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FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TEXTURE OF ESTHER 4:1-17

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the interactions between Esther and Mordecai through the lens of a social and cultural texture of Esther 4:1-17. The paper investigates the social and cultural factors existing in the background of the text, including specific cultural topics such as cultural rhetoric and common social concerns such as honor and shame. The challenges presented within the book are examined in relation to the responses to and actions that occur as a result. The paper seeks to link the behavior of one of the main characters to the aspects of transformational leadership and to identify how modern leaders can look to this pericope for guidance in their individual situations. As the transformational leader often rises in response to uncertain times, times of changes, or times of great adversity within societies (Bass, 1978), it is crucial that leaders possess sound judgment and the ability to act decisively, move followers to action, and identify creative solutions to novel problems.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Robbins (1996), socio-rhetorical criticism allows the reader to enter the world of the text by examining the "values, convictions, and beliefs" (p. 1) of the people living within the text. The method involves critically investigating the different nuances found within the details. Robbins defined five methods for exploring texture, each of which involves different angles and approaches to interpretation. Est. 4:1-17 chronicles the reactions of both Queen Esther and Mordecai to a deadly decree credulously issued by King Xerxes at the request of Haman. The pericope focuses on "changing people [and] social practices" (Robbins, 1996, p. 3) and reveals much about the cultural orientation and social location of the two main characters within the text. This study examines the book of Est. 4:1-17 through the lens of social and cultural texture analysis and uncovers its implications for transformational leadership in present times.

II. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TEXTURE

The social and cultural texture leads interpreters to uncover the "social and cultural 'location' of the language and the type of social and cultural world the language evokes or creates" (Robbins, 1996, p. 71). This type of analysis investigates the worldviews of the narrator and characters by examining their understanding of the world based on their society and culture (Robbins,1996). Additionally, the social and cultural texture of a text reveals the positioning of characters and exposes their innate religious responses to the complications of their world. Robbins summarized several stances characters adopt when faced with issues, as presented by Wilson and Wilde. These descriptions involve the way characters speak about their present issues and places emphasis on the primary concerns that can be drawn from this speech (Robbins, 1996). According to Robbins (1996), these religious responses include conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, thaumaturgical, reformist, utopian, and gnostic-manipulationist.

The conversionist believes that people are the root of evil and that changing people will bring salvation. Revolutionists believe salvation will come only through the supernatural destruction and recreation of the social order. The introversionist view is that no salvation is possible for the world, so they choose to withdraw from society in order to achieve personal redemption. A thaumaturgical response involves exact incidents that are present and central to the time of the text and the characters within the text. Salvation is specific and in response to only that precise grievance. The reformist viewpoint is that the social order within the world is the cause of evil and if the order can be fixed, the world can also be mended. Utopian response seeks to completely eradicate evil through the recreation of social order by people, with no intrusion from a divine entity. Finally, the gnostic-manipulationist response seeks a method of dealing with evil, believing that society can be redeemed, but people must learn how to spark that redemption (Robbins, 1996).

The social and cultural texture requires that interpreters be aware of the distance that exists between ancient times and current times (Robbins, 1996). This awareness helps prevent the mistake of projecting meaning into the message of the text as a "function of the reader's location" (VanHoozer, 1984, p. 149). According to Osborne (2006), each original author shares a certain amount of tacit knowledge with the society and culture for which they originally wrote. In the modern world, this implicit knowledge is frequently either lost or foreign to the present-day reader, and background investigation can help recover and familiarize this obsolete knowledge (Osborne). It is the study of these "common social and cultural topics" (Robbins, 1996, p. 75) that spark awareness of the historical distances and differences between ancient and modern times. Mindfulness allows interpreters to identify and isolate presuppositions and biases that exist as a result of their worldviews. Robbins provides several social and cultural topics that require special attention due to the significant differences in the modern age compared to ancient times. These topics will be discussed in the exegesis section of this paper.

