

Overview of Esther

Theme:

The book of Esther is a very different biblical book because (1) neither the word for God nor the name Yahweh occurs in the Hebrew text; (2) the scene is Shushan (Susa), the winter capital of Persia, not Israel; (3) the book concerns the marriage of its Jewish heroine with a Gentile king; and (4) it identifies the beginning of anti-Semitism which is dealt with by a bloody self-defense.

There are three themes prevalent throughout the book: The first is the sovereignty of God and His providence, which are evident. The second explains the origin of the Feast of Purim (2 Maccabees) on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar (Feb-Mar), when Jews celebrate the deliverance from Haman. He tried to have the Jewish people exterminated.

A third theme is evident, that of anti-Semitism. When fully developed, hatred toward Jews results in genocide, which is the attempt to exterminate a race. This satanic scheme is probably much older than the time of Haman. In Moses' day, Pharaoh attempted to exterminate the Hebrew slaves.

The events of the book cover a 10-year period (483-473 B.C.) during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), (485-465 B.C.). These events occurred between those recorded in the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra.

Authorship

The book gives no hint of who wrote it, but the author knew the Persian culture well. The account has all the marks of a person who was there because he described the events as an eyewitness. And he was probably a Jew. Esther is another of the relatively rare instances where there is general agreement on the anonymity of the writing.

The book as it stands could have been written sometime after 465 B.C. since verse 1:2 seems to imply that Ahasuerus' reign is finished.

Key Verses

- 2:15b — And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.
- 4:14 — For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, *then* shall there relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed; and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this.
- 4:16 — ...and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go into the king, which *is* not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.
- 6:13b — if Mordecai *be* of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.
- 7:3 — Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request.

Broad Outline for Esther

- I. The rise of Esther 1:1 — 2:23
 - A. The feast of Ahasuerus 1:1-9
 - B. The demotion of Vashti 1:10-22
 - C. The choice of Esther 2:1-18

Overview of Esther

- D. The loyalty of Mordecai 2:19-23
- I. The rise and fall of Haman 3:1 — 7:10
 - A. The plot of Haman (chap 3)
 - B. Mourning and fasting of the Jews (chap 4)
 - C. The intercession of Esther 5:1-8
 - D. The pride of Haman 5:9-14
 - E. Mordecai rewarded (chap 6)
 - F. The banquet of Esther 7:1-6
 - G. The death of Haman 7:7-10
- II. The rise of Mordecai & deliverance of the Jews 8:1 — 10:
 - A. The decree of Ahasuerus (chap 8)
 - B. The Jews delivered 9:1-19
 - C. The Feast of Purim 9:20-32
 - D. Mordecai promoted 10:1-3

Food for Thought in Esther

The book does not mention the following words: God, *Yahweh*, LORD, Israel, prayer, temple, worship, religion or Jerusalem. However, in the King James Bible the word king occurs _____ times.

Esther appeared about 40 years after the Temple was rebuilt and about 30 years before the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt.

Esther was a Jew and a pagan woman who married king Ahasuerus and became the queen of Persia by winning a national beauty contest held by Ahasuerus. But by doing so she committed adultery in violation of the Law of Moses. However, since she was raised in Persia by her cousin Mordecai all of her life, she never had any education in God's Word. Yet God used her to save the Jewish nation which Jews still celebrate each year during the holiday of Purim.

King Ahasuerus issued a decree to kill all the Jews in all the provinces throughout the Persian Empire in the twelfth month of Adar. This was after Esther had been Queen 5 years. She went in to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. The outcome was that Haman was hanged on the same gallows that he built to have Mordecai hanged, and his place was given to Mordecai.

Although God is not mentioned in the book, His providential Care of His people, the Jews is nowhere more evident.

Since a Persian king's decree could not be changed (8:8, Daniel 6:15), the decree for the Jews' massacre could not be reversed. But Esther did persuade the king to make another decree authorizing the Jews to resist and slay all who would attack them, which they did. Thus Esther saved the Jewish race from annihilation. This was the origin of the Feast of Purim, which the Jews still observe.

Mordecai was great in the king's hours, next unto the king; and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces. This was in the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) of the Persian Empire. His prime

Overview of Esther

minister was a Jew and his favorite wife was a Jewess: Mordecai and Esther, the brains and heart of the palace. This paved the way for the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Like Joseph in Egypt, so here Mordecai and Esther in Persia.

Fasting and prayer are two different forms of worship. See Nehemiah 1:4 and Daniel 9:3 where they both fasted and prayed. Esther (4:16) and her maidservants only fasted implying that they didn't pray to God or any god. Also in Daniel 9:17, 20 he again prays and not fasts.

Questions

1. Why do you think that the name of God does not appear in the book? Possibly because it may have been copied from Persian records.
2. What do you think the point of the book is?
3. What godly traits does Mordecai exhibit?
He exhibits traits of integrity, faithfulness to Esther, his cousin,
4. What is the purpose of fasting for Christians?
5. Why do you think that queen Esther ordered her maidservants to fast for three days before she went to see the king and why do you think prayer is not mentioned in association with this fasting?
6. Note that fasting is also commemorated as part of the feast of Purim (9:31). Do you think that Purim is celebrated by Jews today as a worship day in honor of God or as a cultural holiday?

Conclusion

The point of the book is that if God can save His people with a woman who may not have been a strong follower of the Lord, then we can only wonder or marvel at what He is capable of doing through Christians.

Note: The view that Esther may have been influenced more by her exile to pagan Persia than by her Jewish heritage is a minority view that considers the absence of the references to God, prayer, Jerusalem and the temple in any part of Esther. Esther was certainly used by God to preserve His people at the risk of her own life and to the ultimate glory of God. (JM)