

ESTHER

A Story of Providential Faithfulness

I. Background

A. Introductory Issues

1. The first historical record of the book of Esther dates back some 2350 years, although the story is set in the approximate time frame of 480-470 B.C. As is the case with much of the Old Testament, the authorship of Esther is anonymous, and therefore the dating of the book must be determined from factors both internal and external to the book itself.
 - a. First of all, the epilogue indicates that the account was written subsequent to Ahasuerus' reign which ended in 464 B.C. (ref. 10:1-2).
 - b. At the same time, the author's familiarity with Persian customs and various details associated with the reign of Ahasuerus suggests that he lived in Persia during the general time period addressed in the book.
 - c. This is reinforced by the writer's intimate knowledge of the events, circumstances and interactions he recounts in his narrative. It is doubtful that oral tradition could long preserve such detail.
 - d. At the very least, since the first known historical reference to Purim – the Jewish festival introduced in Esther – occurs during the Maccabean period (second century B.C.), it is obvious that the book must have been written by that time.
 - e. A final observation is that, given the Jewish nationalistic thrust and orientation of the book, it is virtually certain that the author was a Jew.
2. As to its place in the biblical canon, the Jews have always recognized Esther as a part of their inspired Scriptures. In fact, they have afforded it an exalted position as part of the *Megilloth* ("rolls") – the five scrolls of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) read on five annual holidays. Those five books and the holidays associated with them are: Ruth (Pentecost), Song of Solomon (Passover), Ecclesiastes (Feast of the Booths), Lamentations (Ninth of Ab), and Esther (Purim).
3. One of the most notable features of Esther is the absence of any mention of God. On its face it is an irreligious book in that it simply recounts the historical episode behind the Jewish festival of Purim. In addition, it is fiercely Jewish and nationalistic, and these considerations (among others) have caused Esther's place in the Christian canon to be debated and even contested in Church history. Luther's comment is illustrative: "*I am so hostile to this book (II Maccabees) and to Esther that I would wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too greatly and have much heathenish impropriety.*"

B. Historical Context

The story of Esther is set in the period of the exile following the destruction of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of Babylon.

1. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had established his control over Judah in 605 B.C. and enthroned Zedekiah as his vassal lord in Jerusalem some eight years later. But after nine years on the throne, Zedekiah revolted against Babylonian authority, thereby inciting Nebuchadnezzar to return to Judah and initiate a siege against Jerusalem. His strategy was to surround and isolate the city and then wait for famine and disease to do their work. Two years later in 586 B.C., with Jerusalem's residents sick and starving, Nebuchadnezzar breached the city walls, tore the temple to the ground, burned the city, and took the survivors in chains to Babylon (ref. 2 Kings 24:17-25:21; 2 Chronicles 36:10-21; cf. also Jeremiah 52:1-30).
2. Babylonian rule over Judah continued for the next five decades until Cyrus, the young ruler of the Medo-Persian alliance, took control of the Babylonian kingdom in 539 B.C. in a whirlwind conquest. He conquered invincible Babylon by ingeniously diverting the Euphrates River and using the river bed to move his army under the city wall during a feasting time (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; cf. Ezra 1:1ff; Daniel 1:21).
3. In fulfillment of the word of the prophet (ref. Isaiah 44:28), one of Cyrus' first actions was to issue a decree in 538 B.C. allowing the Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1ff). Many Jews did return to Judah, but many others chose to remain in the cities and villages outside the land of Israel where they had been relocated by the Babylonians. Some eighty years later another group of exiles would return to Jerusalem under Ezra's leadership (457 B.C.), followed shortly after by yet another group led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C.
4. Esther lived during the intervening period between the first and second return episodes, and like so many Jews, her family had decided to remain behind rather than make the journey to Jerusalem. Residing in Susa, the capital of the Medo-Persian Empire (2:5-7), Esther and her cousin Mordecai epitomized Israel in exile.

C. Redemptive-Historical Context

1. In describing the redemptive-historical context of the book of Esther, it is most correct to begin in Genesis 3:15 with God's promise of a conquering seed. *The reason is that the whole of Old Testament history is the tracing out of God's activity in the world as He worked toward the fulfillment of His primal promise through a process of incremental, prophetic, and preparatory acts.*
2. God had promised to provide a seed, and in Abraham that promise found substantial development as the Lord covenanted with him to establish a *kingdom* through him. God would make Abraham's seed into a great and regal nation and would give them control over all the region from the Euphrates River to the "river of Egypt."

