



Teaching an old dog new tricks: Herodotus confirms Xerxes' anger in *The Persian wars*, and the Book of Esther provides insights on anger management¹

R.G. Branch
Faculty of Theology
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
POTCHEFSTROOM
E-mail: rgbranch@crichton.edu

Abstract

Teaching an old dog new tricks: Herodotus confirms Xerxes' anger in *The Persian wars*, and the Book of Esther provides insights on anger management

The Book of Esther describes Xerxes, king of Persia and Media, as an angry man. It highlights the king's ups (Esther, 1:12; 7:7) and downs (Esther, 2:1; 7:10). Surprisingly, Herodotus in "The Persian wars" likewise emphasises the king's anger and wrath. This classic Greek tale possibly fills in a time gap between Esther 1 and 2: Xerxes travels west from his capital, Susa, and loses a war in Sparta. "The Persian wars" chronicles Xerxes' international humiliation and the despot's rages along the way. Xerxes bullies and blames subordinates; destroys property and cuts a swathe from Persia to Sparta; acts pompously; and exhibits angry outbursts when crossed or thwarted. Herodotus confirms that generals, enemies, and aides tiptoe around this international bully. One, however, does not. Artemisia, a woman ship commander, earns Xerxes' respect. When the battlefield of his life switches from Sparta back to Susa, the Bible presents a second model of courage, Esther, Xerxes' new queen. Walking confidently in the halls of power, this lovely "general" in regal

1 A shortened version of this article was presented in June 2009 in Stellenbosch, South Africa, at a conference in a colloquium of societies that included SASNES (South African Society of Near Eastern Studies).

robes comes gracefully yet forcefully before the king, time and time again. Modeling anger management techniques with a blend of wisdom and femininity, Esther faces Xerxes' anger – and neutralises it.

Opsomming

Leer 'n ou hond nuwe truiks: Herodotus bevestig Xerxes se woedetemperament in *The Persian wars* en die boek Ester verleen insig ten opsigte van die hantering van woede

Die boek Ester beskryf Xerxes, koning van Mede en Perse, as 'n driftige man. Dit lig die koning se hoogte- (Ester, 1:12; 7:7) en laagtepunte (Ester, 2:1; 7:10) uit. Dit is verrassend dat Herodotus in "The Persian wars" ook die koning se gramskap en woede op 'n soortgelyke manier beklemtoon. Sy klassieke Griekse verhaal vul moontlik die tydsgaping tussen Ester 1 en 2: Xerxes reis in 'n westelike rigting vanaf sy hoofstad Susa, en verloor 'n oorlog in Sparta. "The Persian wars" stel Xerxes se internasionale vernedering sowel as die tiran se uitbarstings onderweg te boek. Xerxes tiranniseer en blameer ondergeskiktes; vernietig eiendom en lewens vanaf Persië tot by Sparta; tree verwaand op; en openbaar woedeuitbarstings wanneer hy teëgegaan of gedwarsboom word. Herodotus bevestig dat onderdane, vyande en adjudante lig loop vir hierdie internasionale tiran. Daar is egter een persoon wat dit nie doen nie. Artemisia, die vroulike bevelvoerder van 'n skip, verdien Xerxes se respek. Wanneer die gevegsterrein van sy lewe terugskuif vanaf Sparta na Susa, presenteer die Bybel 'n tweede model van waagmoed: Ester, Xerxes se nuwe koningin. Hierdie pragtige "generaal" in koninklike gewaad, loop met selfvertroue in die koning se magsetel. Sy verskyn telkens grasieus dog kragdadig voor die koning. Deur gebruik te maak van woedebestuurstechnieke, met 'n vermenging van wysheid en vroulikheid, trotseer Ester Xerxes se woede – en neutraliseer dit.

1. Introduction

Xerxes I² assumed the throne of Persia upon the death of his father, Darius I, in 486 BC (Anon., 2000:316). Evidently in the first year of

2 Xerxes is the king's Persian name; the Hebrew is Ahasuerus. The Book of Esther opens with a banquet that took place probably in 484/483 BC; Vashti, Xerxes' queen, was deposed at that time. Esther becomes queen in 479/478 BC. In the intervening years, Xerxes wages war against the Greeks – and loses! Esther 2 opens after Xerxes returns to Susa. Historical attempts to equate Vashti with Amestris, Xerxes' queen, have been unsatisfactory (Branch, 2000:1353). Amestris is mentioned in *The Persian wars*, the classic work by

his reign he marched against Egypt and put Egypt under a yoke far harder than that of his father (Herodotus, 1942:7.7).

The victory proved exhilarating. The Book of Esther opens on this celebratory note.³ Esther 1 shows Xerxes lives a life of ease, power, and whim; yet perhaps his indulgence indicates a propensity toward loneliness and isolation.⁴

The Persian equivalents of spin doctors, public relations specialists, event planners, and boon-seekers consistently orchestrate Xerxes' life; they seek his favour.⁵ Actually hosts of servants, counsellors, and eunuchs in the Book of Esther constantly study Xerxes and seek to manoeuvre situations to their advantage (cf. Branch, 2004: 185).

Xerxes decrees a gathering of world leaders and provides for their entertainment. Prolonged festivities, however, sink to the level of a fraternity party gone sour. At midlife, Xerxes rules the world but cannot rule his household. He suffers worldwide humiliation because his queen, Vashti, disobeys him. Displaying anger and fury

Herodotus (Herodotus, 1942:6.61). Xerxes reigns from 486-465 BC (Smith-Christopher, 2000:1401).

3 The issue of dates is interesting and important. The dates in the Biblical text and the dates given by outside sources like Herodotus in *The Persian Wars* often dovetail. Herodotus (1942:7.8) possibly also describes this assembly when he writes, "After Egypt was subdued, Xerxes, being about to take in hand the expedition against Athens, called together an assembly of the noblest Persians, to learn their opinions, and to lay before them his own designs." It would seem that the year of this assembly was 483-482, the third year of his reign (Esther, 1:1, 3-4).

Esther 2:1 and 16 give more clues about dates. "*Later* when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided ... (Esther) was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, *in the seventh year of his reign*" (italics – RGB). A textual note in the NIV (1995:713) says Esther's audience with the king happened in December 479 or January 478. The NIV (New International Version) is the English version of the Bible used in this article.

