

Text: Esther 1

Theme: Series-Unusual Messengers of God: God's Invincible Providence

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Evening Worship Service on 04/01/2015 at 5.00pm

Historical and Theological Themes

The most obvious question raised by Esther comes from the fact that God is nowhere mentioned. Nor does the writer or any participant refer to the law of God, the Levitical sacrifices, worship, or prayer. At no point is Yahweh described as giving anyone advice, hardening anyone's heart, or moving anyone to act. One might think that Yahweh has disappeared entirely, but he is working behind the scenes rather than overtly like in other texts.

But the Jews are still dependent upon Yahweh and still obliged to uphold their part of the covenant; but they can't assume that they will always be able to see how and when they are being supported or helped. Still, the lack of overt theology in the text was the primary reason why it took so long for Esther to be accepted as canonical by both Jews and Christians.

The sceptic 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. Whether He is named is not the issue. He is clearly the main character in the drama.

Background and Setting

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.).

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).

Divided Loyalty and Identity

The entire story in the Book of Esther revolves around the fact that Jews are a minority group scattered throughout an empire dominated by a much larger group that has a different culture, religion, and ethnicity. The Jews in many ways, remain true to the ruler, Ahasuerus, increasing in status in his eyes. But they are separate enough to be easily distinguishable, though they do not have any control over their own destiny. Thus, an important theme in Esther is how Jews living in such conditions cannot preserve their traditions and religion and their very existence without divine intervention.

Interpretive Challenges

"Esther" serves as the title without variation through the ages. This book and the book of Ruth are the only Old Testament books named after women. "Hadassah" (2:7), meaning "myrtle," was the Hebrew name of Esther. 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).

The reason for Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman is never stated, but it does suggest a theme that exists throughout the text: competing loyalties or identities between being Jewish and being a Persian subject. It's never stated whether Mordecai bows before king Ahasuerus, but for the purpose of the story Haman becomes the temporary ruler.

Outline

I. Esther Replaces Vashti (1:1–2:18)

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

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

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 to 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 killed Agag (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 smouldered in their souls. This may explain 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 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.

Esther and Exodus both chronicle how vigorously foreign powers used as pawns in Satan's chess board, tried to eliminate the Jewish race and the seed of Abraham who would bring ultimate redemption to the world, and how God sovereignly preserved His people in accordance with His covenant promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–8).

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.