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King Ahasuerus chooses Esther. Paul on Malta.

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Transcript

Esther chapter 2. After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men, who attended him, said, Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king, and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under the custody of Kigai the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them, and let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.

This pleased the king, and he did so. Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jeah, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of

Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. He was bringing up Hadasah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother.

The young woman had a beautiful figure, and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel, in custody of Higai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Higai, who had charge of the women, and the young woman pleased him and won his favor, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known, and every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with spices and ointments for women, when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shayashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her, and she was summoned by name.

When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abahail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai, the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favour in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in to his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants. It was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not made known her kindred or her people as Mordecai had commanded her, but Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthen and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on

King Ahasuerus.

And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther. And Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows, and it was recorded in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.

In Esther Chapter 2, after the removal of Queen Bashti in Chapter 1, we are finally introduced to the main characters of the book, Esther and Mordecai. The events of Chapter 2 likely open two or three years after the events of Chapter 1. Bashti, who was demoted from her queenly status in Chapter 1, now needs to be replaced, and King Ahasuerus seems to be prepared to look for her replacement in a rather unorthodox way. It is the king's young male attendants who first give him the suggestion.

They propose a kingdom-wide beauty contest to select the new queen. Perhaps this proposal has the added advantage for King Ahasuerus of putting the powerful families in Persia in their place, of discouraging his new queen from getting ideas above her station, as Bashti had done, and also of presenting the queen as a woman of the people. The beautiful Bashti had failed to stand as a symbol of his power and might and glory in the previous chapter.

Perhaps now Ahasuerus hopes that a woman chosen from the commoners would be able to do the job instead. Suitable candidates would be chosen for their beauty, youth and virginity. While the text does not belabor the fact, the selection of the replacement for Bashti also seems to have involved an evening of sexual relations with the king.

The purpose of all of this was probably not merely the king's immediate sexual pleasure. The women in question were not sexually experienced. However it would be a symbol of his dominance that he would be the one to deflower the most beautiful women of the land.

Ahasuerus' seeming sense of entitlement to the bodies of his subjects would not have been considered completely out of the ordinary for a Persian king. Persian kings were known for taking large numbers of young men and making them eunuchs, or women and making them concubines. We should also consider that in a society of arranged marriages, the prospect of one's daughter entering the royal harem, and perhaps even marrying the great king Ahasuerus himself and becoming his queen, would likely have been regarded very positively by many.

The typical woman being brought to Ahasuerus was likely not brought to him by force. The text does not airbrush the character of Ahasuerus. We see enough to know that he was not a particularly righteous man.

But on the other hand it does not present him as a real monster. He is a Persian king of

his time, with all that goes with that, much of it bad but not egregiously so. In verse 5 we are introduced to one of the main characters of the book.

Indeed David Dauber has made the provocative suggestion that Mordecai has a reasonable claim to be the main character of the book rather than Esther. He is the first to be introduced, and it is with Mordecai that the book also ends. He is introduced to us as a Jew, one of the Judahite exiles, but his name, which is similar to other names recorded from the period, is one that probably is of pagan origin, perhaps derived from the god Marjuk.

Elements of his genealogy are filled out for us. He is the son of Jea, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Those names evoke a history that is important background for this book.

Shimei was the name of a man in 2 Samuel who was of the household of Saul, and Kish was Saul's father, and the tribe of Benjamin was the tribe of Saul, the first king of Israel. Verse 6 raises some difficult chronological questions. The most natural reading of the text is that Mordecai himself was carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who were Jechoniah.

Jechoniah being another version of the name Jehoikim. If Mordecai was brought away with the captives he would be at least 80 at this point, and that is if we are presuming a very early dating of the book. It may start to stretch credulity that he would have a cousin at least 60 years his junior.

Recognising this, some have argued that the person who was carried away into captivity was not Mordecai but was rather Kish. This may not be the most likely reading of the text in the abstract, but it is a possible one and may be contextually determined. The fact that either Mordecai or his ancestor had been carried away with Jehoikim in 597 BC suggests that the family was of noble stock.

Commoners were not taken away until about 10 years later. Mordecai is bringing up his first cousin Esther. Esther has two names, Hadassah meaning myrtle, or Esther which might come from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar or might relate to the word for star.

