

Lesson 5: Introduction to Esther

Esther is a Strange Book

If Esther is not the strangest book in the Bible, it must be in the top two or three. Most commentaries begin with the question, “what kind of book is Esther?” – and there are about as many answers to that question as there are commentaries. Is it history? Is it fiction? Is it historical fiction? Is it comedy? Is it a Persian chronicle? Is it a Greek romance? Is it a carnival tale? Is it a wisdom tale? Is it burlesque? Each of those answers is proposed by commentaries.

About all the commentators can agree upon is that Esther is strange. For example:

- Although the heathen king of Persia is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses (29 times by name), God is never mentioned in the book. There is not even a divine title or pronoun referring to God in the book. (God is likewise not named in the Song of Solomon.)
- There is likewise no mention of God’s commands or of his relationship with his people. There is no mention of Satan or angels. There is no mention of the covenant. Unlike the book of Daniel, no one prays in the book of Esther, and no one has a vision in the book of Esther. There are no miracles in Esther.
- Other than the fact that the book is about the Jewish people, there is nothing Jewish about it in the religious sense. There is no apparent concern for the law in Esther. (Haman does say in 3:8 that “their laws are diverse from all people.”) Although the book was written after the events in Ezra 1-6, there is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple. “If one went through the text and replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Jews’ with the name of some other ethnic group, there would be no reason to think the story had anything at all to do with the Bible.” The lack of religious language in the book is highly unusual for books of that time and is certainly intentional. (But, as one commentator noted, God seems to lurk everywhere in the background of the book!)
- Esther is the only book in the Old Testament that was not found among the Dead Sea scrolls. (That omission is probably because the Essenes did not celebrate the Feast of Purim.)

- The book of Esther is never cited or alluded to in the New Testament.
- Neither Esther nor Mordecai is ever mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. (As we discussed, the “Mordecai” in Ezra 2:2 is almost certainly *not* the same Mordecai we meet in Esther.)
- Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman (the other being Ruth).
- The longest verse in the Bible appears in Esther 8:9 (78 words).
- Surprisingly, one of the central themes of Esther is *feasting*. The Hebrew word for “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of the Old Testament books put together. The Feast of Purim comes from Esther and is one of the two Jewish feasts not found in the Law of Moses (the other being Hanukkah.)
- Esther is the only Old Testament book describing events that take place entirely in Persia. In fact, every scene in Esther (except for two brief episodes in Haman’s home and the brief account of the Jewish victory in Chapter 9) takes place in the royal court of Persia, with some in the throne room and the king’s private quarters.
- In the rest of the Old Testament, Jews are introduced by giving the name of their father or the name of their tribe, while foreigners are introduced by giving the name of their country or ethnicity (Uriah the Hittite, Ruth the Moabitess). But in Esther, Mordecai is called “Mordecai the Jew” six times (the only six times the phrase “the Jew” occurs in our English Old Testament).
- The characters in Esther are presented very differently from one another. With Haman, for example, we are told his motives, his drives, and his ambitions. As one noted, Haman is allowed no mysteries. But with Mordecai and Esther, we see only their words and actions – we are largely left to wonder as to their motives. For example, (although we might be able to guess) we are never told why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman or show him any reverence – the event that leads to all the trouble that follows.

- On one level Esther is a simple story, yet it has an incredibly detailed structure in which thesis after thesis is met by antithesis after antithesis. (See the handout.)
- There is very little direct speech in the book. In the book of Ruth, the plot is advanced primarily through dialogue, but the opposite is true in Esther, where the plot is advanced primarily through narration. Mordecai, for example, is mentioned by name 56 times in Esther, yet he has only one short (albeit very memorable) speech (4:13-14).
- The first chapter of Esther has not a word to say about God or God's people, but rather is focused on pagan characters involved in a pagan event from the pagan world (albeit one that will later prove very important to God's people).