4 Briant (2002:515), unequivocally negative in his assessment of Xerxes, describes the one known to have inherited the accolade "Great King" as "weak, easily influenced, immature in his appetites, egotistical, cruel superstitious, (and) licentious". Briant (2002:515) adds that Xerxes' character, an arguably seedy one which sank below that of his predecessors, contributes to the decline of the Persian Empire.

5 Self-serving as this no doubt is, their primary job is keeping their leader happy (see Editors of *Inc.*, 1989:106-107).

(Esther, 1:12), he deposes her and sends an edict throughout the world that all wives should respect their husbands (Esther, 1:22).

Although there is a textual silence between chapters 1 and 2, it appears Xerxes goes to war against Greece and suffers defeat, yet another worldwide humiliation. He carries his anger to Greece and back again to Susa.

2. Methodology

This article's methodology is somewhat eclectic. It includes a literary approach (word and character studies); a canonical principle (letting Scripture interpret Scripture);⁶ extra-Biblical authors (Herodotus, Josephus, and Jewish tradition); and cross-disciplinary insights (psychology and anger management).

The article takes the Book of Esther seriously. It follows the arguments of the short, excellent commentary by Baldwin (1984) who sees Esther as historically accurate.⁷ Extra-Biblical material (the historians Herodotus and Josephus) also, however, takes Xerxes very seriously indeed as the ruler of the world. The article acknowledges that the book reads like a festival novella (Roop, 2002:165) and is preoccupied with power (Bechtel, 2002:7). Indeed, the Book of Esther can be called a maverick text, as Treloar (2008:391) maintains, because it prefers anthropodicy over theodicy and promotes a Jewish diaspora survival ideology. This article also appreciates the insights of Berlin (2001) in her outstanding commentary on Esther. Following Berlin, the Book of Esther contains farce, burlesque, and even vaudevillian slapstick. But remember this: Xerxes as ruler of the world, and its chief bully, is a serious player.

This article maintains the Book of Esther was not written to be read in the courts of Persian kings during banquets. It was written for the

6 The Westminster Confession of Faith in Article 1:6 says,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

This principle is followed in this article.

7 Baldwin (1984:16) notes that the author of Esther presents the work as if it were history; consequently, to "look at the historical accuracy of his work is legitimate and necessary, and does not prejudice the question of literary genre".

covenant community in the language of the covenant community. As such, it expresses the humor of the covenant community – delighting in the underdog’s triumph and portraying the ones in power (Xerxes and Haman, the prime minister) in a less-than-favourable light. Often the book depicts Xerxes as a fool, one too easily led by subordinates, slaves, eunuchs, and a crafty prime minister. As a buffoon, Xerxes follows his hormones. This article, consequently, sees the Jewish humor of laughing at the one in charge and taking delight in the fall of a pompous enemy, Haman, as part of an inside joke, but the article respects Xerxes for his position and argues that even the mighty, with proper role models, change for the better. Yes, even an old, angry dog can leash his anger and make it heel.

3. Herodotus verifies Xerxes’ anger

The historian Herodotus⁸ establishes Xerxes as an internationally angry man.⁹ Herodotus quite likely fills in a textual silence between Esther 1 and Esther 2.¹⁰ Herodotus in *The Persian wars* devotes

8 The place of Herodotus in history abounds with scholarly controversy. Harrison (2002:5) notes that the traditional title of Herodotus as the Father of History is “unhistorical” yet also says that neither is Herodotus a teller of fairy tales. Grabbe (1992:64), however, says modern scholarship credits Herodotus as one of the most important sources of information about the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes. “The reason for this,” Grabbe (1992:64) continues,

is his close access to certain Persian traditions of that time ... Where he can be checked, Herodotus often shows an accurate knowledge of Persian tradition, suggesting that his account can be used with some confidence, along with contemporary Persian inscriptions.

Yet Briant (2002:576) counters categorically, “We must renounce, once and for all, the Greek vision of Xerxes’ reign”. It seems that the scholarly debate and the strong opinions therein continue.

9 A modern historian, A.R. Burn (1962:317), elaborating on Herodotus’ views, describes Xerxes as bigoted and formidable, a centraliser, someone convinced of his own rightness, one expressing religious intolerance, and an altogether hard master. Unlike his father Darius, he was less tolerant of other religions and outlawed the cult of the Daevas. As a follower of Zoroaster, Xerxes expressed intolerance for what he thought were false religions.

10 Baldwin (1984:18) writes that Herodotus shows Xerxes in all sorts of situations and circumstances connected with the invasion of Greece. For example, Xerxes, a complex character, is both an ambitious and bold warrior yet human in having both fears and superstitious; he weighs contradictory advice and asks opinions of others.

Concerning the veracity of both the Biblical and Greek texts, Baldwin (1984:19) comments,

many paragraphs to the character, exploits, and governing model of Xerxes, ruler of the world.¹¹ Herodotus recounts how Xerxes chooses to try to conquer the world; wants to rule even more of the known world than his father Darius left him; bullies his subordinates; destroys property and lives in a swath from Persia to Sparta; unjustly blames his subordinates for his decisions; acts pompously; displays a grandiose lifestyle; and exhibits unpredictable behaviour evidenced by angry outbursts when crossed, thwarted, or disagreed with. Herodotus confirms that generals, enemies, and aides tiptoe around Xerxes.¹²

Herodotus gives many examples of Xerxes' statesmanship, whimsy, and even humanity along with insights on his military campaign. For example, Herodotus (1942:7.46) records that Xerxes weeps when he contemplates the shortness of life and realises that none in his vast army will be alive in a hundred years.¹³

Consider, however, these six examples of Xerxes' anger and cruelty.

- Calling his nobles together after his Egyptian victory, Xerxes tells them of his decision to bridge the Hellespont and march against Greece and Europe (Herodotus, 1942:7.8). Artabanus, Xerxes' uncle, speaks against the venture. Herodotus notes Xerxes' response was "full of wrath". Xerxes calls Artabanus a coward, someone full of silly words, and faint-hearted (Herodotus, 1942:

To possess a work of history, written in the very century when the events of the book of Esther took place (for Herodotus was born between 490 and 480 BC), is a remarkable providence. It supplies an example of history-writing contemporary with the period covered by Esther.

