Esther

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MSB17

Title

“Esther” serves as the title without variation through the ages. This book and the book of Ruth are the only OT books named after women. Like Song of Solomon, Obadiah, and Nahum, the NT does not quote or allude to Esther. “Hadassah” (2:7), meaning “myrtle,” was the Hebrew name of Esther, which came either from the Persian word “star” or possibly from the name of the Babylonian love goddess, Ishtar. As the orphaned daughter of her father Abihail, Esther grew up in Persia with her older cousin, Mordecai, who raised her as if she were his own daughter (2:7, 15).

Author and Date

The author remains unknown, although Mordecai, Ezra, and Nehemiah have been suggested. Whoever penned Esther possessed a detailed knowledge of Persian customs, etiquette, and history, plus particular familiarity with the palace at Shushan (1:5–7). He also exhibited intimate knowledge of the Hebrew calendar and customs, while additionally showing a strong sense of Jewish nationalism. Possibly a Persian Jew, who later moved back to Israel, wrote Esther.

Esther appears as the 17th book in the literary chronology of the OT and closes the OT historical section. Only Ezra 7–10, Nehemiah, and Malachi report later OT history than Esther. The account in Esther ends in 473 B.C. before Ahasuerus died by assassination (ca. 465 B.C.). Esther 10:2 speaks as though Ahasuerus’ reign has been completed, so the earliest possible writing date would be after his reign around mid-fifth century B.C. The latest reasonable date would be prior to 331 B.C. when Greece conquered Persia.

Background and Setting

Esther occurred during the Persian period of world history, ca. 539 B.C. (Dan. 5:30, 31) to ca. 331 B.C. (Dan. 8:1–27). Ahasuerus ruled from ca. 486 to 465 B.C.; Esther covers the 483–473 B.C. portion of his reign. The name Ahasuerus represents the Heb. transliteration of the Persian name “Khshayarsha,” while “Xerxes” represents his Greek name.

The events of Esther occurred during the wider time span between the first return of the Jews after the 70 year captivity in Babylon (Dan. 9:1–19) under Zerubbabel ca. 538 B.C. (Ezra 1–6) and the second return led by Ezra ca. 458 B.C. (Ezra 7–10). Nehemiah’s journey (the third return) from Susa to Jerusalem (Neh. 1–2) occurred later (ca. 445 B.C.).

Esther and Exodus both chronicle how vigorously foreign powers tried to eliminate the Jewish race

and how God sovereignly preserved His people in accordance with His covenant promise to Abraham ca. 2100–2075 B.C. (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–8). As a result of God's prevailing, Esther 9, 10 records the beginning of Purim—a new annual festival in the 12th month (Feb.- Mar.) to celebrate the nation's survival. Purim became one of two festivals given outside of the Mosaic legislation to still be celebrated in Israel (Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, is the other, cf. John 10:22).

Historical and Theological Themes

All 167 verses of Esther have ultimately been accepted as canonical, although the absence of God's name anywhere has caused some to unnecessarily doubt its authenticity. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) added an extra 107 apocryphal verses which supposedly compensated for this lack. Along with Song of Solomon, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations, Esther stands with the OT books of the Megilloth, or "5 scrolls." Rabbis read these books in the synagogue on 5 special occasions during the year—Esther being read at Purim (cf. 9:20–32).

The historical genesis for the drama played out between Mordecai (a Benjamite descendant of Saul—2:5) and Haman (an Agagite—3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24) goes back almost 1,000 years when the Jews exited from Egypt (ca. 1445 B.C.) and were attacked by the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16), whose lineage began with Amalek, son of Esau (Gen. 36:12). God pronounced His curse on the Amalekites, which resulted in their total elimination as a people (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:17–19). Although Saul (ca. 1030 B.C.) received orders to kill all the Amalekites, including their king Agag (1 Sam. 15:2, 3), he disobeyed (1 Sam. 15:7–9) and incurred God's displeasure (1 Sam. 15:11, 26; 28:18). Samuel finally hacked Agag into pieces (1 Sam. 15:32, 33). Because of his lineage from Agag, Haman carried deep hostility toward the Jews.

The time of Esther arrived 550 years after the death of Agag, but in spite of such passage of time, neither Haman the Agagite nor Mordecai the Benjamite had forgotten the tribal feud that still smoldered in their souls. This explains why Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman (3:2, 3) and why Haman so viciously attempted to exterminate the Jewish race (3:5, 6, 13). As expected, God's prophecy to extinguish the Amalekites (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:17–19) and God's promise to preserve the Jews (Gen. 17:1–8) prevailed.

