

Introduction to Esther Tony Hopkins

Versions

There are two versions of Esther in Judeo-Christian scriptures. The shorter version is found in Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament in Protestant editions; the longer version is found in the Catholic version of the Old Testament. The differences between the two versions apparently were produced when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint). In Bibles which include the Apocrypha, the additions to the shorter version are contained in a separate book called the Additions to Esther.

Canonical Context

In the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings; also one of the five Festal Scrolls, each of which is associated with a Jewish festival (Purim in Esther).

Authorship and Dating

Neither the original author nor the author of the additions is known to us. The older version of the story was likely composed in the 4th century BCE; the additions are likely created a century or two later.

Historical and Geographical Setting

The Babylonian exile ends when Cyrus of Persia takes over the Babylonian kingdom (539 BCE) and issues the edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (538). The story of Esther is set during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus (the Hebrew version of the Persian name Xerxes), son of Darius and (maternal) grandson of Cyrus. Ahasuerus/Xerxes is the one who, c. 458 BCE, commissions Ezra and grants him authority to collect revenues and appoint judges to enforce the laws of Judaism. The geographical setting is Susa, the winter palace of Persian kings. (In introducing Ezra-Nehemiah, we said that not all of the Jews went home after Cyrus' edict; this story is about some of the Jews who stayed behind.)

Main characters

Esther (Hebrew Hadassah), the heroine—she is portrayed as beautiful, wise, courageous, and proactive (in a culture in which women were generally taught to be reactive and submissive).

Mordecai, Esther's uncle, who has adopted Esther because her parents are dead. Much of the time, he counsels Esther, though at the pivotal moment in the story, he follows her counsel.

Ahasuerus, the king. He is characterized by the greatest possible power and wealth, but he lacks character; his personal attributes include vanity and self-indulgence.

Haman, the villain—he is characterized by pride, lust for power, and extreme prejudice.

Vashti, the queen, a strong woman who refuses to be put on display by her husband—and who pays the price for showing courage in a culture dominated by men.

Plot(s)

1. The fall of Vashti and the rise of Esther.

The king is having a lavish banquet which lasts seven days, apparently mostly to display his wealth and power. On the last, when he is "merry with wine," he decides to show off his queen. When she refuses to come, the king and his male advisers decide that she must be punished, lest other women think that *they* do not have to obey *their* husbands. So Vashti is deposed and banished, news of which is sent throughout the kingdom so that "every man should be the master in his own house."

The male advisers then arrange for a beauty contest to find a new queen. The candidates are sequestered for 12 months, during which they take various beauty treatments, including oils, perfumes, and cosmetics. Among the candidates is a Jew named Hadassah, known by the Persian name Esther. An orphan, she has been adopted by her cousin, Mordecai, who counsels her to keep her ethnic and religious identity a secret, which she does. She is chosen by the queen to be the new king.

2. A story of intrigue at court

Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king. He tells Esther, who warns the king. For the moment, Mordecai's warning is unknown and unrewarded.

Having risen to the highest position among the king's advisers, Haman expects everyone to bow to him. Mordecai, being a Jew, refuses to do so. Haman decides not only to kill Mordecai but to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. He casts a lot (pur, pl. purim) to decide the date for the pogrom, and it is to be 11 months later. The pogrom is advertised by Haman in a royal decree, "calling on the people to be ready" (3:15).

Mordecai puts on sackcloth and ashes and laments. He then tells Esther that it is up to her to foil Haman's plot. Mordecai famously says, "Perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." (4:14) Esther is willing, but Persian law says that if the queen comes to the king without being summoned, she will be executed unless he extends to her the royal golden scepter. Esther determines to risk her own life in order to save her people, saying, "I will approach the king even though it is against the law. If I perish, I perish." (4:16) Esther indeed risks her life and approaches the king. He extends the scepter, and she requests that he and Haman be her guest at a banquet over the next two days.

Meanwhile, the king learns that Mordecai is the one who is responsible for uncovering the assassination plot and saving his life. Wanting to reward Mordecai, the king asks Haman how the king should reward a man whom the king wants to honor? Haman thinks that he is the one whom the king wants to reward, and describes the most lavish rewards possible. Then Haman is forced to do all of those things for Mordecai, whom he despises.

In the climax of the story, on the second day of the banquet, Esther reveals that she is a Jew. The king now realizes that Haman's plot is against Esther, her uncle, and her people. Incensed, the king orders that Haman and his conspirators be hanged on the very gallows which he had built for the execution of Mordecai. The celebration of the people's salvation become the annual festival of Purim, named for the pur used by Mordecai earlier in the story.

Echoes of other scriptures

God's people face serious trials in a foreign court—Joseph in the court of Egypt (Genesis) and Daniel in the court of the Persians and Medes (Daniel)

During a banquet, a wealthy, vain king is so captivated by a woman that he promises her anything, even up to half of his kingdom (Esther 7:2; Mk 6:23)

A foreign king is instrumental in saving God's people, underscoring the sovereignty of God (Cyrus in 2 Chr 36 and Ezra 1)

Interesting tensions within the book of Esther

The deposition of Vashti, the selection of Esther based on her looks, and the "every man master of his house sentiment" reflect the unbridled patriarchy of the ancient world; and yet this story, produced and set in the ancient world, has a woman who is the savior of God's people!

God is never explicitly mentioned in the book of Esther, yet the Jewish faith is evident in every facet of the story. "The Jews" are mentioned 41 times; Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman because of Jewish law; prayer, fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, prominent aspects of the Jewish faith, are explicitly mentioned.

Interesting tension in the larger canon

A critical question in all of the post-exilic writings is how to be a faithful Jew in the post-exilic world. Ezra and Nehemiah say: return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, restore the Law, and banish all foreigners. Daniel will say: be at home in a foreign kingdom, but observe Jewish commandments and traditions (kosher laws, prayer practices). In Esther, however, she lives in a foreign kingdom; she adopts their diet, dress, and customs; she marries a foreign king; and for a very long time, she hides the fact that she is a Jew. Once more we are reminded that discipleship is not as simple as, "Just do what the Bible says." Throughout the Bible, the same question is answered in more than one way. So how do we decide? The Jesus test!