

SESSION THIRTY-ONE

ESTHER

God's Gracious Preservation of Israel

THE UNIQUENESS OF ESTHER

"I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities."
- Martin Luther

Luther has certainly not stood alone in questioning the canonicity of this particular book. Many have done so, Christian as well as Jewish thinkers. The reasons are quite apparent. Most significantly, the book makes no mention at all of God. Furthermore, there is no reference at all to Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law, the Covenant, sacrifice, prayer, love or forgiveness. In addition to these glaring omissions, the book has been for many Christians and moralists quite repugnant concerning the execution at the end, i.e., the Jewish slaughter of their enemies (9:1-15).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The book places the story in the reign of King Ahasuerus (cf. Ezra 4:6), who has been generally recognized as none other than the famous Xerxes I, the Son of Darius I. Xerxes I reigned from 486-465 BC, and the Hebrew form of his name (אַחַשְׁוֵרֹשׁ, *ʾāḥašwērōš*) corresponds to the Persian form, Khshayarsha. Ezra's mention of King Ahasuerus between Darius (522-486) and Artaxerxes (465-424) lends credence to the identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes I.

If the identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes I is indeed correct, we may date the book of Esther during his reign, i.e., sometime between the years 486 and 465 BC. Three dates are mentioned within the book:

- 3rd yr. of reign (1:3) = 483 BC - the banquet in which the queen was removed
- 7th yr. of reign (2:16) = Dec 479-Jan 478 - Esther brought to the king
- 12th yr. of reign (3:7) = 474 BC - Haman casts—seeking to annihilate the Jews

Therefore, the various events of the book can be dated during the period 483 - 474 BC. The text locates the events at Susa (in present day western Iran, just SW of Dezful). Prior to the reign of Ahasuerus, Susa had been destroyed by Ashurbanipal in 639 BC. However, under the Medes and Persians, Susa rose again to become the regional capital of the Aryans. Darius I chose Susa as his royal residence in 521 BC (as well as initiating another palace at Persepolis in south central Iran). Under Ahasuerus, Susa was the major city. Yamauchi notes: "In the Archaemenid period it served as

the winter palace; in the summers it became intolerably hot".¹ Ecbatana often served as the summer capital.² The palace at Susa was destroyed again in 435 BC, during the reign of Artaxerxes I.

Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) is remembered primarily for his invasions of Greece and is frequently mentioned by the classical writers, including Herodotus. Yamauchi summarizes the description of Xerxes I as given by Herodotus:

Herodotus, in addition to depicting Xerxes' role in the invasion of Greece, presents an unflattering portrait of the king as an impatient, hot-tempered monarch with a wandering eye for women. According to Herodotus, Xerxes not only tried to have an affair with his brother's wife, but also did have an affair with her daughter.³

After Ahasuerus came to the throne, one of his major exploits was to arouse the whole empire of Media-Persia against the realm of Greece. He is even referred to in this regard in Daniel 11:2. This invasion is generally dated about 481-479 BC, and sheds some light on the events of Esther. The banquet of Ahasuerus' third year (483/2 BC), and which lasted for 180 days, was not only a drinking feast but also an occasion for the king to bring together the noble officials of the Persian empire to lay plans for the invasion of Greece.⁴ Ahasuerus spent four years collecting his host and making preparations for his soldiers (cf. Dan 7:5 where Persia is likened to a hungry bear), and the great expedition against Greece began in the spring of 481 BC.⁵ The results were not successful, however. His great navy was smashed before his very eyes at Salamis, to the west of Athens (480 BC). His army, on the other hand, was nearly blocked by the Spartans at the pass of Thermopylae and was defeated in 479 BC at Plataea, northwest of Athens.⁶ Despite the defeats, however, the Persian Empire remained intact.

Comparing Esther 1:3 with 2:16, one can observe that a gap of some four years existed between the banquet when Queen Vashti was removed from her position until the time when Esther was made queen. This is easily understandable in light of Ahasuerus' absence with the Greek invasion. Hence, he returned from the unsuccessful invasion of Greece in 479 BC and took Esther as his queen in late 479 or possibly Jan of 478 BC.

Five years would then pass after Esther was chosen as queen of the most extensive empire on earth until Haman would make his attempt to annihilate the Jews. During this time, she was able to keep her Jewish identity a secret (cf. 2:20). Whitcomb believes this does not speak highly of her commitment to God:

She does not display the 'Judaism at any cost' spirit that distinguishes Daniel and even the apocryphal Judith. . . . She kept her secret for at least five years (cf. 2:16; 3:7). For the

¹Edwin Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Esther," *BibSac* 137:546 (1980): 109.