Jewish commentators have also seen hints in the way that her name in Hebrew could be understood as Let me hide. The story of Esther is in many ways a story about hiding, a story about Esther's hidden identity and of God's hidden presence and activity in the book. Historically a number of Jewish commentators have also seen here a possibility that Mordecai is married to Esther or perhaps that he has adopted her with the intention of marrying her when she comes of full age.

Such readings are speculative but they have likely drawn some of their strength from the parallels between Esther and the character of Sarah whom Abraham instructs to hide her

identity when she is taken by pagan kings on account of her beauty. There are definite similarities to be seen between Abraham and Sarah and Mordecai and Esther. Sarah whose name means princess anticipates and prefigures in certain ways the character and the actions of this long distant descendant.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is just one of many that can be heard in the background of this book. We don't hear Esther's name Hadassah again in this book but as in the case of Daniel and his three friends, the fact that we know that she has another Hebrew name alerts us to her twofold identity and her need to navigate between two worlds. Hidden behind the Persian queen is the daughter of Sarah, Hadassah.

As in the case of Sarah who was taken into the house of Pharaoh and Bimelech, Esther seems to be rather passive as she is taken into the king's palace. While this probably would not have been seen as a particularly bad fate for many of the women selected they would likely have little choice in the matter. In the book of Esther the character of Joseph is most commonly seen behind the figure of Mordecai but in these verses we might see the figure of Joseph behind the character of Esther as she progresses and finds favour in the sight of all of those around her.

Esther brought into the king's palace is like Joseph in the house of Potiphar or in the prison. Like Joseph she will later be raised up to one of the highest positions in the land. Esther is given favourable treatment over the other women in the harem and advanced ahead of them.

That she is given the best position in the harem singles her out for likely further advancement in the future. Like Abraham commanded Sarah, Mordecai strictly charged Esther not to reveal her identity. We're not told exactly why Mordecai did this, perhaps he was aware of and concerned about anti-Jewish sentiment in the court.

It's also possible that her chances of advancement would have been increased if her people of origin were not known. Mordecai keeps up communication with Esther during the time that she is in the harem. We might presume that he uses discreet intermediaries that bring messages back and forth.

When Esther is taken to King Ahasuerus, she wins great favour in his sight much as she has with everyone else. Preferring her over all of the other virgins, Ahasuerus makes her his queen. Another great feast is thrown as Ahasuerus takes Esther as his wife and queen.

Verse 19 is difficult to understand. The ESV translates the verse, Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Michael Fox lists some of the possibilities. Perhaps the king is looking for a new concubine.

Perhaps some of the courtiers are jealous of Esther and want the king to appoint a new

favourite in her stead. Perhaps it refers to a time before Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus. Or perhaps, and this is his preferred understanding, second refers to the second harem to which the women are being taken.

Even after being chosen by Ahasuerus, Esther continues to keep the word of Mordecai. She is the bearer of a potentially dangerous secret. In different ways, both Rabbi David Foreman and James Jordan hear subtle allusions to the story of Genesis, Eden and the Fall.

Chapter 1 involves something going wrong on the seventh day when all was supposed to be at rest. In chapter 2, the king is going to enter into rest with his new queen in the seventh year of his reign. Both of them argue that we can recall the story of the creation of Eve in the beauty contest of this chapter.

The women are all brought one by one to King Ahasuerus and he inspects them, and the one who is selected he will call by name. Esther is Ahasuerus' Eve. Rabbi Foreman suggests that there may be further subtle verbal allusions back to the story of Eden and the Fall.

The description of Mordecai walking in front of the court of the harem is much the same as the description of the Lord walking in the garden in Genesis 3. In verse 10 of our chapter, Mordecai commands upon Esther. This is a stranger way of speaking that we also encounter in Genesis 2.16 as God commanded upon Adam. The case for a connection between the story of Esther and the story of Eden and the Fall is a cumulative one.

It doesn't depend entirely upon any single strand of argumentation, but rather upon the gathered weight of many such arguments. These connections will be greatly filled out as we work through the book. The chapter ends with an important episode that sets up further events in the book.

Mordecai becomes privy to information concerning a plot against the king's life. Two of the king's eunuchs, Bithan and Teresh, previously mentioned in chapter 1, conspire against the king, and Mordecai gets wind of this. He is presumably told by a third party and does not merely overhear a conversation.

