

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2016

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Another way of describing the theology of the book is under the rubric of divine sovereignty. Under Xerxes, the Persian Empire had become the most powerful political entity of all history to that time. Encapsulated within that mighty kingdom were the impotent remnants of the Jewish Diaspora, descendants of the nation whose forebears had also known isolation and then persecution in Egypt a millennium earlier. Just as Moses had been raised up then to become the deliverer of Israel, so now God would effect another deliverance, this time through a Jewish maiden who against all odds would sit on a Persian throne as the agent of Almighty God. There would be no exodus this time, but the deliverance of the chosen people would be just as miraculous and magnificent. It would testify, as did the exodus, to Yahweh as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Eugene H. Merrill, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 359.

Esther

I. Introduction

A. *Title*

The Hebrew title of the book is “Esther,” named after one of the key characters in the book. Subsequent versions of the book (LXX, Vulgate, etc.) have adopted this title. Interestingly, Ruth and Esther are the only OT canon to feature a strong female character, and both books derive their titles from these characters. Yet in both books, the females are not necessarily the main characters. In Ruth, the story is ultimately about God’s providence for Naomi, and Ruth serves as a mediator between Boaz and Naomi. And in Esther, the main character turns out to be Mordecai. He instigates Esther’s queenship, warns Xerxes of the plotted assassination, encouraged Esther to intervene for the Jews, is vindicated before his enemy Haman, and is ultimately honored by the king. In fact, the final words of the book are not about Esther, but speak of the greatness of Mordecai: “For Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation” (10:3).

B. *Authorship & Date*

The book is silent as to authorship. Many writers, particularly throughout early Jewish and Christian history, have speculated regarding his (or her) identity. Though few scholars today accept it, the opinion of medieval Jewish scholarship was that the book was the work of none other than Mordecai himself, being that it reads so much as the product of an eyewitness to the events it depicts. But the absolute lack of modesty regarding Mordecai's greatness and the fact that 10:2 seems to suggest that Xerxes' reign had ended argue against this view.

Ezra and Nehemiah have both been proffered as potential authors, being that their familiarity with the Persian court and customs as well as Jewish history and traditions coalesces with the rich cultural and history details of the text. But as Tomasino bluntly asserts, "This theory, however, is pure speculation, based not on evidence, but on a desire to provide the book with the authority of a known biblical figure."¹ The writing style, the lack of overt religious language, and its inclusion of Jewish-Gentile intermarriage all argue against this view.

Thus, most contemporary scholars, conservative or otherwise, refrain from identifying an author. For those who date the book to the fifth century B.C., it seems most likely that the author would be a Persian Jew, with intimate knowledge of Persian life and customs. If the book dates to the second century B.C., then the author was most likely a Palestinian Jew, as seen in the overt nationalism exhibited by the narrator and the characters. While no certainty can be had, evidences seem to favor an earlier date of composition (450-300 B.C.).²

C. *Canonicity*

The topic and process of OT canonicity is beyond the scope of our discussion here. Nevertheless, there is no question that Esther has been the center of much debate. From its very beginning, in fact, Esther's inclusion in the OT canon has been, as Merrill puts it, "problematic."³ Part of this has to do with a nearly complete absence of copies or references among early OT collections. Qumran, for instance, lacks any manuscripts of the book, which some have seen as evidence of its rejection as inspired Scripture. This however, seems to be a blatant argument from silence and overlooks the theological peculiarities that marked that particular Jewish sect.

The writings of Ben Sira (c. 200 B.C.), which form a kind of "panoramic overview of the heroes of the Jewish faith" and are considered the "earliest and best postbiblical source on the canon"⁴ omit Esther and Mordecai, which is strange considering their role in the

¹ Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 18-19.

² Eugene H. Merrill, "Esther," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 359; F. B. Huey, "Esther," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 779.

³ Merrill, "Esther," 354.

⁴ Tomasino, *Esther*, 32.

Jewish victory over their enemies. Yet it must be noted that Esther is not the only prominent Jewish historical figure absent in these writings. Even Ezra fails to appear in his line of heroes.

