

May 16, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

Week 1 | Esther 1:1-9 | “Ever-Present”

Introduction to the Book of Esther.

Timeline – The events in Esther occur roughly 100ish years after the Babylonian conquest of Israel in 605 BCE. This makes Esther a close parallel with Daniel, though Daniel himself would've been gone for some time. What's important to remember about the setting of Esther is that the Jews were **fractured** people. While many had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple when the Persian king, Cyrus, decreed that the Jews were allowed to go back home (cf. Ezra/Nehemiah), many stayed where they were and continued to live and work where they grew up. Their non-Jewish country land felt more like home to them than Israel. This great desperation of the Jews is called the “Diaspora.” But while they chose to stay, they did not abandon their distinctive Jewish heritage. And Esther is a story about how, through living outside Israel, the Jew will be protected by God as a follower of God. And that just because a Jew makes their home in a foreign land, God will not forget or abandon them (cf. Jer. 29:1-9). Not surprisingly, Esther is among the favorites in the Hebrew canon. In fact, because Esther deals with Jews who are not only under threat of extermination but who are also without a home, many Jews throughout time have resonated on a deep level. Especially considering the treatment of the Jews by wicked leaders like Antiochus Epiphanes and Adolf Hitler, one can understand how a Jew finds the situation in Esther all too familiar. One Jewish scholar reflecting on Esther said, “Jews rarely, if ever, were able to afford the luxury of regarding the book of Esther as ancient history; for them it was almost always current events.”¹

Genre – Esther is a historical short story with a comedic flair. One could even say it has elements of a dark comedy. In fact, it has multiple aspects of different types of genres which makes the job of nailing down a specific one difficult.² However one comes down on the issue of genre, one thing is abundantly clear, this book is meant to be enjoyed.³ This takes nothing away from the historical elements. What occurs in the pages of Esther **really** happened. While the characterization of Xerxes and Haman may be embellished for comedic effect, there is no make-believe about the narrative itself. How the story is told is clearly meant to not only

¹ Bush, Frederic, *Ruth-Esther*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1996), p. 332.

² Firth, David G., *The Message of Esther*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, ILL; Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2010), p. 21-25.

³ Firth (2010), p. 24.

inform but entertain.⁴ This is seen in the long list of ridiculous Persian names that have a satirical flair to them and how the events themselves transpire (cf. Ex. 6).⁵

There are five main characters:

Ahasuerus – Also known as Xerxes, was the leader of the Persian Empire from 486-465 BCE.⁶ The Persians themselves were famous for not only conquering the Babylonians and taking over their provinces in 539 BCE, but, the very next year in 538 BCE, under the decree of Cyrus the Great, the Persians also allowed the Israelites to return home and rebuild the Temple (cf. Ezra and Nehemiah). The time period in Esther takes place roughly fifty years after this decree as Xerxes takes the throne. At the time of Xerxes, the Persian's dominion stretched from Egypt in the West to India's borders in the East.

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Xerxes himself is famous for his conflicts with the Greeks, in which he lost almost every significant battle. The biggest loss Xerxes experienced was when he went up against Leonidas and his Spartans in Thermopylae. In fact, the events which led up to the beauty pageant in Esther 2, from a historical perspective, must've been a way to help Xerxes forget about his defeat at the hands of Greece (cf. 2:16 = 479 BCE, the end of the Second Persian War).⁷ While a barbaric and brutal king, Xerxes is portrayed in Esther as a witless buffoon whose only concern is pleasure.⁸ This is best seen in the opening chapter when he banishes his queens simply because she refuses to be paraded about as some animal and then decrees that all men should be the rulers of his own household. This is classic over-compensation.

Haman – The villain of our story. And ironically, he was a descendent of Agag ("Agagite"), the King of the Amalekites who lived half a millennia ago (cf. 1 Sam. 15). King Saul not only spares Agag's life when he was commanded to kill him, but Saul also takes some of the spoils of war for himself. The consequences of these actions are that Saul is rejected by God in favor of David. But this failure by Saul will have a rippling effect throughout the next 550 years culminating in Haman's aversion to the Jews in general, and, specifically, his burning hatred of our next character we'll look at,

⁴ Bush (1996), p. 315.

⁵ Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 41.

⁶ Huot, Jean-Louis. "Xerxes I." Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 Apr. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xerxes-I>, [accessed 14 May 2021].

⁷ Firth (2010), p. 27.

⁸ Reid (2008), p. 23.

