Ishtar
- ◆ Ishtar is also associated with fate
 - "The goddess - with her there is counsel. The fate of everything she holds in her hand." (Haman doesn't just defy one god of fate, but 2 and Esther has the eyes and ears of the king.)
- ◆ Ishtar participates in a sacred marriage to the king as part of her role in fertility
 - Esther may not have had a choice, nonetheless, her one night with the king has everything to do with the choice of the next queen
- ◆ Ishtar descends to the underworld in search of her lover, Tammuz
 - Passes through 7 gates

- Stripped of an article of clothing at each gate
- Questioning of gatekeeper elicits response that these are the rules of the underworld
- Ishtar is killed by Allatu
- ◆ Esther goes to king with expectation of death
 - Her clothing is given great importance in preparation for this event (she literally wears the kingdom)
 - Haman asks for the clothing of the kingdom; Mordecai wears the clothing of the kingdom; Esther clothes herself with the kingdom.
 - How can the king promise Esther half the kingdom when she is already wearing it?