

Lesson 14

When we ended last week, we were looking at the two major themes in the book of Esther – the theme of reversal and the theme of feasting. We wondered why feasting would be a theme, and one answer we considered was that the interplay between feasting and reversal reflects the interplay between God’s providence and human behavior. And we saw that the way God works in the book of Esther is the way that God works today – not with miracles, but behind the scenes through his providence.

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 the book of Esther shows us.”

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 the book of 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 God 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!

And don’t we see an allusion to God in the statement Mordecai makes in Esther 4:14?: “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

“Another place?” Isn’t that a subtle reference to God. At the very least, there is a strong sense of confidence that deliverance will come. And why should Mordecai add to this a threat to Esther and her family unless he is thinking of the ancient consequences of disobedience to God’s law? Finally, the phrase “for such a time as this” shows us that Mordecai saw a design in these events. How can we have design without a designer?

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence for the hidden God in Esther is found in the links to other biblical events that do mention God.

- God blessed Joseph and gave him favor with Potiphar (Gen. 39:3-4). God gave the Israelites favor with the Egyptians (Exod. 12:36). Esther simply “gained favor.” (Esth. 2:15)
- The Israelites cried out to God (Exod. 2:23). The Jews in Esther simply cry out (Esth. 4:3).
- God promised personally to put fear of the Jews among their enemies in the promised land (Deut. 2:25); in Esther, simply, the enemies of the Jews fear them (Esth. 8:17).

These links are inviting the careful reader to see God on every page of Esther! But if all of these

allusions and coincidences point to God, why is he not named?

“When we think of redemptive history, we think of the great miracles that display God’s power. But these mighty acts of God are linked together through long years of human history by a chain of seemingly insignificant, ordinary events. We are now living in one of those long stretches of history between the ascension and return of Jesus Christ. Like Xerxes of long ago, modern kings, presidents, and rulers make decisions from purely political motives. Like Vashti, people today unwittingly make decisions that have long-reaching consequences far beyond what they could have foreseen. These events may be completely secular and perhaps made by people who give Christ no thought. Nonetheless, through them God is moving all of history forward to accomplish his will.”

The book of Esther assumes that there are two dimensions of reality – one that is seen and the other that is unseen. Esther is herself a person with two identities; she has two names, one of which means “hidden.” (The root for the Hebrew word “Esther” is “saite,” which means “concealment.”) On the surface, to be a faithful Jew would require return to Jerusalem, observance of temple worship, and a legitimate Jewish pedigree. But being a faithful Jew meant more than that. It meant showing the presence of God in this world. Perhaps we look in vain to find God’s name in Esther because his identity is joined to that of his people.

Another place to look for God in Esther is by looking at the narrator of the book. The narrator in Esther is omniscient, privy not only to conversations in highly restricted areas of the Persian palace but also to people’s private thoughts and feelings. Who would know these things but God, and the Holy Spirit who authored the text?

The providence of God is on display in Esther, which means that God is on display in Esther for all to see. 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. 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.

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. (“Purim” means lots.) 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?

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. 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.

Linguistics is one way of dating a text. We can tell pretty quickly whether something was written in the 1900's, the 1800's, or the 1700's just by looking at the words that are used, how they are spelled, and how they are arranged in sentences. The same is true with ancient texts. For Esther, these factors point to an early date for the text. For example, one of Haman's sons in 9:9 is named Vaizatha. "The diphthong 'ai' shifted to 'e' between the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. This indicates that the name transmitted in Esther is strikingly old and authentic."

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 human author of the inspired text, we are not told, but some have suggested Ezra or Mordecai.

Esther 1:1-3

Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:) 2 That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, 3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:

As we discussed, feasting is one of the themes in Esther, and in fact the book of Esther begins with a feast given by King Xerxes. The events of the banquet lead to the king's anger against Queen Vashti and to her subsequent departure. That departure sets the stage for Esther to come forth and deliver her people.

