

Book of Esther - Chapters 1 & 2

Like many OT books, Esther is an anonymous work. The only hints of its origin are the references to some of the key events in the story being committed to writing in either official court records or edicts issued by the king or his representatives. Since the book of Esther is anonymous, it cannot be dated by the years of its author. However, it matches well the time period in which it is set (the reign of Ahasuerus, 486–464 B.C.)

The book of Esther is a story par excellence. It has virtually all the ingredients that people through the ages have most loved in a story — a beautiful and courageous heroine, a romantic love thread, a dire threat to the good characters, a thoroughly evil villain, suspense, dramatic irony, evocative descriptions of exotic places, sudden reversal of action, poetic justice, and a happy ending.

The specific type of story represented by the book of Esther is a hero story, as the action is constructed around the engaging central figure of a heroine whose Persian name Esther means “star.” But the story is also a patriotic story of national history — a rescue story in which a whole nation is delivered from destruction, like Exodus and the story of Joseph.

Esther is one of the most beautiful stories in all literature. Even though the name of God is not mentioned, no book of the Bible teaches His providence more forcefully. Providence is not blind fate. The word "providence" means, "foresight coupled with activity." God alone is able

to act on the basis of foreknowledge. The book of Esther reminds us of two great doctrines: man's free will, and God's absolute sovereignty. Both are at work here. The book covers a period of about 12 years, falling somewhere between the events recorded in the book of Ezra.

In terms of biblical history, Esther belongs to the period after the Babylonian exile, when Persia had replaced Babylon as the ruling power. The story is set in Susa, the Persian capital, during the reign of King Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes I (486–464 B.C.). Some Jews had returned to Jerusalem, where they enjoyed a reasonable amount of control over their own affairs as described in Ezra and Nehemiah. Others, like Esther and Mordecai, were still in exile. As a minority group, the Jews were viewed with suspicion and sometimes faced threats to their existence from people in a position to harm them.

An unseen hand is at work behind all human affairs. Who shapes the destinies of nations – politicians? All things move by the knowledge of Almighty God, and according to His ordained plan and purpose. Woven into God's plans are the most minute details of human history. This is illustrated in the turn of events of the story of Esther. The rejection of a Gentile queen, the choice of Esther, and the finding of the records led finally to the exaltation of Mordecai and the sparing of the Jewish race.

The book of Esther presents us with a picture of God's current relationship with the Jews. The Jewish people, as a whole, have been

out of their land for many years. During this time, they have been under many Gentile rulers. Satan repeatedly has had an evil ruler planning their destruction. But all along, God has been in the shadows watching over His covenant people Israel. Even though, in their present unbelief, they may refuse to recognize His hand, God continues His watchful care over His beloved people.

Esther tells the story of the surprising way God delivered his people Israel from oppression and persecution. The book helps minority believers living in a foreign culture to see how God works among them. It encourages them to see themselves in light of the larger story of the Bible.

Esther is part of a much larger story that runs all the way from Abraham to Christ and, through him, to the church. If the Jewish people as a whole had been destroyed, the story of God's saving work in and through Abraham's descendants would have come to an end. There would have been no fulfilment in Christ, no gospel, and no Christian church. Nothing less than that was at stake. That is why Christians should read the book of Esther, not just as a story about the Jews but as part of their own heritage. It is because of this fundamental connection between God's purposes in the OT and NT, that Christians should value the whole Bible as the Word of God.

Esther's story begins when the king of Persia throws two elaborate

banquet feasts that last a total of 187 days, all for the grandiose purpose of displaying his greatness and splendour. On the last day of the feast, with the entire city gathered, the king is drunk and demands his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear at the party to show off her beauty. Celebrated by feminists for her self-respect and chided by fundamentalists for her disobedience, she refuses to appear before his drunken audience and, in a drunken rage, she is stripped of her position. The message is clear: the king's brashness is to be feared. The king follows with a decree that all Persian men should be the master of their own homes.

The king holds an international beauty pageant to replace the queen and compels "all the beautiful young virgins" to join his harem and undergo beauty treatments for a year. And right when the story feels like a bad soap opera, we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai. Esther hides her Jewish identity and Jewish name, Hadassah, and poses as a Persian. In the end, the "winner" is a Jewish girl named Esther. She's young, compliant, and afraid. The king is so obsessed with her that he elevates her as the new queen of Persia. After this, Mordecai "just happens" to overhear two royal guards plotting to murder the king. He informs Esther, who then tells the king, and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life. And in all these remarkable events, God is not mentioned, but it all seems providentially ordered. What is God up to?

This entire scene — from the party to the pageant — is a spectacle, written to highlight how much Persian culture loves appearances. Men

are measured by wealth and power, women by beauty and sexuality. It tells us that what we have — money, beauty, talent, power — matters more than who we are. When we adopt this approach, we miss God's daily faithfulness because we look only for extraordinary miracles, not ordinary providence.

The heroine, Esther, is a developing character, not a character who displays admirable qualities right from the start. In her early days in the harem, she fits right in with the pagan lifestyle that prevails among the young women who spend a whole year beautifying themselves in a spa. Esther has two names, hinting at the identity crisis that she undergoes when she rises to the highest level of Persian society. But Esther becomes heroic when she is transformed by the ordeal of needing to save her nation.

While God is never mentioned in the book, there are many hints of his presence. The downfall of Vashti, the decision to hold an elaborate "beauty contest" as a way of replacing her, and Mordecai's overhearing of a plot against the king – all conspire to move Esther and Mordecai into positions of power before a threat emerges.

