

Esther Introduction: The Gospel According to Esther

Is God at work on the seemingly chaotic world stage even when we cannot see it with our own eyes? Is God at work in the details of our lives even in times when we have no personal religious experiences or feelings? What does it look like to be an ordinary man or woman of God when you live in a time when your faith in Jesus makes you a minority and cultural outsider? These are questions we will be pursuing in our verse-by-verse study of the Old Testament book of Esther.... In many profound ways the book of Esther points us to Jesus! Therefore, we are titling our series: The Gospel According to Esther.

Facts:

Intro: 5,700 words (in the ESV)

You can Read slowly and carefully in one hour. Listen to it on a Bible App.

Page number in the FR Bibles: _____ (or locate it on your phone app)

Viewpoints: (Mixed Opinions!)

Declaration!! There is a book in the Bible that does not mention God, faith in God, religion, the law of God, or prayer! Guess which one it is? It is Esther! ... Because of this... there have been a big spectrum of positive and negative viewpoints about Esther.

Some Love it!

>> 12th century Jewish Philosopher- Moses Maimonides- “When Messiah comes, the other books of the Hebrew Bible may pass away, but the Torah (Gen-Deut) and Esther will abide forever.” (i.e. this means he is ranking it #6 out of 39- ranking higher than Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Job, etc.)

>> Tim Keller (NY Pastor and Author) did a stellar 4-week sermon series on Esther.

>> Dr. Karen Jobes has a great commentary on it that I would encourage you to buy.

Some do not like Esther quite as much!

>> Reformer Martin Luther- *“I am so hostile to 2 Maccabees and to Esther that I could wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety.”*

>> The 2 main characters Esther & Mordecai do not reflect the character of other great Biblical heroes:

- Mordecai was the one who insisted that Esther conceal her identity
- Esther loses her virginity to a pagan king to whom she is not even married
- Mordecai allowed his refusal to bow to Haman to become a political incident that threatened the entire Jewish people

>> 1st 7 centuries of church history there are no commentaries on Esther

So we have mixed viewpoints!

However, the book of Esther has always been accepted as part of the Bible and never seriously been considered for removal- even by the most liberal of scholars. **For thousands of years God's people have heard God's voice speaking in this powerful and beautiful story filled with timeless truth.**

Romans 15:4- "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

2 Tim 3:16- "All Scripture is God breathed and profitable..."

Date/Author/Style:

Date written: Somewhere between 450-200 BC (meaning that the inspired writer's audience would have been the Bible reading people of God under Persian/Greek rule). I personally tend to believe it was closer to the time of the actual events of Esther (in the 450s BC).

Authorship: We believe that God is the ultimate author of ALL Scripture, but the divinely inspired human author of Esther is truly unknown. The Jewish Talmud (a commentary on the OT) says that some men called the "men of the great synagogue" from Ezra's day (450s BC) were the authors. Historian Josephus and Early Church Father Clement both thought Mordecai was the author. Ultimately, we really cannot know who the human author is.

Style: Esther is history in the form of story. It starts the same way as the other historical books in the Bible (i.e. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, etc.). Everything in Esther is presented as having actually happened in history. While it is an epic story, it is not to be understood as a parable or a myth.

This form of history by story is also not to be seen as "non-interpretive" and "just the facts" writing. The human author of Esther shapes the story to make a point through selection, arrangement, creativity, and emphasis.

So we do not have an exaggerated parable and we do not have a dry news story, rather with Esther we have a Divinely Inspired, historically accurate and informative, Message from God for His Bible reading people in all times and places.

Esther's Place in Bible History:

Creation- God made man and women equal in His image to humbly rule the earth under the rule of God

Fall- Satan tempted Eve and Adam and they willfully disobeyed God causing spiritual, relational, and physical brokenness and death to all mankind.

There is hope that God will act in human history to save and help His creation.

Abraham (2166BC) – God makes a special covenant/promise with Abraham to form a special people through him for His glory. Inclusion with Abraham in this blessing is by grace and through faith alone.

Moses (1446 BC) – God renews His covenant with His people as He rescues them from Egypt. He gives them His perfect law with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (i.e. curses such as expulsion from the land through exile).

Deuteronomy 28:15, 36, 64

¹⁵ *"But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deut 28:15 ESV)*

³⁶ *"The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. (Deut 28:36 ESV)*

⁶⁴ *"And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. (Deut 28:64 ESV)*

King David (900 BC) – God chooses a shepherd boy from the family of Judah to be His King. God promises that through this human King's lineage He will someday provide a Divine and Eternal King (a Messiah, a second Adam) who will save, rule, and love His people forever. This is looking forward to Jesus!

Enter Solomon ... later kingdom division... much idolatry and sin.... Eventual Judgment & Exile for breaking the covenant.

722 BC- the 10 tribes of the North are deported to Assyria to never return

605 - 586 BC- Southern Tribes exiled into Babylon. Temple Destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

** 539 BC - Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and founded the Persian Empire. He freed the Jews to go home and re-build their city and temple

Ezra 1:1-4

1:1 *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:*

² *"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.*

³ *Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem,*

which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel-- he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

Returns from exile: 536 BC (Zerubbabel), 458 BC (Ezra), 444 BC (Nehemiah).

