

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 32

ESTHER

I. Background

Who wrote Esther?

This is a question that no one can answer with any certainty. Certain Jewish tradition ascribes authorship to the “men of the Great Synagogue (*Baba Bathra* 15a). Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, believed Esther’s author to have been Mordecai, one of the main characters of the story. While there is no proof to support this belief, the author of Esther clearly used the writings of Mordecai (Est. 9:20). Harrison (*Intro. to O.T.*) notes that while the author’s identity is completely unknown, the material makes it evident the author was from Persia rather than Palestine. Archaeology has shown the palace details and descriptions as well as the culture set forth all consistent with Persia at the time.

When was Esther Written?

Just as we cannot be certain about the author, we also have difficulty putting certainty on the date of authorship. The material takes place during the reign of “Ahasuerus,” a Persian king. We know the time of Persian rule was 539 – 333 B.C. However, exactly who King “Ahasuerus” was has been the subject of scholarly debate. Most scholars understand Ahasuerus to be Xerxes I (486 to 465/4 B.C.) in part because the Hebrew name is roughly equivalent to the Persian for Xerxes I (*Khshayarsha*). (“Xerxes” itself is the Greek form for the name.) Some scholars consider Ahasuerus to have been Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.). History makes either king possible. While the terms, cultural references, places, and attitudes of the book are consistent with the historical knowledge of the era of which it is written, there is no historical evidence of the actual story itself.

How old are our copies of Esther?

We have copies of Esther in Latin that date from Jerome’s Vulgate translation in the late 300’s. Josephus around 65 – 75 A.D. writes about the book and paraphrases a few verses. There were no copies of Esther found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Septuagint (LXX) contains not only a translation of the Hebrew text of Esther but also quite a few additional

verses which were most likely never in the original Hebrew text. Most modern translations do not include these supplements from the LXX.

What is unique about the book of Esther?

Esther is the only book in the Bible where the name of God is not used. There is also no direct reference to praying, praising, or worshiping God. The closest the story comes is in references to fasting. These omissions do not mean that God is not present in the Book – for he is. In fact, the absence of a direct reference to God makes his presence even more pronounced. The themes of providence and the victory of God’s chosen people over their enemies, all point clearly to the divine workings of Almighty God.

Esther also gives us the origination of the Jewish Festival of Purim. Purim, with its wonderful customs, is a major Jewish holiday of fun, festivities and even frivolity; however, it was not rooted in the Law of Moses. It’s inception is given in Esther as a celebration that began during the Persian rule.

II. The Story

Esther takes place in the Persian capital of Susa. King Ahasuerus gave a huge party as part of a six month display of his royal treasures. Toward the end of this seven day feast, where the drinking had been rampant, the King sent for his Queen (Vashti) to show her off to his fellow partiers. Vashti was just finishing up her own seven day bash and refused to come as the King ordered. Ahasuerus “became furious.”

Rather than take it lying down, Ahasuerus asked his counselors for advice. The counselors’ advice was clear. After first pointing out that the Queen’s insubordination would lead wives everywhere to thumb their noses at their husbands (“There will be no end of disrespect and discord.”), the advice was given – get rid of her. This seemed like good advice to Ahasuerus, so he did it.

Some time later, after the King had cooled down, memories of Vashti started floating in his head. Ahasuerus’s attendants suggested that a beauty contest be held so the King could find a suitable alternative to Vashti. Among those brought in for the beauty pageant was Esther (Hebrew name: Hadassah, meaning “Myrtle”). Esther was an orphan being raised by her cousin Mordecai.

Now, this was no ordinary beauty pageant. The ladies were brought to the palace and put into an extensive beauty treatment preparation (12 months worth!) Esther found favor with those working up the ladies for their respective presentations to the King. During this time period, Mordecai would walk back and forth daily to the harem to check on Esther.

Once it became Esther's time to go before the King, she was a sight to behold. The King found her more attractive than all the others and set the crown of Vashti on Esther's head.

Meanwhile, Mordecai spent a good bit of time sitting at the King's gate. While at the gate one day, he overheard two of the King's guards discussing plans to assassinate Ahasuerus. Mordecai told Esther of the plot and Esther, in turn, told the King – giving appropriate credit to Mordecai. After an investigation confirmed the plot, the instigators were hung.

Ahasuerus disposed of the plotters but somewhere around the same time elevated another to a position of great honor. This honored fellow was named Haman. Part of the honor given Haman was the kneeling of court officials at the King's gates. Mordecai, however, would never kneel before Haman.

Haman was none too pleased that Mordecai was insistent on a refusal to bow. So, Haman concocted a scheme to kill, not only Mordecai, but all Mordecai's people (*i.e.*, the Jews). Haman went before Ahasuerus and notified the King that a group of people were disobeying all the King's orders and decrees. Haman suggested a wholesale slaughter of these people and the King agreed. A law was put forth that all Jews were to be slaughtered on the 13th day of the 12th month (the month of Adar, which falls in either our February or March, depending upon the year).