Later on, considerable debate surfaced in Jewish scholarly circles as to the legitimacy of the book's inspiration. However, all this discussion does not necessarily suggest that the book ever came under scrutiny by the majority of the believing community. It only suggests that despite its overall recognition and acceptance, there were some who challenged its canonicity on various grounds but were ultimately overruled. It is clear that by the time of the translation of the LXX, Esther was included among the books to be translated. And the noted Jewish historian Josephus undoubtedly included the book in his list of canonical texts (even while omitting the apocryphal books found in the LXX).

Within the canonical process, the theological element of divine inspiration, as previously emphasized, rests with the witness of the Holy Spirit to the authority of the Word. As Fisher states, canonicity is "an innate authenticity by virtue of divine inspiration"⁵ That witness is wrought internally in the hearts of those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells—the believing community, whether it is the OT or NT community. Yet that witness does not imply that "there was *immediate* acceptance by all 'the faithful'."⁶ It is perfectly reasonable that recognition of the canon was at times a process complicated by the details of the individual books. Considering the nature of some of the moral and theological "challenges" in Esther, this process was likely drawn out longer than other books (i.e., the Torah).

D. *Historical Background*

The historical backdrop of the story is highly influential for explaining the events that transpire. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah into Babylon, the people lived under foreign domination for 70 years. By this time, cataclysmic political changes had swept the region. Babylon had finally fallen to the Persian Empire, under the leadership of Cyrus (540 B.C.). Shortly afterward, Cyrus decreed the release of the Jewish captives, allowing them to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Yet several thousand Jews returned, many willingly chose to remain in Persia:

After living there for almost half a century, the Judahites had become settled, and many were enjoying a standard of living they could not have known elsewhere. The thought of returning to the ruined and isolated land of "Yehud," as it was called in this era, had little appeal to them. In fact, the lure of economic opportunity drew many of the Jews still farther to the east, to the new seat of world power and commerce: Susa, the capital of Persia. There, they once again found that ambitious and capable individuals could attain positions of affluence and influence, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. There seemed to be no ceiling on one's possible ascent, with a Jew such as Nehemiah even becoming cupbearer for King Artaxerxes I.⁷

⁵ Fisher, "The Canonicity of the Old Testament," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:386.

⁶ Huey, "Esther," 4:783.

⁷ Tomasino, *Esther*, 6-7.

These details inform the overall “secular” tenor of the book. Practically every Bible student is aware of the utter absence of divine references. Indeed, the Jews in the story—including their leaders—operate under an attitude of religious ambivalence. If anyone prays or offers covenant devotion to Yahweh, it goes unmentioned by the narrator, who seems to go out of his way to describe a people who are completely comfortable with their lives in Persia.

The text identifies the ruling king of the time as “Ahasuerus” (1:1), whom we now know to be the Persian king Xerxes I. He was the fourth king of the Persian Empire, son of Darius and grandson of Cyrus. When he came to the throne (486 B.C.), immediately he was required to deal with an Egyptian and Babylonian rebellion (common during changes in leadership). He was able to squash both rebellions (483 B.C.), after which he set his sights on Greece and made plans to resume his father’s quest. He launched his invasion in 480 B.C. and initially enjoyed success, but was eventually defeated at Salamis and returned home that same year. The campaign would ultimately fail when the Persians were defeated by the Greeks at Plataea (479 B.C.). Eventually, he was killed in 464 B.C. by Artabanus and other conspirators.

History has labeled Xerxes as a bit of a “spoiled child” and given to fickleness and sudden compulsions. The 180-day conclave mentioned in 1:4 is a reference to the planning period before the Greece campaign, during which time he convened an assembly for six-month long drunken feast, where he asked the queen to display her beauty before the assembly. When she refused, he deposed and banished her.

The next dated event in the book is that of Esther’s appointment as queen (2:16; c. 479 B.C.), which corresponds to his return from his defeat at Salamis. Xerxes had returned from his campaign to the unpleasant reality that he had deposed his queen. Thus, he initiated an empire-wide contest in order to find a new one.

