

Esther chapters 1-2 - The World that left God out Living in a world that left out God

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

We could read the Book of Esther in our Bible as history, which it is; or as a dramatic presentation of feuding characters with a happy ending, an aspect which is certainly discernible in the totality of the Book; or we could study this Book as a story in which, though the name of God is left out, the evidence of divine sovereignty is unmistakable- and there is an annual Jewish Feast PURIM to this day to commemorate the events of that period!

As to who was the human author of the Book of Esther, there is no scholarly agreement, but what can be ascertained is :

Firstly, the king, Ahasuerus, whose name appears in this Book, reigned in the Persian Empire between 487 and 465 BC and so it was written after that time.

Secondly, we also know that long ago, the Jewish people were taken from their homeland to live as captives in Babylon.

Thirdly, via the Persian Emperor Cyrus' decree in 536 B.C., God had brought a remnant of His people back to their homeland. We read about this in the Book of Ezra chapter 1: and verses 1-11. Only about 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem.

Fourthly, all the others, who were deported to Babylon or born in captivity, remained scattered across the Middle Eastern world, including an orphaned young girl and her cousin around whom the story of the Book of Esther centres (Esther 2: 6).

Fifthly, it can be deduced from the royal court details given in the story, that the author was most probably a Jew who knew the Persian culture well. So one finger points to Esther's cousin, Mordecai.

It is my intention to present today's talk not as an analysis of a historical account but as the living Word of God, and as the Apostle Paul wrote:

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15: 4).

We will see that Book of Esther has a message for today and shows that living in a world that left God out then, is not so very different to how many people choose to live without God in our world today. Yet, just as God took account of those who were faithful to His message for them then, He is still the same and still cares about all His people today.

For our consideration, I have divided the first two chapters into four short sections, based on the four personalities introduced to us: Ahasuerus, Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai.

Section 1: The Display of the King's splendour, chapter 1: verses 1-9.

Section 2: The Defiance of the King's command, chapter 1: verses 10-12.

Section 3: The Promotion of the new Queen, chapter 2: verses 15-18. and

Section 4: The Plot at the Palace Gates discovered, chapter 2: verses 19-23.

Section 1: The Display of the King's splendour

So as we read the opening verses of the Book of Esther, chapter 1 verses 1-9, we are introduced to a joyous occasion in which the splendour and considerable wealth of the Persian king is exhibited before an innumerable host. I am reading from ESV.

“Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict: “There is no compulsion.” For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.”

That was some feast! We might say! 180 days - amounted to some 6 months or so in their calendar! This Ahasuerus, who was also known as Xerxes, went by a grand title which read: “I, the mighty king, king of kings, king of populous countries, king of earth, far and near.” (Esther, page 431 The New Bible Commentary, IVP 1975)

The Persian Empire he inherited from his father, Darius I, covered what we call today, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel; and also parts of modern day Egypt, Sudan, Libya and Arabia. So, it was quite considerable!

As well as displaying his considerable wealth and might to his subjects, the king not only wanted them to leave with the sense of belonging to a great empire, but he also wanted to foster their loyalty for the next military campaign that he was planning. So really, there is no such thing as a free lunch!

In the Book of Esther, there are no references to the Scriptures, prayer, the temple, sacrifices, prophecy, the Law of Moses, worship, although there is a reference to fasting and to the presence of Jews and historical enemies of Jews. The Jews who had settled in exile, had become established in their businesses and in their practices, there was no obvious outward testimony to the God of Israel. Contrast this with the lament in Psalm 137 where, by the rivers of Babylon, the Exiles held religious meetings, mourned many things, not least not being in Jerusalem. For them, a foreign land was not a place for the LORD'S song!

In Ahasuerus's Persia these people had left God out. So Ahasuerus was effectively a god! But his Empire would fall in accordance with biblical prophecy (Daniel chapter 9).

We can readily contrast here the One whom we know as The King of kings and Lord of lords, the One of whom the Word of God says that the earth is the Lord's and all its fulness, including the cattle on a thousand hills (see Psalm 24:1 and Psalm 50:10, (NKJV). His reign is from everlasting to everlasting. Daily, we are in the presence of the display of His greatness, majesty, and power.