² The ancient site of Ecbatana is partially situated on what is now the city of Hamadan in Iran, nearly 300 km SW of Teheran. Founded originally by the Medes about 678 BC, Ecbatana was eventually captured by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 550 BC. The city (elevation 1877 meters), sat at the foot of Mount Alvand, and thus had a much cooler climate in the summer than Susa (though extremely cold in winter).

³Ibid., 104.

⁴John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 34.

⁵Ibid., 35.

⁶Ibid., 30.

masquerade to last that long, she must have done more than eat, dress and live like a Persian. She must have worshipped like one!⁷

Esther's name may have been derived from Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love, whereas Mordecai's name was derived from Marduk, the god of Babylon. Some scholars have attempted to question the historicity of the book of Esther in view of the debated existence of any such person known as Mordecai. His position at the king's gate (3:2) probably indicates he was serving in some official capacity of the court (note 4:2), which may explain why he happened to discover the plot against the king by two other officials (2:21,22). Yamauchi comments about the person of Mordecai:

The name appears in Aramaic letters, but most significant is the occurrence of the name *Mardukâ* in a tablet from Borsippa in Mesopotamia. The tablet was first noted in the Amherst collection in England in 1904, but was not published until 1942 by Ungnad after it had been sold to the Berlin Museum. *Mardukâ* is listed as a *sipîr* ("an accountant") who makes an inspection tour of Susa during the last years of Darius or early years of Xerxes. It is Ungnad's conviction that 'it is improbable that there were two Mardukas serving as high officials in Susa.' He therefore concludes that this individual is none other than Esther's uncle.⁸

This discovery of a cuneiform text by A. Ungnad which refers to a court official named Marduka may well be the most important evidence available for defending the book's historicity.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The book of Esther gives an account of a very acute political struggle involving a segment of the Jews who remained in exile during the period when Persia was in power. By a unique turn of events, a wicked plot to annihilate the Jewish population is reversed. The story became, as a result, a very significant one for the Jews, since the whole existence of the Jewish race was seriously threatened (even for those Jews who had returned to the land). Consequently, a unique feast resulted as a means to commemorate the survival and victorious outcome of the Jews. In one sense, the book serves to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim. The book gives the historical occasion, the reason for the dates, and the origin of the name. The name Purim arises from Haman's attempt to cast lots by which to ascertain the "lucky" day to carry out his plot. Moore comments, "It is clear that the word pur in Esther 3:7 and 9:24 represents the Babylonian word *puru*, meaning 'lot' and, secondarily, 'fate'."⁹ The Feast of Purim has for the Jews become one of the most joyous occasions of the year, being celebrated in the 12th month (i.e., March).

Although the book certainly explains the origin of Purim, the purpose must go deeper than that. Many Bible students have observed the strong sense of God's sovereignty throughout the book. This can be seen in the following details:

1. Mordecai, a Jew and cousin to Esther, held an official position within the king's service (at the "gate" 2:5,6,19).
2. Of all the beautiful women of the kingdom, a Jewish girl (Esther) is chosen as queen (2:8,17).

⁷Ibid., 24. Whitcomb quotes from an MDiv thesis by Carl A. Baker ("An Investigation of the Spirituality of Esther," Grace Theological Seminary, 1977).

⁸Yamauchi, 107.

⁹Carey A. Moore, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 38:3-4 (1975): 76.

3. Mordecai, of all people, learns of the attempt to assassinate the king and is able to foil the assassins (2:22).
4. Esther is able to approach the king unsummoned and is extended favor (5:2).
5. The king happens to have insomnia one night, reviews the court chronicles, learns of Mordecai's previous feat (see point 3), and demands he be honored just as Haman comes to seek Mordecai's execution (6:1,2).
6. Mordecai is elevated to the second most important position in the Persian kingdom (8:2), which certainly alerts the rulers of the province to be careful of offending his Jewishness (9:2,3).
7. The king authorizes a new pro-Jewish edict (8:8).
8. The enemies of the Jews are unable to overcome the Jews of the kingdom (9:2).