The bulk of the narrative of Esther occurs nearly six years following Esther’s appointment and comprises a one-year period, beginning in 474 B.C. (3:7) with the casting of the lot for the extermination of the Jews and ending the following year, when the Jews rose up under royal sanction and defeated their enemies on March 7, 473 B.C. (9:16). The Jews spent the next two days celebrating and rejoicing in commemoration of their deliverance, which became known as the Feast of Purim. The book of Esther is read annually in Jewish synagogues during this feast.

II. Major Themes

A. *The Secularism of the Jews*

As previously noted, there is a decidedly “secular” tone to the book of Esther, by which is meant that the book is devoid of anything overtly religious. Yahweh is not mentioned once throughout the work, either by name (Yahweh) or by title (God/Lord). Additionally, there is no mention of Palestine, Jerusalem, the temple, or the law. The individuals are never portrayed as exhibiting any manifestations characteristic of covenant faith, i.e., praying. The closest element of religious activity mentioned is fasting (4:16), yet it is unclear whether prayer should be assumed as well. Tomasino, on the one hand, argues that

the “imprecatory quality” of the prayer implies a religious petition for divine aid.⁸ Huey, on the other hand, emphasizes that the narrator deliberately “avoid[s] the mention of God or that prayer was made to him.”⁹

But the absence of religious practices and words are not the only evidences of Jewish secularism in the book. A number of moral and ethical practices uncover the people’s covenant disinterest. Esther is willing to hide her Jewish identity from Xerxes in order to become queen, advice she received from Mordecai. She is willing, as a Jew, to marry a Gentile, and to participate in a morally degrading pageant which included spending a night proving her ability to sexually please the king. Even Mordecai’s refusal to honor Haman could be seen as an expression of pride rather than godly devotion. When the circumstances demand it, the story’s characters are willing to act with prudence and bravery, yet they fail to call upon Yahweh for guidance.

All of this points to a general desire among the people in the book to accomplish purposes and face difficulties using human means rather than relying on God. How different would the outcome had been had Esther refused to take part in Xerxes’ pageant? Would God have protected her the way he protected Daniel and his friends when they determined to obey God and remain morally pure? Would she have even been considered for the pageant had her Jewish ethnicity been revealed from the start?

As for Mordecai, could the threat of extermination wrought by Haman’s rage at Mordecai’s insolence been abated had Mordecai been willing to show honor to the man? Tomasino explains,

The order for all the people to bow before Haman would not have been unusual. According to Herodotus, the Persians were very conscious of social class and observed strict protocols regarding rank. They would greet equals with a kiss, but would always bow and make obeisance before those of higher standing. The practice was also common among the Jews, who had no problems kneeling before those whom they respected or whose favor they wished to garner.¹⁰

Thus, the common explanation—that Mordecai refused to bow down and worship Haman as god—is baseless. Some have suggested that pride was Mordecai’s sole motivation, and while possible, the view is speculative. Two reasonable explanations have been given for this episode. The majority of commentators suggest that Mordecai’s insolence is based on the national identities of the two individuals. Mordecai is a Jew, while Haman is identified as an Agagite (a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag). Intense antagonism had marked Jewish and Amalekite relations since the days of Moses. It is thought that Mordecai’s insubordination was based on this antagonism, and some take 3:4b as Mordecai’s explanation for his actions (“he had told them he was a Jew”).

⁸ Ibid., 249.

⁹ Huey, “Esther,” 4:817.

¹⁰ Tomasino, *Esther*, 216.

But the text actually indicates that Mordecai had previously revealed to royal officials his Jewish identity (“he *had* told them”), but remained silent when prodded to explain his insolence (“he would not listen to them”). Their knowledge of his ethnicity peeked their curiosity—would Haman stand for Mordecai’s behavior, being that he was a Jew? Since they would have no reason to know of Jewish/Amalekite antagonism, this seems to imply that there was some kind of social stigma against the Jews, which explains Mordecai’s advice that Esther keep her ethnicity hidden during the pageant. Thus perhaps “Mordecai’s colleagues were interested in seeing whether Mordecai could get away with insubordination because he was a member of an ethnic group that was subject to prejudice and yet apparently lived a ‘charmed life.’”¹¹