In addition to being a strange book, the book of Esther is an incredibly meaningful book, particularly to those facing persecution. We will see how it is meaningful to Christians, but it has always been a very meaningful book to Jews as well, particularly when they have been faced with those seeking to destroy them, as Haman did in Esther's day and as Hitler did in ours. The Nazis forbade the reading of Esther in the concentration camps, but Jewish prisoners wrote the book from memory and read it in secret on Purim (the feast that traces its history back to this book).

What Kind of Book is Esther?

That is a strange question to ask about a book of the Bible. No one ever asks, what kind of book is Exodus or what kind of book is Ezra? But all commentaries on Esther begin with that question, and many different answers are proposed.

Some argue that Esther is a historical narrative. That is, Esther contains an accurate account of a series of events that took place at the stated time and place. (Not wanting to keep anyone in suspense, this is where we are going to end up – but first we will consider some of the other ideas that have been put forth.)

Some argue that Esther is a historical novel. That is, the author is writing about a historical event, but he is doing so with a degree of poetic license. Something of historical importance is being told, but in a creative way.

Others argue that Esther is a fictional narrative. That is, Esther is just a very creative short story meant to entertain or teach (or both), but not meant to convey a history of actual events.

Some argue that Esther is a comedy (and no one disputes that some of the events in the book are very funny). They point to Haman and the King as a megalomaniac and a buffoon, respectively. They point to the many amusing coincidences, parallels, and reverses in the book. They point to what they see as mockery, ironic exaggeration, and underdeveloped characters and caricatures in the book.

Each of these proposals (except for the first) has something in common – they all propose that Esther is fictional to some degree. Thus, we can group these proposals into two categories: (1) The first option in which Esther is not fictional at all, and (2) The second option in which Esther contains portions that are fictional (either partly fiction or entirely fictional).

The arguments in favor of the second option and against Esther's historicity are based primarily not on evidence but instead on two things: (1) the absence of confirming evidence about some of the details in the book, and (2) events judged to be highly improbable, at least based on our limited knowledge of the ancient world. As for (1), those who bet against the Bible have been proved wrong over and over again as additional archaeological evidence is found, and we will see examples of that in our study of this book. And as for (2), God may not be named, but God is present – and what may seem like improbable coincidences, make perfect sense when viewed as God's providence providing for his people and fulfilling his plans.

Those who argue that the book is *not* historical very often point to contradictions they see between Esther and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus. (Of course, it never seems to occur to them that perhaps Herodotus is the one that is mistaken.) For example, Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was Amestris. Also, Herodotus says that Persia was divided into 20 satrapies, whereas Esther says that Persia was divided into 127 provinces. But even if we assume that Herodotus was correct, these difficulties have easy explanations. For example, some argue that Amestris was Vashti (the first queen in the book), while others argue that the king had multiple wives. (Some argue that Amestris was Esther, but that is almost certainly *not* the case due to some of the horrible deeds attributed to Amestris.) While it is true that Herodotus does not mention Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti, it is also true that Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar,

whose existence was likewise denied by modern scholars until archaeological discoveries confirmed his place in history.

In Esther 3:7, Haman casts lots during the first month of the year to determine a date (in the 12th month) on which to execute his plans. Commentators once pointed to this event as an example of something highly improbable, but evidence has since been found that some rulers in the ancient world would cast lots in the first month to determine events and actions for the following twelve months – and suddenly the improbable looked much more probable.

The book also agrees very well with what we know about King Xerxes from other sources – the greatness of his empire, his quick and sometimes irrational temper, his almost unlimited promises and generous gifts, his drunken feast, and even his efficient postal system (3:13 – “Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces”).

Details such as these have tended to change the critical climate. Few today would argue that Esther is a complete fiction. Instead, most modern scholars view it as a historical novel.