These observations underscore that God is providentially at work to preserve His chosen people. However, the purpose of the book is more than to show the sovereignty of God over His covenant people. The key to the book is to note that this is His people who are out of the will of God! The setting for this story is roughly 480 BC, but under Cyrus the faithful Israelites had returned to Jerusalem from exile in 538 BC. This previous return was in response to Yahweh's clear expression of His will in Isa 40–48. In that section of the prophet's message, he addresses the Israelites who had gone into the Babylonian exile and he offers them a word of encouragement from the LORD. He says to them in effect, "Take heart! I have not cast you off forever; I will raise up My servant Cyrus who will effect the means of your release from captivity. When that happens, you should return to Judah so that you can continue the covenant program." That the exiles should leave Babylon and return to the promised land is clearly dictated in Isa 48:20, "Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans!" (cf. Zech 2:6-7). Therefore, when we look at the book of Esther, we ask "What are they doing over there in Persia?" Believing Israel would have gotten back to the homeland and become involved in God's work!

This helps explain the deliberate avoidance of God's name. There is no evidence that the people, including Mordecai and Esther, rely on God in their desperate dilemma. There is no remark that they turn to the LORD in prayer or faith (there is mourning and even fasting, but this may be no more than what people would do of other religions). Never once do they call upon the God of Heaven! Even where we would most expect it in 4:14 when Mordecai exhorts Esther, there is no such mention. Dr. Waltke has suggested that they were simply living by their wits.

Whitcomb concludes, "There seems to be no evidence that Mordecai or Esther harbored any desire to relate to the heart of God's theocratic program by journeying to Jerusalem, offering the prescribed Mosaic sacrifices on the altar through Levitical priests, and praying to Jehovah in His Holy Temple."¹⁰ There is no mention of God, because they were not even concerned about God's theocratic program centered in that land. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman need not be construed as devotion to the Law. Moore suggests that Mordecai's actions be seen "as an expression of Jewish national spirit and pride rather than adherence to Exod 20:5."¹¹ J.S. Wright concurs, "Mordecai was a strong nationalist, and a brave man, but his concealment of his Jewish ancestry at first (2:10) may indicate that he was more opportunistic than devout."¹²

¹⁰Whitcomb, 22.

¹¹Moore, 36.

¹²Merrill C. Tenney, ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI:

The purpose of the book of Esther could be succinctly stated as follows:

*Esther was written to show God's providential care in preserving Israel even though the nation was not actively concerned about returning to Jerusalem.*¹³

As a result of a careful investigation of Esther from a literary perspective, Weiland adds,

The narrator in Esther wove together the plot developments, character portrayal, and use of irony to produce a dramatic impression of God who was providentially superintending the affairs of His people—even when they were spiritually disinterested or ignorant of His care. . . .

. . . Based on the literary presentation it seems that the author desired to move his audience from an attitude of estrangement in their relationship to Yahweh to one of dynamic faith in Him, amazement at His providential working, and gratitude for His care. The combined and final effect is dramatic and evangelistic—dramatic in the sense that God is seen caring for those who appear to be spiritually unaware or even indifferent, and evangelistic in the sense that this kindness of God should lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4).¹⁴

Therefore, in Esther we have a picture of Israel in her unbelief, enjoying prosperity out of the will of God. Thus, we need not rejoice that these Jews slew 75,000 of their enemies. The Jews of Persia were certainly spared, but the real credit goes not to their own "wits," but to God's sovereignty to preserve them. Whitcomb remarks,

. . . the book of Esther is a divine message of hope for Israel as well. Even in her unsaved condition, cut through unbelief from her God-given institutions, she has not been forgotten by her God. The nations of the world may have long since forgotten His covenant with Abraham. But Jehovah has not, 'Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep' (Ps 121:4).¹⁵

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

At the end of chapter five, it seems apparent that Mordecai will be hanged in the morning. Yet the opening verses of chapter six reveal how wondrously God works:

"During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh" (Esther 6:1-2).

Does it seem strange to you that the king could not sleep on this particular night? Does it seem strange that he just "happens" to read an entry in the chronicles concerning the good deed of Mordecai? This is not strange. Rather, this is the sovereignty of God at work. God's sovereignty . . . not a minute too early nor a minute too late . . . was looking after Mordecai. That should encourage you and me as we seek to serve the Lord Jesus today. We have God's sovereignty on our side, and this is the source of our courage, our hope, and our confidence!

Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), s.v. "Esther, Book of," by J. S. Wright (2:380).

¹³I am indebted to, Dr. Rick Griffith, my former colleague at Singapore Bible College for suggesting this purpose statement to me.

¹⁴Forrest S. Weiland, "Literary Clues to God's Providence in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 160:637 (Jan-Mar 2003): 46-47; cf. Weiland, "Literary Conventions in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 159:636 (Oct-Dec 2002): 425-35.

¹⁵Whitcomb, 27.