He relays the information to Esther, and Esther informs Ahasuerus, mentioning the name of Mordecai. The plot is foiled, and the event is recorded in the book of the Chronicles of the King. Mordecai is not rewarded in any way at this point, however.

A question to consider. When reading a text like this, it's important to consider some of the texts that lie in the background. These can be like the countermelodies that go with the melody of the text to produce harmony.

I have mentioned already the story of Joseph, the story of Eden and the Fall, the story of

Abraham and Sarah, the story of the establishment of the tabernacle. I have also mentioned the character of Saul. Do you find these connections persuasive or unpersuasive? How would you rank these connections from the weakest to the strongest? Do you hear any connections that I have not mentioned? Acts 28, verses 1-15
No doubt this man is a murderer.

Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead.

But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery, and Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.

And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honoured us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days, and from there we made a circuit and arrived at Regium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brothers, and were invited to stay with them for seven days, and so we came to Rome.

And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the forum of Appius, and three taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. In Acts chapter 28 we are in the finishing straight of the book.

Paul and his companions have been shipwrecked, and after spending some time upon the island of Malta, they finally complete their journey to Rome. Through miraculous divine protection, Paul and all of the 276 persons aboard the shipwrecked vessel made their way safely to land. The soldiers had planned to kill all of the prisoners, but the centurion prevented them from doing so.

Having been driven by the wind for 14 days, without sight of sun or stars, they didn't have a clear idea of where they were. When they arrived, they discovered that they had landed on Malta. There are competing claims about the identity of the island, arising in part from a narrower construal of the Sea of Adria, mentioned in chapter 27 verse 27.

Some have seen it as a more limited region of the modern Adriatic Sea, between Italy and the Balkans. The island of Miliet, off the Croatian coast near Dubrovnik, is suggested

as a possible alternative to Malta. However, this identification is unpersuasive and rejected by most scholars.

When we consider the direction of the wind that drove them away from Crete, their concerns about the sands of the Sirtis, and the fact that the ship that they later board goes via Syracuse, which a vessel of Miliet would not have done, Malta is by far the more likely location. Several commentators note that the name of Malta means refuge, although Luke does not seem to make anything of the etymology here. Malta is a smaller island than Crete or Cyprus.

It is about 95 square miles, or 250 square kilometres. It is 27 kilometres, or 17 miles long, and 14.5 kilometres, or 9 miles wide. It is about 93 kilometres, or 58 miles, south of the island of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

The local people are here described as barbarians, in verse 2, neither Greek nor Latin speakers, and likely without the Greco-Roman culture associated with those languages. They would probably chiefly have been people of Phoenician origin, speaking Punic, although there would be Greek and Latin speakers around, such as Publius. The distinction between Greeks and barbarians is one that Paul himself employs in Romans 1, verse 14.

It need not be taken in a derogatory sense, as it principally refers to the linguistic differences. Luke presents the Maltese natives very positively. He praises their hospitality, which would have been most important for survivors of a shipwreck, who would have been greatly at risk if they had been among inhospitable peoples.

The survivors are presumably soaked through from the swim, so the natives kindle a fire. Possibly several fires were made for various groups of the shipwrecked persons, but Paul here might refer to a fire made for his own group of survivors. Paul gathered wood with the others, but a viper came out and bit him on the hand.

Having been tempest-tossed and shipwrecked, many pagans might have speculated that the gods were against Paul. The goddess Justice, a daughter of Zeus, clearly had fated Paul to destruction for some wickedness, and wasn't going to allow him to escape. However, Paul shook off the viper and neither suffered immediate harm nor swelled up and fell down dead afterwards.

Some have raised questions about the plausibility of this account, as there are no poisonous snakes on Malta today. Indeed, this is one of the considerations some advance in favour of a different island being in view. As the reasons for identifying the island as Malta are strong on other grounds, it seems reasonable to suppose that the locals are Maltese.

They seem to expect that Paul would be injured by the snake, which would be surprising

if no poisonous snakes were to be found on the island. It is quite possible that there were once poisonous snakes there, but that they went extinct or were destroyed by humans, as they have done in other places. The story of the viper might remind the hearer of statements of Christ in the Gospels, speaking of his followers' power over serpents, as symbolic of their power over the evil one, the great serpent of old.

