

Introduction

Esther is unique in the OT for its apparent "secularism." God is never mentioned in the book, nor is worship or prayer even in the time of fasting and weeping over the proposal to destroy the Jews (3:5-6;4:1-3). Even Esther only asks the Jews in Susa to "fast for me" (4:16; they may imply prayer).

Also, the feast that celebrates the Jewish victory that occurs through Esther is a feast of joy and a day for giving presents to each other (9:19); and it was a custom the Jews took upon themselves to observe (9:27). The book's purpose is to background this feast.

Luther spoke of it as judaizing too greatly with "much pagan impropriety" (IOT 189).

Others tried to sacralize the book (make it more sacred and pious) by apocryphal additions (cf. the LXX and the Roman Catholic canon).

The time frame covered in the book is the reign of the Persian king, Xerxes (486-465 B.C.). So, we are near the middle of the OT period recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah.

The genre is historical narrative with wisdom motifs, irony (peripety), and satire interdispersed (IOT 194-195).

Peripety is when actions or states of affairs result in the opposite of what is expected. It comes from two Greek words, *peri* (around) and *piptein* (to fall); thus, it means to fall around, turn around in sudden reversal, or turning the tables. This is addressed as a theme in the book (9:1, 22, 25). Consider what was expected in the following in contrast to what actually transpired:

- 1) Haman intends to destroy Mordecai and the Jews, (ch 3 with 9.1)
- 2) Haman expects special honor at the queen's banquet, (5:11-12; seeks her mercy when things go wrong only to intensify the king's anger 7:7-8)
- 3) Haman writes a script for his own glorification (6:6-9; but must exalt Mordecai and is humiliated before his family, 6:10-13).
- 4) Haman erects a gallows for Mordecai at his family's suggestion (5:14; but is hanged on it himself at a servant's suggestion, 7:9-10).
- 5) The enemies of the Jews hoped to overpower them (9:1)
- 6) The threat of death brought sorrow and fasting to the Jews (4:1-3.15 with 9:22)

1A. Outline

Background to the plot against the Jews 1:1-2:23

Divorce of Vashti 1:1-22

Elevation of Esther 2:1-18

Loyal service of Mordecai 2:19-23

Haman's plot, timed by lot, 3:1-15

Esther's intervention 4:1-9:16

First banquet, 5:1-8

Haman's sadistic happiness, 5:9-14

King's sleepless night, Mordecai honored, 6

Second banquet, Haman hanged, 7

Conquest of Jewish enemies, 8:1-9:16

The feast of Purim 9:17-32

Prominence of Mordecai 10:1-3

2A. Message

It is true that if you read the book forgetting its place in the larger body of OT canonical writings that a secularism seems to rule the day. However, it does not stand alone. *It must be read in the context of the rest of the OT.* Particularly relevant here is the announcement of Moses that "The Lord will be at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16). Saul had disobeyed God's command to destroy the Amalekites and this was one of the reasons that he was deposed by God (I Sam. 15; 28:18). Haman is a descendent of Agag (Esther 3:1) the Amalekite royal opponent of Saul (I Sam. 15).

The theme of rest (Esther 9:22) harkens again to God's promise in Genesis that will be effected through a historical process that will include enmity between God's restored image bearers and Satan's seed (Gen. 3:15). Rest in the land (as in Joshua so in Esther) is indicative of God's unfolding covenant faithfulness.

Thus, even in conflict, exile, domination and radical assaults, God will carry out his purposes: "the book of Esther voices the confidence that 'deliverance for the Jews will arise (4:14) and that the nation will endure because the electing purpose of God will not fail' (IOT 197).

The sovereignty of God is therefore a major theme of the book. It is part of the literary genius of the author to convey this message forcefully without mentioning God. He relates "seeming coincidences" that are "indispensable when the story reaches its moment of peak dramatic tension at the beginning of chapter 6" (IOT 196).

Note the seeming coincidences: Esther's attractiveness, her ancestry and relation to Mordecai, her being chosen by the king to be queen, Mordecai's loyalty and "chance" overhearing of an assassination plot that was recorded in the king's chronicles, that Esther had concealed her identity, that the king showed her favor, the sleepless night of the king and the reading of the annals, reading the section relating to Mordecai's loyal action and lack of reward, and the king's wide-eyed concern to reward Mordecai.

"Luck indeed! What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned-the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people" (IOT 196).

3A. Theme

Behind the scenes of history, God delivers His people from the schemes of their enemies, turning the tables in ways unexpected. God providentially delivers the Jews from Haman's plot.

4A. Message for us

1) Here is a story of providence and election for our comfort and assurance: "God's actions may be hidden; they are certainly not transparent to all. Yet in spite of our inability to understand divine purpose in all that transpires, nothing is beyond the reach of his hand" (IOT 196).

This is no fatalism. Where God's actions and purposes are not apparent, the importance of human obedience and faithfulness becomes the more apparent (IOT 196). Dillard and Longman point us to parallel texts like Matthew 26:24 (Judas), Acts 2:23; 3:18-19 (crucifixion of Jesus).

2) Covenant fulfillment is peripetetic

In his providence, God is still fulfilling his covenant to Israel in the face of his enemies. But is it peripetetic.

Israel's expected Messiah has come and tabernacle with us in Christ but his own people received him not and crucified him and he rejected the nation for another (Matt. 21). Israel's fall has brought blessing to the nations; God keeps this part of his promise to Abraham in spite of Israel's unbelief. But the formation of a new Israel from the nations includes a remnant from the old Israel (Rom. 11:1-4).

The rejected stone becomes the head of the corner. A sinful people become a blessing to the nations. A rejected people are saved in remnant. The church is the new Israel, the new 12 tribes (cf. the 12 apostles) and the church is composed of both Jew and Gentile for Jewish particularism has now given way in Christ to national universalism.

But God is never mentioned, how do we explain this fact? Young: these are exiles who did not return to the promised land of covenant; these are blessed but not fully in covenant. Another explanation - God is at work with covenant people who are immersed in the nations; thus the book is almost secular. The covenant name and language is omitted in order to present the covenant God who is 1) working among the nations, 2) in remnant. A subtle emphasis on the promise to bless the nations (the nations are blessed when Israel is blessed as part of them). God is saving his people in remnant form wherever they may be.

Peripety Summary

Deliverance (salvation) comes through opposition; there is no bed of roses; through much tribulation we enter the kingdom of God.

The Lord and king of glory rides the donkey of humiliation.

Israel's fall brings blessing to the nations.

The kingdom is given to another in covenant fulfillment yet that other includes Israelite remnant (Matt. 21:33-46; Rom. 11:1-5; Eph. 2:11-14).

The remnant will be the world (today you are a little flock, tomorrow you will be the world, Warfield).