- 11 Xerxes was born to Darius and Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus. Xerxes was about 32 when he ascended the throne on the death of Darius (Burn, 1962:313). Xerxes waged war against Greece with eight of his brothers and half brothers among his generals; all were under age 40.
- 12 For an excellent summary of Xerxes' Greek campaign, see Briant (2002:525-535).
- 13 In addition to tears and wrath, Xerxes shows other qualities in *The Persian wars*. Consider two more examples. He laughs – but perhaps laughs out of ignorance. A Greek, Demartus, a Spartan, tells him that the brave Spartans never will surrender. Xerxes, knowing his vast army, laughs in disbelief (Herodotus, 1942:7.101-105). Herodotus credits Xerxes with true greatness of soul for not killing the heralds who announced news of the Greeks' victory (Herodotus, 1942:7.136)

7.11). Disregarding Artabanus' advice, Xerxes instigates a world war.¹⁴

- Xerxes' engineers build a bridge over the Hellespont, an engineering feat necessary to move the army and supplies. A great storm destroys the completed work. When Xerxes hears of it, he responds with wrath. He commands that the Hellespont be beaten – that's right, the land! – with 300 lashes and branded with irons. He also commands the beheading of the engineering overseers (Herodotus, 1942:7.34-35).
- Xerxes expresses deadly wrath toward Pythius, a Lydian who finances Xerxes' campaign but then asks that he be allowed to keep his eldest son home from the battle (Herodotus, 1942 7.27-28, 38). Calling Pythius a wretch,¹⁵ Xerxes commands that the eldest son be slaughtered, his body cut in two, and the Persian army march between the halves (Herodotus, 1942:7.39).
- Xerxes displays his wrath over his enemy, Leonides, king of the Lacedaemonians. Xerxes walks through a battlefield looking for the body. When he finds it, he orders the head removed and the trunk fastened to a cross. Herodotus comments that this proves to him that Xerxes "was more angry with Leonides than with any other mortal in life" (Herodotus, 1942:7.238).
- On the journey back to Persia, Xerxes' ship encounters a storm. The helmsman informs Xerxes the ship is too heavy with passengers. Xerxes asks his soldiers to lighten the ship, and they leap to their death. He rewards his helmsman with a crown because he has preserved the life of his king but orders his beheading because he caused the deaths of a number of Persians (Herodotus, 1942:8.118).
- Significantly, Herodotus ends his epic, *The Persian wars*, with a chilling story of marital entanglements. The sordid, tragic story can be quickly summarised. Xerxes fell in love with the wife of

14 Xerxes' army marches and sails by national groupings. Significantly, Herodotus' list lacks mention of the Jews, although the Syrians of Palestine and the Phoenicians are mentioned (Herodotus, 1942:7.89). His army tallies 5 283 220 (Herodotus, 1942:7.186). The fleet of ships tallies 1 320, but 720 were lost along the way (Burn, 1962:331)

15 When a person chooses to express anger in name calling, hitting, kicking, breaking things, and swearing, anger is destructive (Hankins & Hankins, 1993:5-6).

Masistes, his brother. She declined his advances. Xerxes arranged a marriage with his son and the daughter of Masistes. He pursued the daughter, Artaynta, and she returned his advances. This angered Amestris, the wife of Xerxes, who decided to seek revenge on the wife of Masistes. Amestris nagged Xerxes who finally gave the wife of Masistes into her power. Amestris had the wife of Masistes mutilated: her breasts, nose, ears, and lips were cut off and thrown to the dogs; her tongue was torn out by the roots. Thus mutilated, she went home and Masistes found her. He gathered his sons and attempted to overthrow Xerxes, but Xerxes sent an armed force after him and slew him and his army (Herodotus, 1942:9.108-113).

An observation summarises this section: Herodotus and the Biblical text agree that Xerxes serves as a prototype of an oriental despot. Indeed, Esther enters the court of Xerxes with much reason to fear for her life ¹⁶ Yet the Biblical text records that she walks gracefully into the court of power and handles herself with queenly confidence.

4. Definition of anger

Anger is a normal emotion that in and of itself is neither good nor bad. According to a psychological definition, anger is an emotional reaction to a current provocation or to the memory of a former one (Hankins & Hankins, 1993:65). In other words, anger can become a habit of choice; one angry outburst often leads to another that is generally more intense.¹⁷

The Biblical text, however, regards anger as an emotion; as such it can be controlled. Anger is a choice. That human beings will become angry is accepted and expected. In general, the Biblical text sees human anger as a sin.

Not surprisingly the Biblical text commends controlling one's anger. Controlling anger brings health, ends contention, and is synonymous with greatness and wisdom (Prov. 12:18; 15:18; 16:32; 29:11). The

16 Baldwin (1984:19) points out that the world Herodotus "shows us is recognizably that of the book of Esther".

17 Put another way, anger signals something is wrong; a strong emotion controls a person. Anger is an emotional expression of distress. Hostility is the physical manifestation of anger. Anger may be the result of stress. Anger, however, is not a productive result of stress. Anger and losing control because of stress can have fatal consequences, as those facing Xerxes' rage discovered (Benton, 1998:71-73).

angry person, one choosing not to control his anger, is dubbed a fool (Prov. 12:16; Ecc. 7:9); stirs up strife (Prov. 15:18); and lays the groundwork for his/her own destruction (Prov. 25:28) (Baloian, 1997, 4:377-385).

The Book of Esther examines the extremes of venting one's anger (via two characters: Xerxes and Haman) and of controlling one's anger (via three characters: Esther, Mordecai, her uncle/cousin, and arguably a somewhat reformed Xerxes). Xerxes, in the accounts of Herodotus and the Biblical text up until Esther 7:7, skips the steps in anger, i.e. annoyance, irritation, fury, and rage (Hankins & Hankins, 1993:57). Xerxes jumps straight to rage. In Esther 7:7, Xerxes exhibits more control than he has throughout the book because he leaves his wine and walks into the garden when he hears Haman is behind a scheme that will cause the death of his queen.

