

Esther: “For Such a Time as This”

Part One

Park Street Church Christian Formation – Fall 2017

Review Historical Contexts

- Into exile - covenant disobedience; deportations to Babylon; destruction of Temple
- The Persian empire [with a map]
 - Cyrus the Great (539 BCE) – God’s people returned from exile
 - non-returnees - exile transformed to diaspora
 - Darius I (522-486 BC) – temple rebuilt
 - *Xerxes (Ahasuerus) - (486-465)* – Herodotus’s description
 - Artaxerxes I (464-425 BC) – Ezra and Nehemiah

The Narrative in Artistic Representations

Challenges to the Book of Esther – and Responses

“I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much, and has too much heathen naughtiness” (Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, W.A. xxii, 2080)

“The book is so conspicuously lacking in religion that it should never have been included in the canon of the OT . . .” (Paton, *International Critical Commentary*, 96-97)

“Faithful Christian ministers will not take their texts from Esther . . .” and “. . . if the leader of a church-school class shows any Christian discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, and piety...”

“[Esther] may be left aside as one of those unfortunate detours away from the road, first blazed by the prophets, which led toward enlightenment” (Bernhard Andersen, “The Place of the Book of Esther” 42)

On the other hand -

Rabbi Shim’on ben Lakish (ca. 300 CE) said that Esther and the Torah would remain while the Prophets and the Writings would cease (*Talmud of the Land of Israel* Megillah 1:5).

Maimonides echoed this approximately 900 years later: When Messiah comes and the Prophets and Writings pass away, only Esther and the Torah will remain.

And from the Christian “camp”

“... a valuable moral lesson pervades the whole narrative” (*The Pulpit Commentary* 7:3)

“I know of no single book in the whole Old Testament which more lucidly illustrates the principles governing the Christian life” (W.I. Thomas, *If I Perish, I Perish* 15)

Questions

- What has prompted radically different opinions regarding the value of the book?
- Are Esther and Mordecai meant to be moral examples?
- Why is God not explicitly mentioned in the text?

Biblical/Theological Contexts: Echoes of Scripture

- Israel vs. Amalek – and so? individual and ethnic identities
 - Mordecai (Esther 2:5) - tribe of Benjamin
 - Haman (Esther 3:1) - an Agagite
- Let’s unpack this a bit further
 - Genesis 36:12 - Amalek was a descendant of Esau
 - Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19 – Amalekites’ attack on Israel
 - I Samuel 15:1-9 – Saul (tribe of Benjamin) failed to cut off Agag, king of Amalekites
 - subsequent encounters - David (I Samuel 27; 30; II Samuel 8:12); tribe of Simeon (I Chronicles 4:42-43)
- Egypt / Passover associations
 - Esther 10:3 - Mordecai second in command
 - Esther 3:12 - edict against Jews written on 13th of Nisan (Passover was 14 Nisan)
- The intermarriage issue - Esther is married to a pagan king
 - Deuteronomy 7:3-4 (Canaanites)
 - Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 13:23-27

Chiastic Structure in Esther

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| A Greatness of Ahasuerus | A' Greatness of Ahasuerus and Mordecai |
| B Two banquets of Persians | B' Two banquets of Jews |
| C Esther identifies as a Gentile | C' Gentiles identify as Jews |
| D Elevation of Haman | D' Elevation of Mordecai |
| E Anti-Jewish Edict | E' Pro-Jewish Edict |
| F Key exchange of Mordecai and Esther | F' Key Exchange of Ahasuerus and Esther |
| G First Banquet of Threesome | G' Second Banquet of Threesome |
| H Royal Procession | |

Cultural Contexts (and Contrasts) – Honor and Shame / Inside, Outside, on the Boundaries

Persian Court: “Inside” but with unstable trappings of honor

Focus on Splendor, Status, Self, Substance

- [Ridiculous excesses] – ostentatious displays by Ahasuerus (1:1-8)
- Possible political motives for excessive displays (483 BC – mustering massive force for attack on Greece)
- Nobles and “experts” in the law, who “saw the face of the king”

Note the differences between deserved and contrived honor: narrative ironies (chs 1-2)

- Experts’ advice: Vashti was forbidden to do what she had refused to do; the decree served to publicize what they feared would become public knowledge; men came to rule their households by public decree.
- Persian legal system (“law of the Medes and Persians”) was repeatedly undermined; the king’s laws were shown to be foolish and dangerous enterprises, and he was effectively controlled by those around him
- The king’s lapses were funny (dependent on servants to arrange for next queen), but ominous, when he neglected to honor Mordecai and instead appointed an egotistical butcher as “second-in-command”

Esther and Mordecai – Outsiders (Inherent Shame)

- Taken into exile and members of diaspora community (2:5-6) – outsiders in Persia
- Further factors for Esther (2:7): gender and family status (orphan)
- Passivity - Esther had to “win favor” (2:9, 15, 17) – which she did

On the Boundaries (chs 1-2) - implications in a number of spheres

- Vashti’s separate banquet in the palace; refusal to cross the boundary when ordered (1:11-12)
- World of the eunuchs
 - commanded to enter Vashti’s world and bring her to the king (1:10-11)
 - Hegai – in charge of harem (2:8)
 - Officers (guards) at the king’s gate (2:21)
- Esther (Hebrew and Persian names – 2:7) - harem to throne - not allowed to reveal her identity (2:10, 20)
- Sectors of the harem (2:14) – women moved into separate part of harem - status as concubines
- Mordecai in the courtyard (2:11) and the gate (2:21) – uncovering the plot and reporting to Esther
- Moral ambiguities – Esther as queen (to *this* king?)

Mordecai and Haman – Old and New Enmities

- **Mordecai Threatens the “Honor” of Haman** (3:1-6) – five years later (vs 7) – reminder of identities
 - Note what has changed in the court “structure”
 - Why did Mordecai not bow?
 - Why did Mordecai identify as a Jew to those around him?
 - Haman’s consuming rage
- **Haman Threatens the Existence of Mordecai and His People** (3:7-15)
 - Haman’s description of the Jews (vs 8)
 - The payoff (vs 9)
 - The oower of Haman, “the oppressor of the Jews” (vss 10-11)
 - The edict (vss 12-14)
 - Initial response (vs 15)

In Case You Are Not Here Next Week What messages are conveyed through this text?
Faith and cultural compromise? What kinds of decisions are necessitated when we live in a “messy” place?