

The Role of Gender Power in the Book of Esther

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Introduction

We as modern readers do not have to read far into the Old Testament to realize that the setting is a very different culture than our own. One of the most distinguishing features about the world of the Old Testament, situated in a region called the ancient Near East, is the presence of patriarchal culture. Patriarchal cultures are strategically structured to benefit men, especially in the ways in which men wield positions of power and authority. As a result, women in the ancient Near East had very little power and were regarded as the property of men. Indeed, in the Old Testament, women are rarely mentioned (and even more rarely named), let alone speakers and actors in the biblical narrative. And when women do appear, speak, and act, as in the case of Vashti and Esther in the book of Esther, readers should be attuned to the various power dynamics concerning gender at work in their respective contexts.

Gender Dynamics in the Old Testament

It is worth emphasizing that God never canonizes, or issues approval of, any certain culture. Since all cultures are the creation of humans, all cultures are flawed, including our own. Yet, God uses culture as a means by which to reveal God's self. Since we are finite human beings, we need things like language and place to make sense of the world. We cannot exist in a vacuum, nor can we make sense of God within a cultural vacuum. Thus, God puts God's self at the mercy of limited, flawed cultures in order to love and interact with us. One flawed cultural expression God uses, without approving, is the Old Testament's patriarchal culture. In fact, despite originating in the context of the ancient Near East, the Old Testament offers a critique of its own patriarchal culture. The opening story in Genesis explains that male dominance over women was never God's intent for this world; rather, it is a result of the curse of sin. After the first man and woman sinned, the woman was cursed with her husband ruling over her (Gen. 3:16).

Yet, if we turn back a little earlier in the story, we realize that this was never God's original intent. When the woman was created, God designated her as the man's "helper" (Gen. 2:18, NRSVUE). In Hebrew, this role designates something far more remarkable than a second-class, subservient position. The Hebrew compound word (*ezer kenegdo*) most translations deem "helper" first consists of the word *ezer*, which comes from a root that means "strength." The word is frequently used to refer to God when God rescues or delivers God's people from peril (see Pss. 10:14; 70:5). The second word, *kenegdo*, refers to something that is "equal to" and "corresponding to." When put together, the *ezer kenegdo* is a strengthening presence who is equal to and compatible with the man. In the context of Genesis 2:18-25, where after naming all the animals the man still had no equal partner, we might say that the woman "rescued" the man from the fate of being alone. This is God's vision for men and women – mutual co-partners who work together caring for and guarding creation. Sin does not get the last word. As God's people, we do not live according to sin's curse but according to God's creational intent.

Biblical archaeologist Carol Meyers has noted evidence that the kind of co-partnership presented in Genesis 2 between men and women may have existed before the monarchic period in Israel's history.¹ Archaeology suggests men and women shared household roles and that women were often household managers and contributed economically to the family. Proverbs 31:10-31 also presents a "woman of strength" (Prov. 31:10, NRSVUE) who builds her household by overseeing servants and utilizing economic independence.

The majority of the Old Testament's culture, however, reflects sin's curse of male dominance over women. In the ancient Near East, women were identified through the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, and sons) and did not have social, legal, or economic power outside of these familial relationships. When a woman married, she joined the household of her new husband. Her primary roles were ones of wife and mother. It was especially important for women to produce sons, as the family

¹ See Meyers, Carol, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, NY: Oxford, 2012.

name and inheritance were passed down through male heirs. Because this patriarchal society created a system in which women were dependent on men for their entire wellbeing, women who were orphaned, widowed, or barren were women in crisis.

Because of the Old Testament's patriarchal perspective, women are largely missing from the narratives. Yet, they are always present on the margins. When we read Scripture, we should approach it with the mindset that women are present in the stories even if they are not explicitly mentioned. For example, several women followed Jesus even though they were not frequently mentioned (Luke 8:1-3). When women are mentioned, especially by name, we as modern readers know that something significant is happening, such as in the case of the book of Esther.

