

Proper 21
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:30-33

King Xerxes I ruled the Persian Empire 485-464 BCE, but the Book of Esther does not pretend to be a chronicle of that reign. Instead, it belongs to the category of short narrative works like Ruth, Daniel 1-6, etc. called by some researchers *novellas*. The lectionary selection here omits the actual reason for the wicked Haman's execution. Sufficiently lubricated after drinking for two days with Esther and the king's vizier Haman, Esther springs a carefully plotted trap for Haman by accusing him rightly of seeking her life and the lives of her people, the Jews. The king stomps out of the dining hall while Haman is in the position of having to beg for *his* life from Esther the Jewish queen. Falling on her dining couch to entreat her further, the king chooses that moment to stomp back into the room and his bleary senses lead him to believe that Haman is in the process of sexually assaulting the queen. One notices that Esther does nothing to change Xerxes's misunderstanding, and the wicked Haman dies on the very gallows he had prepared for Esther's uncle. Chapter nine tells us about how the Jews in the Empire killed 75,000 of their enemies on the very day Haman had appointed for the slaughter of the Jews. The story also served to create an origin for the festival of Purim.

Psalm 124

This psalm used to be classed with the *community thanksgivings*, but the fact that the psalm nowhere refers us to a previous *lament* casts doubt upon that classification. Its liturgical setting, however, is assured by the expression "Let Israel say now" in 124:1. (See Psalm 129:1 and the similar construction in Psalm 118:2 for parallels.) For this reason, it cannot be a "didactic poem" as H.-J. Kraus suggests. The "if...then" construction of verses 1-2 suggest the prophetic construction in Isaiah 1:9, and on balance some kind of *hymn* of praise is probably the best understanding. There are some linguistic suggestions in the psalm of a late origin for this psalm, perhaps un a time after the Exile.

OR

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

The tent of meeting was outside the camp where Israelites might consult the LORD (Exodus 33:7). The idea that the seventy elders take some of the responsibility for the Israelites from Moses as well as some of the prophetic power that resided upon him was a way of dealing with the question as to who the proper successor of Moses the Lawgiver would be. The answer of this text is that the true successors of Moses are those whom God appoints as opposed to people related to the prophet, such as Aaron, or by office such as Joshua.

Psalm 19:7-14

This psalm contains fragments of two different psalms. Psalm 19:1-6 derives from a *hymn*, whereas Psalm 19:7-14 comes from a *wisdom psalm*. Hymns celebrated God's presence in the temple, usually making reference to God's power in the creation and sustaining of the world. The wisdom psalms have no known function in the temple and stem from the scholars of the realm, and many wisdom psalms appear to have been composed in the time of exile in Babylon where there was no temple to the LORD. Faithful Jews in exile remembered their temple by singing its

ancient liturgical poems, especially the hymns, and it is under those circumstances we may imagine the marriage of the two parts of the present psalm.

James 5:13-20

Healing by means of special ointments was a staple feature of the Greco-Roman world, especially for those who had no access to physicians or money to seek treatment at a temple of Asclepius. The instruction in James, however, does not impart any magical power to the ointments the elders might bring for anointing. Further, there are no magical prayers such as we read in the Paris Magical Papyrus. The “prayer of faith, (5:15)” otherwise unspecified, will “save” the sick person, leaving it to the reader’s imagination as to what kind of salvation this prayer might accomplish. As the rite of healing became formalized in the Byzantine church, Christians came to regard these “elders” (5:14) who anoint and pray with the order of priests (*presbyteroi*), and the rubrics for this sacramental rite have always specified a priest as the proper officiant. From the context, however, whoever the *presbyteroi* of James 5:14 are, it is prayer, not ointment, which saves the sick, brings forgiveness of sins, and calls the sinner back. In the only moral calculus of its kind in the Bible, the author also assures us that those who bring sinners back into the fold will also save their own souls by covering “a multitude of sins” (verses 19-20).

Mark 9:38-50

When Jesus’s students report finding others healing in Jesus’s name, the reader expects Jesus to condemn those healers as interlopers. Consistent, however, with his argument about a “house divided” in Mark 3:19b-30, Jesus portrays the work of these non-disciples as building up the kingdom and warns his students against standing in the way of the work of God. Because of the imminence of the Kingdom of God, the disciples would be justified in taking extreme measures to avoid being found opposing that kingdom, even measures ordinarily not allowed by the law such as self-mutilation. On the other hand, Jesus has already maintained that the real origin of sin is not in external members but in the human heart (7:14-23). The quotation from Isaiah 66:24: “where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched” occurs in 9:48 and in many manuscripts also after verses 43 and 45. The best texts, however, have it only at 9:48.

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