5. Anger in the Book of Esther

The Book of Esther¹⁸ lists anger and its cognates (rage and fury) eight times: five relate to Xerxes (Esther, 1:12 [two references]; 2:1; 7:7, 10), one to the eunuchs, Bithana and Teresh (Esther, 2:21), and two to the villain and prime minister, Haman (Esther, 3:5; 5:9). Six mentions are of *hema* and two are of *qsp*.

The first mention of the strong emotion of anger is *qsp*, fury or anger (Esther, 1:12; 2:21).¹⁹ The word describes the reaction of Xerxes, ruler of the world and king of Persia,²⁰ upon learning of Vashti's refusal to appear before his guests wearing (only?) her crown

18 The Book of Esther was written between 400 and 200 BC. It comes in three versions. The Masoretic Text (MT), the one used in this article, is accepted by the Jewish and Protestant faith communities (Tull, 2003:7, 9). Roop (2002:162-164) gives an excellent overview of the different versions of Esther. The Greek counterpart, the LXX, contains a larger version of Esther; in this latter version are references to God, something lacking in the MT.

19 The word *qsp* occurs 28 times in the Old Testament, most frequently regarding the Lord; for example in Deut. 29:28, the people abandon the Lord and worship other gods and therefore the Lord will uproot the people from the land in *wrath* and *great wrath* (italics – RGB) (Struthers, 1997b:3.962-963).

20 Of the four temperament types (choleric, sanguine, melancholy, and phlegmatic), Xerxes probably is choleric. He is hot-tempered, cruel, impetuous, cutting, sarcastic, and intense on the negative side, and a good leader, able politician, and superior builder on the positive side (LaHaye, 1982:89-90).

(Esther, 1:11-12).²¹ Another mention of this emotion refers to Bigtha and Teresh, two eunuchs who are furious at Xerxes regarding something and plot his death (Esther, 2:21).²²

Hema, another word for anger, depicts heat, wrath, poison and even venom (Struthers, 1997a:2:170-171). In Esther, it is associated with the king and Haman.²³ Xerxes displays this kind of wrath over Vashti and her memory (Esther, 1:12; 2:1);²⁴ and over Haman and his doings (Esther, 7:7, 10). Haman displays *hema*, rage, toward Mordecai (Esther, 3:5; 5:9).²⁵

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- 21 Jewish tradition maintains that Xerxes demanded Vashti come and display her beauty adorned *only* with her crown. Vashti, no prurient, didn't mind, but found as she disrobed that she had leprosy that could not be disguised with cosmetics. Feigning decency, she therefore sent a tart refusal designed to humiliate the king in front of his satraps. The refusal in part said, "I refuse to appear before thy boon companions stripped of my clothing, and I do it for thine own sake. Knowest thou not, thou fool, that if they are charmed with my beauty, they will kill thee and take possession of me, whilst if they remain indifferent they will simply say that thou art a liar and a boaster." (Rappoport, 1995:248.)
- 22 Jewish literature provides insight on a possible reason for Bigthana and Teresh's anger. It seems that the Persian tradition of drinking a goblet amounted to a death sentence for some. If a guest could not drink down a goblet, the servers would kill him; often if he did drink down a goblet, he would go mad or die from the process. Consequently, the guests bribed the servants to permit them to drink sparingly. The servants participated avidly in this scam and got rich. Xerxes' command (Esther, 1:8) that each guest drink according to his preference may have angered the servants because it cut into their livelihoods (see Rappoport, 1995:245-246).
- 23 In the prophetic books, *hema* is used only in relation to the wrath of God (Struthers, 1997a:2: 2:170).
- 24 Jewish tradition maintains that Xerxes ordered Vashti killed yet kept her portrait above his bed for many years. He could not forget her because none of the maidens (until Esther) equalled her in beauty (Rappoport, 1995:249).
- 25 Jewish tradition provides additional material on Haman, who, the Biblical text says, is an Agagite, a term meaning he probably descended from Agag, the Amalekite king (Esther, 3:1; 1 Sam. 15:20). Jewish tradition establishes a professional relationship between Haman and Mordecai and maintains he is the direct descendent of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, the brother of Jacob. Haman, a barber by profession, sold himself into the army and was befriended by his commanding officer, Mordecai. He left the army and found a vast treasure outside Susa (Shushan) and became a very wealthy man, the wealthiest in Xerxes' kingdom. When he saw Mordecai, he was afraid Mordecai would tell others of his poverty-stricken past. Consequently, he vowed to kill Mordecai and exterminate his race (Rappoport, 1995:251-252).

6. Esther 2: textual analysis

A handful of Greeks renders Xerxes a stunning defeat. Xerxes returns, humiliated, to Susa. His anger has subsided against Vashti, perhaps replaced by another strong emotion: his shame at losing to the Greeks. His aides appease him by suggesting a new consort, actually a beauty pageant of virgins, for his pleasure (Esther, 2:1-2).²⁶ After all, the empire needs a queen. Xerxes is easily diverted; some would say easily manipulated.

Esther is among the herd of virgins.²⁷ She stands out. She comes under the notice of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem. The text says she pleased him and won his favour. He immediately provides her with beauty treatments, special food, seven maids to wait on her, and the best quarters in the harem (Esther, 2:8-9). She joins the gaggle of teenage girls going to beauty school.²⁸

6.1 Textual indications that all will be well (Esther, 2:15b-18)

6.1.1 Esther 2:15b

“And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her.” Esther won the favour, *hnn*, of all who saw her – especially the king (Esther, 2:15b, 17)! The idea is that she *kept on finding favour* with her

26 Xerxes’ servants, counsellors, and eunuchs constantly scrutinise this ruler of the world. Their lives and economic livelihoods depend on it. As they interact with and serve Xerxes, they mentally make note of his strong and weak points and his moods. Skilled at biding their time, they wait an opportune moment before suggesting a course of action that looks beneficial to Xerxes but ultimately benefits them (cf. Branch, 2004:185). The suggestions of a new queen and a beauty pageant fit this model.

27 Esther’s Hebrew name, Hadassa, means myrtle. Myrtle has a pleasant scent but a bitter taste. According to Jewish tradition, she was called myrtle because she was pleasant to her people but proved bitter to her people’s enemy, “the Jew-baiter Haman” (Rappoport, 1995:249).

