

## The Replacement of a Queen: Vashti and Saul Compared

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The story of Saul and the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) is often referred to when the conflict between Mordecai and Haman in the book of Esther is discussed. According to the communis opinio, this story provides the necessary background information to fully understand their clash. Mordecai is portrayed as a son of Kish (Est 2:5), just as Saul. Haman is said to be an Agagite (Est 3:1). Since Agag was the Amalakite king to be destroyed by Saul, the presentations of Mordecai and Haman already indicate their function in the text. Haman is the "born enemy" of the Jewish people, whereas Mordecai (together with Esther) will have to defeat him, as once Saul should have done. The author of the text of Esther obviously knew the story on the fight against the Amalakites and made use of them in order to portray his characters as main enemies.<sup>1</sup> In this short note, I will explore some other links between the story of Saul and the book of Esther. More precisely, I will argue that the replacement of queen Vashti is build upon the model of the replacement of Saul by David, as part of a specific strategy of the author.

### 2. THE REPLACEMENT OF A ROYAL FIGURE: THE STORIES OF VASHTI AND SAUL

At the beginning of the book of Esther, the Persian king is exposing his wealth and power to all his princes by offering a banquet during no less than six months. Thereafter, he offers a banquet to the inhabitants of his capital city. As the crown upon the festivities, he orders the appearance of his queen Vashti. When the servants convey this order, she refuses. Her motivations for not showing up are not mentioned. The king is angry, and turns to his advisors. They make the event into a national crisis and a threat to the complete social order<sup>2</sup> in the Persian reign by exaggerating what the queen has done. Not only to the king, but also to all the princes and all the peoples is her crime. Instead of the desired glory, Vashti will bring contempt over every man in the kingdom. Therefore, Memucan advises the king to send out a royal decree that can not be revoked. Vashti should be forbidden ever to come into the king's presence again, and her royal status should be given to somebody else. Before the king can change his mind, a beauty contest is organised. When the king meets the beautiful Esther, she pleases him and he makes her queen instead of Vashti.

The story of the replacement of Saul (1 Sam 15) is at first sight quite different. Samuel orders Saul in the name of God to fight Amalek. No one should be spared, neither people nor cattle. Saul indeed conquers the Amalekites. Together with his people, though, he spares the lives of the king Agag and the best of cattle. Therefore, God repents that he made Saul king, for he

<sup>1</sup> T.K. Beal, *Esther*. Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, Minnesota 1999), p. 45-46; F.W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary 9 (Dallas Texas, 1996), p. 383-384; D.J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll. The Story of the Story*, JSOTSS, 30 (Sheffield, 1984), p. 13-15; M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*. Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia SC, 1991), p. 42; G. Gerleman, *Esther*, *Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament* (Neukirchen/Vluyn, 1973), p. 90-91; C.A. Moore, *Esther*, *Anchor Bible* (Garden City NY, 1971), p. 35; S. P. Re'em, *Israel among the nations. A Commentary on Esther*, *International Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh, 1985), p. 119; 121.

<sup>2</sup> Thus T.K. Beal, *op.cit.*, p. 13; M.V. Fox, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

has not obeyed. At first, Saul states that he performed God's commandment. The cattle would be intended as an offering for God from the people. Yet, according to Samuel, obedience towards God is more important than offerings. Since he rejected God's word, God rejects him. This is followed by the tearing off of a part of Samuel's robe when Saul tries to stop him. This is explained by Samuel as the tearing off of the kingdom. God will give it to someone else. God will not change his mind nor repent. In Sam 16, Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. Of all the sons of Jesse, he anoints the handsome David.

### 3. COMMON ELEMENTS BETWEEN BOTH STORIES

It is quite obvious that there are significant differences between both texts. The context in which the action of replacement takes place is totally different. Vashti is not God's chosen royal ruler, as Saul is. The elaborate motivation of the disobedience of king Saul contrasts with the fact that for Vashti's refusal to join the royal meeting no reasons are given at all. Moreover, in the story of Saul, God is present both in the words of the characters Saul and Samuel, and as an active character whereas God is not even once mentioned in the whole book of Esther. Apart from these obvious differences both texts contain some relevant similarities. The most significant common elements between both stories are: the replacement of a royal figure as a legal action; the phraseology of this replacement; the motivation given for it; the irrevocability of the decision taken; and the motif of the good-looking hero/heroine. I will elaborate and comment on each of these aspects.