Section 2: The Defiance of the king's command

King Ahasuerus's grand display was wound up with a seven-day banquet in the Capital: to which everyone else was invited great and small, irrespective of age, rank, nationality. Yet, we also learn that his invitation was not accepted by all. We read in chapter 1, verses 10-12:

“Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.”

We are not told why the queen refused to attend, apart from her holding an alternative engagement. We learn, however, of two very significant outcomes from the queen's conduct.

Firstly, the king was very angry and for quite some time. Secondly, in verses 13-19 the king, after consulting with his seven select wise counsellors, issued a decree. It was a royal decree that could not be repealed which went out to every land and in every language of the Empire so there would not be any misunderstanding.

It had far-reaching consequences not only for the queen but for all households throughout the vast Empire. It was that no other woman was to follow the example set by the queen and challenge the authority of her husband. Queen Vashti was deposed, and a new queen would take her place. And so we learn that from the disobedience of one woman, all women became subject to their husbands. We cannot but draw a lesson here from Scripture – here we are reminded of Adam who was crowned with glory and honour over God's creation (Psalm 8), but then came the Fall, through his disobedience.

Our God is one who has already dealt with the question of universal disobedience. In the Epistle to the Romans, we read:

"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19, NKJV).

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Roman 3:23, KJV).

"The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

In Psalm 7, we read: "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7:11).

The invitation that God has issued to everyone, regardless of age, rank, nationality is:

"Come for all things are now ready" (Luke 14:17).

“Come without...money” (Isaiah 55:1)

“Today if you will hear His voice: do not harden your hearts” (Psalm 95:7).

Section 3: The promotion of the new Queen

As stated earlier, Esther was among the Jewish people who had not returned to Jerusalem. She is introduced to us in chapter 2 verses 5 to 7 by her Hebrew name, “Hadassah, that is Esther”, a given Persian name. Verse 15 states she was the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai, a cousin, took her as his own daughter.

“So when the king’s order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel ... Esther also was taken into the king’s palace and put in custody of Hegai, the king’s eunuch who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favour. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king’s palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem” (vv.8-9).

Some of us are told by our friends that we stay in the shower for “too long”! But I wonder what they would make of the beauty regime of the new queen-to-be? It took one year in two 6 months sessions...Esther was already beautiful (v.7) but there were still the king’s standards to meet. Being prepared for the presence of the king was a costly business.

“When the turn came for Esther, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favour in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther’s feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity” (vv.15-18).

We note here that Esther is a foreigner, an exile, and an orphan, who became queen in the vast empire of the Medes and Persians - to share the king’s glory, riches, and honour. But also that she did not seek that position. She was brought to it.

Some of us, myself included, know what it is like to be uprooted from our country of birth and to be a foreigner and alienated, then years later to find ourselves as very different people, indeed - not just a product of the passage of time but as actively transformed individuals, and with a purpose in life. God works uniquely and universally. Universally, His plans for mankind have already been revealed:

“ When the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to law; God sent Him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that He could adopt us as His very own children” (Galatians 4:4-5 NLT).

That's the Good News. As for God working uniquely, He, in His grace, uses ordinary people like you and me as part of His plan. God placed Esther in a high position so that she would be able to influence the king. She was in the right place at the right time (Esther 4:14).

Section 4: The Plot at the palace gates discovered

Mordecai is introduced here but becomes even more important later in this Book. He was Esther's cousin, as stated previously.

“Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away....And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her” (Esther 2:5-6 & 11).

The reference to Mordecai's lineage reminds us of his ancestors who were carried into captivity and so Mordecai himself must have been from among the Jews who did not return in response to the decree by Cyrus. Ahasuerus, the grandson of Cyrus, issued a very different decree later that all Jews, in every province of the Empire, were to be destroyed on one day. The outcome of this is revealed later in this series of talks!