28 I once asked two students, both freshmen women, what they thought the beauty contest of teenage girls was like. One said mean; the other said vicious. Then I said, “And it went down from there!” My class laughed. The students’ description of a teenage beauty pageant supports a relationship miracle the text mentions: “Esther won the favour of all who saw her.” (Esther, 2:15b.) In other words, the other contestants wanted Esther to win. They joined the chief eunuch, Hegai, in singling out Esther as the one meriting the crown. Esther goes to her night with the king (Esther, 2:16) clothed like a queen and with her head held high – and arguably with the enthusiastic support of the competing girls.

peers, the eunuchs in charge of the girls, and then with Xerxes the king (Fretheim, 1997:2:204).

This text, puzzling to me for years, lacks a description of how and why she won the favour of all who saw her. Surprisingly, the life of Gertrude the Great (AD 1256-1302), a mystic living in Saxony at the abbey Helfta, provides insights. Gertrude came to the abbey at age five, an orphan or possibly a nobleman's love child (Obbard, 2002: 16).²⁹ Gertrude herself wrote, and people also wrote about her. One such anonymous man recorded this insight about Gertrude. It sheds light on the phrase in Esther: "Esther won the favour of all who saw her."

It seems that the anonymous man prayed for young Gertrude, and the Lord spoke to him saying,

I have chosen to dwell in (Gertrude) because it delights me to see that everything that people love in her is my own work. Those who know nothing of interior, that is, spiritual things, love in her at least my exterior gifts, such as intelligence, eloquence, and so on. Therefore I have exiled her from all relatives, so that there should be no one who would love her for the sake of ties of blood, and that I may be the only reason why all her friends love her. (Obbard, 2002:19; [Book 1:16]).

This explanation about Gertrude fits well with the Biblical text's assessment of Esther. Perhaps favour in the Biblical sense is a sovereign gift from the Lord, a gift designed to point others to God. Xerxes agrees with everybody – the girls, the eunuchs – and makes Esther queen (Esther, 2:15b, 17). It must have been a decision greeted with much joy.

6.1.2 Esther 2:17³⁰

Now the king *loved* Esther more than any of the women and she won *favour* and *lovingkindness* before him more than any

29 The abbey was a delightful place, a seat of learning where women engaged in scholarly and theological pursuits throughout their lives. Gertrude thrived in this atmosphere.

30 According to Jewish tradition, Esther was 75 years old when she was brought to the king, making his love for her and his favour upon her even more of a miracle. Evidently when Esther came to the king, he forgot Vashti and her beauty (Rappoport, 1995:249).

of the virgins and he set a crown of royalty on her head and he made her queen instead of Vashti. (*italics – RGB.*)³¹

This text serves as an indicator that all will be well, for the king *loved* Esther; she enjoyed his *ongoing favour*. Via this verse, the narrator signals to his audience to expect both a happy ending and bumps along the way!³²

Again, the king loved Esther! That's amazing because the word *love*, *'hb*, is rarely used in the Biblical text for the relationship between a husband and wife.³³ How sad this rarity is *'hb* can mean love, covenant friendship, and in a heterosexual relationship, the idea of experiencing and desiring love in an all-encompassing sense (Els, 1997:1:277, 291). The text hints that it was love at first sight for this sexually experienced, jaded, cruel, selfish, angry, and very complex man.

The verse continues. The idea of *lovingkindness*, *hesed*, carries the notion of one of superior rank (usually the Lord, but here in Esther 2:17, the king) extending deliverance and even protection to one of lesser rank (Baer & Gordon, 1997:2:211). *Hesed* involves a moral responsibility voluntarily taken on and an ongoing loyalty on the part of the one of superior rank to the one of lesser rank. The idea here is that Esther comes under the love, favour, and protection of the mighty monarch. Furthermore, this mighty monarch willingly and even gladly extends it.

31 Baldwin (1984:19) writes that the dismissal of one queen, the search for another, and the choice of another (even one from another background) is "quite within the bounds of the probable" for this monarch. Baldwin (1984:19) adds that as a youth, Xerxes made a commitment to his father Darius to marry within seven noble families in Persia.

32 Other texts serve as indicators of events to come as well. Consider three examples. The text introduces Boaz as a *hayil*, a man of standing (Ruth 2:1); Boaz also calls Ruth a *hayil*, a woman of noble character (Ruth 3:11). Arguably, the use of the same word indicates the narrator's approval of their plans to marry. Rachel and her son Joseph are called by the same adjective, beautiful (*yapeh*), an indication that quite likely they shared a strong family resemblance (Gen. 29:17b; 39:6b). Yet in another example of a textual indicator is the narrator's initial descriptions of Nabal as a husband who was mean and surly in his dealings and of Abigail as a wife who was both intelligent and beautiful (1 Sam. 25:3). After making an editorial statement like this, the narrator must substantiate it via the story that follows.

33 Biblical examples include these texts: Isaac loved Rebekah (Gen. 24:66) and Solomon loved many foreign women (1 Kings, 11:1).

6.1.3 Esther 2:18

And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

This banquet, the third so far in the text, seems more dignified. Men and women dine together. The text contains no mention of drinking matters, of representatives coming from throughout the world, or of separate banquets for the king and queen. There was one banquet; significantly it was called Esther's Banquet. The world enjoys a holiday and the king's liberal gifts. A statesmanlike atmosphere, with proper joy over a wedding, prevails.

6.1.4 Textual warning: Esther 2:19

When the virgins were assembled a *second* time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. (Italics – RGB.)

What does this – a second time – mean? Has Xerxes already tired of Esther?

Esther 2:16-17 hints at a love-at-first-sight infatuation and establishes Xerxes' ongoing favour for Esther. Xerxes honors his queen by naming a banquet in her honor, placing a crown on her head, and distributing gifts throughout the kingdom (Esther, 2:18). An unspecified length of time passes between Esther 2:18 and 2:19. As is typical in Biblical narrative, no explanation of the time lapse appears.