Although the story shows that the outcome is a divine gift rather than a human achievement, Esther and Mordecai do show great initiative and courage, and their actions are obviously significant. A little over a century earlier, the prophet Jeremiah had written to the exiles in Babylon

about the responsibilities and benefits of good citizenship, especially under foreign rule.

For each following generation of Jews, the book of Esther answers the question, “How is it that we are still here?” by pointing to God’s often hidden purpose. In the larger story of the Canon, it shows how God has preserved the offspring of Abraham for his purpose of bringing blessing to the whole world through them by raising up the Messiah and by including Gentile believers in his people. Thus, Gentile Christians own this as their story too. When you’re a religious minority living in a dominant culture with completely different views from you on almost everything, how do you relate to that culture? Do you withdraw, assimilate, protest, critique?

In the biblical Book of Esther, the Jews are in danger. They’re a religious minority living in Persia, a society dominated by spiritual and moral values at great variance to theirs. They have no king, no army, and no land. And powerful forces want to destroy them.

In the past, when God’s people have been in trouble, he sent miraculous signs and wonders. Here, he seems completely absent. There’s no mention of God at all — no vision, no dream, no prophecy, no prayer. Is this an accidental oversight? Or could it be the point?

The Esther story is one of the most realistic biblical accounts of God’s

providence precisely because God seems absent. It shows us how the unseen God often works through human history — not by his miraculous intervention, but through completely ordinary events and people.

In Esther, a string of “coincidences,” similar to, “as it happened” in the Book of Ruth, occur in order for the Jews to be saved — a drunken and boastful king, a self-respecting queen, a beauty pageant, a sensuous girl, an overheard plot, and a timely insomnia. God even uses morally questionable decisions to work all things together for the good of his people. And through these inscrutable and seemingly insignificant means, he advances his purposes.

The sad irony, though, is that God doesn’t care about appearances, but we do. Esther opens with a party hosted by the king at the palace — a palace so opulent that its description can only be compared to the temple and the tabernacle. (The original hearers would have recognized this association.)

Today, if we can’t see God at work in political decisions or in medical ethics in healthcare or in events in our daily lives, we must not conclude he’s not working. “His silence is not absence, his hiddenness is not his abandonment.” Esther teaches that, in his providence, he’s working out the salvation of his people.

And Esther points to Jesus. He’s not what the people expect to find in a

saviour. He's from Nazareth, not Jerusalem. He's seen as the son of a carpenter, not a king. Based on appearances, he's not to be esteemed, but ridiculed. Then they see him on a criminal's cross and bury him in a borrowed grave. What a joke!

But that's not the end of the story. Appearances are not what they seem. The gospel story, like the Esther story, makes clear one of the most basic principles of biblical interpretation: "Without divine revelation, the human experience is inherently ambiguous and cannot be rightly understood."

And that divine revelation is the resurrection. The powers that seek to destroy Jesus are themselves destroyed by him. Against all human expectation, Jesus takes the death we deserve so that we can take the life he deserves. Today isn't the end of the story. The powers that seem in control are not in control. The trajectory that seems inevitable is not inevitable. Beneath the surface of even seemingly insignificant human decisions and events, an unseen and uncontrollable power is at work that can be neither explained nor thwarted.

From Esther we learn that courage is essential, especially during challenging times. Esther faced the daunting task of confronting an absolute monarch; her very life was on the line. Yet she chose to act instead of remaining passive. Her courage shows us the importance of standing up against wrongdoings, even if it seems overwhelming.

Courage does not mean the absence of fear, but rather the acknowledgment of fear and the decision to proceed regardless. The world often presents us with challenges that require us to act bravely. Esther's story inspires us to find our own courage when we face injustice or must make difficult decisions.

Esther's journey highlights the significance of knowing and embracing one's identity. Initially, she hides her Jewish identity in the Persian court, fearing repercussions. However, when her identity is revealed, it becomes her strength. Being proud of who she is gives her the courage to stand up for her people.

The Book of Esther demonstrates the power of advocacy and the importance of using one's position or influence for the greater good. Esther transitions from a humble background to the queen of Persia, giving her a unique platform. She uses her voice to advocate for her people when they face dire threats. This lesson reminds us that everyone can be an advocate, regardless of their position in life. Whether it's standing up for a friend in need or raising awareness about larger societal issues such as homelessness, childhood poverty, domestic violence, or racism, we can all make a difference. Advocacy is about being aware of injustices and taking action, just as Esther did.

Use your voice to advocate for others. Recognize the privilege you hold and find ways to leverage that for good. Encourage others to speak out

against injustices they witness. There have been various attempts to trace elaborate types in the Book of Esther, but the simple fact stands out that here was one who was willing to lay down her life for her people. It is here that we find Christ in the Book of Esther. A picture of Him who was not only willing, but who actually did lay down His life for us, and through whose intercession, salvation is assured to us.

God has a purpose for each one of our lives. He has placed us where He can best use us for His glory. If we fail just there, it may be that He will work out His purpose in some other way; but we shall suffer untold loss. Like Esther, we must be ready to take our life in our hands and risk everything in His service.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Creator God, maker of stars and seashores, reveal your word to us this day in which all things were made. Redeemer God, caller of disciples, light our lamps this day, dress us for action, and open the doors of our hearts and minds. Sustainer God, sender of the Holy Spirit, Renew in us the faith of our ancestors, that we might claim it as our own in covenant with you. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**