We, of course, will take the position that Esther is not any sort of a novel, but instead is a historical narrative describing actual events and actual people – and we will do so for at least four reasons:

1. There is no indication that the book is intended to be taken in any way other than as a straightforward narrative of events as they occurred. It goes to great lengths to include places, names, events, and many historical details. If this book is not a history, then how can we distinguish it from the other historical books in the Bible?
2. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that Esther is an accurate witness to Persian affairs and Persian culture.
3. Although we have no record of Jesus ever mentioning Esther, Jesus’ view of the Old Testament is that it is an unquestionably reliable guide to past events. He mentions Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, and many other persons and incidents from the Old Testament. “It is not too much to say that he accepted without reservation the entire historical fabric of the Old Testament, including those aspects of it most troublesome to modern minds.”

4. The Bible is the inspired word of God. Although there are within it some fictional accounts that are intended to teach a lesson (the parable, for example), they are always clearly indicated as such (“Then he began to speak to them in parables”). Esther has no such indication, and so we must take it for what it claims to be – a true history of actual events. The first words in the book are “Now it came to pass,” not “Once upon a time.”

One of the main objections raised by some against Esther is that, they say, it contains events that are just too improbable to be true. Esther is in the right place at the right time when Vashti is deposed and when Haman’s evil plans come to light. When the king cannot sleep and asks for historical records to be read, the page happens to fall at the page highlighted Mordecai’s role in foiling a plot against the king. As the king considers what to do, Haman just happens to be standing outside. How do we answer those who argue such coincidences are too unlikely to be true?

First, as we have already said, such comments forget that although God is not mentioned in Esther, God is nevertheless present in Esther – and with God all things are possible. Second, it should go without saying that fact is stranger than fiction. Third, those who make such comments appear to know as much about mathematics as they do about theology! There is a difference between picking a lottery winner ahead of the drawing and reporting on the winner after the drawing – one is so improbable as to be unbelievable, whereas the other happens every week. We are not looking at an event randomly plucked from history; we are looking at an event chosen after the fact because it was so interesting it was deemed worthy of inclusion in the Bible.

And one final note on this point – those modern scholars who believe Esther is so unlikely to have happened most likely believe that they themselves evolved through random mutations from single cell creatures that somehow arose from lifeless matter after a big bang. When viewed alongside that fairy tale, Esther should look much less improbable!

This book has much to say about coincidences and luck. Are the events in the book just lucky coincidences, or is a greater power involved? The answer seems clear in Esther – each of the incidents regarded by itself might well appear to be the result of chance, but taken together, the element of chance disappears. They all converge to one point, and their design is evident. If I flip a coin and get four

heads in a row, you may think I am lucky. But if I flip that coin and get 40 heads in a row, you will no longer be thinking that luck has anything to do with it – you will suspect I have a two-headed coin!

What is the answer regarding the lucky coincidences in our own lives? While it is true that time and chance happens to us all (Ecclesiastes 9:11), not everything that happens to us comes by chance. If God by his providence is actively working in this world, then we need to look for his hand and for his open doors. The pagan may believe that all we do and all we are is governed by chance, but the Christian knows better. Esther can teach us to recognize God's providence in our own lives. I am reminded of a story I once read in a book about prayer. The author told about how he was trying to get to sleep one night in advance of a big speech the next day, but he was being kept awake by a barking dog next door. He prayed for the barking to stop, and (to his surprise) it did so at once. He was then unable to sleep for wondering whether the dog had stopped barking on account of his prayer!

What is the Historical Setting of Esther?

We discussed the history of Persia in our first lesson on Ezra, and we won't repeat that here. But we will consider the history of Xerxes, the Persian king at the center of these events.

The events in Esther took place during the reign of Xerxes, who in Hebrew is called Ahasuerus. Xerxes was king of Persia from 486 until 465 BC. He was preceded by Darius the Great (who was king when the second temple was completed) and was followed by Artaxerxes (who was king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned).

Our main evidence from this era comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian, whose book *Histories of the Persian Wars* (490-480 BC) tells us about the Persian kings and their campaigns. Although he was a Greek writing about his Persian enemies and therefore not an objective source, his books does provide some evidence about Persian personalities and practices. For example, he describes Xerxes as tall and handsome, as an ambitious ruler, and as a warrior. It appears that Herodotus was fascinated by Xerxes because about a third of his book is taken up with his reign.