In Esther 2:19, Esther reigns as queen. But she holds her position and her life (as did her predecessor, Vashti) by the king's favour. Suddenly in this verse, there are more virgins! Esther has competition! Groves sees the verse through the eyes of the cold anger of the Persian populace that again is forced to relinquish its daughters yet a second time to satisfy the lust of the ruler of the world (Groves, 2003:109). Rather than being secure, Esther's position trembles. This verse is an earthquake for her.

6.1.5 Anger of officials and Haman

Anger intrudes again in the text. Bigthana and Teresh, officers in charge of the doorway, become angry at Xerxes and plot his assassination (Esther, 2:21). Mordecai, Esther's uncle, hears of the

conspiracy and informs Esther who informs the king.³⁴ The plot is investigated and the officers, executed.

Haman's anger then forces the crisis in the book. Enraged at Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, he plots to destroy Mordecai and Mordecai's people and receives the king's signature giving the date for the Jews' extermination (Esther, 3).³⁵ However, his blood lust toward Mordecai and Mordecai's people backfires. It leads to his own death, the deaths of his ten sons, the confiscation of his property, the strengthening of the marital bond between Xerxes and Esther, the elevation of Mordecai to his position of prime minister, and an opportunity to show that Xerxes finally is learning to manage his anger (Esther, 7-10).

7. Anger management: living with an angry person

The Book of Esther, via the characters who relate to Xerxes, gives guidelines on how to live with a person who is both angry and powerful. In chapter one, the seven named eunuchs, Xerxes' chief servants, tiptoe around him, doing his bidding immediately. Vashti defies and embarrasses him in front of the whole world. The court counsellors manipulate him to sign an edict that benefits their own dysfunctional marriages (Esther, 1:10-22).

Queen Esther differs from them all.³⁶ Esther follows a program of recognising Xerxes' anger but dealing with it constructively. Consider these insights:

7.1 A survival program

The text indicates Esther incorporates a multi-step survival program as queen and consort (Stoop & Arterburn, 1991:91-100).

34 According to Jewish tradition, Mordecai, a member of the Sanhedin, knew 70 languages and could converse in them. He understood the language of Bigthana and Teresh, the two disgruntled eunuchs, when they spoke in Tarsian (Rappoport, 1995:249).

35 When Haman gained permission to exterminate a people, Jewish tradition says Xerxes knew it was the Jews (Rappoport, 1995:257).

36 The unlikely hero of the Jewish people in the Exile is a girl, an orphan, a teenager, and an exile. The Book of Esther via its main character, Esther, gives a model of how the covenant community, Israel, is to make its way triumphantly, successfully, and even amid God's silence while it is exiled from the land (Treloar, 2008:396).

- Esther becomes Xerxes' biggest fan. Yes, her life depends on keeping his favour, but she seems truly to respect him in the sense of wanting the best for him. She saves his life from Bigthana and Teresh. She introduces him to Mordecai, a man to replace Haman as his chief advisor. In short, she seeks to please him.³⁷
- Esther is Xerxes' wife, but she also acts as his friend – not as his slave and not as his mother. They share a bed (occasionally) but they also share common concerns for the state. They share complementary roles in the state. Because Esther acts as a friend and not as a slave or a mother, Xerxes seems to begin to deal with his anger (Stoop & Arterburn, 1991:94).
- Esther does not nag. Instead, she pleads for the lives of herself and her people. Instead, she successfully uses body language in her supplications by throwing herself on the floor and pleading for an end to Haman's evil plan (Esther, 8:3). Pleading, however, differs from nagging by bringing in a moral element.
- Esther stresses her loyalty. Xerxes knows she is on his side. She is for him, not against him. She is exclusively his. She seeks to be of help to him in his job of king of the world. A way she helps is to point out a people in his domain, the Jews, who, because of her, are loyal to him.
- Esther affirms Xerxes. Xerxes' self-worth, like that of many men, is tied up in his job (Stoop & Arterburn, 1991:93). As ruler of the world, he received a major defeat in Greece. She affirms him as a man. She is exclusively his. Although he has not been to her bed in 30 days, she approaches him. It is a bold, sexually-laden move, a move arguing (in the intimate language of a husband and wife) that she desires him so much that she'll risk death to be with him (Esther, 5:1-9).
- Esther never criticises Xerxes or blames him for his inept actions. She works within his framework – the laws of the Persians and Medes – and not within the framework of wishful thinking. Her

37 Throughout the book of Esther, a common phrase is this: "If it pleases the king" (Esther, 1:19; 3:9; 5:4, 8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13). Memucan, Haman, and Esther all address the king in this way. Literally the phrase is this: "If it is *good* to the king" (italics – RGB). *Twb* (*good*) carries with it an ethical sense of acting rightly and, because the phrase addresses Xerxes, a sense of kingly conduct (Gordon, 1997:2:353-355). The word *twb* reminds the king to act like a king.

actions show she realises that nagging or criticism or airing her opinions about things cannot change the reality of the decree. Nagging, criticism, and negative opinions probably intensify anger. Esther displays none of these.

- Esther appreciates Xerxes for his efforts on her behalf and the results of his new edict. The Jews can defend themselves and do defend themselves. They kill 800 of their enemies in Susa (including the ten sons of Haman) and 75 000 throughout the world (Esther, 9:12-16).³⁸
- Esther works as a team player. Together with Xerxes and Mordecai, Esther works for the betterment of the Jews and for what the Biblical text presents as the betterment of the kingdom.
- Esther gives Xerxes space and time, two priceless gifts in anger management. Meanwhile, she remains constant. In addition to not nagging Xerxes, she doesn't rush him. She doesn't ask him for freedom and wealth. He gives to her the house and fortune of her enemy, Haman (Esther, 8:1). He gives to her the freedom to be a counsellor of state. By proving her merit, Esther moves from the harem and into the counsels of power.
- Esther never punishes Xerxes by withholding her presence from him. She makes herself available – both in the counsel chamber and in the bedroom. Esther makes it plain she desires him.

38 Jewish tradition mentions Xerxes was warned in a dream concerning the larger intentions of Haman. Xerxes had a dream of his vizier Haman bending over him with a word and ready to kill him (Rappoport, 1995:271). Xerxes woke up, greatly frightened and commanded the state records be brought to him (Esther, 6:1-2).

