

The First Book of Esdras is found in the Eastern Orthodox Old Testament but not in the Jewish Bible or the Roman Catholic or Protestant Old Testaments. According to David DeSilva, “The work may have been composed originally in Greek or may have been translated into Greek from a Hebrew or Aramaic original—no traces of which, however, have survived. ...a date anywhere in the two centuries before the turn of the era [before Christ] seems plausible.” DeSilva also indicates that while 1 Esdras had little impact on Judaism, early Christians showed definite interest in the story of the bodyguards which stands out as a major episode in the book.

The Contest of the Three Bodyguards

(The Lexham Old Testament Apocrypha: A New Translation, introduced by David A. DeSilva, Lexham Academic, 2023, pages 274-276.)

Now Darius gave a great banquet for all who were under him and for all born in his household and for all the nobles of Media and of Persia and for all the satraps and generals and governors who were under him in the one-hundred and twenty-seven satrapies from India to Ethiopia. And they ate and drank, and when they were satisfied, they departed, but Darius the king departed to the bedroom and fell asleep but became awakened out of his sleep.

Then the three young men, bodyguards who were watching the body of the king, said one to the other, “Let us state, each of us, one thing that is strongest, and whosoever his word seems wiser than the other, Darius the king will give him great gifts and great prizes of victory, and he shall be clothed in purple and drink from gold cups and sleep on gold and have a chariot with golden bridles and a turban of fine linen and a necklace around his neck. And he shall sit next to Darius because of his wisdom, and he shall be proclaimed kinsman of Darius.

And then, after each one wrote his own statement, they sealed them and put them under the pillow of Darius the king. And they said, “When the king wakes up, they will give him what is written, and whatever the king decides, ...to him will be given the victory, just as it is written.” The first wrote, “Wine is strongest.” The second wrote, “The king is strongest.” The third wrote, “Women are strongest, but truth prevails beyond all things.” Now when the king awoke, they took what was written and gave it to him, and he read. And he sent and summoned all the nobles of Persia and of Media and satraps and generals and governors and prefects, and he sat in the council chamber, and what was written was read in the presence of them. And he said, “Call the young men and they themselves will explain their statements.” And they were called and entered. Then they said to them, “Explain to us about the writings.”

And the first, the one who spoke about the strength of wine, began and he declared thus, “O men, how does wine prove strongest? It leads astray all people who drink it, with respect to the mind. It makes the mind of both the king and the orphan equal, both of the servant and of the free, both of the poor and of the wealthy. And it turns every thought to feasting and cheer and does not remember any sorrow or any debt. And it makes every heart rich and does not remember a king nor satrap... And they do not remember when

they drink to act friendly with friends and brothers, and with not much they draw swords. And when they awake from the wine, they do not remember what they have done. O men, is wine not strongest since it forces people to act this way?" And he was thus silent after speaking.

Then the second, the one who spoke about the strength of the king, began to speak, "O men, do not humans prove superior, ruling over the land and the sea and all things in them? But the king proves strongest, and he is lord over them and master over them, and they obey everything he says to them. If he says to them to make war one against the other, they do it. And if he sends them against the enemy, they proceed and level mountains and walls and towers. They murder and are murdered, and they do not transgress the word of the king. And if they conquer, they bring to the king everything, whatever they plunder and everything else. And as many as do not serve in the army or fight, they instead till the land; in turn, whenever they sow and reap, they bring to the king, and one compels the other to bring tribute to the king. And yet he is alone! If he says to kill, they kill; he said to release, they release; he said to beat, they strike; he said to lay waste, they lay waste; he said to build, they build; he said to cut down, they cut down; he said to plant, they plant. And all his people and his forces obey. With these things he reclines, eats, and drinks, and sleeps, but they keep watch all around him, and each one is not able to depart and do his own work, nor do they disobey him. O men, how is the king not strongest, since he is obeyed in this way?" And he was silent.

Then the third, the one who spoke about women and truth, began to speak, "O men, isn't the king great, and aren't humans many, and doesn't wine prove superior? Who, then, is master over them, or who is lord of them? Is it not women? Women give birth to the king and all the people who are lord over the sea and the land. And from them they were born, and they reared those who planted the vineyards from which wine came into being. And they make the clothing of the men, and they bring about glory for men, and men are not able to exist apart from women. And if men gather gold or silver or any beautiful thing, and they see one woman lovely in appearance and beauty, then, leaving all these things, they gape at her, and opening their mouths wide they look at her, and all choose her rather than the gold or the silver or any beautiful thing. A man forsakes his own father, who reared him, and his own country and clings to his own wife. And he lets his soul loose with his wife and neither remembers father nor mother nor territory. And hence it is necessary for you to realize that women rule over you. Don't you work and labor and give and carry everything to women? And a man takes his sword and goes to march out and rob and steal and sail to the sea and rivers, and he faces the lion, and he proceeds in darkness, and when he steals and seizes and robs, he brings it to the woman he loves. And a man loves his own wife much more than father or mother. And many have lost all sense in their own mind because of women and have become slaves because of them. And many have perished and stumbled and sinned because of women.

"So now don't you believe me? Is not the king great in his authority? Don't all territories fear to touch him? I have beheld him and Apame, the daughter of admirable Bartacus, the concubine of the king, sitting at the right hand of the king and taking the diadem from the head of the king and putting it on herself, and slap the king with her left hand. And at these

things the king, opening wide his mouth, would gaze at her. And if she laughs at him, he laughs; but if she is embittered at him, he flatters her, so that she may be reconciled to him. O men, how are women not strong since they act like this?" And then the king and the nobles looked at one another.

And he [the third] began to speak about truth, "Gentlemen, are not women strong? The earth is big and the heavens high and the sun swift in its course, since it turns in the circuit of the heavens and again returns to its place in one day. Isn't the one who does these things great? But truth is great and stronger than all. All the earth calls upon truth, and heaven blesses her. And all its works quake and tremble, and with it there is nothing unrighteous. Wine is unrighteous, the king is unrighteous, women are unrighteous, all the sons of men are unrighteous, and all their works are unrighteous, all such things, and truth is not in them, and in their injustice they will perish. But truth remains and is strong for eternity, and it lives and prevails for the eternity of eternity. And there is no taking face with it, or difference [perhaps this means that no one can genuinely be offended by it or legitimately adopt an alternative point of view]; rather it does what is righteous instead of anything unrighteous or evil, and all approve of its deeds. And there is nothing unrighteous in its judgment. And it has the strength and the kingship and the power and the majesty of all eternities. Blessed be the God of truth." And he stopped speaking, and all the people then shouted and said, "Truth is great, and it prevails over all."