Luke 10, verse 19 The longer ending of Mark's Gospel also has a teaching of Christ on the subject. Mark 16, verses 17-18 Given Exodus' themes in the preceding chapter, we might also think of some connection with the character of Moses, who also shows power over serpents as the messenger of the Lord and as a sign of his authority. He turns his staff into a serpent and then picks it up as a rod again.

Paul seemingly picks up a serpent as if it were a stick for the fire, but is unharmed. In Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4-9 The response of the natives is to regard Paul as a god, much as the pagans in Lystra had done in Acts chapter 14. In that city, there was a sudden shift of the people's attitude to Paul, from regarding him and Barnabas as gods to regarding them as people to be put to death.

Here the movement goes in the opposite direction, but it illustrates the same level of superstition among the pagans. Publius is the chief man of the island, presumably a procurator and a Roman citizen. The fact that his father is present on the island suggests, as Craig Keener notes, that Publius was from the island.

Publius received them in his house for three days, presumably not all of the survivors of the shipwreck, but the people of higher status. While they probably don't have much, if any, money to pay for lodgings after the shipwreck, the centurion and the soldiers would probably have been able to secure some lodgings by virtue of their military status. This is also an example of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

Publius' father was suffering from fever and dysentery. Depending on its kind, a fever could last for an extremely long time, for months or even a few years. Darrell Bock is one of several commentators who mentions a microbe found in goat's milk in Malta that could be the cause of such fevers.

However, Keener cautions against taking this identification as certain, given the fact that there were many other potential causes of such fevers, and there was also the additional symptom of dysentery. It is likely that the events of the voyage and Paul's vision and prophecy came up during their conversations with Publius, for Paul visited Publius' father, prayed for him and put his hands on him so that he was healed. After this remarkable healing of a man with a serious medical condition, many people from around the island came to Paul and his companions and were also healed.

Another thing that we see here is Paul's common dealings with people of authority. We've seen this throughout the Book of Acts. He deals with Sergius Paulus in chapter 13.

He has friends among the Asiarchs in Ephesus. He speaks to the Sanhedrin, to Agrippa, Festus and Felix, and now also to Publius. The Gospel is addressed to all people, but it is also for people as groups, and so it addresses their leaders in a special way, the ones who represent them.

It calls for them to repent, not just individuals as detached persons. The people of Malta send them on their way with everything that they need. Considering the huge quantity of possessions that they have presumably lost in the shipwreck, this was an immense blessing.

Finally, after wintering in Malta, they take another Alexandrian ship heading up the western coast of Italy. The ship has the twin gods, the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux as its figurehead, for which the ship would likely have been named. The twin gods, of course, are Gemini in the Zodiac.

They were patrons of navigators and were also regarded as the punishers of perjuries and the guardians of truth, so the fact that they are figureheads on Paul's ship might be apt. While I see no clear evidence that there is something more going on here, it is curious to see a number of signs of the Zodiac randomly appearing throughout Luke's narrative, in his Gospel and now in the Book of Acts. The Virgin, two fish, a man carrying a water pitcher, and now the twins.

Several scholars have speculated also upon a Zodiacal ordering of the nations in Acts chapter 2. Whilst scripture clearly does not advocate the practice of astrology, in various places it does seem to use some celestial symbolism for its own purpose, such as in Revelation chapter 12 and perhaps also in the story of the Magi. This is likely around February of 60 AD. This would be the earliest time when sailing would have opened up again in the region.

Presumably they didn't want to stay too long in Malta, imposing on their hosts without money to pay them or in requisitioned lodgings. The most dangerous stretch of the journey would be from Malta to Sicily. Julius the Centurion would probably have requisitioned passage on this vessel to Italy, another Alexandrian ship.

Their journey there seems to have been safe and fairly uneventful. Paul finally gets to meet the Christians from Rome here. Paul was presumably well known by many of the Christians in Rome already, as his letter to the church there indicates, but he had yet to visit.

By this point Paul had seemingly obtained great favour with those holding him, and he was permitted considerable freedom, even while technically still in custody. A question to consider, what are some of the chief miracles associated with each of Paul's four journeys in the Book of Acts?