

Esther

One modern writer has quipped: “How odd of God to chose the Jew.” One is impressed with the tragic and unusual history of the Jewish people in ancient and modern times. They are the only ethnic group to have survived, indeed thrived, without a homeland (from A. D. 70 until 1948); and this despite persecutions and notorious plots against them. There is only one explanation for such a history: God has providentially protected and preserved them as a distinct people, apart from their faith or lack thereof. The Book of Esther is about God’s providential preservation of the nation of Israel. It is a book written from the standpoint of faith in God’s providence yet it is not about faith in God. There is no explicit expectation of faith or exhortation to believe. It is simply about how God saved His covenant people from annihilation by working “behind the scenes” as it were.

Authorship

The title of the book is taken from the primary character. There is no claim of authorship in the text itself and nothing by way of inferential evidence to indicate one. Though suggestions have been made (e.g. Mordecai or the “Men of the Great Assembly”) it is best to accept it as another of the many anonymous writings of the Old Testament.

Date

The latest datable event in the book takes place in 470 B.C., which was when the casting of the lot (*pur*) to determine the date for killing all of the Jews took place. There is no reason to place its writing other than in the mid-fifth century B.C.

Historical Setting

The events of Esther take place during the Persian period (539-331 B.C.), more specifically during the reign of Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus (485-65 B.C.); the specific dates for the book itself involve Xerxes' 3rd year (483 B.C.—1:3) and the end of his 12th year (473 B.C.— 3:7). Israel had been released from exile by the decree of Cyrus (536 B.C.) but most had not returned, even though Isaiah and Jeremiah had urged them to do so (Isa 48:20; Jer 50:8; 51:6). In relation to the biblical record the events of Esther take place between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.

Original Readers

The Jews living in the dispersion were in need of encouragement as to their place before God in the new world order, that is, the times of the Gentiles. Esther served to assure them that “relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews . . .” (4:14). Every subsequent generation would find solace in the message of Esther, though sometimes only after experiencing the kind of tragedy that was averted in Persia.

Occasion

The institution of the days of Purim as a celebration of the Jews' deliverance from the plot of Haman required a explanation that would cement the occasion in Israel's calendar. The Book of Esther supplies this explanation in a highly entertaining and memorable manner.

Special Issues

Lack of mention of God, worship, prayer, or sacrifice. For some this has produced suspicion as to the book's canonical status. It is remarkable that a portion of holy Scripture could so systematically exclude the very heart of biblical revelation. However,

it must not be assumed that the author was simply a secular Jew. In fact the absence of explicit reference to God and His care for Israel is vitally linked to the book's message, namely, that God is always at work providentially to guard His chosen people, whether they are cognizant of it or not, so as to accomplish his preordained purposes in history.¹

Message

God acts providentially in history to preserve His covenant people and promote His purposes regardless of their knowledge and response, and seals it in their memory.

Outline

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| I. | The preparations of Providence: Through an unlikely replacement of royalty, Israel is given an influential advocate. | 1:1—2:20 |
| A. | The Persian queen Vashti inexplicably forfeits her royal status. | 1:1—22 |
| 1. | Ahasuerus's feast leads to a refused appearance by Vashti. | 1:1—12 |
| 2. | Ahasuerus's council secures the removal of Vashti as a warning to the people. | 1:13—22 |
| B. | The Jewish commoner Esther unexpectedly becomes queen. | 2:1—20 |
| 1. | Ahasuerus's servants recommended a strategy to select a new queen. | 2:1—7 |
| 2. | Esther obtains the favor of the custodian of the women. | 2:8—11 |
| 3. | Esther wins the favor of Ahasuerus and receives the crown. | 2:12—20 |
| II. | The proving of Providence: Through seemingly coincidental circumstances Israel is delivered from certain annihilation. | 2:21—7:10 |
| A. | The Jews are threatened with annihilation by Haman's plot. | 2:21—3:15 |
| 1. | Mordecai acts to expose a plot against Ahasuerus. | 2:21—23 |
| 2. | Haman plots to annihilate all the Jews of the kingdom. | 3:1—15 |
| B. | The Jews are delivered from annihilation by Esther's action. | 4:1—7:10 |
| 1. | Mordecai acts to enlist Esther's advocacy for the Jews. | 4:1—17 |

¹ "What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned—the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people. It is an extraordinary piece of literary genius that this author wrote a book that is about the actions and rule of God from beginning to end, and yet that God is not named on a single page of the story. For Jews at the author's own time, and for all readers of the story in the centuries and millennia since, this story of divine providence and election has provided a message of comfort and assurance. God's actions in history may be hidden; they are certainly not transparent to all. Yet in spite of our inability to understand divine purpose in all that transpires, none of it is beyond the reach of his hand." (Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 196.