Date of Events in Esther- 486-465 BC (Note- no attention paid to what is going on back in Jerusalem, from a chronological standpoint, if Esther does not take place, then Nehemiah and Ezra would not have happened.)

>> Karen Jobes- *"the book of Esther tells the story of the Jewish people who, about 50 years after Cyrus's decree, apparently had chosen not to return to the homeland."* p26

** What happens in Esther ultimately leads to the preservation of God's people, from whom, Jesus will come 400 years later and usher in the New Covenant in His blood. Everything changes with Jesus. He is the way the truth and the life! The Old Testament looks forward to Him, the Gospels present Him, and the New Testament helps God's people learn to live as believers in Jesus.

Esther's Place in World History:

World stage (outside of Jerusalem and Israel)

- Confucius was born in China
- Herodotus was writing history in Greece
- Protagoras was being a philosopher
- Socrates was born
- Pythagoras was coming up with the Pythagorean theorem
- The Olympic games were already 200 years old
- And Esther and Mordecai were in Susa of Persia

Main Characters:

** **Place- Susa:** City in PERSIA- Modern Shush in SW Iran about an 8-hour drive from Tehran.

In the Bible, the city is known primarily from the story of Esther... The city is also mentioned in Nehemiah and Daniel, both of whom lived in the city during the 6th century BC in the period known as the Babylonian captivity... A tomb known as *Shush-Daniel* is believed to be that of Daniel himself. It is capped by an unusual white cone which some believe was formerly a stone 'Star of David'.

Persian King Ahasuerus (a.k.a. Xerxes) - Xerxes- an ambitious, ruthless, and intolerant ruler, administrator over a vast empire, a brilliant warrior, and jealous lover according to HERODOTUS, an ancient Greek historian who wrote *HISTORY OF THE PERSIAN WARS*. He was assassinated in his bed chamber in 465BC. Father was Darius I

Vashti- The Queen to King Ahasuerus.

Mordecai (the Benjamite)- He had been living in Susa ever since Nebuchadnezzar dragged him there as an exile. He was the cousin of Esther, but functioned more like a guardian uncle in her life.

Esther (Hadassah- Her Jewish name)- 55x in book and nowhere else in Scripture... Ishtar (Babylonian Goddess of love)— or Persian word for STAR. She was an orphan- her parents both dies and Mordecai raised her. The text says that she had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at.

Haman (the Agagite) – A Royal official who was promoted above all officials except for the king. Infuriated in our story because Mordecai will not bow down to him in honor. He was so furious that he contrived a plan to have all the Jews wiped off the face of the earth.

Plot and Features: (Esther has it all!)

>> Everyone loves a good story. We've all read that book that we just could not put down, or watches that movie or TV series where it was so good that you were sad to have to turn it off. Esther has it all. All the makings of an amazing story.

To name some: Inside look at Imperial Royalty, Wealth, Ego-Mania, Battle of the Sexes, Beauty Pageants, Sex Trafficking, Gender Equality, Civil Disobedience, National security threats, Genocide, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, An Assassination plot thwarted by covert intel, Adoption, Orphans becoming Queens, Chaotic Politics, Government officials receiving death sentences, Blood Money, Capital Punishment, Just War, Lobbying, Courage, Social Justice, Feasting and Partying for the Holidays, and much more.

Summary: Esther is a story about God's faithfulness to preserve His people through His providential care and protection. We see an attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish race that is thwarted through a series of impossible coincidences and through the brave actions of an orphan turned Queen (Esther) and her cousin/guardian Mordecai.

Key Verses & Major Themes: (verses in and outside of Esther)

Theme 1- The Providence of God (God's protective care at work through every detail and circumstances)

Esther 4:13-14- Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

¹⁴ For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Esther 6:1 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king.

Rom 8:28- And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Theme 2- The Faithfulness and Hiddenness of God (God at work in my life even when I do not directly see it)

Esther 4:1- When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.

Esther 5:4- ⁴ And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king."

Let Come (YABO) the King (HAMMALEK) and (WE) Haman (HAMAN) YHWH

Theme 3- Reversals!

Esther 9:1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

1 Corinthians 15:55-58

⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Relevance and Application Today: 3 Big Ways

- The founding of Purim for Jews. (will talk much more about this later)
- God, in the midst of widespread secularization, the exaltation of un-godly values, and domestic and international political chaos are you actively working in this world and are you winning?
- God, in the midst of seasons where I lack of personal religious experience in many and perhaps all areas of my life are you still actively working in my life? How can I know you are at work?

- We live in a culture and world where faith in Christ makes you a cultural minority. God, what does it look like to be an ordinary Christian in a non-Christian family, workplace, neighborhood, city, and world? (not a super spiritual church mouse, but a winsome and wise man or woman of God shining forth through a life well lived to the glory of Christ)

Fellowship Groups are going to rock! Don't miss out!

Resources and Sources Used:

- INTRO TO HISTORICAL BOOKS, DAVID HOWARD
- KAREN JOBES - NIV LIFE APPLICATION COMMENTARY
- GOOGLE INFO ON SHUSH, IRAN
- BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE ESV BIBLE