

The Book of Esther

INTERNATIONAL SCOPE OF LOCAL PROBLEMS

On at least two occasions in the book of Esther, issues of a personal nature are extrapolated into international magnitude. The king, Xerxes, is told that if he allows his wife to refuse his order then all the women in the kingdom will hear of her insolence and take the same action against their husbands. With the vastness of the Persian Empire the likelihood of every woman hearing of Vashti's refusal to come at the king's command is minimal. Even if they did eventually hear it would take months and possibly years before even most would have heard of her defiance. The humorous side of this is that the king is manipulated into having the tale of his queen's disobedience told to every province by the king's own courier system. The second occasion in the book of personal issues becoming an international fiasco occurs when Haman takes offence at Mordecai. One Jew refusing to honor one Persian has Haman willing to genocide a whole race. Haman is not content to deal with Mordecai alone but desires to have anyone ethnically related to Mordecai annihilated.

TEXTUAL ASPECTS OF ESTHER

The book of Esther exists textually in multiple forms. There is of course the Massoretic text, which forms the basis for the translation most of us have in our Bibles. There are however several Targumim of Esther and at least two Greek manuscripts. The Targumim are expansionistic Aramaic translations with some interspersed commentary along the way. We will look at some of the Targums later in our study. There are two primary Greek translations of the book of Esther and they too (like the Targums) are expansionistic at multiple places. There is the LXX version of Esther and the Greek Alpha text version of the book. The expansions of the Greek texts fill out the MT by attributing to G-d things the MT left unattributed and by filling out the description of the characters within the book. The Book of Esther does not appear in the Apostolic Scripture (in either quotation or allusion) and to date no fragments from Esther have been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

THE ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

One will search in vain to find any mention of G-d in the book of Esther. Much shorter books of the Hebrew Scripture have at least some mention of G-d's name or at the least a title attributing the outworking of life to His sovereignty. It may have been this absence of G-d's name that kept the writers of the Apostolic Scripture and the Dead Sea Scrolls from giving the book of Esther any mention. Esther contains no mention of prayer, covenants, sacrifice, the temple, or Promised Land. Esther has no mention of character traits such as love, kindness, mercy, or forgiveness. One will not find in Esther the religious jargon, liturgical quotes or pat clichés that we find in other books of the Hebrew Scripture.

THE USE OF DOUBLETS

In Esther one finds an incredible amount of duplication. There are three groups of banquets that come in pairs. There are two lists of the king's servants (1:10, 14), two reports that Esther concealed her identity (2:10,20), two gatherings of the women (2:18,19), two houses for the women (2:12-14), two fasts (4:13, 16), two consultations of Haman with his wife and friends (5:14; 6:13), two unscheduled appearances of Esther before the king (5:2; 8:3), two investitures to Mordecai (6:7-11; 8:15), two coverings of Haman's face (6:12;7:8), two references to Haman's sons (5:11; 9:6-10, 13-14), two appearances of Harbona (1:10; 7:9), two royal edicts (3:12-14; 8:1-13), two references to the king's anger subsiding (2:1; 7:10), two references to the irrevocability of Persian laws (1:19; 8:8), two days for the Jews to defend themselves (9:5-15), and two letters establishing the festival of Purim (9:20-32).

HAMAN AND MORDECAI—CONTINUATION OF A TORAH MOTIF

In Hebrew narrative one should pay special attention to how individuals are introduced into the narrative. The astute reader of Hebrew narrative will note that in both their introductions Haman and Mordecai are linked with names of the past. Both Mordecai and Haman are playing out an ancient conflict that began long before they arrived on the scene. Haman we are told is a descendant of Agag who the narrative of I Samuel 15 tells us was an Amalekite. The Amalekites were the first nation to bring aggression against the burgeoning nation of Israel as she entered the Promised Land. Mordecai on the other hand was a descendant of Saul who had the responsibility of destroying Agag in I Samuel 15. The aggression of Amalek was especially egregious since she did not try to engage the army of Israel but rather picked off those who were stragglers (women, children and infirmed). The narrative of Esther is a tale of two diaspora Jews who finish off the work that their ancestor Saul should have completed.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

While there is some background history to the book of Esther these events are not recorded for us by the Biblical author. There are three primary sources that bring some interesting historical detail to the forefront in relation to the book of Esther—Herodotus, Plutarch, and Josephus. While each of these individual historians are not Persians and their reports could contain negative propaganda or biases they are interesting to consider nonetheless. For instance Herodotus tells us that Xerxes fought the Greeks for about four years and depleted the royal treasuries. If one understands that the royal treasuries were empty it makes sense that Haman was able to catch the king's interest by offering to put money into the royal coffers (presumably money from the Jews he would kill).

