

Commentary & Notes on Esther

The commentary and notes below are adapted from the teaching materials of Annie Kartoizian (1906-1989). In 1934 Annie became a missionary in China with OMS. During World War II she spent 21 months in a Japanese concentration camp as a prisoner. She was repatriated in 1943 and sailed on the famous vessel Gripsholm. In 1949 she made a miraculous last-minute escape from Beijing before it fell to Mao's Communists. When she could no longer enter China, Annie went to Taiwan. Annie and her family have been life-long friends of our family. In 1989, while pastoring with the United Armenian Congregational Church of Hollywood I had the honor of participating in her funeral. It was during those years in Los Angeles that Annie gave me her teaching notes (the commentary below) - laboriously typed on what is now yellowed paper with hand written marginal notes, many of which are in Chinese. - Pastor Steve

INTRODUCTION

The Writer Of The Book

The author is uncertain. Ezra and Mordecai are both suggested. Some think that the book is an extract from Persian records. If the book is taken from the records of the Persian kingdom, it would account for several characteristics of the book: the omission of the name of God, the details given concerning the empire of Ahasuerus, the exactness with which the names of his ministers and his sons are recorded, and the fact that the Jews are mentioned only in the third person.

Date Of Writing

The third year of the reign of Ahasuerus (1:3) who reigned from 486-466 B.C. The story of the book falls into the period between the first expedition under Zerubbabel, 536 B.C., and the second restoration under Ezra, 457 B.C.

Reliability Of The Book

The greatest proof of its reliability comes from Jesus' use of the words from this book when being tempted of the Devil (Matthew 4:1-11). He quoted Deuteronomy 6:13,16; 8:3; 10:20. Satan's departure shows that he too knew and felt the power of the words quoted.

The Place Where The Events Transpired

Shushan was the capital of the Persian Empire. It was on the plains of the Tigris River and the winter residence of the Persian kings was located there. Most of the Jews still remained in the Persian Empire, those returning to Jerusalem being in the minority.

The Purpose Of The Book

It is to show God's providential care of His people. It illustrates the nature and ways of Divine Providence. The same God who watched over the builders of the temple, also guarded the Jews in the 120 provinces of the Persian Empire. It is an inspired commentary on Deuteronomy 31:6 and Isaiah 54:17.

Key Thoughts Of The Book

The key word, though not given in the book, is providence; the protecting care of Divine Providence.

Connection With Other Scripture

There is historical connection with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Compare Mordecai's position under Ahasuerus, Esther 10:3, with that of Joseph under Pharaoh, Genesis 41:40, and that of Daniel at the court of Babylon, Daniel 5:16-29.

Principal Characters

1. Ahasuerus or Xerxes. He is the Persian King who invaded Greece and was so badly defeated, 480-479 B.C. His son, Artaxerxes figures in the later chapters of Ezra and in Nehemiah.
2. Mordecai. He was a Jew, dwelling in Shushan, and upright and intelligent man. He was the family of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin (2:5), the first cousin of Esther, whom he had brought up as his own daughter.
3. Haman. He was a high officer at the court of Xerxes; very wealthy (5:11); stood nearest the throne; was entrusted with the King's signet ring and had the power of life or death over his subjects (3:1,10-12). He was vain and full of enmity and selfishness. He was supremely unhappy because one man refused to bow down to him. Haman was an Agagite, a descendent of Amalek; so Mordecai could not pay him homage (Exodus 17:16).
4. Esther. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah. Esther being her Persian name. She was an orphan, a woman of great beauty, but also of wisdom and devotion. Her resourcefulness, under the blessing of God, caused right to triumph and wrong to be dethroned.
5. Vashti. She was the queen of Ahasuerus and was deposed for refusing to come into the presence of the King and his nobles during a drunken spree.