3. According to God's express timetable (Genesis 15:13-14), the covenant descendents of Abraham (the twelve tribes of Israel) were liberated from Egyptian captivity, brought into formal covenant union with Him at Sinai, and led through a period of wandering and conquest under Joshua until the land of Canaan had been substantially subdued. By the time of his death Joshua could declare that all of God's word of promise to Israel had been fulfilled (23:14, cf. 21:43-45).
4. The succeeding centuries were marked by an overall trend of deepening apostasy within Israel – "every man did what was right in his own eyes." Predictably, this resulted in escalating conflict, moral decline, and fragmentation among the twelve tribes. This woeful period in Israel's history (recorded largely in the book of Judges) largely continued until David ascended the throne of Israel as a "man after God's own heart."
5. David reunited the hearts of the twelve tribes and established the dominion, power and greatness of the kingdom in accordance with God's promise to Abraham. But for all its glory, David's reign was marred by sin which brought disgrace on Yahweh's name and His covenant kingdom. The Lord responded by declaring that David's house – embodying his immediate household, his royal dynasty, and his kingdom – would be set at odds and fractured. So it was that during the reign of his grandson Rehoboam the Israelite kingdom was split into the two sub-kingdoms of Judah and Israel.
6. From that point, the trajectory of the two Israelite kingdoms was toward destruction and captivity. God's prophets continued to proclaim that the day of His patience and petition was coming to an end, but, by and large, the people turned a deaf ear. Though their covenant Father had shown Himself to be faithful, merciful, and longsuffering, the seed of Abraham could not escape judgment and captivity. Thus the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and Judah soon followed, with Jerusalem being sacked in 586 B.C. by the armies of Babylon.
7. Because of unbelief and rebellion, the covenant descendents of Abraham had been driven from the land and scattered among the nations. Powerless and persecuted for more than a century, many of the Jews in exile had all but lost sight of the Lord's promise to Eve, the patriarchs, and their beloved King David. And now an ominous storm cloud was forming on the horizon that threatened to wash away all hope.

D. Literary Context

1. The book of Esther is composed as historical narrative, but it also has the qualities of a dramatic epic tale in that it recounts the laudable deeds of its hero and heroine, Mordecai and Esther. But though the story advances in connection with Esther and Mordecai, the true protagonist is the unnamed, invisible God. The book of Esther is a narrative illustration of the operation of divine providence, and Esther (and, to a lesser extent, Mordecai) serve simply to spotlight the role of human instrumentality in the divine work.
2. If divine providence is the primary thematic element in the story, the story's intended effect is the encouragement and strengthening of the faith and patience of God's people.

- a. Esther was composed during a period of great difficulty and discouragement for the Jewish people. David's dynasty and kingdom had been destroyed, and Abraham's "great nation" had become a powerless "byword" among the Gentiles. Moreover, this once mighty people were now in exile, subjugated to the oppressive, heathen world power, to all appearances without hope or recourse.

As if desolation, exile, and opposition were not enough, the sons of Abraham were now facing their greatest threat since being constituted as a nation. It is in the context of this perilous historical circumstance that the writer crafts his tale of Jewish deliverance, vindication, and triumph.

The story is fiercely nationalistic precisely because of its historical purpose in the life of the Old Covenant people. The writer intended that it would provide hope and encouragement to Abraham's seed that God is ever faithful to keep His covenant promises. Esther is a story of triumph, and it is the biblical basis for the jubilant festival of Purim that to this day is an important part of the Jewish religious calendar (thus the book's exalted place as one of the five Megilloth).

- b. But the story of Esther also makes an important contribution to the revelation of redemption; it, too, is a part of the Scriptures that Jesus insisted testify of Him. Its first role in salvation history was to strengthen the hope and confidence of Abraham's physical covenant seed, and thus the Jews still hold it in high regard. But for this very reason it ministers gospel truth to Christians, for God's faithfulness to Abraham's seed finds its ultimate point of reference in the patriarch's true seed – those descendants who are joined to the singular Seed.
3. The book of Esther is an ingeniously composed dramatic narrative that spotlights the operation of divine providence in the affairs of human history. In this way the story unfolds on two levels: the *natural* level of human intention, action and expectation, and the *supernatural* level of divine oversight and outcome. The genius of the writer lies in the way he has the supernatural operating entirely beneath the story itself, unmentioned and invisible, never intruding upon, violating, or vitiating the natural. The story is an account of purely natural human intentions and actions, but ones ultimately yielding a stream of outcomes neither foreseen nor predictable.

A primary way the writer accomplishes this literarily is through the repeated use of *irony*. As a literary device, irony refers to the use of words to convey the opposite of, or sharp contrast with, their literal meaning. It can take several forms, the most basic of which is an utterance characterized by a deliberate contrast between the apparent and intended meanings. It can also be a stylistic device associated with plot, setting, characterization, etc. used by the writer for rhetorical, humorous, or other effect. Another form of literary irony is incongruity in the events of a story between what is expected and what actually occurs. This is the most common use of irony in the book of Esther, and it is especially suitable to the author's goal in telling his story.