Learning of the decree, Mordecai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and went into mourning. Esther heard of Mordecai's dress and sent him a new outfit. Mordecai refused to wear it. Esther then sent one of her attendants to ask Mordecai what was wrong. Mordecai told the attendant the whole story, asking the attendant to get Esther to weigh in with the King and help.

Esther sent back word to Mordecai that in spite of her position, she was not allowed to approach the King without first being invited. Should Esther even attempt to do so, she was subject to execution, unless the King extended his scepter to her when she approached unsolicited.

Mordecai was not satisfied. He sent word back to Esther that her life was no safer than any other Jew's, come Adar 13th. Mordecai then adds the profound question: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

At this statement, Esther agreed to approach the King, but only after Esther, Mordecai and several others fasted for three days.

After three days, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner courtyard of the King. Once Ahasuerus saw Esther, he extended the royal scepter, saving her life. Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted, and she replied with a request that the King and Haman come to a banquet in the King's honor that night.

Ahasuerus brought Haman and they went to Esther's dinner party. Not an unintelligent guy, the King realized there was more going on than mere dinner. While enjoying the wine, Ahasuerus again asked Esther what she really wanted. Esther's response was a desire for a second dinner party with the King and Haman the following night. Esther said she would tell the King her real desire that second night.

After the first party, and in anticipation of the second, Haman headed home, with quite the big head. On his way home, Haman runs into Mordecai who, of course, refuses to bow. This act infuriates Haman.

After getting home, Haman amazes his family and friends with bragging about how in addition to his great wealth and responsibilities, he dines alone with the King and Queen – just the tight little threesome enjoying dinner together. Haman then tells how irked he was over the Mordecai mess.

Haman's wife and friends suggest that Haman have a gallows constructed and ask the King for permission to hang Mordecai. Then, Haman can continue his dinner fun with the King and Queen without the emotional burden of knowing Mordecai is getting away with not kneeling! Haman decides this is a good plan!

While Haman is doing his bragging and plotting, the King is back in his bedchamber having trouble sleeping. Ahasuerus orders his servants to get his records and the night is spent with the records read to him. From the reading, the King hears again of the assassination plot foiled because of Mordecai's squealing. The King asked what had been done to reward or thank Mordecai. The answer is "Nothing."

The King asks his assistants who is around in the court. Haman is there, no doubt up at work bright and early to get the King's permission to hang Mordecai. The King orders Haman in and asks him a question: "What should be done for the man the King delights to honor?" Well, coming off an evening of intimate dinner with the King and Queen, Haman figures Ahasuerus wants to honor him!

With his head in a dream land, Haman answers the King and suggests that if the King wants to honor someone, the King should put the man on the King's own horse wearing the King's own robe and have a great noble of the King lead the man on a parade through town telling all "this is what happens to a man the King chooses to honor."

The King says that Haman's got a great idea and orders Haman to go get the robe and horse and ... get Mordecai the Jew for honoring! Haman is to lead Mordecai around the city and proclaim the King's honor on Mordecai. This was a bad start to what ultimately proved to be a very bad day for Haman.

After parading Mordecai around town, Haman got home just in time to clean up and tell his wife how sorry the day turned out. The King's attendants then showed up to escort Haman to dinner with Esther and the King.

While drinking wine on this second night of dinner, the King again asked Esther what was up. Esther explained that someone was plotting to kill her and all her people. Ahasuerus asked who on earth would ever do such a thing and Esther answered "this vile Haman."

The King is furious and gets up to walk. Haman, meanwhile is terrified and starts begging Esther for his life. In the process of begging, Haman falls on Esther's couch – just as the King returns. This maneuver was the frosting on the cake. The King exclaimed, "Will he even molest the Queen while she is with me in the house?"

The King is none too pleased. He has Haman hung on the very gallows Haman had built for Mordecai.

As to the edict of the Jews' massacre set for Adar 13th, Ahasuerus notes that he cannot reverse the law. Instead, at Esther's request, he passes another law giving the Jews the right to defend themselves on the massacre day. The story ends with the victory of the Jews over their enemies on Adar 13th.

The celebration of *Purim* is then set forward as a new holiday for the Jewish people.

A final note on the origin of the name “*Purim*” for the festival. Akkadian, a Semitic language of the time, had the word “*pur*” meaning a die or lot that was thrown. “*Purim*” is the plural form of the word. The festival is named *Purim* because dice were thrown to determine what day to destroy the Jews (see Est. 3:7).

III. Points For Home

- A. God is in control, whether we say his name or not.
- B. You and I were made for a purpose.
- C. God will take care of his people.
- D. Step out in faith, no telling how God may use you.