Verse 1 begins with the phrase "Now it came to pass," which is the same type of introduction we find in books such as Joshua and Judges. (Joshua 1:1 – "Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass..." and Judges 1:1 – "Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass...") The phrase "it came to pass" is found 453 times in the Bible. The book of Luke uses the phrase 40 times. Those who argue that Esther is not historical must admit that the book presents itself as a history, and they must explain why their reasoning as to Esther would not also mean that Judges and Joshua and the others books where that phrase occurs are likewise fictional.

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the name of the Persian king called Xerxes I by the Greeks. We saw him briefly in Ezra 4:6. We also saw him in Daniel 11:2, where Daniel told us about Xerxes 100 years before Xerxes was born. Xerxes reigned from 486 to 465 BC, and from his father Darius

the Great he inherited the great Persian Empire that extended from India to Ethiopia (as verse 1 tells us and as history confirms). This was the largest empire known up until that time.

Critics argue that the “127 provinces” in verse 1 is inaccurate because Herodotus listed only 20 satrapies. Fair-minded critics, however, notice that verse 1 does not say there were 127 satrapies, but rather that there were 127 provinces. The Hebrew word translated “province” no doubt refers to a subdivision of a satrapy. In Daniel 2:49, the same Hebrew word refers to the province of Babylon, and in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:6 it refers to the province of Judea. (Although Daniel does refer to the leaders of the 120 provinces as “satraps” in 6:1.) As for the different numbers between Daniel and Esther, I could point you to any number of sources that say the United States has 48 states!

One interesting suggestion was that 127 is symbolic of Xerxes’ reign over the entire earth, being a combination of 12 (the number of God’s people), 10 (the number of completeness), and 7 (the number of perfection). But I think we must reject that option because Esther is a historical text that is not presented using apocalyptic language. Although apocalyptic language is properly interpreted by assuming the language is figurative unless forced to do otherwise, historical narrative is properly interpreted according to the opposite rule. There is no reason to understand 127 here as a figurative number. (Be very careful of commentaries that try to read something mystical or figurative into every number they encounter. As Freud said, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”)

Susa (Shushan in the KJV) had been the capital of ancient Elam. Darius I rebuilt it and used it as his main residence before he moved his capital to Persepolis. Xerxes also had his main residence at Persepolis, but he lived in Susa during the winter. Daniel previously had a vision at Susa (Daniel 8:2), and later Nehemiah would serve in Susa as cupbearer to Xerxes’ son, Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah 1:1).

Xerxes ascended to the throne in 486 BC at the age of 32. The third year of his reign was 483 BC, a few years before his famous expedition against the Greek mainland. Rulers used banquets to show their greatness and to reward their loyal subjects. Herodotus described banquets with 15,000 guests. The Assyrian king Ashurnazirpal once gave a feast with nearly 70,000 guests.

At the Louvre Museum in Paris you can see part of a wall covered with many-colored mosaics from the great banquet hall built by Darius in Susa – the same place where many of these events took place.

Verse 3 refers to “Persia and Media” rather than “Media and Persia.” This ordering attests to the book’s historical accuracy. Prior to the days of Cyrus, the Medes had been the dominant partner. Cyrus won the allegiance of both nations and united them because his father was Persian and his mother was a Mede. By the time of Xerxes, Persia was the dominant partner within the joint empire.

Verse 3 gives us a time frame for the events in this first chapter – the third year of Xerxes’ reign. We know from extra-Biblical history that Xerxes’ campaigns against the Greeks began a few years after this time and ended four years after this time. When we get to Esther 2:16, we will see that Esther’s reign as Queen began in the 7th year of Xerxes’ reign. This otherwise unexplained gap of 4 years between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 fits perfectly with the evidence of Xerxes’ campaign

against the Greeks. It may also explain what we saw about Xerxes in Ezra 4:6 – “And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.” Note that the letter was sent in the beginning of his reign and that no response is recorded. Perhaps that is because Xerxes was not around to give a response but instead was off fighting the Greeks.