III. THE WORLD OF ESTHER 4:1-17

Per Robbins (1996), "specific social topics in the text reveal the religious responses to the world in its discourse" (p. 71). The book of Esther is rich in social and cultural references and reactions that reveal the religious backgrounds of the main characters, thereby exposing their social and cultural locations, worldviews, and religious stances. The narrative and discourse featured in chapter four of the book provide a distinct glimpse into the background of the verse. Chapter four begins as Mordecai mourned over a decree sealed with King Xerxes' signet ring. "When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry" (English Standard Bible, 2001/2016, Est. 4:1). Haman, an Aggagite official of King Xerxes', requested the decree after he became enraged over Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him per another edict.

Background Events

Esther was the Queen of the Gentile King Xerxes of the Persians. Xerxes was ignorant of her origins; both Jewish and an orphan, she was raised by her cousin Mordecai (Cairns, 2013). Esther ascended to the throne under guidance from Mordecai, after winning a pageant held to replace the former Persian Queen Vashti, who was banished for insolence by Xerxes and his advisors (Pierce, 1992). Mordecai, appointed to a government position due to his relationship with Esther, had recently uncovered a plot to assassinate King Xerxes, a deed for which he received no recognition (Est., 6:3; Cairns, 2013). Haman, instead, was honored, though it was not clear for what deed. The mistake possibly contributed to the conflict between him and Mordecai (Pierce, 1992). The narrative begins after the Jewish people have been removed from their lands by King Nebuchadnezzar (Pierce, 1992). Many chose to remain living in Susa even after King Cyrus cleared the way for their return to Jerusalem (Pierce, 1992).

Specific Social Topics

The book explicitly deals with aspects of society, including exile, grieving customs, deception, exclusion, loyalty/disloyalty, and genocide through the actions and behaviors of the characters within the narrative (Pierce,1992). The absence of explicit references to God in the book has called to question the nature of the book itself (Magonet, 2014; Berger, 2016). God's involvement is implied and understood as background movement expressed through the rhetoric and behaviors of the characters within the chapter. A more in-depth linguistic analysis of the book reveals "phrases where the initial letters of the words, as a form of an acrostic, actually spell out divine names" (Magonet, 2014a). Others have posited that this unique absence is a result of the times, speculating that the Gentile attempt to displace God or exile the Jews and distance them from God's leadership contributes to the seeming omission of Him in the book (Berger, 2016). Whatever the reason for the apparent absence, the religious response of the characters is evident considering their perceptions of the problems which they face.

IV. EXEGESIS OF ESTHER 4:1-17

Est. 4:1-17 narrates Mordecai's appeal to Esther to for help in Haman's decree of destruction against all Jews. When Esther initially heard of the plot she objected out of fear "if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter" (Est. 4:11). Despite her fears, Mordecai's unadorned reply prompted Esther to act. "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (Est. 4:12). The cause of the decree in question is a point of confusion for historians and Biblical scholars. Mordecai's refusal to bow made no apparent sense as no article of Law prohibited the Jewish people from this action (Hertzberg, 2015). Whether a point of stubbornness, a matter of pride or honor, or just an inane refusal to defer to his political enemy, Mordecai's actions triggered the issuance of the decree. The edict is an even more significant problem as King Xerxes later declared that an "edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked" (Est. 8:8) Per Katz (2003) this is another point of confusion for historians and scholars, as no other evidence exists that supports the irrevocability of laws issued by the King.

Final Cultural Categories

Per Robbins (1996) cultural location is revealed by the way the characters "present their propositions, reason, and arguments to both themselves and other people" (p. 86). Est. 4 involves dominant culture rhetoric, the presentation of "a system of attitudes, values, dispositions, and norms" (Robbins, p. 86) which the author understands to be endorsed by those in a position of power. The book also exhibits ethnic subculture rhetoric, the result of the Jews living in a diasporic state and residing within a "new cultural environment" (Robbins, p. 86). Despite the danger faced by Jews simply for the offense of being Jewish during this exilic period, Mordecai struggled to establish a sense of order (Green, 2011) and uphold the ways of Judaism within their new environment.   Chapter four opens with Mordecai and all the Jews mourning at the issuance of the decree. Haman's vendetta against Jews has already been made evident in Est. 3:10 which describes how "the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews."

