

Getting Started With Esther: “For Such a Time as This”

© Elaine A. Phillips, Gordon College, 2013

Introduction

The story of Esther is full of ironies and reversals. Because the plot is so engaging, we could easily overlook the complexity in this text. The narrative is at the same time biting sarcasm as it pokes fun at the Persian court and horrifyingly ominous as one man’s wounded pride and hatred spell potential disaster for the entire Jewish people. It is also brimming with ambiguity at every turn. What are we to make of the choices and activities of Vashti, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), Mordecai, and Esther? Apart from the thoroughly evil Haman, every major figure in the narrative has garnered a wide range of character assessments from centuries of commentators. Even God Himself is subjected to scrutiny. How are we to understand His apparent absence from this stage of human events?

We first meet Esther as an orphan, a young Israelite woman in exile. We might say that she had three strikes against her in that culture – gender, no family, and a foreigner. When her story ends, however, she was a powerful queen of Persia. What happened in the interval is an arresting story of God’s providence even though the name of God never appears in the book at all.

Narrative Summary and Historical Context

Xerxes and the Jews in the Persian empire

Xerxes (Ahasuerus in Hebrew) was the proud and powerful king of the Persian Empire. The date of Xerxes’ accession to the throne was 486 BC, about one hundred years after the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and took a significant number of Israelites into exile. There was a sizeable Jewish population spread throughout the empire.

About this time, Xerxes was planning to go to war against Greece. Xerxes’ predecessor on the throne, Darius, had previously attempted to take Athens only to lose the battle of Marathon. When Xerxes ascended the throne, he held a long series of banquets for military brass from all over the kingdom to show off his wealth and bolster support for the renewed war effort. The extreme opulence of the Persian court is the target of subtle humorous jabs in the first chapter of Esther.

Vashti Out; Esther In

As part of this display, Xerxes summoned Vashti so that he could show off yet one more possession. Since the text specifies that she was to be wearing her crown, ancient Jewish commentators suggested that Xerxes had ordered her to appear with *only* her crown, a further lewd aspect of the all-male carousing. When she refused to exhibit herself, Xerxes was so furious that he, the most powerful figure in the empire, was unable to decide what to do next! The king’s advisers gave him

stunningly brilliant counsel; Vashti was never to appear before him again. Her position would be given to one who would have a more pliable disposition. A “commission” was appointed to gather all the likely prospects from each province to the harem at Susa. The description of the operation makes it quite clear that local populations had no choice in the matter. When Esther, who was strikingly beautiful, was brought to the court of the king, she was worlds away from her Jewish home.

Haman’s intent to exterminate the Jews

Shortly after Esther’s coronation, her cousin and guardian, Mordecai, discovered a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai was never rewarded for exposing the conspiracy. Instead, Haman was elevated by the king to be second in the power structure, and the king’s advisers disappeared. That post was not sufficient for Haman’s ego. With the king’s approval, a decree was issued that everyone should pay homage to Haman. Mordecai refused; Haman seethed with rage.

When Haman was told that Mordecai was Jewish, he determined to ruin not only Mordecai but all of the Jewish people. He told the king that there was a dissident group of people who were a threat to the stability of Xerxes’ kingdom and should be destroyed. The king gave Haman permission to issue a decree in the king’s name for the slaughter of all Jews on the 13th of Adar. Because the edict was sent throughout the entire empire, there would be no safe haven.

“For such a time as this”

When the king’s decree was made public, Mordecai challenged Queen Esther to risk her life to save her people: “If you remain silent, do you really think relief and deliverance will come from any other place? You and your father’s family will die.” In other words, you will be found out and all the rest of us will die as well. “Who knows but that you have come to the royal position *for such a time as this?*”

Esther chose to identify with her people even at the likely cost of her life. She called for a corporate and comprehensive fast, radically appealing for God’s intervention. Following that, she would enter into the king’s presence even though she had not been bidden to do so. Her closing words to Mordecai are telling; “when I perish, I perish,” indicating her recognition that death was the likely outcome. Nevertheless, the king held out the golden scepter to Esther.

Esther piqued the king’s curiosity by inviting him and Haman to a private banquet. They came to the feast and again Esther tantalized them by requesting their presence at another exclusive dining experience. Haman headed home elated but was enraged when he encountered Mordecai who this time refused to rise in

Haman's presence. His wife suggested a solution - a public hanging for Mordecai. This restored Haman's good humor and he went to acquire the king's permission.

God's Intervention

In the meantime, the king had suffered a bout of insomnia. Even though the name of God does not appear in Esther, here are His "fingerprints." At the very moment that Haman was arriving at the king's bedroom door, the king was scrambling to set right the oversight from five years ago. Mordecai needed to be recognized and the king asked Haman's advice without naming Mordecai. Certain that the king intended this for him, Haman described an elaborate public ceremony complete with a pronouncement that *this* was the person the king wished to honor! Haman's role as the town crier was the ultimate humiliation for him. He returned home just in time to be escorted back to the second banquet that Esther had prepared.