Gender Dynamics in Esther

The book of Esther contains two named women who are essential to the unfolding story. Because of their presence, the book is full of power and gender-role reversals. Sometimes, the women directly challenged the patriarchal structure. This is especially seen through Vashti. On the other hand, Esther more often strategically and subversively worked around the power system via means of wit and manipulation.

The narrative begins with Queen Vashti's deliberate and defiant refusal to obey her husband, King Xerxes. His request for her to appear before the noblemen was a means of objectification and control. After all, he had just finished showing off all his other possessions, and in accordance with his patriarchal culture, Vashti was also his property to flaunt (1:1-6). According to Persian custom, women could be present at banquets before the drinking began (see Neh. 2:6). At Belshazzar's banquet, only women from the king's harem were present (Dan. 5:2). Thus, summoning Vashti not only diminished her role as the king's "property," but further denigrated her status by presenting her as a mere concubine. Vashti's refusal challenged Xerxes in two ways. First, it usurped the power Xerxes wielded as king. But

secondly, it also challenged her culture's familial power a husband had over his wife. For this reason, Vashti's defiance was viewed as a threat to *all* men in the entire kingdom. In the eyes of the insecure rulers, her "no" signaled a social rebellion they were eager to quickly quell (1:13-20). As a result, Vashti was sent away and disappeared into the background. It is unclear whether she was executed or exiled (1:19). Challenging the king's power had painful consequences for Vashti, yet her bravery put a story in motion to save God's people.

Unfortunately, Vashti was not the only woman who suffered from the curse of sin: the story mentions many unnamed women who endured similar fates. As a means of regaining his power over his kingdom and, practically, to choose a new wife, King Xerxes brought all the virgins in the kingdom to the palace. Women were considered marriageable when they began their menstrual cycles, so it is likely that they were young teenagers. As indicated by 1:13-14, each woman spent one night with the king and then was sent back to the harem, where she would remain for the rest of her life. These young, nameless women had no social, political, or gender power over this situation and were unable to resist the king's wanton desires, on which each of their fates hinged.

Esther was one of these young women taken into the king's harem, and while we do not know what she thought or felt about her circumstances, she had no power to defy the king. What she wanted was of no interest and she was not consulted before being brought to the king's bed (2:14). The king's elevation of Esther to her position as queen did not undo the sexual abuse wrought against her. And while God did not compel the king to abuse his station, God nevertheless redeemed this traumatic experience for Esther.

At first, Esther appears to be the "perfect wife," at least according to ancient Near Eastern patriarchal standards. Like Vashti, she was beautiful, but unlike the former queen, Esther was obedient and passive, obeying both her uncle, Mordecai, and the king. She did not ask the eunuch for anything additional (2:15) and was hesitant to approach the king against his wishes (4:11). In fact, throughout the

narrative Esther is presented as passively “taken” by others (2:8, 16). Yet, upon further investigation, Esther demonstrates subversive resilience. She uses the limited power she has as a woman and queen to challenge the plot to murder God’s people.

The turning point in Esther’s character development occurs in Esther 4:15-16. Here, for the first time, Esther issued a command. Using direct, imperative language, Esther took control and emerged as both a political and religious leader over her people. Esther devised a plan of her own, one that was much more cunning than the one Mordecai proposed (see 4:8). Whereas Vashti refused to come to the king, Esther intruded on the king. And although the king ordered Esther to explain her reasons for approaching him, Esther carefully dodged the question by not complying until the following day. Vashti openly defied the king and publicly embarrassed him, but Esther hatched a more indirect plan by holding a private banquet and stroking the king’s ego with flattery (see Esther 7:3-4). This deliberate strategy enabled Esther to triumph over the limitations placed upon her by her political and cultural situation. The passive young woman from chapter two has emerged as a bold and clever queen!

Conclusion

Although Vashti and Esther had limited power because of their patriarchal culture, the Old Testament remembers the ways in which they boldly challenged and subversively worked around it. These women demonstrate the ways in which God’s people can faithfully remain resilient amidst cultural tensions. Their social context of subjugation and sexual abuse did not have the last say in God’s story. Together, their actions remind God’s people about the kingdom work God still is inviting us to do in our contexts, as we strive to live according to God’s vision for mutual partnerships between men and women today.