

Esther and the Recruitment of Virgins by JoAnne Chung Yan Lam

As a part of my Master of Theological Studies degree at Emmanuel College, I had requested to work with the Canadian Council of Churches on the topic of human trafficking. It was a struggle to comprehend human cruelty in the midst of desperation. Also, the existence of suffering and oppression in our world challenges my own understanding of the nature of God and the redemptive of the cross. Through studying biblical texts through diverse lenses, I have come to experience the resurrected hope in Jesus resides in and with those who are suffering and the vulnerable ones are calling us to “seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

When I used to read about the emperors of China, I was envious of the fantasy-like lifestyle of the queen and the numerous concubines within the Forbidden City. It seemed like they were living on a little piece of heaven. Only through history books have I read of the horrible accounts these women have experienced. Set in a social system where the ability to bear children and physical attractiveness were like currencies, the women plotted to eliminate threats by means of violence and vicious acts. A beautiful palace was a prison for these women and instead of finding solidarity, the search for security rested on establishing power within the ranks of the palace. For survival, women sustained oppressive gender stereotypes and in the story of Esther, we observe the treatment of women not as sex slaves but as disposable objects of affection. We will use the experience of Esther and the many virgins recruited for the queen selection process to reflect on the plight of women within a social context that continues to understand women as objects.

As I have studied the story of Esther, I remember my Sunday School teacher insisting on the courage and trust she demonstrated in her struggle to secure survival for her people, the Israelites. As much as we would focus on the hero aspect of Esther, the biblical story makes us reconsider the situational and circumstantial factors that allowed Esther to become a hero for her people. First, King Ahasuerus was dissatisfied with Queen Vashti because she refused his command to parade before his guests, as she was beautiful and a trophy for the king. This caused King Ahasuerus to look powerless before his guests, as he could not even command his queen before him. Anger led the king to dethrone Queen Vashti, beginning the experiences of Esther and the other virgins.

I would rather not focus on Esther but the experience of the virgins who were not selected. To begin with, young virgins were “sought out for the king” (Esther 2:2). An edict was written so that all “virgins” were gathered by commissioners of the king and, possibly as one would do to gather animals. The biblical passage says that Esther was also “taken into the king’s palace” where beauty treatments took place under the supervision of Hegai. I imagine that much corruption occurred here where the young women were taught to offer gifts or purchase favour with the eunuchs. However, the texts clearly named Esther as the favourite of Hegai and that she “pleased him and won his favour,” which leads me to question what Mordecai would have done in order to

establish such a position for Esther at such an early stage of the selection process. While Esther received preferential treatment, the other young women were left to wait for their treatments. The importance of these treatments for these young women was crucial if they hoped to become queen. However, the sight of Esther's closeness with Hegai, these girls may have realized their common destiny.

To be in the palace for twelve months of cosmetic treatment illustrated the standards the king has required the young women to meet. In ancient China, young girls were brought into the palace to train in the etiquettes of the Forbidden City so that they would be trained to serve the emperor accordingly. Such as the practice as described in the biblical passage, because these women arrived in the palace from various settings and contexts that the eunuchs needed to ensure quality control. Perhaps one could parallel these twelve months with the gruelling training for supermodels and movie stars. Their physical appearance is constantly under scrutiny that their cosmetic treatments would involve maintenance to the extreme, avoiding any deviation from perfection. The standards of the palace would be no less. As a child, I had dreamed of beauty treatments at the spa, feeling a princess being pampered. This illusion dissipated after a visit to the local aesthetician months before my wedding ceremony. I was told that my skincare lacked adequate regularity and substance. My defence was that I kept my face clean with specialized facial wash and though I did not have a four or five-step routine, I am caring for my skin. Nothing was satisfactory for the aesthetician who analyzed from top to bottom and concluded with weight loss as being crucial for a "beautiful bride." It was amusing and disturbing that our society associates degrees of beauty with the achievement of a dress size and not considering the individual in a holistic sense. This experience made me realize the delicate line between chosen or discarded in the selection based on outward beauty. Not only in the queen selection do physical attributes play significant and discriminating roles, because in the exploitative sex trade, beauty, and youth become bargaining tools and negotiating factors. We should learn to appreciate beauty as we find God's handy-work in it and the celebration of creation as a whole, because God saw that it was "very good."

Returning to the young virgins, they have spent twelve months preparing to come before the king. Taking the form of a competition to demonstrate their qualification as candidates as queen in etiquette or mannerism, speech and education, etc. or perhaps a beauty pageant where each participant model before the king, desperately hoping to be chosen as queen. None of these took place. Each of the women were "given whatever she asked for to take with her from the harem the king's palace" and they took turns to spend the evening with the king (Esther 2:13).

“In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name” (Esther 2:14).

For a moment, let us consider the experience of the young women who have been anticipating the selection process to be guided to the chambers of the king. It was particularly amusing to read that the women were “given whatever they desired” before going to see the king. However, were they items that would be gifts or equipment for a special talent that she wanted to perform for the king? I had difficulties imagining what type of items I would request to bring into the chambers with me. Perhaps if I had a musical talent, I would request a lyre or ribbons for dancing in case the king was in the mood for some musical entertainment. In all honesty, there was one agenda item for the young women to visit the king in the evenings and so, Esther was wise to “ask for nothing except what Hegai the king’s eunuch, who had advised” (Esther 2:15b). She brought in the good favour of the king’s eunuch and that would have significant impact on the king’s preliminary impression of her. Furthermore, Hegai served the king very closely and knew his preferences. This information is powerful because Esther was able to make a memorable appearance before the king and he took favour to her. Without it, Esther would experience the same fate as the other women who became disposable and were stored away until the king would request for them.

Concubines remind me of many stories of women who suffered under the patriarchal marriage system of polygamy, where men acquired wives as they bought other objects. Young women from impoverished families sought to establish a marriage arrangement with wealthier ones in order to provide social and financial security for the girl-children. Although these young women often are treated as domestic workers, the parents can only manage to place them in situations where their basic needs would be met in exchange for either marriage or manual labour. Sometimes very young girls are sold to be servants of the master’s daughter, who would be the same age. Due to the lack of opportunities and available alternatives, parents and families offer their children for sale and trade because between starvation and oppressive lives, they would rather have the children alive. Perhaps this is the same mentality when the king’s commissioners gathered up the young virgins. They offered the young women a chance to become something beyond their imagination. To be a concubine and live within the courts of the king, even though being ignored and for the rest of their natural lives seemed better than to struggle for mere survival. At least the life of solitude provided materialistic fulfillment even though emotionally they remain abandoned and devalued as relationship partners. I wanted to use this account of Esther and the young virgins to address the silent individuals who suffer in the shadows, without the capacity or space to voice resistance against an exploitative system. During a conversation about advocacy and missional work of the Christian churches, I was reminded that we do not need to speak for the vulnerable and

silenced, but rather to stop dominating the conversation and open our ears to hear the message of the oppressed and exploited. Jesus walked amongst the suffering communities to offer solidarity in presence and actions, living a witness of restorative accompaniment for the excluded and stigmatized.

Discussion

In countries where extreme poverty exists, how do we hear the stories from the margins and provide support systems for the vulnerable groups to find empowerment and understanding?

How are we indirectly participating in exploitative practices in our daily lives? Has our faith communities embraced the corporate and individual responsibilities for abusive treatment of individuals and peoples and what can be some ways our churches can be active in the advocacy against human trafficking and the commoditization of human beings?

Name some venues and opportunities to explore human trafficking incidents present in Canada. What are some effective/non-effective measures to fight against trafficking and to establish Canada as a trafficking-free zone?