Esther revealed Haman's evil plan

After they had dined, the king again asked to know Esther's request. Her response was a masterpiece in diplomacy. She had to set the stage for the accusation of Haman without implicating the king even though he was equally culpable because he had granted Haman free reign to unleash his fury against the Jews. In declaring "we have been sold, I and my people," Esther identified herself with the Jews even though she did not yet name them. Her direct quote of the language of the decree did away with any ambiguity; Haman at this point would have realized with mounting horror what this meant for him.

Because the king had been negligent in knowing about Haman's activities and the identity of his queen, he asked the question that allowed Esther to point at Haman. This revelation infuriated the king; he had been duped by Haman in more ways than one. His enraged exit matched his character. In the final irony of Haman's life, he fell onto the couch where Esther was reclining, and was in that posture of entreaty when the king returned and found him there. What the king saw allowed him to make a charge that would resolve his dilemma about the dishonorable implications for him of the edict. Everything could be blamed on Haman.

The end of this story

Together Esther and Mordecai countered the deadly decree of Haman with a royal authorization for the Jews to defend themselves in the face of organized, empire-wide attacks on their persons and property. They were successful, a commemorative celebration called Purim was established, and the book ends with peace and stability.

Thematic Emphases

Honor and shame

In the Persian court, individual honor was most ostentatiously lodged in the person of the king. Nevertheless, the pomp and pageantry of the court scene were accompanied by actions and advice that exposed the ridiculous excesses and intemperate decisions of members of that court and, in effect, undermined entirely the façade of honor. As the plot develops, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai had also to do with honor. Haman craved the public obeisance that accompanied his exalted position; shame and honor teetered on the balance for him as Mordecai refused to do homage and Haman raged over the affront.

Honor and shame were part of the fabric of national identity as well; exile in the world of the Ancient Near East meant loss of honor and was perceived as a matter of divine punishment. Thus, the subsequent decree affording Jews the right of self-defense and the success of that operation restored their honor. Mordecai was transformed from refugee to prime minister, and Esther from orphan to royalty.

Power and presence

The power of the king is at the center of the narrative. Nevertheless, he was astonishingly impotent. The will of others repeatedly became the law. In contrast, the initially powerless Esther came to control the king. Her royal attire and demeanor overwhelmed the king as she came into his presence. Subsequently, she wielded royal power, especially in her denouncement of Haman, the elevation of Mordecai, and the measures taken to insure the security of the Jewish population empire-wide.

Initially, those with authority included a group of seven eunuchs who served in the king's presence, additional individuals who "knew the times," and seven princes of Media and Persia who sat first in the kingdom and "saw the face of the king." In five years, however, there was an insidious change and only Haman was named as empowered; the rest had been silenced.

Law and justice

Persian political theology meant that the word of the king unified the realm. Thus, Haman's description of the Jews as those who did not keep the king's laws made them sound particularly threatening. The "law of the Persians and Medes" was irrevocable, and it was essential that there were mechanisms in order to get around these unchangeable laws. The unjust law mandating the annihilation of the Jews was over-ridden by a second one, and the pattern of measure-for-measure justice is highlighted as the language of that second edict mirrors the first. Ironically, in a court that was manifestly short on true justice, there were edicts for wine consumption, marital relations, language, the deposition of the first queen, and the prolonged preparation of the royal concubines.

Anti-Semitism

Mordecai commanded Esther not to reveal her ethnic identity, an indication that there was already widespread antipathy toward the Jews even before Haman's edict. It is evident that Haman expected extensive public participation in his plan to annihilate the Jews. In fact, there was a significant part of the empire that decided to attack the Jews, even in the face of the second decree.

Texts of Esther

In addition to the Hebrew text, there are two Greek versions of Esther which are significantly different from each other. The longer of the Greek versions has six major additions which enhance the Hebrew text by naming God and describing his intervention, reporting Mordecai's dream and its interpretation, inserting prayers of Mordecai and Esther, describing Esther's audience with Xerxes, and presenting the texts of the edicts. As a result of the additions, God and Mordecai are central in the text instead of Esther.

Literary and Linguistic Structure

When the Hebrew text is read in its entirety, an over-arching chiasmic structure is evident.