THE USE OF IRONY AND REVERSALS (PERIPETY)

There are many types of irony that can occur within a given narrative. Irony is primarily created when what the audience expects to happen is turned on its head and right the opposite happens. The book of Esther is filled with irony and reversals. For instance: the

king honors Haman and later the king unknowingly dishonors him. Haman has the king's signet ring but by the end Mordecai has the ring. Haman is happy at the end of the first banquet with Esther but is terrified at the second banquet. Haman desires the destruction of all Jews but at the end has to beg a Jewess for his life. After obtaining the decree to kill the Jews Haman rejoices, but later bemoans his humiliation. The impalement stake meant for Mordecai becomes the exact stake on which Haman is impaled. Mordecai also experiences several ironic reversals. When the story opens Mordecai is sitting at the gate but when the story ends he has Haman's job. Mordecai initially dresses in sackcloth but later we find him clothed in kingly garments. In fact Mordecai gets everything that once belonged to Haman with the exception of his family. The book of Esther is one big narrative reversal just waiting to happen. Esther is a book about the ability of G-d to turn everything around and upside down. Just when you have all of life figured out—it changes. Just when you think that G-d has forgotten—He remembers. Just when you think that G-d is absent—He shows up.

HUMOR

Humor is a very subjective topic since what some find humorous other temperaments will only find amusing. There are at least two places in Esther where the humorous side of life might be seen. One can at least chuckle a little at Haman who can't imagine that the king would want to honor anyone more than him. Haman's arrogance makes the eventual picture of him leading Mordecai through the streets of Susa a laughable scene. Another laughable moment comes at the end of Esther where Haman is accused of molesting/raping the queen when we are all aware that Haman is begging for his life. One of the Targums actually has the angel Gabriel pushing Haman so that he falls at Esthers feet. Persian law required that no one but the king come within 7 steps of the queen and yet Haman has violated royal protocol.

ON THE MORALITY OF THE LAST CHAPTERS

Some have seen the last chapters of Esther as a reason for despising the book on the whole. Was Esther a vindictive villain who wanted revenge? Did the Jews go too far in defending themselves? Were two days of bloodshed necessary or just punitive? These and other questions about the last chapters have left many commentators with a very uneasy feeling about the book of Esther. Let me present some things to think about as one tries to deal with the morality of the book and answer questions about the books ethical stand. While no one point is sufficient in and of itself, I do believe that the weight of the evidence reveals a Jewish people that only wanted to survive a potential holocaust.

- 1) There is no evidence that the Jews in the Persian Empire hated Persians. In fact, both Esther and Mordecai, play a significant role in thwarting an assassination attempt on the life of the king.
- 2) There is no evidence that when Mordecai approached Esther about the potential destruction of the Jews that he had any bloody solution in mind.
- 3) In Esther's appeal to the king, she asks only that the king spare her people (and her life). The very fact that Esther makes her appeal to the king demonstrates she is willing to work within the established government to survive.
- 4) The evidence within the text indicates that the primary request of Esther is that her and her people be allowed to defend themselves against attack. There is no evidence that the Jews made offensive first strike attacks.
- 5)

While the decree of the king allowed for the Jews to take the plunder of those who tried to kill them, the text makes it clear that no Jew made personal profit from the death of any Persian (9:10,15). 6) Esther's request for a second day of defense was not vindictive but only allowed for the earlier decree to be extended one day and then only in the capital of Susa. 7) Esther's request that the sons of Haman be impaled publicly was an accepted form of deterrent in the Ancient Near East. By publicly displaying the bodies of those who tried to kill the Jews, the hope was that others would be dissuaded from attempting to attack.

