

Surveying the Text: Esther

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INTRODUCTION:

In the book of Esther, God is never mentioned, but is everywhere present. His providence surrounds all the events and characters. If we think about it carefully, we can perhaps see why a human author is not mentioned. This account has a very plain way of presenting itself—"story by God."

THE TEXT:

"And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them: And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so" (Esther 2:3-4).

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK:

You are all familiar with chiasms and, as it turns out, the book of Esther is structured as a chiasm. (See Dorsey.)

- A The emperor's proud feast
 - B Esther becomes queen
 - C King's life is saved
 - D Haman's plot
 - E Mordecai learns of plot
 - F Esther invites king and Haman to first banquet
 - G Turning point: Haman's fortunes turn
 - F' Esther invites king and Haman to second banquet
 - E' Mordecai and Esther given Haman's estate
 - D' Haman's plot foiled
 - C' The Jews are saved
 - B' Esther wins second day for Jews
 - A' The Jews' grateful feast

A ROLLICKING GOOD STORY:

The name *Esther* is a Babylonian one, and most probably means *Star*. Her Hebrew name is the lovely name *Hadassah*, and if we translated it into English (instead of just transliterating it), we would have to call her *Myrtle*. It doesn't have the same connotations, really.

This is a short story, not long at all, but it has all the ingredients you might want in a

story. As one writer observed, we have a sharp and pronounced conflict between good and evil, we have a brave, sexy, and gorgeous heroine, some carousing at the royal court, palace and harem intrigues, a Cinderella motif (an orphan girl marries the *emperor*), a really fine villain with a cape and a waxed mustache, hapless victims rescued just in the nick of time, a profound reversal of fortune, a moment of truth in character formation, open battle, and poetic justice. What else could you possibly want?

A SHOWDOWN:

The reversal of Mordecai's and Haman's fortunes is a driving theme in the plot of this book (8:2). Mordecai does not appear as an over-scrupulous fusser at all — the whole thing appears to me to be covenantally *personal*. Haman is descended from Agag, the king of the Amalekites that Saul had once disobediently refused to kill, and Mordecai is descended from Kish, of the house of Saul, the king who had failed to kill Agag. They both appear to know, throughout the book, that there are some outstanding accounts remaining to be settled. When the book of Esther opens, Haman and Mordecai were already looking coldly at one another across the saloon, right hands twitching just above their holsters.

Should we blame Mordecai for not bowing before Haman? Not at all. First, there is no explicit or implicit condemnation of Mordecai's action by the writer. Second, Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to Haman (3:2) comes immediately after Mordecai reported (2:21-22) a threat to the king's life. Thus, Mordecai is clearly not refusing to bend out of some kind of misguided Jewish zealotry. Third, Mordecai is willing to *receive* from Haman what he would not render to Haman (6:10-11). Thus, the refusal to bow was not a principled objection to a human being receiving civil honors. It was an objection to giving homage to a skunk, an objection which God vindicated throughout the remainder of the book.

NATURAL ANTIPATHY:

And just as unbelief loves to eat souls — the bitter and envious ones have the sweetest crackle — so also unbelief is utterly hostile to that which is indigestible to it. That indigestible reality is evangelical and living faith — the only kind of faith that God gives. Faith and unbelief can recognize one another instantly — by the smell, Scripture says — and this is why Haman was giving Mordecai the stink eye from the first time he saw him. As already mentioned, there was some unfinished business between them, and they both knew about it. They both displayed their lineage — Haman by filling up with helium of vanity, and Mordecai by not bending, by refusing obeisance to the helium man.

THE BASIC STORY:

After Esther had replaced Vashti as queen, Mordecai overheard a plot on the king's life and told her about it (2:19-23). At just that moment, it happened that Mordecai refused to bow down before Haman, who as a result plotted to kill all the Jews (3:1-15). When Haman manipulated the king into signing a decree against the Jews, Mordecai persuaded

Esther to make an appeal to the king (4:1-17). She does so, and as a result of her shrewd intervention Haman is eventually hanged (7:1-10). The king sends out a second edict, allowing the Jews to defend themselves (8:1-17), and the Jews take this opportunity to defeat and kill their enemies (9:1-19). To honor the victory, the holiday of Purim is established (9:20–32). The story ends with Mordecai being promoted (10:1–3). That enabled him to return to Jerusalem—in honor and not in disgrace.

Learning the lesson of Esther enables us to be the kind of Christians who have learned how to say, in the midst of our very own adventure story, “It appears that all is lost. *Glory!*”

LACK OF COMPROMISE:

This book has several genuine heroes, but this should make us reflect a bit. Mordecai and Esther are the center of the story, and both exhibit true courage and true loyalty to God. At the same time, their lack of compromise is the kind of thing that would fail many modern Christian “purity tests.” Mordecai’s name means “man of Marduk.” He saved the life of a despotic emperor. And yet he is the one who ran a great risk by refusing to bend before Haman. He is not simply “a political schemer or climber.” And Esther walked by faith . . . right into the harem.

Remember Obadiah’s faithfulness . . . working alongside Ahab. Purity matters, but not our kind of purity.



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