#### 3.1. *The Replacement of a Royal Figure as a Legal Action*

The first, obvious, common element between Esther 1-2 and 1 Samuel 15-16 is the succession of events. A royal figure disobeys a given order, somebody states that his/her royal status should be given to somebody else, and a new royal figure is chosen. One could object that this is coincidence, inherent to mere fact that both stories deal with the replacement of a royal figure. One should, however, keep in mind that normally a replacement of a king/queen has to do with an illegal action, namely a violent revolution. The commander Zimri, for instance, kills his king Elah and takes his place (1 Kgs 16:10). When the people make commander Omri king over Israel, and the latter besieges Tirzah, Zimri dies in a fire he started himself (1 Kgs 16:16-18). Half of the people want Omri as their king. The rest of the people prefer Tibni. When Tibni is killed, Omri becomes definitively king. This aspect of illegality or of a violent revolution is absent in our stories. The replacement is described as a legal decision that someone can no longer be king/queen, because of what this king/queen has done. Therefore, the royal status is taken away and given to someone else. The decision is legal, insofar as the speaker has the (legal) power to take that decision. In Saul's case, it is Samuel who speaks for God. Since God made Saul king, God can also reject him. In the case of Vashti, it is Memucan, the royal advisor who has to give the advise "according to the law" (Est 1:15), and the king follows his advise.

#### 3.2. *The Phraseology*

Of Memucan's advice, one phrase especially draws our attention.

יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ לְרֵעוּתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה: ומְלֻכוֹתָהּ Est 1:19

Compare with:

קָרַע יְהוָה אֶת-מַמְלַכּוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעֶלֶיךָ הַיּוֹם וּגְתָנָהּ לְרֵעֵךְ הַטּוֹב מִמֶּנָּה: 1 Sam 15:28

In both texts, someone is giving (נתן) the royal status (מלכות) to (ל) the former king/queen's (indicated with personal suffix) "neighbour (רע/רעות) who is better (טוב) than (מן) him/her

(personal suffix)". This similar formulation can hardly be coincidental. The author links the substitution of Vashti with the replacement of Saul, by using the same phraseology.

### *3.3. The Motivation for the Replacement of the Royal Figure*

Apart from the formulation of the verdict, the rationale for the replacement of the royal figure is the same as well. In both cases, the direct reason is disobedience to a given order. In the case of Saul: disobedience to God's word as conveyed by Samuel, in the case of Vashti: defiance of the king's word as conveyed by his servants. Moreover, in both cases, the act of disobedience is taken very seriously since it stands for a graver offence. Non-compliance is considered to be rebellion and stubbornness, which is as grave as the sins of divination, iniquity and idolatry according to 1 Sam 15:23. The refusal of Vashti is a crime to every man in the kingdom, since all women will likewise look upon their husbands with contempt (Est 1:18).

### *3.4. The Irrevocability of the Decision taken*

Apart from the above-mentioned specific common elements, some shared elements are not exclusively typical for these stories only. Yet, since they occur in both stories, they add to the similarities between the stories. The motif of the irrevocability of the decision is such an element. This motif is inherent in the law of the Persians and the Medes, which cannot be revoked (Est 1:8; cf. Dan 6:8,12,15). Yet, it is repeated when the servants notice that the king remembers Vashti, what she has done, and what has been decided against her. Before he can change his mind, the servants suggest a beauty contest, which makes the rejection of Vashti permanent (Est 2:1-2). In 1 Samuel 15, this motif of irrevocability is present in verse 29: God will not lie or repent. Though Samuel himself grieves over Saul, God makes his decision irrevocable by sending him to anoint a new king (1 Sam 16:1).