ESTHER AND THE JOSEPH NARRATIVES

Ludwig Rosenthal has suggested that the Joseph narratives and the book of Esther share many linguistic, stylistic, and thematic similarities. The very fact that both Esther and Joseph were foreigners who rose to power in a foreign court would give both stories some similar elements. We do find similar terminology in comparing the two narratives in the following places: Esther 1:3/Gen 40:22; Esther 3:4/Genesis 39:10; Esther 6:11/Genesis 41:43; and Esther 8:6/Genesis 44:34. Perhaps the purposeful comparison of Esther with Joseph had a theological point to make. Just as G-d had worked behind the scenes in Egypt to deliver His people from famine and destruction so too here in Persia this same G-d was also working behind the scenes to once again deliver His people from annihilation.

ESTHER AND THE EXODUS NARRATIVES

Gerlman has suggested that the book of Esther shows thematic affinity with the Exodus narratives. Some of the parallels Gerlman identifies are: 1) In both narratives we find two Jewish leaders (Moshe-Aaron/Modesai-Esther); 2) Both Moshe and Esther appear before the king asking for deliverance for the Jews; 3) Moshe was an adopted child and so was Esther; 4) Moshe and Mordecai both become great and influential; and 5) Both narratives end with the establishment of a national festival (Passover and Purim). A closer connection with Passover can be found in the fact that Haman sends out the decree throughout all the provinces of Persia on the day before Passover. In fact the lots fell on the 13th of Adar, which comes one month prior to Passover. Perhaps here again the author of Esther was making a subtle attempt to say that just as G-d had delivered the Jews from the hand of the Egyptians He would once again provide a way out for those Jews living in Persia.

ECHOES OF JOEL 2 IN ESTHER

At times in the Hebrew Scripture and especially in the Apostolic Scripture an author would allude to another text previously written so that similar contexts would be linked together. The more technical literary term for this echo feature is "metalepsis". In Esther 4:3 we have the following string "with fasting, weeping and wailing". While these Hebrew words are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scripture separately they are put together in the same order in Joel 2:12. When one turns to Joel 2:12ff one finds further thematic and textual affinity with Esther. The context of Joel is a call for repentance and

perhaps the Jews of Persia have done that with their “fasting, weeping and wailing”. Note further the context of Joel where the people are commanded to “rend your heart” and not the garments. In Esther the people upon hearing of the edict to destroy the Jews did rend their garments but more than garments needed rending. Two final echoes from Joel 2 come out in the same context of Esther. First, Mordecai says to Esther “Who Knows...” which indicates that something is in doubt. This same phrase is used in Joel 2:14. Secondly, Joel’s solution continues in verse 15 by asking the people to declare a fast which is exactly what Esther orders Mordecai to do. By alluding to Joel 2 where G-d is clearly in view perhaps the author of Esther is providing a subtle hint at the need for the Jews of Persia to reassess their relationship to G-d.

PUR AND THE CASTING OF LOTS

The word “Pur” (singular) is an Akkadian loanword that is given the Hebraicised plural ending “im” to make up the word “Purim”. To make sure that his Jewish readers would know what the “pur” were the Hebrew equivalent “goral” is given to clarify. In the Ancient Near East there was widespread belief that one could divine the will of the gods by casting lots. Archeologically these dice-like lots have been found and are made of differing materials ie glass, wood, etc. For the Hebrew people the lots could be used to ascertain the will of YHVH for numerous questions. In Hebrew Scripture the lots were used to determine the selection of kings (I Sam 10:9), warriors (Jud 20:9), and sacrificial animals (Lev 16:8-10). The lots were also used to assign specific tasks (I Chron 26:12-14), distribute the land to various tribes (Josh 20), and distribute booty (Nah 3:10). The lots could also be used to settle individual disputes (Prov 18:18), and could even identify guilty individuals (Josh 7:14; I Sam 14:42). From a Hebraic perspective this seemingly random method of determining G-d’s will was understood to be in the sovereign domain of G-d’s discretion. Proverbs 16:33 states: “The lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord”. Haman went to his “god” to find out what date would be acceptable to destroy the Jews and in fact he was determining the time of his own death. The book of Esther is a polemic against those who might think that the universe is run by other “gods”. By reversing the decision of Haman’s “god”, the G-d of the Jews demonstrated that He alone was in control of that which seems random.