Characteristics Of The Book

1. The book gives a fine picture of Persian life and customs.
2. Although the Jews lived in the Persian Empire, they were recognized as a distinct people, not having been absorbed by the Gentiles.
3. Although the name of God is not mentioned there is everywhere a recognition of His power and care. Although God is not named, the reality of God is there.
4. The Jews have always taken great pride in the book since it records a great triumph. The Feast of Purim instituted at this time, became a national feast and remains so to this day. This feast is a proof of the integrity and validity of the book. National festivals do not usually arise out of fiction.
5. The faithfulness of the God of Israel is clearly portrayed. Haman planned the destruction of the whole Jewish race, but he left out of his plans the faithfulness of the God of Israel.

Special Note On God's Providence

This is one of the best books in the Bible in which to study the workings of Providence. Providence is secret, mysterious, and even unintelligible until its ends are revealed.

1. Providence works secretly. God, through His providences, is in everything yet He is not seen. In this book Ahasuerus, Vashti, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman seem to be doing all that is done; but back of the action there stands One who is infinitely wise, loving and patient, who guides all things for the accomplishment of His glorious purposes and for the good of His people. His name is not mentioned as He Himself is not seen, yet in all that occurs He is present. Back of all stands God, who controls all and uses them for His glory (Hebrews 1:3). How appropriate is a book which especially shows forth the Providence of God. His hand can be seen everywhere, yet His name is not once mentioned.
2. Providence works through the seeming trifles of life. In this book we see God dealing with and using the most trifling things to carry out His purpose. A whim of Ahasuerus caused Vashti to be set aside and Esther, the orphan Jewess to take her place. A sleepless night caused Mordecai to be exalted to a high position. Many a person's whole life has been changed by what seemed to be a mere trifle. Under the guiding hand of God, none of these "trifles" are insignificant or small.
3. Providence adjusts all circumstances to accomplish His will. The intelligence and wisdom

of Providence is clearly seen in this book. Queen Esther came to the throne for just such a time (4:14,16). Sleep is taken from Ahasuerus at precisely the right time (6:1-3). Mordecai is brought into prominence at the right time (6:10-13). The lot was cast for the destruction of the Jews on the 13th day of the first month, but its execution was to be on the 13th day of the 12th month. God ordained it so that the Jews might have plenty of time to counteract the wicked decisions (3:7; 8:9-17; 9:1,2). The book shows how God adjusted everything to accomplish His will (Proverbs 16:33).

Introductory Outline Of The Book

- A. Queen Vashti's Fall Chapter 1
- B. Esther's Exaltation Chapter 2
- C. Haman's Conspiracy Chapter 3
- D. Esther's Intervention Chapters 4-7:7
 - 1. The Jews ordered to fast Chapter 4
 - 2. Esther secures favor with the king Chapter 5
 - 3. Haman compelled to exalt Mordecai Chapter 6
 - 4. Esther presents and obtains her request Chapter 7:1-7
- E. The Jews' Vengeance Chapters 7:8-9:19
- F. The Feast of Purim Chapter 9:20-32
- G. Epilogue and Conclusion Chapter 10

EXEGESIS

- A. Queen Vashti's Fall Chapter 1

According to history, Vashti was a subordinate wife, and at this time the royal favorite.

- 1. The occasion of her deposition verses 1-9
 - a. This event transpired in the third year of his reign (vs. 3). Probably about 483 B.C.
 - b. The occasion was a feast (v. 3). Herodotus, the great historian of this period, tells us that Xerxes, in the third year of his reign, held a great assembly of his princes to determine and arrange his war with the Greeks. It is believed that this feast was held at the close of that assembly.
 - c. The king had displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and desired to display also the beauty of the court favorite, Vashti.
- 2. The queens refusal verses 10-12
 - a. The command issued by the king was given while he was drunk (v. 10).
 - b. Such an appearance as the king required would, according to the then existing rules of propriety, be a degradation to which a women of reputation would not likely submit.
- 3. The queen's removal verses 13-22
 - a. Her refusal injured the pride of the king in the presence of his princes, etc.
 - b. The king's word had also been disobeyed.
 - c. As a result she was removed from her position. God works out His purposes even through the sins of men (Romans 8:28).