Because of God's faithfulness to save His people, the festival of Purim (named after the Akkadian word for "lot"—3:7; 9:26), an annual, two day holiday of feasting, rejoicing, sending food to one another, and giving gifts to the poor (9:21, 22), was decreed to be celebrated in every generation, by every family, in every province and city (9:27, 28). Esther later added a new feature of fasting with lamentation (9:31). Purim is not biblically mentioned again, although it has been celebrated throughout the centuries in Israel. Esther could be compared to a chess game. God and Satan (as invisible players) moved real kings, queens, and nobles. When Satan put Haman into place, it was as if he announced "Check." God then positioned Esther and Mordecai in order to put Satan into "Checkmate!" Ever since the fall of man (Gen. 3:1–19), Satan has attempted to spiritually sever God's relationship with His human creation and disrupt God's covenant promises with Israel. For example, Christ's line through the tribe of Judah had been murderously reduced to Joash alone, who was rescued and preserved (2 Chr. 22:10–12). Later, Herod slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem, thinking Christ was among them (Matt. 2:16). Satan tempted Christ to denounce God and worship him (Matt. 4:9). Peter, at Satan's insistence, tried to block Christ's journey to Calvary (Matt. 16:22). Finally, Satan entered into Judas who then betrayed Christ to the Jews and Romans (Luke 22:3–6). While God was not mentioned in Esther, He was everywhere apparent as the One who opposed and

foiled Satan's diabolical schemes by providential intervention.

In Esther, all of God's unconditional covenant promises to Abraham (Gen. 17:1–8) and to David (2 Sam. 7:8–16) were jeopardized. However, God's love for Israel is nowhere more apparent than in this dramatic rescue of His people from pending elimination. "Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4).

Interpretive Challenges

The most obvious question raised by Esther comes from the fact that God is nowhere mentioned, as in Song of Solomon. Nor does the writer or any participant refer to the law of God, the Levitical sacrifices, worship, or prayer. The skeptic might ask, "Why would God never be mentioned when the Persian king receives over 175 references? Since God's sovereignty prevailed to save the Jews, why does He then not receive appropriate recognition?"

It seems satisfying to respond that if God desired to be mentioned, He could just as sovereignly have moved the author to write of Him as He acted to save Israel. This situation seems to be more of a problem at the human level than the divine, because Esther is the classic illustration of God's providence as He, the unseen power, controls everything for His purpose. There are no miracles in Esther, but the preservation of Israel through providential control of every event and person reveals the omniscience and omnipotence of Jehovah. Whether He is named is not the issue. He is clearly the main character in the drama.

Second, "Why were Mordecai and Esther so secular in their lifestyles?" Esther (2:6–20) does not seem to have the zeal for holiness like Daniel (Dan. 1:8–20). Mordecai kept his and Esther's Jewish heritage secret, unlike Daniel (Dan. 6:5). The law of God was absent in contrast to Ezra (Ezra 7:10). Nehemiah had a heart for Jerusalem that seemingly eluded the affections of Esther and Mordecai (Neh. 1:1–2:5).

The following observations help to shed some light on these issues. First, this short book does not record everything. Perhaps Mordecai and Esther actually possessed a deeper faith than becomes apparent here (cf. 4:16). Second, even godly Nehemiah did not mention his God when talking to King Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1–8). Third, the Jewish festivals which provided structure for worship had been lost long before Esther, e.g., Passover (2 Kin. 23:22) and Pentecost (Neh. 8:17). Fourth, possibly the anti-Jewish letter written by the Samaritans to Ahasuerus several years earlier had frightened them (ca. 486 B.C.; Ezra 4:6). Fifth, the evil intentions of Haman did not just first surface when Mordecai refused to bow down (3:1, 2). Most likely they were long before shared by others which would have intimidated the Jewish population. Sixth, Esther did identify with her Jewish heritage at a most appropriate time (7:3, 4). And yet, the nagging question of why Esther and Mordecai did not seem to have the same kind of open devotion to God as did Daniel remains. Further, Nehemiah's prayer (Neh. 1:5–11, esp. v. 7) seems to indicate a spiritual lethargy among the Jewish exiles in Susa. So this issue must ultimately be resolved by God since He alone knows human hearts.

Outline

I. Esther Replaces Vashti (1:1–2:18)

A. Vashti’s Insubordination (1:1–22)

B. Esther’s Coronation (2:1–18)

II. Mordecai Overcomes Haman (2:19–7:10)

A. Mordecai’s Loyalty (2:19–23)

B. Haman’s Promotion and Decree (3:1–15)

C. Esther’s Intervention (4:1–5:14)

D. Mordecai’s Recognition (6:1–13)

E. Haman’s Fall (6:14–7:10)

III. Israel Survives Haman’s Genocide Attempt (8:1–10:3)

A. Esther and Mordecai’s Advocacy (8:1–17)

B. The Jews’ Victory (9:1–19)

C. Purim’s Beginning (9:20–23)

D. Mordecai’s Fame (10:1–3)

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