

LESSON 17

What are the key themes of Esther?

Reversal

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. God turns darkness into light. God turns mourning into rejoicing. God turns defeat into salvation. God 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 52:15)

Feasting

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 reflects 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.

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, the events in the life of Joseph 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 without miracles. Instead, what we see is God working behind the scenes through his people and through others to providentially provide for his people as they live in a hostile and pagan environment. What we see in Esther is how God’s providence works through human action, and we also see how our inaction can hinder the providence of God.

Is God Hidden in Esther?

Let's return now to the big question we started with - why is God never mentioned in the book of Esther?

I think we can say that God is not hidden in Esther, but rather perhaps 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 Esther 4:3, what did the Jews do in response to the edict from Haman? They fasted. What purpose could that fasting have had other than an appeal to God? 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 in Genesis 39:3-4. God gave the Israelites favor with the Egyptians in Exodus 12:36. Esther simply “gained favor” in Esther 2:15.

- The Israelites cried out to God in Exodus 2:23. The Jews in Esther simply cry out in Esther 4:3.
- God promised personally to put fear of the Jews among their enemies in the promised land in Deuteronomy 2:25. In Esther, the enemies of the Jews simply fear them Esther 8:17.

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

The book of Esther reveals that there are two dimensions of reality – one that is seen and one 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 “saiter,” 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. And today, we in the church are likewise called to show 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. We can see God when we see God’s faithful 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. How can we explain the humor in this book apart from confidence in God?

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 that fate 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 that are 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. God is in control, and history moves toward the goal that God has marked. Esther can be seen as a conflict between this Biblical 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 around 465 BC (the end of Xerxes' reign) and around AD 70 (when Josephus included the events of Esther in his *Antiquities* book). 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 even further?

Most modern scholars date the book to 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 to 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 points to an early date.

Linguistics is one way of dating a text. We can tell today pretty quickly whether an English text 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 Esther 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.”

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 (or legal jurisdictions). 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.)

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 (as shown on the handout) you can see a large column and part of a wall covered with many-colored mosaics from the palace and the great banquet hall built by Darius in Susa – the same place where many of these events took place. These items were likely seen by Nehemiah and Esther.

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.

As we saw, 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 and the time frame for the events that will follow: the Persian court in Susa in the fifth century BC.

#ezra-esther