NAMES IN THE NARRATIVE

Unlike any book of the Hebrew Scripture, the book of Esther gives us the name of just about every individual that splashes across the page. Names in Hebrew thinking are not just used for individual designation but often have meaning that goes beyond the surface. One of the primary characters in the book of Esther is the king. His Persian name is Khshayarshan and the Greek texts give him the name Xerxes. In the Hebrew text his name takes the form Ahasuerus which when pronounced sounds something like “king headache”. Herodotus the historian tells us that king Xerxes was one of the most vile and ruthless of the Persian kings and he eventually was killed by an internal assassination plot (just like the kind Mordecai foiled earlier). Haman is probably not the real name of this character since his name is close to the Hebrew word “hemah” meaning wrath or anger. I would suggest that the Hebrew writer of Esther is lampooning the king and Haman by

giving them funny names that reveal their true character. The later Jews reading this narrative had to laugh when reading about king headache and his sidekick anger. The third primary character in the book is Mordecai. It has been common for commentators on the book of Esther to assume that both Mordecai and Esther have names equivalent to the Persian “gods” Marduk and Ishtar. This association of the names with Babylonian deities is being rethought by current scholarship. In fact Esther may come from a Persian word that means, “star”. The Targums of Esther suggest that Esther was a nickname given her by the Gentiles of the Persian Empire. Esther in fact also has a Hebrew name—Hadassah which means “myrtle”. I would suggest that by giving the main character two names, which represent two countries, the writer of the narrative is giving us a hint of the upcoming struggle the young lady will face. Will she choose to identify with her Hebrew heritage as Hadassah or will she hide behind her new identity as Esther the Persian queen? The narrative of the book lies in the answer to that question and its foreshadowed in the two names given the heroine.

MORDECAI’S REFUSAL TO BOW

From a shallow reading of Esther one might conclude that the whole reason Haman hated the Jews was based on the refusal of one Jew to show him honor. The question that immediately comes to mind is: Why doesn’t Mordecai just bow to Haman and be done with causing problems? When Haman is encouraged by his fellow courtiers to bow to Haman, he refuses by appealing to his ethnic identity. The verbs used in Esther of kneeling (kara’) and bowing (hwh) are important since both verbs are used in the Hebrew Scripture of individuals showing respect to another individual (II Kings 1:13; Ruth 2:10) with no signs of idolatry insinuated. However, apart from Esther there are only four other places where these verbs are used together and in all of these texts the only one given this homage is YHVH (see II Chron 7:3; 29:29; Psalm 22:29; 95:6). When these verbs are paired together they constitute the equivalent of worship and Mordecai refused to worship any human being. Mordecai stood up for his beliefs and did not allow the pressure of a mandate from the throne to move him.

INTENTIONAL OMISSIONS

In his insightful commentary on Esther, Angel Rodriguez argues that there are a number of places in the Esther narrative where the author deliberately chose to hide the presence of G-d. While this idea is admittedly open to criticism, Rodriguez argues that there are places where one would have expected to hear G-d mentioned and yet there is silence. The reason one would expect to hear G-d mentioned occurs because the same or similar language in other Biblical narratives does mention G-d. For instance, in Esther 2:9 we are told concerning Esther “and the girl was good in his eyes and won favor (chesed) before him”. We have very similar terminology used in reference to Joseph (Gen 39:3,4,21) and also of Daniel (1:8,9). In the cases of both Joseph and Daniel this favoring they receive is caused directly by G-d while in Esther G-d is not stated as the cause. Another example: Faced with having to save her people, Esther asks Mordecai to fast on her behalf. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scripture fasting is linked with prayer (II Sam 12:16; Ps 35:13;

Jonah 3:5-9; Dan 9:3) and with the expression of deep emotions poured out to G-d. It seems as one noted "Esther studiously avoids religious terminology even when the context demands it". The author of Esther uses several expressions that the attentive ear accustomed to the Hebrew Scripture would have found intriguing. For instance, the Jews are called "the people of Mordecai (10:3) where we might have expected "the people of JHVH". The phrase "fear of the Jews" is used several places (8:17; 9:2) where the more natural phrase might have been "the fear of the Lord". The book ends by saying that Mordecai "spoke peace for all his people" while according to Psalm 85:8 it is G-d who speaks peace for all His people. Suffice to say the author of Esther had plenty of opportunity to say the name of G-d and directly attribute the actions of the narrative to the G-d of Israel but chose to veil and suppress the work of G-d, leaving His work just below the surface.