In his account of the Esther story, Josephus adds insights the Biblical text omits. Josephus records that Xerxes writes his views of the Jews. Xerxes says that the Jews are people who conduct their lives in the best manner and are dedicated to the God who preserved Xerxes' kingdom (Josephus, 1985:242).

Xerxes also writes that Haman treacherously tried to take the life of Esther, Xerxes' partner for life, and have his dominion brought to destruction (Josephus, 1985:242).

Jewish tradition likewise elaborates on Xerxes' letter. Xerxes writes that Haman was controlled by an extreme hatred of the king's peaceful suspects, the Jews. The letter claims that Haman even plotted to kill the king and take the king's throne. Haman received a just punishment: being strung up on the gallows. Xerxes writes that he wanted his loyal subjects, the Jews, to live in peace throughout his dominions (Rappoport, 1995:273-274).

- Esther keeps her mystery – and therefore keeps Xerxes' interest.³⁹ Xerxes keeps coming back. Xerxes' behaviour improves with his marriage to Esther, and it keeps on improving throughout the book.

7.2 A workable model for living with an angry person

Put another way, Esther lives amid deadly court intrigue by following what modern research would praise as a workable model for living with an angry person (Hankins & Hankins, 1993:78-79).

- She waits. When she acts, it is not impetuous; it is not out of hurt or anger.⁴⁰
- She knows her intentions: to save herself, Mordecai, and their people (Esther, 7:3-6).⁴¹
- She stays focused on her intentions.⁴²
- She lets Xerxes know she has something to discuss. She gives him time to prepare for their encounter (Esther, 6:4).
- She is calm.⁴³ She waits until Xerxes is well fed before she lets her request be made known.

39 Esther is “tellingly artful” (Groves, 2003:104). Her aura of mystery appeals to the king who is more used to subterfuge, the slaughter of thousands, and the extermination of whole peoples.

40 Yet Groves (2003:108) sees Esther's agony in seeking out the king as “palpable”. Esther's hope of receiving royal favour (because of this second batch of virgins, Esther, 2:19) is minimal. She knew the king's guards could strike her down without a thought because of her defiance of the known law of the Persians.

41 Benedict, when writing his Rule, cites Scripture frequently. His chapter entitled “Reverence in prayer”, however, contains no Scripture references. Nevertheless, perhaps he had in mind Esther when she came unbidden to Xerxes (Esther, 5:1). “Whenever we want to ask a favour of someone powerful, we do it humbly and respectfully,” Benedict says (Chittister, 1992:90).

42 She chooses to put aside her own self-preservation. She walks with eyes wide open into danger. She chooses a pre-emptive strike, so to speak, which displays great courage and faith (Groves, 2003:107).

43 Esther lives with unbelievable tension, yet she does not express stress, tension or anger. Instead she channels her energy into constructive waiting and appropriate action.

- She speaks appropriately. She handles herself as a queen and loyal subject of Xerxes, and yet brings a smile to his husbandly face when she states she hopes she finds his favour (Esther, 6:4; 7:3-4).
- She uses the pronoun “I” and gives “I messages” – messages in the first person pronoun: “If the king regards *me* with favour, if he is pleased with *me* ... *I* and *my* people have boon sold for destruction” (italics – RGB) (Esther, 7:3-4).
- Esther follows through. She keeps on negotiating with Xerxes. She doesn’t stop with the death of Haman. Her focus is saving her people from death.
- Esther dresses appropriately (Esther, 5:1). She comes before the king on his throne⁴⁴ dressed in her royal robes. She comes as a statesman, not as a boudoir specialist. Esther makes no misstep in venting any anger she may feel. Anger, when one models anger management, is counter productive. Esther controls her feelings, indeed is mysterious about many of them.
- She thinks before she speaks, reasons out a plan that involves others, and shares the burden of saving her people with her people (Esther, 4:16).⁴⁵ Esther is a model heroine; an able

44 According to Jewish tradition, Xerxes sat on Solomon’s throne, a throne pilfered from Solomon’s Temple by the Shishak of Egypt, then captured by Sennacherib, then by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, then by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and finally by Xerxes of Persia. The festivities that open the Book of Esther commemorate the completion of the rebuilding of Solomon’s throne to Persian grandeur (Rappoport, 1995:243).

45 Esther, her serving maids, and her people fast (Esther, 4:15-26). Throughout Scripture, fasting, abstaining from food for spiritual purposes, occurs (Foster, 1998:48).

In most cases, fasting is a way, accompanied by prayer, to face a serious problem (Foster, 1998:50). It seems that Esther thought her crisis presented such a spiritual problem. No laws, however, regulate a fast. The purpose of Biblical fasting is to focus on God. Fasting fixes attention on God. Arguably, Esther’s fasting, accompanied by the fasting of her people in Susa, produces this result: Xerxes spares her life; he extends his sceptre to her when she arrives unannounced in his presence (Esther, 5:1-2). Throughout the ages, fasting has produced increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, increased concentration, deliverance from bondage, an increased physical well-being, and revelations from God (Foster, 1998:56).

teacher. Consider her options: silence, committing suicide, fleeing the country, waiting for death, recanting her heritage.⁴⁶

- Esther's rational approach shows her mastery of a crucial aspect of anger management: the consequences of inappropriate behaviour (Hankins & Hankins, 1993:71). The life of Xerxes, as recorded by Herodotus, shows he successfully avoided looking at his behaviour's consequences. No one before Esther had had the courage to confront him.

8. Xerxes shows (some) evidence of managing his anger

Anger management, a modern phrase, refers to psychological and therapeutic techniques and exercises by which a person who has exhibited uncontrollable or excessive anger can recognise the patterns that trigger anger and reduce the effects of outbursts.⁴⁷ Significantly, Xerxes is not demonised in the Biblical text but is portrayed more along the lines of a hot-tempered and self-centered oriental despot.⁴⁸

The Biblical account indicates Xerxes changes a bit from Esther 1 to Esther 7. Consider these techniques in anger management he displays (see LaHaye, 1982:148-163), but bear in mind that the responsibility of handling anger – be one king, queen, or commoner – rests with the person alone.⁴⁹

46 Jewish tradition records Esther initially was misunderstood. The Jews of Shushan feared the queen had abandoned them because she only invited Xerxes and Haman to a banquet. The Jews of Shushan thought Esther had made friends with their enemy (Rappoport, 1995:269-270).