Verses 1-3 thus provide the setting for the events that will follow: the Persian court in Susa in the fifth century BC.

Esther 1:4-8

4 When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days. 5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; 6 Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble. 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king. 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Verses 4-8 tell us about the splendor of King Xerxes. Persia's wealth and magnificence dazzled even Alexander the Great when more than a century later he entered this same palace and found 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion and 270 tons of gold coins. Excavations at Susa between 1884 and 1886 produced many treasures from this very palace (which are now displayed at the Louvre in Paris).

The same critics who complain about the 127 provinces in verse 1 also complain about the 180-day banquet in verse 4. But the language does not say that the banquet lasted that long. More likely, Xerxes must have had some sort of public event that lasted that long. This may have also been a time of planning for the military campaign against the Greeks, which would explain why the nobles and princes of Persia and Media were before him in verse 3. The feast itself, as verse 5 tells us, lasted only 7 days.

The banquet corresponds well with the great war counsel of 483 BC. In Book 7 of The Histories, Herodotus writes: “After the conquest of Egypt, when he was on the point of taking in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes called a conference of the leading men of the country, to find out their attitude towards the war and explain to them his own wishes.” Herodotus records the following words of Xerxes at that counsel, which may have been the same banquet described here in Esther: “For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose.” He then proceeded to describe the upcoming Greek invasion, and he told them they would receive lavish gifts in exchange for their support. If so, it was important that he display his

wealth and power to convince them he would make good on his promises. Anyone who made him look powerless before this audience would definitely make him very angry. (That observation is a bit of foreshadowing!)

Verses 6-7 emphasize the incredible luxury of the Persian palace. Herodotus relates an incident that occurred during Xerxes' retreat from Greece in which the king left one of his tents behind in an abandoned camp. The Greeks were astonished to find gold and silver couches in the tent. They wondered what such a rich Persian king would want with Greece!

The word translated "edict" or "law" in verse 8 is used 19 times in the book and each time refers to a royal decree.

Verse 8 begins literally, "And the drinking was according to the rule: let there be no restraining." Usually a toastmaster would indicate when everyone was to drink, but here the people could drink whenever they pleased. This detail suggests that the banquet was not only luxurious but was also licentious. We are reminded of the drunken banquet in Daniel 5 that preceded the fall of Babylon to Persia.

These introductory verses emphasize one of the key themes in the book of Esther – the theme of reversal. All who read the book originally knew as they read Chapter 1 how these events were going to turn out – Xerxes' campaign against the Greeks was a total failure! They knew that Xerxes would return from that campaign four years from now with depleted power and a depleted treasury. This unstated reversal sets the stage for the other reversals that will follow in the book of Esther. The book of Esther could have easily begun with a record of Xerxes' great defeat, but it did not. Instead the book begins with a display of Xerxes' great wealth and power. Why? Because the theme of this book is reversal.

And there is yet one more hint of reversal in these opening verses. The elaborate description of this foreign palace is unusual in the Bible. Only the description of the temple receives similar treatment, but that temple had been destroyed and had now been rebuilt in a much less grand manner. Perhaps the author wants the reader to see the beauty of the temple as having been moved to Persia, along with the people of God. If so, then we are being reminded of yet another humiliating reversal.

So in the opening verses of Esther we see both of the major themes of the book – feasting and reversal.

Esther 1:9

9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.

Verse 9 tells us about Queen Vashti's banquet, and the fact that she gave a banquet tells us that she had liberty to make such decisions and take such actions. We will later see Queen Esther exercising similar powers.

Verse 9 shows the King and the Queen acting separately, which foreshadows the trouble that will soon come between them.

For those who may have wondered whether feasting was really a theme of this book, note that we have now had two feasts in the first 9 verses (and possibly three, depending on whether the feasts in verse 3 is the same or different from the feast in verse 5). As we will see, a primary purpose of the entire book is to explain the significance of the feast of Purim.