Yet another interpretation proffered by Bickerman and supported by Tomasino is that Mordecai “might just have been suffering from ‘sour grapes’: Mordecai was jealous because Haman received a promotion that he thought was his due.”¹² After all, in the previous scene (2:21-23), Mordecai had just uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, yet he received no reward. As Tomasino explains,

It might be considered a biblical trope that when Jews do favors for foreign kings, they are rewarded with a promotion, as in the case of Joseph (Gen 41) and Daniel (Dan 2 and 5)... The narrator and audience might have known not only these stories, but others of similar vein, conditioning them to expect that Mordecai’s actions would have been rewarded with a similar promotion—but instead the promotion goes to Haman. Of course Mordecai would have been offended. Also, that Mordecai refuses to explain his behavior gives the impression that he is pouting over a perceived injury. Finally, there is—typically overlooked—that even before the Jews are empowered to defend themselves, Mordecai receives the office vacated by Haman (Esth 8:2). His promotion appears to be part of the reversal motif, representing the righting of a wrong. If this narrative is truly “balanced,” this act could be the correction of an earlier injustice and implies that Mordecai should have received the office that had been given to Haman. It should also be noted that Mordecai receives Haman’s office right after a eunuch reminds the king of Mordecai’s aid to the king (Esth 7:9).¹³

He goes to point out another point in support of this view:

It is also worth noting that Mordecai’s refusal to bow was not only an insult to Haman, but to the king as well. After having just saved the king’s life, he is now deliberately insubordinate. This fact further supports the theory that Mordecai is responding to an apparent snub. Mordecai is not just stubborn; he is angry at the king.¹⁴

This data overwhelming suggests that the present state of the Jews who remained in Persia was not one of covenant faithfulness and loyalty. Hedged by decades of economic opportunities, comfortable amenities, and religious pluralism, the Jews had grown indiffer-

¹¹ Ibid., 218.

¹² Ibid., 217.

¹³ Ibid., 217-18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 218.

ent towards the things of God and the covenant. They had refrained from any desire at remaining morally and religiously pure and had adopted the social, cultural, and perhaps even religious features of their environment.

B. *The Threat of Extermination*

Regardless of the moral and religious status of the Jews in Persia, the book intently emphasizes the ethnic peculiarity of the Jews. The term appears numerous times in the book. As was just discussed, there seemed to be a social prejudice at work against the Jews in Persia, which explains Esther and Mordecai's reluctance to boast of their ethnicity. This is, of course, aggravated further by Haman's hatred of the Jews, for he determines not just to kill Mordecai, but to exterminate all the Jews (3:6). It is this decision that marks the greatest threat to Jewish existence since the Babylonian exile. The very fact that the Jews rose up against their enemies and slaughtered 75,000 in one day (9:16) attests to the fear and hatred garnered toward them at the time.

But the threat that faces the Jews in the book is but a symptom of the real issue of the time. The Jews were living in an era wholly different than any other in their history. The exile had marked a time of Israelite subservience—a time of the gentiles—where Israel was no longer the great and dominant kingdom of the earth. They must live among and beneath the dominance of foreign powers—powers which can be both benevolent and malevolent.

C. *The Providence of God*

Despite the honor bestowed on Mordecai at the close of the book, and despite the courageous gestures exhibited by Esther to save her people at the risk of her own life, the true unsung hero of the book is God himself. Without a single reference, the narrator is able to weave a tapestry of divine, providential fabrics that are glaringly apparent to the reader even as they go unseen and unrecognized by the characters. As Merrill puts it, "God's name nowhere occurs in the book, but no book exceeds Esther in its manifestation of God's presence and power."¹⁵

Scholars almost unanimously recognize the "reversal motif" as the central literary device utilized by the narrator. The story is, in fact, an extended tale of extreme irony, where every action seems to be headed in one direction, only to be overturned and reversed by unexpected interventions. In fact, the number of remarkable circumstances, improbable events, and unexpected turns are intentionally pointing us, the reader, toward the providential care of God for his people. How else would one explain the following:

- Vashti's refusal and immediate deposal?
- Esther's quick flight to royalty, despite her obscurity as a Jewish orphan?
- Mordecai's timely discovery of an assassination plot which put him in (belated) favor with the king?
- Xerxes' chance midnight reading of Mordecai's prior warning?
- Haman's boasting which turns into lament *because* Xerxes read of Mordecai's prior warning?
- The ironic honoring of Mordecai in a fashion requested and expected by Haman?