HISTORY, AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The Persian Empire maintained a powerful presence over the Ancient Near East for over two hundred years. In 539 B.C. Cyrus conquered Babylon beginning the dominance of Persia and in 323 B.C. Alexander the Great conquered Persia ending her role as the dominant nation. In 539 B.C. Cyrus issued a decree that allowed the Jews in the dispersion to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple using Persian funds. The Biblical account of this decree is found in Ezra 1:1-4. However most of the Jews living in the dispersion did not return to Jerusalem having settled down and living comfortably in Persia. The situation today is very similar where the majority of Jews live outside the land of Israel while the doors of immigration are opened wide. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah show how the Jews who did return to the Land were very dependant on Persia for help in rebuilding the infrastructure. The book of Esther is set during the reign of Xerxes who reigned from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C. The book of Esther was written during the time period some fifty years after Cyrus's initial decree. From the historian Herodotus we know that for much of his reign Xerxes fought with the Greeks but was never able to subdue them.

On the authorship of the book there is no internal evidence to fall back on. According to the Talmud (Baba Bathra 15a) the book was written by "the men of the Great Synagogue". Josephus, the Jewish historian, and Clement of Alexandria both claimed that Mordecai himself wrote the book. Jobes commenting on the author of Esther says, " it was almost certainly written by a Jew who lived outside of Palestine under Persian rule and who was familiar with Susa and the Persian court".

Concerning the actual date of when the book itself was written there is difficulty finding a consensus. Joyce Baldwin places the time of the writing of Esther in the latter half of the fifth century or early in the fourth century. Baldwin's three reasons for dating the book of Esther are 1) The authors familiar knowledge of the geography of Susa and the palace are consistent with archeological evidence, 2) There are many Persian loanwords in the text but few if any Greek words. This suggests that the book was written before Greek became the lingua franca at the time of Alexander's conquest. 3) The Hebrew in which the text of Esther is written is similar to that of I and II Chronicles, which are also dated to the period of Persian dominance.

LXX AND ALPHA TEXT EXPANSIONS

The Hebrew text of Esther was eventually translated into two primary Greek families. The first is what is commonly called the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) the second is known as the Alpha Text. Both of these translations date to somewhere between 300 and 200 B.C. What is interesting about these translations is that they are both about a third larger than the Hebrew Masoretic Text. The expansions of both Greek translations come in two major areas: 1) A desire to see G-d given credit where the MT did not acknowledge G-d, and 2) A desire to clear up the ambiguity of Esther and Mordecai's actions. While the first of these seems clear as to the reason the second might need more explanation. One of the things the author of the MT does not do for his/her reader is make a condemnation or exoneration of Esther and Mordecai's actions. Anyone thinking canonically would have at least asked how Esther could have married a pagan king or why Mordecai and Esther did not go back to Jerusalem when they had the opportunity. In questions like these the MT does not try to provide any commentary but leaves any judgment of Esther and Mordecai unstated. It seems from looking at the LXX and the Alpha Text that the Greek translators were very uncomfortable and uneasy about the ambiguity of the MT. Let's look at some the places that the Greek texts inserted material not found in the MT.

1. In the LXX Esther tells us that she did not violate the food laws of the Torah and that in regards to her marriage to king Xerxes she abhorred "the bed of the uncircumcised".
2. In the MT we are left to wonder why Mordecai would not bow before Haman and pay him respect. In the LXX Mordecai tells us that it was not hubris or arrogance that made him refuse to honor Haman, but that he might not give the glory due to G-d to any man.
3. One way of reading the LXX text allows for the conclusion that Mordecai was raising Esther to be his eventual wife.
4. In the Alpha Text of Esther 4:9 Mordecai says, "If you neglect to help your people, then G-d will be their help and salvation, but you and your fathers house will perish".
5. In Esther 6:1 the LXX is not content to let the kings lack of sleep be just a case of insomnia but adds "the Lord took sleep from the king that night".
6. In the LXX there are two chapters added, one at the beginning and one at the end. In these chapters Mordecai is portrayed as having dreams, which are then interpreted as coming true. These dreams have the effect of making Mordecai look and sound like Joseph and Daniel.
7. In the MT where Esther asks for Mordecai and the Jews to fast for her, the LXX adds two prayers, one by Esther and one by Mordecai. In their prayers Esther and Mordecai mention Abraham, the Exodus, circumcision, and the temple. They beg G-d to deliver them just as He had delivered their ancestors from Egypt.