47 Anger management includes the following techniques: power relaxation, positive self-talk, adjusting one's expectations, communicating with "I messages", not taking things personally, deep breathing, and therapeutic counselling (see Hankins & Hankins, 1993:156). Anger's arousal represents an emotional trigger a person can respond to and control in constructive or destructive ways.

48 Niskanen (2004:74) points out that in the Book of Daniel, Antiochus IV is portrayed badly and even demonised; however, Xerxes, in comparison in the Book of Esther, resembles more the hot tempered, self-satisfied, and proud Nebuchadnezzar of Daniel.

49 Granted, rank can be pulled in any social situation (be it in family, job, or kingdom) and others blamed, but ultimately one's responses to life and the situations it presents are under the control of each individual. The Book of Esther and *The Persian wars* certainly provide examples of how Xerxes, up until Esther 7:7, seemingly successfully blamed others and caused them to fear for their lives by immediately displaying wrath, anger, and rage.

- More information. In contrast to his reaction to Vashti, Xerxes gets more information before responding to Esther. He does not order her killed but extends his sceptre to her (Esther, 5:2). He finds out why Esther wants to honor him with a dinner.
- Memory file. Xerxes manages his anger by going into his memory file. He could have ordered Esther struck down when she approached him unbidden (Esther, 5:1-2), but he was pleased with her (v. 2) and perhaps remembered his conjugal affiliation with her. After all, Vashti *refused* to come to him at his command, but Esther *comes* to him without his command.
- Displaced anger. Perhaps Xerxes became aware of displaced anger, expressing anger toward a third party that was meant for a first party.
- Evaluate feelings. Perhaps the humiliating, world-renowned defeat in Greece led Xerxes to evaluate his angry responses. The banquet honouring Esther differed from the banquet that opened the Book of Esther, a banquet that amounted to a half-year drinking bout.
- Control issues. The defeat in Greece perhaps taught Xerxes he really did not rule the world or control its history.
- Sin issues. The Biblical text overwhelmingly depicts anger as a sin of choice and a controllable sin. Perhaps living with Esther showed him another standard.
- Time. During the second intimate banquet shared by the royal couple and Haman, Esther tells the king of Haman's plot. The king leaves his wine in a rage. He walks in the garden (Esther, 7:7). This space of time shows he now thinks before he speaks, thinks before he acts, and chooses to be alone while angry. These measures show growth, a change from chapter 1. He returns to the banquet scene to find Haman "falling on the couch where Esther was reclining" (Esther, 7:8).⁵⁰

50 According to Jewish tradition, Haman prostrated himself before the queen and started kissing her head. She pushed him back, and that was the scene when the king came back into the private chamber from the garden. He saw Haman kissing the queen and concluded he was trying to seduce her (Rappoport, 1995:275).

9. Conclusion

Actually, the Book of Esther keeps its secrets well, and perhaps is somewhat textually unsatisfying because it leaves its hearers and readers with questions (Treloar, 2008:393). For example, consider these questions: How did the marriage fare? Were there children? How long did Esther and Mordecai live? Evidently Xerxes was assassinated in 465 BCE (Smith-Christopher, 2000:1401).

The Biblical text presents no evidence that Xerxes converts to the God of Esther and Mordecai. But there is textual evidence that he changes a bit from a very angry man to a man who makes attempts at controlling his anger. The text presents evidence that the close interactions with Esther (and then with Mordecai) change him, temper him, calm him. He listens to their advice (Esther, 8:3-10), finds that logic defeats anger, and redirects his angry energy toward something positive: working for the good of his kingdom (Esther, 10:1-2a). He allows his subjects, the Jews, to defend themselves.

In successful anger management, love comes first. (Carter, 1983:143-149). Xerxes loves Esther; it would seem he loved her at first sight (Esther, 2:17). In contrast to his other relationships, there is kindness and warmth in his treatment of her. Esther keeps her standards and yet gives Xerxes unlimited acceptance. She gives him the emotional space to change (Carter, 1983:144). Favor, the polar opposite of anger, gains the advantage.

The goal of anger management is not the elimination of anger. Much more to the point, anger management's goal is knowing how to recognise anger and handle it. Give anger space. Realise that triggers like memories, pain, frustration, disappointment, fear, arrogance, and irritation remain as part of life (Benton, 1998:73). Anger yields animosity. Favour yields good will.

In my research for this article, I discovered the ancient classic, *The Persian wars*. The adventure story delighted me. Herodotus records Xerxes' interactions with many people and singles out Artemisia, the daughter of Lygdamis, in particular. She rules the Halicarnassians, the men of Cos, and others. Herodotus writes that "her brave spirit and manly daring sent her forth to the war, when no need required her to adventure" (Herodotus, 1942:7.99). Artemisia furnishes Xerxes the most famous ships in his fleet, next to those of the Sidonians (Herodotus, 1942:7.99). Artemisia captains her own ship. In a significant sea battle, Xerxes credits Artemisia with more skill and valor than his men (Herodotus, 1942:8.88). Courageously, it is she

who correctly assesses the Spartans' victory and counsels Xerxes to go home to Persia and leave his general Mardonius to fight the Greeks (Herodotus, 1942:8.102-103). She clearly exhibits anger management skills in dealing with Xerxes.

Via Artemisia – woman adventurer, ship commander, and warrior – Herodotus establishes that Xerxes recognises sound counsel from a woman when he hears it. Xerxes respects courage. If, as it is thought that Xerxes meets Esther after his defeat in Greece, then Artemisia paves the way for Esther.⁵¹

The battlefield switches from Greece to Susa. There, Esther acts as a general in royal robes. Truly within the court of Xerxes, Esther the queen emerges as one who walks and does not tiptoe around the halls of power. She comes gracefully yet forcefully before the king, time and time again. Displaying courage and confidence, wisdom and femininity, Esther fights for her life and the lives of her people, the covenant community. Blessed with favour, she faces anger, neutralises it, and channels its powerful force toward life.

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51 Perhaps stories of her became known in Persia; perhaps she modelled for Esther (in advance and from a distance) how to deal with Xerxes.

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