

Some Thoughts Concerning the Book of Esther
April 19, 2020

This Sunday's Bible Study reading is from the Book of Esther, one of the most unique books in all of the Bible. It is a well-known story, and a good and enjoyable read. And, as is often the case, there are depths to the story beyond the obvious. The author of our Bible Study has been focused on prayer and prophesy this quarter, and a selection from Esther may seem puzzling. This is explained. In many of the other prophets' writings, the concern is raised, why do the wicked seem to prosper, and the righteous, God's people, suffer? Habakkuk was particularly concerned with this issue as the instrument of God's justice, the wild and cruel Chaldeans, came into view. Esther is an answer to that question. It is an instance in which, not only does the evildoer get what ought to come to him, but the righteous are rewarded. There's a happy ending.

I'm not going to try to cover the same material as in the book. Rather, imagine that we are going to relax together and enjoy a good read. Pull up a chair, or have a seat on the couch, some refreshing beverage nearby, and let's enjoy the story. As you read Esther, then, here are some few additional details that may add to your insight and pleasure.

The Persian King, Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther, is none other than King Xerxes I! Xerxes is the Greek translation, and Ahasuerus the Hebrew translation, of the Persian name "Khshayansha." (How that came out as it did I can't imagine.) Xerxes (who reigned 485-465 B.C.) was the Persian king who invaded Greece, and tried to destroy Greek civilization. That is something you likely studied in history lessons in grade school. It was he who had a throne built for himself from which to watch the Persian fleet annihilate the Greeks at Salamis. That was when Pericles evacuated Athens and trusted to the "wooden walls" of the Greek ships, his interpretation of the Delphic oracle's prophesy. So, Xerxes sat on his throne to watch the spectacle, only to witness the destruction of his fleet and a consequent end to his quest to conquer Greece. Xerxes was the emperor of the most powerful and biggest empire on Earth at the time. Yet, he doesn't come across in history as being particularly bright. One gets the same impression from reading Esther as well.

So, as the story opens, Xerxes is giving a feast. It's lavish. Lavish in a way that was beyond any precedent. The Persian empire was huge, stretching from India to Ethiopia, and all the way to Greece in Europe. And, it had an income to match. To put that in perspective, there were something like 127 governors of provinces, each charged with helping add to the treasury. The Persians were relatively benevolent rulers. They allowed subject peoples, the Jews included, to retain their own religions. They didn't want trouble; they just wanted to collect taxes. And, that they did. So this "wine feast"

that Xerxes threw for his officials, nobles, and governors, went on for 180 days. With no restraint on how much anyone might drink. This is consistent with what is known of the Persian monarchy. Parties with as many as 15,000 guests were held, where all could be entertained at the same time. That's a stadium sized party! And there are lots of sub-parties. I imagine that was sort of like suites off the main event, like luxury boxes at sports stadiums. Indeed, the Book of Esther reports that the queen, Vashti, held a seven day event for the women. Imagine that kind of setting for what comes next.

Xerxes was by now "merry with wine", as verse 1: 10 puts it. He's been putting on this show of how wealthy and powerful he is, with the best of everything, and he has this big idea. He commands that his queen, Vashti, be brought before him, and everyone else attending, wearing her crown, so they could appreciate her beauty. She refused. This may seem puzzling. Why would she refuse? The conclusion is that the command was for her to wear "just" her crown. In front of as many as 15,000 of his drunk friends and officials and governors, and so forth, at a stadium sized event.

Well, her refusal got her dismissed. The Greek historian Herodotus reports Xerxes's wife's name as Amestris, rather than Vashti, but we've seen how names can vary. She was reportedly imperious and superstitious. Eventually Xerxes decided to fill Vashti's position by holding a "beauty contest" of sorts.

Esther was a young Jewish woman who was an orphan, being raised by an uncle named Mordechai. How they had happened to come to Susa is unknown, but Jews had scattered throughout the known world by this time as a result of the fall of Jerusalem. When the "contest" was to be held, Esther "was taken" as one of the beauties from whom the King would choose a new queen. (It's unclear whether she went voluntarily. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, has a greatly expanded Book of Esther. In that version, Mordechai tried to hide her. The Septuagint version emphasizes religious details more, perhaps an expansion of the original. The Septuagint parts of Esther were separated out as part of the "Apocrypha" in the Catholic Bible.) Esther got her turn to please the king, won his favor. She was chosen to be queen in place of Vashti. This all happened without it being known that she was Jewish, or associated with Mordechai. Of course, the occasion became an excuse to hold another lavish banquet.

Meanwhile, Mordechai seems to have been a regular at the king's gate. We don't know what his business was. An important gate was a social meeting place. That was often where business was transacted, from much earlier in antiquity. (It was at the Bethlehem town gate that Boaz redeemed Ruth, many centuries further back.) Mordechai discovered a plot against the king, and let the right people know. The plotters were killed, and Xerxes had Mordechai listed in a book, "annals" is the word used in verse 2: 23.