 Est. 4:1-3 depicts the grieving actions of the Jews, describing the tearing of garments, donning of sackcloth, ashes, fasting, and wailing. The description of Mordecai's tearing of his clothes is a form of ethnic subculture rhetoric. The action is directly related to an ancient Jewish mourning ritual known as Keriah. The custom involved tearing cloth as a form of expressing emotions such as extreme grief (Cutter, 1992). Donning sackcloth and ashes were not directly related to Jewish customs but were more a shared ritual of mourning (Oren, 2009). Description of these behaviors and actions are presented as a form of dominant culture rhetoric which is familiar to the social structure of the time. Mordecai carries out his protestations boldly. He tore at his clothes, perhaps even aggressively ripping the cloth away himself in anger and grief (Jastrow, 1899) before donning his sackcloth and weeping and wailing loudly outside

the King's gates (4:1-2). Effectively "parading his Otherness" (Resnick, 1994, p.81) for all to see, confusing those who are unaware of the decree (including Esther) and calling attention to the fact that he is a Jew.

Gnostic Manipulationist Response

Mordecai's strange behavior captured the attention of Esther, resulting in an exchange between Esther and Mordecai facilitated by Hathach, Esther's attending eunuch. Hathach is ordered by Esther to relay the cause for Mordecai's behaviors to her, prompting him to travel back and forth to deliver messages between the two. Esther first attempted to have Mordecai remove his sackcloth and come inside, but Mordecai refused, rendering the involvement of Hathach a necessity. It is this exchange that first revealed Mordecai's religious approach to the world. Per Robbins (1996) the gnostic-manipulationist rebuff "the institutionalized means of attaining [societal goals] and the existing facilities by which people might be saved" (p. 73). This view does not rely on supernatural intervention for salvation, but rather, contends that redemption is possible "if people learn the right means [and] improved techniques to deal with their problems" (p. 73). Mordecai sent a copy of the document executed to destroy the Jews to Esther, instructing "her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (Est., 4:8). Mordecai's plan to intercept the destruction of the Jews involved the intervention of Esther, in her position as Queen as a technique to address the problem.

Honor, Guilt, and Rights

The perception of honorable behavior and actions is not uniform across all cultures; instead, they are relative based on the culture surrounding the society standing in judgment (Speier, 1935). Est. 4:11-17 chronicles the conversation between Esther and Mordecai as it progresses through Hathach and provides a glimpse into Esther's own sense of "self-worth and the public, social acknowledgment of that worth" (Malina, 2001, p. 48). Esther questioned the wisdom of approaching the King and informed Mordecai "I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days" (4:11). The expression of shame shows Esther's awareness of how the opinions of others regarding her honor impacted her; it shows that she was cognizant of the "rules of human interaction" (Malina, p. 49) and was aware of her boundaries and the laws governing her behavior and limiting her rights. Even as the Queen, if the King did not delight in her uninvited appearance, Esther was subject to losing her life. Mordecai's response reminded Esther of her worth, place, and honor as a member of the Jewish culture before and after she became a Queen. Mordecai warned that "relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish" (Est. 4:13-14). Mordecai's response highlighted that risk existed regardless of the route Esther chose.