### *3.5. The Motif of the Good-looking Hero/Heroine*

The "beautiful appearance" motif can be found back in many stories. It seems to indicate the hero or heroine, as well as the divine favour. In the same way, Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, and Judith are all beautiful/good to look at (Gen 39:6; Exod 2:2; 1 Sam 9:2; 1 Sam 16:12; Jdt 8:7). All these persons are chosen/sent to save their people. Both persons who replace the previous royal figure are said to be good-looking (David: 1 Sam 16:12; Esther; Est 2:7), a quality in common with their predecessor (Saul: 1 Sam 9:2; Vashti; Est 1:11). In the book of Esther, this motif plays an important role to the story, since being beautiful was a requirement to become queen.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, her beauty contributes to the expectation of the reader that she will be the one who saves her people.

To sum up: the stories of Vashti and of Saul can be described as a "replacement of a royal figure" story. Typical for these specific replacement stories is, however, that the replacement is – at least according to the story – legal and non-violent. Moreover, the phraseology of the decision that the royal status should be given to someone else is very similar. The rationale for the replacement is in both cases the same: disobedience to a given order, which is taken as a symbol for an even graver offence. The decision taken is irrevocable. The replacements of the royal figure both answer the traditional description of the hero/heroine chosen and sent to save the people. Moreover, both predecessors are handsome as well. All these aspects together lead to the conclusion that the author of Esther made not only use of 1 Sam 15 as a

<sup>3</sup> This is usually the only explanation given to Esther's beautiful appearance in Est 2:7. cf. F.W. Bush, *op.cit.*, p. 367; T.K. Beal, *op.cit.*, p. 29-30.

background for the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, but also for the replacement story in Esther 1-2.

#### 4. CONSTRUCTING LINKS BETWEEN SAUL AND VASHTI, DAVID AND ESTHER

Once the similarities are stated, one question remains: why? Why portraying the substitution of Vashti by Esther in the same way as the replacement of Saul by David? I would argue that the author of Esther made use of several aspects of the stories on Saul and David, since this has as an effect that Esther is implicitly portrayed as a new David. She is the better queen than Vashti, as David is the better king than Saul. Moreover, the parallels evoke the question: is Esther God's chosen queen? In the story of Saul, God's presence, intentions, actions are clearly mentioned. The replacement of Saul is intended by God, and the new king is God's choice. In the Book of Esther, God is no character in the story, and even not ever referred to at all. Still, this silence speaks of God, or at least, of the possibility that God is active in the events. As M.V. Fox clearly enumerates,<sup>4</sup> several aspects of the book have been used as evidence for God's active presence: allusions and hints (such as the certain rescue "from another place"); the many coincidences (such as the fact that there is a vacancy of queenship, that Esther meets the criterion of beauty, that she is chosen out of all her competitors etc.); the many reversals which can be taken as a sign of God's intervention; the theme of the survival of the Jews, which is in line with God's will. All of these aspects can, however, also be explained without a divine intervention. According to Fox, it can never be decisively determined whether God is present or not. This is, in his view, a careful construction. The author is not absolutely certain about God's role in history. Fox concludes: "the author conveys his belief that there can be no definitive knowledge of the workings of God's hand in history. Not even a wonderful deliverance can prove that God was directing events; nor could threat and disaster prove his absence."<sup>5</sup> This does not, however, mean that the book of Esther contains no theology. The underlying theology is one of *possibility*: the possibility that God is present and active in history, thus Fox. In my opinion, this is exactly what the author creates when he describes the replacement of Vashti in terms of the replacement of Saul: a hint to a possible activity of God in these events. It is possible that God's hand is present in this replacement by Esther, since God once rejected Saul in order to give his kingship to another, who is better than he. It is possible that God is fighting with Esther and Mordecai against "Amalek" as once is said that YHWH will fight Amalek from generation to generation (Exod 17:16).

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The book of Esther does clearly use the story of 1 Samuel 15. The text does not only hint at the function of Mordecai and Haman in the story by making of Mordecai a descendant of Saul and of Haman a born enemy of the Jews. It also builds up the replacement of Vashti with elements of the replacement of Saul. This construction fits a general strategy of the author: creating hints at the possibility that God is present in the events. More precisely, the author opens the possibility that God is at work in the replacement of Vashti, as well as in the choice of the beautiful Esther as the new queen.

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<sup>4</sup> M.V. Fox, *op.cit.*, p. 240-244.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.