It might be diagrammed as follows:

Chiasmic Structure in Esther

[adapted from Jon Levenson, *Esther* 10]

A Greatness of Ahasuerus (ch 1)	A' Greatness of Ahasuerus and Mordecai (ch 10)
B Two banquets of Persians (ch 1)	B' Two feasts of Jews (ch 9)
C Esther identifies as a Gentile (ch 2)	C' Gentiles identify as Jews (ch 8)
D Elevation of Haman (ch 3)	D' Elevation of Mordecai (ch 8)
E Anti-Jewish Edict (ch 3)	E' Pro-Jewish Edict (ch 8)
F Key exchange of Mordecai and Esther (ch 4)	F' Key Exchange of Ahasuerus and Esther (ch 7)

G Esther's First Banquet (ch 5) G' Esther's Second Banquet (ch 7)

H Royal Procession
(ch 6)

A major thread that weaves the structure together is a succession of ten banquets. The first chapter describes the king's lavish banquets, the first one for the nobility, and second specifically for the residents of Susa. Correspondingly, Esther closes with the first celebration of Purim on the fourteenth of Adar and the second for Susa on the fifteenth. The chiasm has as its central turning point the insomnia of the king (Esth 6:1) which occurred in between the two private banquets of Esther. The king's insomnia and the subsequent exchange between Xerxes and Haman were so utterly beyond the scope of anyone's schemes that they serve as stunning witnesses to the sovereign working of God.

There is an over-abundance of pairs of words. The word pairs in chapter 1 are representative of Persian "officialese." These pairs lead to the critical "petition and request" pattern of the king's invitations to Esther to state her case (Esth 5:3,6; 7:2). Passive forms are also vividly apparent. Esther's early appearances are almost exclusively described in this manner; she is acted upon by larger nameless forces. This same anonymity pervades the court scenes, divesting that bureaucracy of accountability. Implicit in this stylistic device may also be an acknowledgement of the unnamed Divine Orchestrator.

Theological and Moral/Ethical Challenges

God's apparent absence, the lack of prayer and piety, and the questionable behavior of Esther are all viewed as possible evidence that she and Mordecai represent a diaspora community that was decidedly irreligious. This assessment, however, misses several issues that significantly affect the interpretation of the text. Esther and Mordecai had no choice as to Esther's presence in the harem; it was a "round-up." When it came time to move into the public arena, Esther enlisted the support of the Jewish people in fasting. Faced with the prospect of genocide, defensive and punitive actions were necessary. To do nothing when it was within the power of Esther and Mordecai to address the situation would have been irresponsible.

The ambiguity regarding God's presence in this narrative allows for wide-ranging application. In the face of divine silence, God's people are compelled to choose between the imperfect alternatives that arise in the ambiguities of life, just as

Esther and Mordecai did. Individual Jews and Jewish communities have lived for millennia in an uncertain world of political intrigue and hostility.

Esther and Its Biblical Contexts

The narrative reverberates with echoes from all of Israelite covenant history. That the villainous Haman was an Agagite reminds the audience that King Saul, a Benjaminite descendant of Kish just like Mordecai, was commanded by the Lord to destroy completely the Amalekites and their king, Agag (I Sam 15). Saul disobeyed; the incident in Esther addresses that “unfinished business.” The annual Passover celebration commemorated the paradigmatic deliverance of God’s people from bondage and oppression. Haman’s malevolent decree to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews was written on the thirteenth day of the first month, the day before Passover. Instead of celebrating on that festive occasion, the Jewish population of the Persian realm was plunged into mourning. The corporate remembrance of both brutal oppression and subsequent deliverance would reverberate through the entire Jewish community.

Historicity of the Narrative

The style of the narrative, with its concern for dates, numbers, names, and procedures, indicates that it was intended to be read as history. Furthermore, the correspondence between Esther and extra-biblical sources is remarkable, a point conceded by most scholars. Nevertheless, even though it has been increasingly demonstrated that the author represents Persian customs, language, names, and court matters in a plausible manner, this plot and these characters are otherwise unattested, leaving many to suggest that the text was intended as some form of historical fiction. Virtually every introduction to Esther has addressed the alleged inaccuracies from one perspective or the other, providing a list of the problems, and either indicating why they are indeed insoluble or marshaling evidence to demonstrate that they ought to be viewed as red herrings.

Nevertheless, Purim was indeed adopted and practiced with enthusiasm, something inexplicable if the basis was entirely fabricated. The essence of the narrative is God’s deliverance of His people from a catastrophe in the making. The message of hope is severely diminished if that deliverance never in fact happened.

Purposes of This Narrative

Unlike the rest of the post-exilic literature that emphasizes return to the land, this narrative presents the vulnerability of diaspora communities. Throughout the history of the Jews in the diaspora, the tide has turned against them with appalling frequency. The text of Esther is a vital part of the biblical canon as it prepared God’s people for their precarious existence in every diaspora that would follow this one.

Reaching across the millennia, Esther challenges its audience to consider in what manner God has prepared them “for such a time as this” and just what those “times” might be in each of our lives. Esther’s story describes life “under the sun” (cf. Ecclesiastes), with ambiguities and the messiness created by sin. It also attests to the reversals that are part of life’s experience, preparing for the great reversal from death to life eternal through the unlikely means of the crucified Messiah. The beginning and end of the Gospel message is the resurrection, the greatest of all reversals.

Questions

1. What roles do honor and shame play in the development of this narrative?
2. What profound lesson is embedded in the structure of the book?
3. How would you characterize the purposes of the narrative for God’s people?