Mordecai. Haman is a man driven by pride and ego. He is irrational evil personified.⁹ He is the classic case of an individual who cannot be protected from himself. Where Mordecai and Esther represent the wise of Proverbs, Haman represents all the Bible has to say about the fool and his folly.¹⁰

Mordecai – Is a faithful Jew living in service to a foreign king. Interestingly, he is a Benjamite, the tribe from which Saul hailed, making Mordecai a descendant of King Saul. This means the conflict between Haman and Mordecai was fueled by centuries of bitterness. In one sense, we can say that had Saul done his job in 1 Sam. 15, Mordecai wouldn't have been put in the situations he was in. On the other hand, we find in Mordecai everything Saul should have been: courageous, faithful, and humble. One could even say that Mordecai finished what Saul didn't. Mordecai is portrayed as the Jew. In fact, he is often referred to by his ethnic identity rather than his tribal identity. This is rare in the OT as most Jews are known for their tribal heritage.¹¹ The implied message for Jews is that the world does not care about what part of Israel they hailed from. They are simply the "Jews." This means that Mordecai is what all Jews, dispersed throughout the world, ought to aspire to be. Throughout the story, Mordecai is known more for his Jewishness than his own name. He near-perfectly balances what it means to be a follower of God as a minority in a hostile world.

Esther – Out of the characters just mentioned, Esther is the only one to experience growth.¹² Xerxes, Haman, and even Mordecai are all static characters who, more or less, play their role. As we'll see, Xerxes is a pawn manipulated not only by his own people but also by his own voracious appetites. Haman is your typical one-dimensional villain bent on destroying the "good guys." And Mordecai is the sage adviser, resolute and wise giving counsel to our heroine, Esther. But Esther, on the other hand, goes from a character who's only recognized for her beauty to one who ends up being recognized for her courage. She goes from a quiet and subservient character to one who wields her wit and intellect like a sword. And though she begins the story by taking orders, the story ends with her giving orders, not only to Mordecai but Xerxes as well.

⁹ Bush (1996), p. 317.

¹⁰ Firth (2010), p. 31.

¹¹ Bush (1996), p. 312.

¹² Bush (1996), p. 308.

In summary, Xerxes is known for gluttony and gullibility. Haman is known for pride and being emotional. Mordecai is known for his loyalty and wisdom. And Esther is known for her courage and wit. But there is one more to add to our list of cast.

God – The irony, of course, is that the seeming absence of God is the most striking feature about Esther. What's more, along with Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, Esther is not cited by the writers of the NT or quoted by Jesus.¹³ Because of this, there have been some throughout Church history who have proposed that Esther not be included in the canon of Scripture at all, though they are indeed in the minority when it comes to this opinion.¹⁴ Most famously, the great reformer, Martin Luther, said, "I am so hostile to...Esther that I could wish that [it] did not exist at all, for [it] Judaize[s] too greatly and [has] much pagan impropriety."¹⁵ Luther's comments are inspired by the fact that Mordecai and Esther are, without a doubt, flawed. For instance, unlike Daniel, Esther (under the direction of Mordecai) hides her Jewish identity. Their humanity, like most characters in the OT, is on full display. We'll point out these flaws as we go along. However, what Luther failed to account for is that even though Mordecai and Esther are our human heroes in the story, they are really playing off of the lead actor: God. And God is primarily seen in two ways: the preponderance of unlikely **coincidences** (Haman the Agagite vs. Mordecai the Benjamite) and the long list of **reversals** (at least 10- Haman builds a stake to impale Mordecai, but he is the one impaled).¹⁶ Thus, like our study of Ruth, there is a ton of "...and it just so happened." So much so, to deny the existence of some Grand Actor who is behind the scenes pulling strings is to leave all reason behind. God is a God of coincidences and reversals. There is no such thing as a chance encounter when God directs our paths. And if God can reverse the effects of sin and death, He can reverse any situation in our life.

READ: Esther 1:1-9 (ESV)

¹ Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, ³ in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, ⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. ⁵ And when these days were completed, the king

¹³ Reid (2008), p. 29.

¹⁴ Bush (1996), p. 275-276.

¹⁵ Bush (1996), p. 332.

¹⁶ Reid (2008), p. 34-37.

gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.⁶ There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.⁷ Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.⁸ And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

So, what's the takeaway?

The hidden God is always present with His followers.

Out of all the other books of the Bible with its explicit and numerous mentions of God, only Esther, which has no mention of God at all, requires us to read it with the eyes of faith to see God at work. This is not unlike how we live out faith today in a world and a time where God is not so easily seen. Yet, we know, even when God is seemingly absent, he present with us...always.

READ: Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV)

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age."

Just as Mordecai and Esther were a part of the Jewish Diaspora, we, as followers of Christ, are a part of the Christian Diaspora. We have been sent out to four corners of the World to bring the Good News that Jesus Christ is risen. And wherever we go, God has promised to go with us (cf. Heb. 13:5). After all, He is Yahweh, the 'I am who I am,' the one who always acts and always is.¹⁷

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The hidden God is always present with His followers.

¹⁷ Reid (2008), p. 51.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/NWPbG2g>