Robbins (1996) described challenge-response (riposte) as a "sort of constant tug of war, a game of push and shove" (p. 80). Per Robbins, challenge-response develops through a minimum of three phases. First, the challenger (Mordecai) initiates the

challenge either through an action or a message; second, the challenged (Esther) must receive and process the challenge, and finally, the challenged person must respond, and be judged in the eyes of the public (the Jewish community, the Persian community and all those privy to Mordecai's revelation of Esther as a Jew). Mordecai's approach is positive; he approached Esther to save not only himself and her, but the entirety of their people. Esther initially considered Mordecai's challenge from the viewpoint of the damage that it might cause to her honor and self-worth in the face of the King, and those surrounding the King. She reminded her cousin that this could mean her life. Mordecai rebuffed her reaction by expanding his challenge, and finally, Esther agreed to act, and acknowledged that though the stakes were

 high, she had no other option. The outcome of the book of Esther shows that her judgment in acting was apt, resulting in the salvation of people.

V. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

James MacGregor Burns, political scientist, author, and professor, was a primary developer of the transformational theory of leadership (Sorenson, 2014). Burns (2003) contended that transformational leadership raised both leaders and followers to increased levels of motivation through expanding "want and hope and ambition and demand" (p. 151). Burns (1978) further posited that transforming leadership "ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both" (p. 20). Further, transformational leaders are a "response to the needs of society" (Burns, 1978, p. 142), arising at times of turbulence or crisis and often struggling with internal, external, or societal conflicts. Bass (1990), later defined transformational leadership as:

> when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group" (p. 21).

Transformational leaders accomplish complete investiture by using a combination of behaviors, including exemplifying morals and values to boost follower respect, encouraging creative thought and innovation, developing and increasing employee performance, and sharing a vision using artifacts that engages followers (Yukl, 2013). Respectively, these actions are known as idealized influence, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Per Vondey (2010) "it is not only important to create a vision, but also vital to communicate that vision in a way that followers can, in turn, imagine a positive future" (p. 11). This behavior of the transformational leader is categorized as inspirational motivation. Bass described inspirational motivation (1990) as leader ability to effectively project an appealing prediction of the future to followers. Per Yukl (2013) transformational leaders empower followers by "delegating significant authority to individuals or teams, developing follower skills and self-confidence, providing direct

access to sensitive information, [and] eliminating unnecessary controls (p. 329). Per Bass, these traits fall under the heading of individualized consideration, an aspect of the theory in which leaders focus on the individual growth of their followers. Idealized influence encompasses role model behaviors and engagement in activities such as self-sacrifice and displays of humility that increase follower trust (Yukl) in the leader. The leader effectively positions their own behavior as an example for followers (Bass). Per Vondey, "the creativity and the imagination that a leader brings to the organization should pervade throughout the system so that followers feel welcomed to express their own creative imagination" (p. 10). She describes a form of intellectual stimulation, in which the leader challenges followers to ascend to higher levels of innovation and creativity (Bass) through engaging in and encouraging imaginative and novel solutions to problems and decisions faced by organizations.

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF ESTHER 4:1-17 FOR LEADERSHIP

This single pericope presents vision, influence, decision-making, planning, and action, all of which are crucial metrics of effective leadership (Yukl, 2013). Mordecai's actions and behavior in these verses more closely resemble those of the transformational leader than any other. This section presents an examination of Mordecai's actions as they align with the four primary behaviors of transformational leaders. Though Esther had an exhibited tendency to acquiesce to Mordecai's instruction which is apparent in her joining the harem of a gentile King under his guidance, and the hiding of her origins from the King, again, under Mordecai's tutelage (Hertzberg, 2015). This time, however, Esther showed resistance to Mordecai's demands, sending back a carefully worded message that not only outlined the reason for her refusal but seemed to contain a rebuke for Mordecai's disregard for not only her honor but her very life. "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned, the king has but one law…" (Est. 4:11) which implied that Esther is aware that Mordecai should also be familiar with the law as a member of both the government and the royal province. Esther further theorized her potential death if the King did not favor her arrival and expressed her concern over the time that had passed since she had last seen the King.