¹⁵ Merrill, "Esther," 356.

- Xerxes' willingness to listen to Esther despite her boldness to enter his presence uninvited?
- Xerxes' chance entrance to find Haman "assaulting" the queen (i.e., begging for his life)?
- The fate of Haman to die on the gallows constructed for Mordecai's execution?
- Mordecai's promotion to Haman's position after previously being overlooked?
- The overriding of a Persian decree which could not be revoked?
- The impossible victory of the Jews in slaughtering 75,000 of their enemies on the day they were to be exterminated?

In the end, there is no question that the individuals in the narrator were raised up by God to affect his purposes and the events described orchestrated—albeit silently—by the very hand of God. Even in an age when God's people forgot him, he did not forget them. They, rather, continue to be "the object of his concern and love"¹⁶ and he continues to accomplish his purposes through them. As Merrill writes,

Another way of describing the theology of the book is under the rubric of divine sovereignty. Under Xerxes, the Persian Empire had become the most powerful political entity of all history to that time. Encapsulated within that mighty kingdom were the impotent remnants of the Jewish Diaspora, descendants of the nation whose forebears had also known isolation and then persecution in Egypt a millennium earlier. Just as Moses had been raised up then to become the deliverer of Israel, so now God would effect another deliverance, this time through a Jewish maiden who against all odds would sit on a Persian throne as the agent of Almighty God. There would be no exodus this time, but the deliverance of the chosen people would be just as miraculous and magnificent. It would testify, as did the exodus, to Yahweh as King of kings and Lord of lords.¹⁷

III. Purpose

On the surface, the book of Esther serves the immediate purpose of explaining the origin of the Feast of Purim. Because it was a feast that did not find its origins in the Torah, the book sets out to explain the historical context for the feast and the reasons for Israel to celebrate it.

Yet on a deeper level, the question that began at the exile continues into the book of Esther: If Yahweh has been faithful to Abraham's seed, then why are they on the verge of certain destruction? The book of Esther answers that question. Just as exile did not spell the end for Israel, the threat against them in Persia would not prevail. God's promises to Abraham remain secure.

Thus, the purpose of the book can be summarized as follows: *While the physical seed of Abraham was not faithful to Yahweh, they were still protected by God from Gentile attack.*

¹⁶ Huey, "Esther," 4:794.

¹⁷ Merrill, "Esther," 359.

IV. Literary Structure

Esther has been lauded by scholars of every stripe as a literary masterpiece. “It has been submitted to careful literary analysis by technical experts...but its literary merits and readability are apparent even to the untrained. The action is vigorous and quick with a dramatic turn of events, reminiscent of O. Henry or Guy de Maupassant. The plot is skillfully narrated with a paucity of words and swiftly carries the reader along to its climactic denouement.”¹⁸ It uses extensive use of literary devices such as assonance, alliteration, hendiadys, parallelism, hyperbole, and chiasmus. But its use of irony and the motif of “reversal”, already discussed, unify the book into a rhetorically effective historical “novella.”

- I. Esther’s Elevation to Power (chs. 1-2)
 - A. The Demand of Xerxes (1:1-12)
 - B. The Decrees of Xerxes (1:13-2:4)
 - C. The Choice of Esther to Be Queen (2:5-18)
 - D. The Discovery of a Plot against Xerxes (2:19-23)
- II. Esther’s Role as Deliverer (chs. 3-7)
 - A. The Decree against the Jews (ch. 3)
 - B. The Vulnerability of the Jews (chs. 4-5)
 - C. The Deliverance of the Jews (chs. 6-7)
- III. Esther’s Establishment of Purim (chs. 8-10)
 - A. The Decree Favoring the Jews (ch. 8)
 - B. The Implementation of Deliverance (9:1-16)
 - C. The Celebration of Deliverance (9:17-32)
 - D. The Advancement of the Jews (ch. 10)

¹⁸ Huey, “Esther,” 4:781.