The reference to Mordecai's tribal origin as a Benjaminite is not an irrelevant detail, you wouldn't expect it to be, which becomes clear later when he meets Haman, an old tribal adversary, not only as a Jew with principles by which he lived, but a Benjaminite with a mission to accomplish (indirectly), one that King Saul should have done (see 1 Samuel chapter 15).

However, it's Mordecai's position as a palace official and that he is Esther's cousin that are important here. In verses 11, 19 and 21 of Chapter 2 we learn of Mordecai firstly as walking, and then as sitting, at the king's gate. This position indicates that Mordecai was associated with the decision-makers and men of influence in the Persian kingdom. This became significant not only in the part he played in saving the king's life, but in establishing his own legacy, as detailed in the latter chapters of this Book. It was while at the king's gate that Mordecai overheard a conversation between two of the king's eunuchs, who “guarded the threshold” (verse 21). They had become angry and had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

“And Mordecai, told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king” (vv.22-23).

Mordecai's eyewitness account, courage, and intelligent use of information in his loyalty to the king, brought their reward later, even belatedly and in place of his arch enemy who will have given meaning to the saying, "hoist by his own petard"! After the death of Haman, Mordecai was promoted to high office in the Persian Empire under Xerxes. This underscores our consideration that, “God's ways are behind the scenes; but He moves all the scenes which He is behind” (J. N. Darby, quoted in Esther, page 399, What The Bible Teaches , Ritchie 2009).

Final words : Living in a world that left God out

A number of arguments have been put forward concerning the absence of the name of God in the book of Esther, though in this respect, this is not unique in the Bible (The Song of Solomon is another). We have already referred to the 'non-returning-to-their-homeland-Jews' and their lack of outward witness to God. Twice, we read that Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her (Esther 2 :10 & 20). It would seem that Mordecai sensed it was

not the right time to do so, and Esther who trusted him, agreed. We know from chapters 3 and 4, that being a Jew incurred the wrath of their archenemy, Haman.

This teaches us that there are situations where we may feel directed by God to be restrained about revealing our identity, even our Christian identity – not for the purposes of permanently concealing it but waiting for the opportune moment to reveal it. For example, consider a situation when you are approached by one of those religious people who deny the divinity of the Lord Jesus. You might initially act as if you know nothing and do it, not to avoid confronting it, but to seize a strategic opportunity to tell them the real truth about the Son of God. Or as the Apostle Peter put it:

“Be always prepared to give an answer to every one that asks you to give an account of the hope that is in you, but with meekness and fear”
(1 Peter 3:15, J.N. Darby).

The book of Esther is read in full at the annual Feast of Purim, which commemorates the avenging of the massacre that had been decreed by Ahasuerus (see talk T1331). At that festival, the Jews commonly become drunk. It would seem that in that atmosphere, it would be so easy to profane the name of God if it had been in the Book.

Many of us leave God out of our lives on a daily basis. Our modern lives have become, from morning to evening, full of noise, hurrying about here and there, and centred on the here and now. Of course, we have God-given minds to think and abilities to be creative, but it is very easy not to hear the voice of God and to become hardened to His guidance on every detail of our lives. How many of us would say: as we read in Habakkuk:

“I have heard all about you, LORD. I am filled with awe by your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, help us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy ” (Habakkuk 3:2 NLT).

Although we may question certain circumstances in our lives, we must have faith that God is in control, working through both the pleasant and difficult times, so that we can serve Him effectively. The Book of Esther begins with a feast and ends with a feast. But in between, the problems of life and their attendant resolutions are set out.

Outwardly there may not be a national testimony for our God in the UK. No flying the King’s flag, if you will, but compare and contrast this with this word from Malachi:

“Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another and the LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD, and esteemed his name”
(Malachi 3:16, ESV).

Our God demands His unique place in our hearts and affections, daily.

A hymn writer summed up our journey with these words:

It is not with uncertain step
We tread our desert way
A well-known voice has called us up
To everlasting day.

He leaves us not alone to trace
Our path across the waste
But leads us still, with living grace,
Homeward, whereto we haste.

(J N Darby 1800-1882, Psalms Hymns &
Spiritual Songs, 1978).

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