

Old Testament Survey—Esther

As we finished last week's study in the book of Nehemiah, we were discussing how God used Nehemiah and commented that Nehemiah wasn't a priest or prophet, but a political figure. He worked for the king, and was used by God to bring physical stability to Jerusalem after the captivity.

We asked the question, "Should there be such a thing as a "spiritual/secular" dichotomy in our lives?" We asked that because we tend to think that going to church, reading our Bibles, and praying are "spiritual" activities, while fixing cars, and washing clothes, and punching a time clock are "secular" activities. The subtle idea is that God is not as interested in the secular areas of our lives. Nehemiah teaches us otherwise. God is interested in every area of our lives. Building a wall for Nehemiah was a "spiritual" task. Why? Because it was God's will! Anything that is God's will is a "spiritual" task.

Discuss: Why do we compartmentalize our lives? What are some ways this tendency shows up in our lives?

*The Book of Esther*

Now let's break some new ground by turning to the next book in our English Bibles, the book of Esther. Esther is one of the most intriguing books in the Bible. Why?

1. The name of God is not mentioned anywhere in it.
2. The New Testament does not quote from it.
3. No copies of it have been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.
4. The Law is never mentioned in the book.
5. Sacrifices or offerings are not referred to in the book.
6. Prayer is never mentioned in the book, though fasting is.

Why then did God preserve this book in the canon? For good reason as we'll see.

**Who wrote the book?**

--Unknown; someone who knew the Persian culture well

**When was the book written?**

--The events in the book occurred between those recorded in Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.

--The events cover the period between 483 B.C. (which was Xerxes' 3rd year; see 1:3) and 473 B.C. (which was Xerxes' 12th year; see 3:7).

--The book was probably written between 470-465 B.C. by someone living in Israel (see BKC)

Observation by BKC: "The book takes place in the Persian period (539-331 b.c.) after many Israelites had returned from the Exile to the land of Palestine to rebuild the temple and set up the sacrificial system. Most Israelite captives, however, chose not to return to their homeland. They should have done so for Isaiah and Jeremiah had urged the yet-to-be-exiled nation to come out of Babylon (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6) after 70 years (Jer. 29:10) and return to the place where the Lord could bless them under the covenantal promises (Deut. 28). Esther and Mordecai had not returned to the land and did not seem interested in complying with the prophetic command to return."

### **Why was the book written?**

A key related question: For whom was the book written? There is no explicit evidence in the book about its readers. The BKC offers this interesting assessment:

"Some scholars suggest that the book was composed in the Persian Empire and then transported back to Palestine and added to the collection of biblical books (OT mss. considered canonical). More likely, however, is the view that the author lived in Palestine and wrote this account of events transpiring in the Persian Empire for the benefit of his fellow returnees to the land. It is unlikely that the book was written for Persian readers. No doubt it was composed to encourage Israelites that God was working on their behalf, even through some people who had refused to come back to the land."

Discuss: What was happening in Jerusalem around the year 470 B.C.? Why would the Jews back in the land need the encouragement that Esther could provide?

The BKC states, "At the time of the writing of the book the Jews in Palestine were going through difficult times in their struggle to rebuild their nation and to reestablish temple worship. It had taken the nation 21 years to complete the building of the temple (536-515) and, as is evident from the last half of the Book of Ezra, the people were not in good spiritual condition during the reign of Artaxerxes (464-424)... The Book of Esther, then, would have been a great encouragement to these struggling Jews. It would have helped them realize that the surrounding peoples which seemed so awesome could never conquer the unique people of God. Israel was protected by God even though a large number of them were outside the land. The Book of Esther would also encourage them to worship the God of Israel, though He is not mentioned by name in it. "

What then was the purpose of the book?

God gave His people this book to encourage them to trust in His sovereign control. The book highlights the doctrine of His providence.

See BKC: "Purpose. As noted earlier, the Book of Esther was written to encourage the returned Jewish exiles by reminding them of the faithfulness of God who would keep His promises to the nation. The author was describing God's unfailing preservation of His people (even "disobedient people" such as Esther and Mordecai\_ those not back in the land). The author was also explaining how the Feast of Purim began. That feast, each time it was celebrated, would encourage the remnant."

### **What is the outline of the book?**

- I. The Feast of Xerxes and the Divorce of Vashti (1)
- II. The Choice of Esther as queen (2)
- III. Hamon's plot to destroy the Jews (3)

- IV. Mordecai's persuasion of Esther to intervene (4)
- V. Esther's successful petition to the king (5-7)
- VI. Downfall of Haman and Deliverance of the Jews (8:1-9:16)
- VII. Feast of Purim (9:17-32)
- VIII. Conclusion: The Prominence of Mordecai (10)

Note: Though God is not mentioned in the book, we see Him at work orchestrating the events of history:

1. He used a marital spat between Xerxes and Vashti to eventually preserve His people (ch 1).
2. He used a pagan beauty contest to put Esther in a position where she could be used to intervene (ch 2).
3. He used a foiled assassination plot, and the oversight of Mordecai's good deed, to result in an even greater good for the people of God (ch 2).
4. He kept sleep from the King so he would read the chronicles and discover that Mordecai had never been justly rewarded (6:1).
5. Haman showed up at just the right time to exalt Mordecai (ch 6).
6. Haman went from the banquet table to the gallows in one day (ch 7).
7. Mordecai went from being a "nobody" to being #2 man in the land (ch 10).
8. God reversed the planned holocaust so that instead of getting rid of Jews, some pagans chose to become Jews (8:17)!

Note: Many scholars have criticized the historicity of the book of Esther. But, as the BKC points out, "Much evidence does support the historicity of the facts in this book. Xerxes was a real king in Persia . His drinking parties were well known. Xerxes did have an irrational temper, occasionally exhibiting fits of rage (1:12; 7:10). He did have a palace in Susa and a large harem there. Various features of the court can also be substantiated from other sources."

### **What is the message of the book in one sentence?**

Esther highlights the providence of God by showing how God guided a series of events to protect the Jewish people from destruction.

### **What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?**

Discuss: From your perspective, what contribution does Esther make?

1. *Esther reveals the doctrine of the **providence** of God.*

Discuss: What does “providence” mean? Why is this an important doctrine to know about? What happens if we *don't* live in light of God's providence?

2. *Esther reveals the futility of **anti-Semitism**.*

Discuss: What is anti-Semitism? Where else do we see it in the Bible?

3. *Esther reveals the historical background of the Jewish Feast of **Purim**.*

Note: At the Feast of Purim, the book of Esther is read in its entirety (also called the “Megilla” which means “scroll”).

One of the things the feasts in the Bible teach us is that the Lord wants His people *to remember*. When God does something for His people, He wants His people *to remember it*, and even at times *to celebrate it*.

Discuss: What are some other examples of this in the Bible?