Herodotus describes Xerxes' Greek expedition in 480-479, which ended as a dismal failure. But Xerxes also had some victories. He reconquered Egypt, which had rebelled under Darius, and he also suppressed a rebellion in Babylon.

Xerxes' greatest achievement may have been his completion of the palace complex that Darius began in Persepolis. It has been called a marvel of grandeur, beauty, and luxury. A foundation stone has been found that begins, "I am Xerxes, the great king."

But Xerxes had a problem (according to Herodotus and according to Esther): he did not measure up to the moral quality of his predecessors (who weren't that high on the scale to begin with!). One historian notes that Xerxes inherited none of the good qualities of the previous kings, but only a love of opulent display that progressively sapped his moral fiber. Another wrote that Xerxes "had the weakness, tyrannical character, and love of luxury to be expected in a prince reared at court."

In 470, the Persian army again suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks, which ended their 50-year struggle with Greece. Persia maintained control over Egypt and Cyprus, but lost control over the Greek colonies of Asia Minor. Xerxes was killed in a conspiracy in 465 and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I, who is the king who later allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

What is the theme of Esther?

As shown on the handout, Esther has a remarkable structure that is built around the key event in Chapter 6 in which the tables are turned between Haman and Mordecai. For each thesis leading up to that event, there is an antithesis following that event.

Each of these thesis/antithesis pairs reinforces a central theme of Esther, which is the theme of reversal. That theme is seen most clearly in Esther 9:1, which has been called the guiding principle of the book:

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, **the reverse occurred**: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

That verse is a summary statement of the entire book, and it emphasizes that events had taken an unexpected and complete turnaround.

In a book that does not refer to God, this theme of reversal has the providence of God at its center. The reversals occur because the actions of powerful people are overturned by power from a different source. The tables get turned repeatedly in Esther, and God is the great over-turner of tables. He turns darkness into light. He turns mourning into rejoicing. He turns defeat into salvation. He turns death into life. Is it an overstatement to say that this theme of reversal that we see so clearly in Esther is perhaps the theme of the entire Bible? (And, if so, what does that tell us about the importance of this oft-neglected little book?) Who overturned more tables than Jesus? “Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.” (Isaiah 52:1)

A second theme that we find in Esther is the theme of feasting. The word translated “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of Old Testament. The events in Esther open and close with feasting, and others feasts occur throughout. One of the central events in the book is the establishment of the feast of Purim (or “lots”), which is still celebrated by Jews today. Why the emphasis on feasting?

Perhaps the best explanation is that the interplay between feasting and reversal reflect the interplay between God’s providence and human behavior. Esther herself, for example, is propelled forward by the interplay of human behavior and God’s providence. She begins as a pawn, and we see things happening to her rather than through her. But by the end, she is in control and acting with full authority (9:29). Why? Because at a decisive moment she decided to act, crossing that boundary between human behavior and God’s providence. (4:15) That decision led to the reversals in the book, and God’s providence worked through her decision. If she had made another decision, God’s providence no doubt would have looked elsewhere, but she made that decision, and we can see the outcome. (God likewise works through our decisions today, and he will likewise turn elsewhere if we remain undecided.)

As we study Esther and see the providence of God in action, we are reminded of the events in the life of Joseph. As with Esther, those events are often viewed by some as too improbable to be true, but as with Esther, the answer to that objection is the providence of God.

In one way, this ancient tale of intrigue from the Persian court is the most modern book in the Old Testament. Why? Because in this book, God deals with his people as he deals with us today. Like the

Jews of Persia, we have no earthly king, no earthly prophet, and no earthly kingdom. Like them, we live in an age without miracles. Instead, what we see is God working behind the scenes to providentially provide for his people as they live in a hostile and pagan environment. What we see is God using those people to fulfill his plans. What we see in Esther is how God's providence works through human action, and we see how our inaction can hinder the providence of God. If Esther had failed to act, God would have looked elsewhere. Is God looking elsewhere today because of our own failure to act?