Per Green (2011) Mordecai's considerable skill in persuasive tactics helped him determine how to best override Esther's protests. He appealed to her sense of honor, deigned to incite her rage at the callous disregard Haman showed for Jewish life, and reminded her that her life was irrevocably intertwined with the lives of the entire Jewish race. Mordecai conveyed his vision to her in a real enough manner, "for if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish" (Est., 4:14) thus revealing his vision of her fate if she fails to move to thwart the planned genocide. Finally, Mordecai appealed to Esther's sense of duty and religious doctrines in a final question posed to her in which he asked: "who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Est., 4:1).

Mordecai's actions and rhetoric resembled that of the transformational leader in the way he conveyed "high expectations and expressed important purposes in simple ways" (Bass, 1990). His rhetoric was bold and pointed and his vision, though not one of positivity, was clear enough that it inspired Esther to act. Per Bass (1999) "idealized influence encompasses influence over ideology, influence over ideals, and influence over "bigger-than-life" issues" (p. 19), while Burns (1978) argued that "skill in exploiting power resources is in itself a vital power resource for leaders" (p. 169). Mordecai did not hesitate to tap into Esther as a source of power to counteract an issue as severe as the genocide of his entire race. Further, the entirety of the Jewish community living within reach of the provinces of King Xerxes seemed to identify with and imitate Mordecai's actions within the pericope (Green, 2011). First Mordecai began to grieve, then all the Jews begin to grieve. The surrounding books within the Esther narrative show that Mordecai exhibited individualized consideration for Esther throughout her life, but also was concerned for the entire Jewish community through his movement toward "reinvigorating his people by endowing them with a sense of confidence and strength" (Green, p. 69). Finally, Mordecai presented a challenge to Esther to formulate a creative and innovative method to gain the favor of the King and sway him to decide to protect her people. Mordecai's actions essentially changed Esther's mind; she transcended to an elevated level of "motivation and morality" (Burns, p. 20) in which their objectives joined, and moved to become a leader herself.

VII. CONCLUSION

This social and cultural texture revealed essential areas of application to the contemporary theory of transformational leadership. The close examination of Mordecai's behaviors and actions within the text reveals that his behavior aligned well with the behaviors of the transformational leader. The revelation of his gnostic-manipulationist response to the problems within the text demonstrates his concern with a "transformed method of coping with evil" (Robbins, 1996, p. 73). He approached the salvation of his people by exploiting the most logical power resource at his disposal: the relationship of his cousin Esther to the King. Further, Mordecai was prepared to risk the life of Esther, and his own position and safety through his boldened actions throughout the passage to appropriate salvation of the greater good.

Mordecai's resolve and determination to create change is a reminder to leaders of the importance of the remaining focused on the goal, appealing to follower values, and willingness to make sacrifices in order to transform followers or influence situations that may seem beyond their normal abilities. Further, the pericope presents a case for the importance of timely decisions coupled with swift execution in the face of a "dynamic, unstable environment that increases the need for change" (Yukl, 2013); a facilitating condition that calls for the rise of a transformational leader. Per Green (2015) decisive action was a strength of Mordecai's, especially considering his position as mediator between the exiled Jews and the Gentiles.

Finally, the pericope solidifies the importance of joining with followers and available power resources "as mutual support for a common purpose" (Burns, 1978).

Leaders should take advantage of all available resources to work toward a shared goal and vision that is beneficial for the community overall. Mordecai's words to Esther "but you and your father's family will perish" (Est. 4:14) sound harsh to modern ears. However, they are well-chosen by Mordecai to remind Esther of the nature of their dyadic relationship and the danger that hung equally over each of their heads. The final message for leaders in the book of Esther is to remain mindful of the fact that leaders often rise to dizzying heights and are often granted a specific window of opportunity for a precise purpose (Seidler, 2017). When the time comes to act or to inspire others to act, one should not hesitate, but rather, should move forward with resolve and determination, empowering and inspiring followers to do the same.

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