Women were present at royal Persian banquets, but typically the men and women were separated once the drinking began. Only the concubines were left for entertainment after the other women left. Josephus explains Vashti's later decision simply as her reticence to break this protocol.

Esther 1:10-12

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, 11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on. 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Verses 10-12 describe a command from the King and the Queen's denial of that command. Verse 4 tells us that Xerxes wanted to display his splendor and glory, and the beautiful Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown would have been seen as a living trophy of that splendor and glory.

Why did he send seven eunuchs (chamberlains in the KJV) to go and get her? The eunuch part is self-explanatory, but why seven? Some suggest that seven may have been needed to carry her while seated in the royal litter. In any event, they are listed by name in verse 10 for a reason – their names serve to verify the event.

Herodotus tells us something interesting about the Persian view of alcohol – they drank as they deliberated matters of state:

“Moreover it is [the Persians'] custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk, and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. And when they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.”

The ancients believed that intoxication put them in closer touch with the spiritual world. If Herodotus was correct, then drinking would have been an essential element of Xerxes' war counsel – yet another historical fact in the book of Esther.

A key event in the entire book occurs in verse 12 – Queen Vashti refused to come to Xerxes, the most powerful person on earth at that time. Why?

This is a question we will ask many times in our study of this book – why? What was the person's motivation? Why did the person do something or not do something? What was the person thinking? For some, we are told what they were thinking, but for others we are not. Vashti falls in the latter

category. We know only what she did; we are not told why.

So, of course, the speculation runs rampant! Perhaps Vashti was just acting on a whim. Here is how one commentary described the situation: “Vashti could have been motivated by any of the following: anger, pride, disdain, dignity, modesty, marital fidelity, love, royal decorum or early feminism. Any of these motives, or a heady cocktail of them all, could have prompted her refusal. One thing is certain – refuse she did, and in doing so she set in motion an epoch-making train of events.”

Herodotus describes another banquet at which the women present were assaulted by drunken men (5.18). And, as we mentioned last week, almost any woman would have been reluctant to appear before a group of men who had been drinking for 7 days. And yet this was not just any woman – this was the royal wife of King Xerxes of Persia, the most powerful man on earth. And this was not just any event – this was the banquet at which Xerxes was planning his invasion of Greece and at which he most needed to impress his princes and generals with his royal power and authority. Vashti could hardly have picked a worse time to refuse the king’s request. And, again, we must ask, why?

Perhaps she was opposed to the Greek invasion, and rightly so as it would turn out! Perhaps there was a conflict between the royal command and existing Persian law or custom. Josephus suggests that Vashti refused to appear before the king “out of regard to the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers.” [Antiquities, 11.6]

The answer the Jewish rabbis offered is that the king wanted Vashti to appear naked before him, wearing only “her royal crown” (which is a slight rewrite of verse 11). But verse 11 does not tell us that. We do know, however, that coming to show the princes her beauty would have meant coming unveiled. So modesty could have been a motivation even absent the suggestion of the Jewish rabbis.

Jewish legends over the years have added quite a bit to the events in Chapter 1. Even the explanation that Vashti had been commanded to appear unclothed did not satisfy the Rabbis, for they could not see why such a shameless creature as Vashti (as they considered her) should be unwilling to come even in that condition. In Jewish legend Vashti is sometimes said to have resisted appearing because the angel Gabriel, to effect the salvation of the Jews, had afflicted her with leprosy. Jewish tradition also depicts Vashti as the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar and daughter of Belshazzar. Jewish lore further views Vashti’s own banquet as filled with political intrigue – the nobles’ wives were captives being used as insurance that their husbands not rebel against Xerxes. None of that is in the text.

We mentioned one intriguing theory earlier. Vashti may have refused to appear before the drunken banquet when ordered to do so by Xerxes because she was pregnant with Artaxerxes I. (Under this view, Vashti and Amestris are the same person.) Artaxerxes I was eighteen when he came to the throne in 464/5 B.C. That would mean he was born in 483 B.C., presumably sometime shortly after the lavish banquet described in Esther.