God is not hidden in Esther, but rather God is veiled. "Visions and revelations may come and go, but the veiled presence of God is a constant that may not be seen or felt but will always sustain his people in good, bad, and ugly times. This is the precious truth that Esther's story celebrates."

The events in Esther encourage the reader to look behind that veil to understand what is really going on behind the scenes, and the key way that Esther does that is by not mentioning God at all. What better way to illustrate the veiled nature of God? What better way to illustrate God's unseen role in history? What better way to encourage faithfulness even when it appears that God is hidden?

And is God really veiled in Esther? Those who look for him will find him – even in Esther. In 4:3, what did the Jews do in response to the edict from Haman? They fasted. What purpose would that have if not to affect God's will? The veil is pretty thin in that verse!

The providence of God also explains the book's humor. Despite the seriousness of the events, there is a sense of lightness in the book. Although God is not mentioned, Esther is undeniably written based on an understanding that God is actively present in the world. There is optimism from the outset that the Jewish people will survive. Esther is an optimistic book, and it calls his people (both then and now) to be an optimistic people. Esther shows us that the phrase "*pessimistic* child of God" is the ultimate oxymoron.

Another way to look at Esther is to see it as a conflict between competing worldviews. One worldview is represented by Haman, who believed in fate and tried to use it to destroy his enemies. This belief in fate pervaded the ancient world except for Israel, and it formed the basis for the astrology, omens, and magical practices so strongly condemned in the Old Testament. Many aspects of these

ancient pagan practices are being revived today and called “New Age” beliefs. They are anything but new!

By contrast, the Biblical worldview knows nothing of fatalism. God is the Lord of history, although he has made men responsible for their decisions and actions. The Bible views history as a dialogue between God and man. God is in control, and history moves toward the goal that God has marked. Esther can be seen as a conflict between this worldview and Haman’s fatalism.

When was Esther written?

Commentaries have much to say about this question. Most modern scholars have a simple method for dating books of the Bible. If the book contains a prophecy about a certain event, then the book was written *after* that event occurred. If external evidence dates the existence of the book to a certain earliest known date, then the book must have been written on the day before. Finally, if the book dates itself to a certain date or time period, then it could not possibly have been written on that date or during that time period.

For no book are these rules more clearly applied than with Daniel. Modern scholars have to push that book forward in time because if they did not, they would have to agree that it contains genuine prophecies. But they can’t push it too far because a copy was found among the Dead Scrolls. In fact, because Daniel’s prophecies about Roman emperors who ruled *after* the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, the modern scholars have a problem – and they solve it by misapplying the prophecies in Daniel to apply to the Greeks rather than to the Romans. They are nothing if not consistent!

What about Esther? First, there are no prophecies in the book that would preclude the book from having been written after a certain date. All we can say with absolute certainty is that it was written between 465 BC (the end of Xerxes’ reign) and AD 70 (when Josephus included the events of Esther in his *Antiquities*). There is some evidence that Esther was translated into Greek by Lysimachus, which could move the endpoint of that range to 76 BC or possibly to 112 BC. Can we narrow that range further?

Most modern scholars date the book in the third century BC during the Greek rule in Palestine. They reject a second century date because the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to reflect a Hebrew language with diction, idioms, and syntax later than that found in Esther. And, following the

modern scholar rulebook, they push it as close to that point as they can – hence the third century BC.

Others, however, have pointed to evidence that Esther was written at a much earlier date. Some, for example, argue that the language used to describe dates in Esther points toward a late fifth century date. Also, the lack of any reference to Greek culture suggests that the book was written during or before the first half of the fourth century BC (around 330 BC or earlier). There are no words of Greek origin, but many words of Persian origin. Further, the book displays an accurate knowledge of life in Susa during the time of Xerxes, which also argues for an early date.

Thus, it is probably best to date Esther as being written during the Persian period, and no later than around 350 BC. As for the author, we are not told, but some have suggested Ezra or Mordecai.