Consider it the “official records”. It is known from elsewhere that Xerxes did indeed keep such a record of captains who had done worthy deeds. The connection to Esther remained a secret.

Chapter 3 introduces the villain. Haman isn't just any villain. He is an “Agagite.” You may not know what that means, but it's significant. He is a descendant of Agag. Agag was the king of the Amalekites in King Saul's time. The Amalekites were Israel's most hated enemy, going all the way back to the Exodus, before Mount Sinai even! Exodus 17: 8-13 describes how the Amalekites, a brigand tribe of the wastelands, attacked the Israelites as they were struggling through the wilderness toward Sinai. Moses appointed Joshua to lead the Israelites in battle. The Amalekites were finally defeated as the sun went down. They seem to have retreated back into the desert to cause more trouble later. In Exodus 17: 14 we read, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.’”

We can read in I Samuel Chapter 15 that more than a century later, Saul was given the mission of carrying out those words. He was successful in defeating the Amalekites, but Samuel had charged him with killing all of them, including King Agag, who Saul had spared, as well as the best of the sheep and cattle and some other valuable livestock. This disobedience is why Saul was rejected by God, as reported in Samuel. Samuel then killed Agag himself. In the next chapter, Samuel anoints David to be king of Israel. Obviously Saul had spared more than just Agag. Many centuries later, this Haman, a descendant of Agag the Amalekite king, is Grand Vizier, the number two official, in King Xerxes's administration!

Mordechai knows that Haman, the “Agagite” Grand Vizier, is an Amalekite. A hated ancestral enemy of the Israelites, and hence of the Jews. Mordechai won't honor Haman by bowing down before him, as a Grand Vizier ought to be honored. People in high places like to be so honored. They take offense when they are not. And clearly, Haman found out Mordechai was a Jew. He was not satisfied to just have Mordechai killed, but plotted to have all of the Jews killed, from one end of the empire to the other. He went to the king, telling him, “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them” (4:8). Haman then offers 10,000 talents of silver to the treasury. The king makes a show of refusing that (but no doubt expects it anyway) and gives Haman permission to do, in the king's name, whatever he wants. A “talent” is a big slab of metal, about 65 lb. It was about as much as you could expect a slave to carry. Maybe 10,000 talents is an exaggeration. Maybe not. That was about 2/3 of the annual Persian

royal income from their empire. Haman seemingly expects that to be the yield from killing all of the Jews and appropriating their property. (Doesn't all this sound appallingly familiar? From just about a century ago, within our remembrance?) Xerxes doesn't seem to question Haman. As mentioned, he doesn't come across as the brightest.

When this becomes known, Mordechai sends a message to Esther asking for her help save the Jews, her people. She can bring the problem to the king. She is hesitant. Going before the king without permission can be a death sentence. Mordechai's subsequent response to Esther (4: 13-14) is perhaps the most important passage in the whole book: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Esther asks for prayer, then does what she needs to do.

When Esther appears unbidden before the king, he holds out his scepter to her, granting life. She invites him to a banquet, and he's invited to bring Haman with him. Suspense builds. Haman is giddy with excitement. At the banquet, Esther extends the suspense by asking the king and Haman to come to another banquet the next day. Clearly something is on her mind. The king can't sleep. He reads a book to help him – yes, the annals. "Hey, what did we ever do to honor this Mordechai," he asks some of his advisors. "Nothing" is the answer. About that time Haman shows up. The king asks Haman what should be done as an honor for someone the king considers worthy of great honor. Haman thinks the honor is for him. The result is Haman leading Mordechai in a procession, with Mordechai wearing the king's robe, on the king's horse, with honor being proclaimed.

That brings us to the climax of the story, our scripture from Chapter 5. Esther has set things up beautifully. Haman is exposed, and Xerxes is furious. When he returns from a short walk to cool off, he sees Haman appear to be assaulting Esther as he pleads with her for his life. So, Haman is hanged on the very gallows he built for Mordechai. Xerxes can't reverse his (actually Haman's) royal decree, but he does declare that the Jews can defend themselves, which they do, and thus Haman's plans are frustrated. So, in the end, the evil Haman, and by extension the evil Amalekites who were under God's curse from hundreds of years earlier, are indeed punished. And, God's people survive and go on to prosper.

The reason this book is in the Bible is that it explains the Jewish celebration of Purim. Purim is the one Jewish holiday that is NOT prescribed in the law. "Purim" derives from "casting lots", the method Haman used to choose an auspicious date on which the Jews

were to be killed. It is a secular holiday, but also serves the purpose of reminding the Jews that God is with them.



Picture by Jan Lievens (circa 1659)

Mordechai's words in Chapter 4 remind us that God's purpose will not be frustrated. But we can make the choice, or not, to be part of His plan. As Esther chose to put her on life at risk for her, and God's people. In like manner, Jesus also submitted to his mission two millennia ago, for our sake. The result is Easter, the Resurrection, and God's saving message extended to all of humanity who will listen. That sounds like a reason for a celebration, and maybe a banquet! (Perhaps next year.)