



**Bella Vista Baptist Church
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Introduction

Esther as Literature

Esther is a narrative. It tells a story. As such, it does not assign motives and intentions to the characters. Motives and intentions are revealed in and interpreted from the characters' action and speech. To properly interpret the narrative, we must be careful not to read our 21st century western context into the story. Rather, we want to, as best we can, understand the story in its original context and draw application from that to our modern context. Esther provides ample opportunity for that.

Esther's Historical Context

In 586 B.C., the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem captive, carrying many into exile. In the process, he destroyed the city and burnt the temple. It marked the end of the glory that was ancient Israel.

But prior to their exile, God had promised His people that a remnant would one day return to Israel (Jeremiah 30:3). In 450 B.C., Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, waded with his army through the Euphrates river and the canals of Babylon to take it captive. His victory put all the lands previously ruled by the Babylonian kings under his rule as part of the growing Persian empire. Those lands included Jerusalem and Judah.

In 539 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree that allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland (Ezra 1:1-4). Zerubbabel and then Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a remnant to restore the city and rebuild the temple. The narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story. But most of the Jews did not return. They remained voluntarily in exile in Babylon and across the Persian empire.

Esther's Immediate Context

The Esther narrative tells the story of Jews who decided not to return to their homeland some 50 years after Cyrus' decree. During and around this time, Confucius was born in the Far East, Greece was reaching its golden age, Pericles was developing a political system that would lay the foundation for modern democracy, Sophocles was writing plays, Herodotus was recording history, Socrates was born, and the Olympic games had been around for two centuries.

In the global context, the fate of the Jews in the Persian empire did not make the headlines. But for the Jews across the Persian empire, what unfolds in Esther was a matter of life and death.

The narrative is set in Susa (in modern Iran) during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus, whose Greek name was Xerxes I. Xerxes claim to fame was a failed largescale invasion of Greece. He would eventually be assassinated by his closest advisors in his bedroom. He was described by Herodotus as “the tallest and most handsome of the Persian kings, an ambitious and ruthless ruler, a brilliant warrior, and a jealous lover.”

Along with Xerxes, the main characters of the narrative are his wife, Vashti, the evil Haman, and two Jewish cousins – Mordecai and Esther.

Esther’s Theological Question

The big question during the postexilic period was the Jews’ status with God given how they had broken covenant with Him and suffered the promised consequences for doing so. Was God’s covenant with Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through him and his descendants now null and void (Genesis 12:1-3)?

It was not just a question for the Jews in Persia. It was and is a question for us. Living as exiles in an increasingly pagan culture, we may wonder if God will keep His word to us. Is our hope in His promise in Jesus secure? The narrative of Esther is a reminder that our God is a promise keeping God. The sinfulness of man will not thwart His salvific purpose in Christ.

Esther’s Omission

God is never explicitly mentioned in the Esther narrative. The most asked question about Esther is, “Why not?” Read in the greater context of Scripture and Jewish history, God is central to the story both in terms of the big theological question and the providential unfolding of events. But why is His name omitted from the story?

I would suggest that the apparent absence of God in the Esther narrative is one of the great strengths of the narrative. It’s obvious there is more going on here than what can be attributed to a king, a queen, a villain, and a Jewish girl and her cousin. Esther is a real-life reminder for common folk like us that just because you may not identifiably see God’s face in your story, His hand is nevertheless always at work, providentially superintending you and keeping His covenant with you in Jesus Christ.

Resources

Esther: The NIV Application Commentary by Karen H. Jobes

Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Esther by Landon Dowden

Teach the Text Commentary Series: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther by Douglas J. E. Nykolaishen and Andrew Schmutzer