2. Esther secures Ahasuerus and Haman's attendance at her banquets. 5:1–8
 3. Haman plots the execution of Mordecai. 5:9–14
 4. Ahasuerus exalts Mordecai for his past faithfulness. 6:1–11
 5. Esther exposes the plot of Haman, who is hanged. 6:12—7:10
- III. The postscript of Providence: Through a grateful Gentile king Israel receives a perpetual memorial of their miraculous existence. 8:1—9:32
- A. Esther petitions Ahasuerus to allow the Jews to protect themselves. 8:1—9:17
 1. Her petition for the Jews was granted and celebrated. 8:1–17
 2. Her petition was applied with success. 9:1–17
 - a. It was applied the first day against the enemies of the Jews and Haman's family. 9:1–10
 - b. It was extended to a second day against the enemies of the Jews. 9:11–17
 - B. Esther confirms the feast of Purim as a perpetual memorial to the preservation of the Jews. 9:18–32
 1. The Jews spontaneously celebrate their deliverance with gladness and feasting. 9:18–19
 2. Mordecai formalizes by letter the days of Purim as a perpetual celebration among the Jews. 9:20–28
 3. Esther confirms, by royal decree, the days of Purim. 9:29–32
- IV. Epilogue: Mordecai is exalted as second to Ahasuerus. 10:1–3

Argument

Esther progresses in a chronological fashion, yet also displays a chiasmic structure and various devices of parallelism.² Suspense and reversal are two main features of the book, and serve to deliver the message of providence in an entertaining and memorable fashion. Providence works in preparation, circumstantial juxtaposition (“coincidences”), and effects. This is the manner in which the Book of Esther unfolds.

² For structural considerations see David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 162-64.

I. The preparations of Providence: Through an unlikely replacement of royalty, Israel is given an influential advocate (1:1—2:20).

Israel had become so solidly entrenched in Babylon during the captivity that when the conquering Persians granted them release only a minority returned. However, those who remained did so without official status or particular favor. For a Jew to have become elevated in such a realm to the position of queen was indeed unusual. And yet through the odd circumstance of Queen Vashti's refusal to honor King Ahasuerus's request she is deposed and a Jewish maiden is elevated to the position. The story is not implausible as it stands, just extremely improbable. This is the stuff of providence, that is, God working in the normal circumstances of history to produce extraordinary and unexpected results, yet by very normal means.

II. The proving of Providence: Through seemingly coincidental circumstances Israel is delivered from certain annihilation (2:21—7:10).

How does one know that providence has been at work? In the case of Esther it is determined by a succession of reversals that result in transforming a certain disaster into a glorious victory; reversals that if interrupted anywhere along the line would not produce the end effect. Preparation continues throughout this section as the first incident demonstrates. Mordecai exposes a plot against Ahasuerus and it is recorded in the official annals (2:21–23) only to come into play later (6:1–11). This is great literature. Tension is introduced into the story as Haman, out of hatred for Mordecai, plots the annihilation of the Jews (3:1–15). The preparation of Esther (by becoming Queen) now comes into play. After being persuaded by Mordecai to intercede with the king (4:1–17), the Jewish queen secures Ahasuerus and Haman's attendance at a banquet (5:1–8) only to request their

presence at another one the next day. This raises the level of suspense. Two things happen between the banquets. First, Haman plots Mordecai's death and builds a gallows for the occasion (5:9–14). Second, King Ahasuerus cannot sleep and decides to read records of the empire! When Mordecai's service is discovered the king purposes to honor him (6:1–3). Through a superlative touch of dramatic irony Ahasuerus asks Haman's opinion about how to honor a man, whom Haman assumes is himself. However, it is Mordecai who receives the honor suggested by Haman, who retires to his home and wife with the worst of feelings (6:4–14). Now that Mordecai's valuable service to the king has been recognized the time is ripe for Haman's plot to come back on his own head. This is precisely what happens at Esther's second banquet as she exposes his destructive schemes against her people, and the king condemns the wicked counselor to die on the gallows prepared for Mordecai (7:1–10). Though the edict of destruction on the Jews is still hanging over the nation, Haman's execution is the climactic action that releases the superbly crafted dramatic tension. The rest of the story is the logical outworking Haman's demise.

III. The postscript of Providence: Through a grateful Gentile Israel receives a perpetual memorial of their miraculous existence (8:1—9:32).

Since the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be broken (cf. Dan 6:15), Esther's request for Ahasuerus to revoke the plan of Haman (8:1–5) could not be undone by simply canceling the decree in question. She and Mordecai are granted permission to write a decree to address the situation as they saw fit (8:7–8), which they do, specifying that the Jews be permitted to arm and protect themselves from anyone who might attack them (8:9–14). The decree itself brought joy and gladness throughout the empire, even

resulting in the conversion of many Persians to Judaism (8:15–17). On the appointed day the Jews are successful in defending themselves and take particular vengeance upon the house of Haman (9:1–10). Esther petitions and receives permission for a one day extension of the decree which resulted in the Jews experiencing “rest from their enemies” (9:11–17).

The day after the second day of defense the Jews held a feast of celebration as a holiday and sent gifts to one another (9:18–19). Mordecai and Esther establish this as an official holiday to be celebrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar and called it Purim, after the Pur (lot) used by Haman to determine the day of Jewish annihilation (cf. 3:7) (9:20–32).

IV. Epilogue: Mordecai is exalted as second to Ahasuerus (10:1–3).

Mordecai’s exaltation to second in the realm is reminiscent of Daniel’s position in Babylon and Joseph’s status in Egypt. In many ways he is as much the hero of the book as Esther. He had been instrumental in saving the Jews and also a blessing to the Persians in that they were kept from raising their hands against God’s chosen people. In this God’s promise to Abraham is embodied: “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you” (Gen 12:3). The Jews were intended to be a blessing to the people of the earth, and in significant ways they have been throughout history. But woe to that person or nation who persecutes the Jew, as witnessed in Haman.

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