B. Esther's Exaltation Chapter 2

1. The advancement of Esther to the position of queen verses 1-21
 - a. Many candidates are chosen, among them Esther (vs. 2-3,8). How soon this occurred, we do not know. The intervening time had been spent in the expedition to Greece.
 - b. Esther was chosen (vs. 5-17). She had been brought up by her cousin, Mordecai, whose great grandfather (Kish) had been carried to captivity in the year 598 B.C.
 - 1) She pleased the chamberlain (vs. 8-11).
 - 2) She pleased the king (vs. 12-17)

It was not left to the choice of Esther, or of her guardian, whether she should be brought to the palace or not (v. 3). A disclosure of her lineage might have kept her from being chosen queen, but would not have saved her from concubinage. Esther was wise in being guided by the judgment of Hegai (v.15).
 - c. Esther made queen (vs. 17,18). A lowly one was exalted (1 Samuel 2:4-8; Luke 1:52). A great feast was held, at which time a release was made, probably of prisoners.
2. Mordecai advanced because of his faithfulness to the king verses 21-23

Mordecai discovered a plot against the life of Xerxes (who was ultimately assassinated), through Esther he communicated its discovery to the king. After an investigation, the two guilty courtiers were hanged and Mordecai's service was recorded in the royal annals.

C. Haman's Conspiracy Chapter 3

1. Haman exalted, and all reverence him except Mordecai verses 1-6
 - a. Haman was an Agagite, and Amalekite (v. 1) (cf. Isaiah 15:18).
 - b. He was made prime minister and all the princes gave reverence to him (v. 3).
 - c. Mordecai would not reverence him (v. 3). In the apocryphal chapters of this book (13:12-14) Mordecai is represented as saying, "*Thou knowest Lord, that it was neither in contempt nor pride, nor for any desire of glory, that I did not bow down to proud Haman, for I could have been content with good will, for the salvation of Israel, to kiss the soles of his feet; but I did this that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of God, neither will I worship any but Thee.*" (cf. Exodus 17:16; Deuteronomy 25:17)
2. Haman's plot to kill all the Jews verses 7-15

In 1 Samuel 15:8ff, we read of the defeat of the Amalekite king by Saul. The hostility between Agag and Saul is transmitted to their descendants Haman and Mordecai.

 - a. Haman misrepresented the Jews to the king (v.8). He spoke of them as a dangerous people
 - b. He promises to pay a large sum of money to the king (v 9). So the Devil makes high offers to try to destroy their spiritual lives. Recall Satan offering Jesus the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:1-11).
 - c. He obtains permission to carry out his request (vs. 10,11). The king gives him his signet ring with which to seal the order.
 - d. The lot is cast (v.7). To determine the proper day for the execution of the plan, Haman had lots cast in his presence. Everyday was taken up in turn and the lot fell

on the 13th day of the 12th month (note: Esther had been queen for about 5 years). Esther and Mordecai had eleven months to make plans.

- e. The edict is drawn up (vs. 12-15) to destroy, kill, cause to perish, all Jews both young and old, little children and women in one day (cf. the command given to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3).

D. Esther's Intervention Chapters 4-7:7

1. The Jews ordered to fast chapter 4

In 3:15 we see the enemy rejoicing; but in 4:3 the Jews are weeping. This is indeed a dark hour for the whole nation is under the sentence of death. It reminds us of the whole world which is under the sentence of eternal death. The law could not be changed; only God knew how deliverance would come.

- a. Mordecai takes the lead in the fasting (vs. 1-4). The people followed his example for they all felt the burden of this sentence of death. Today a greater sentence is against the people, but few take it to heart. Esther also enters into the sorrows of Mordecai. Because of her high position she does not feel that her safety exempts her in feeling the sorrows of her people.
- b. Mordecai urges Esther to go before the king (vs. 5-8, cf. 2:10).
- c. Esther's decision (vs. 11-14). Her going before the king is contrary to law and custom, but she does not fail God nor her people at the crucial time (v. 14). The great opportunity of Esther's existence had come. The question was whether she would rise to the occasion. Character is revealed only by being tested. Character is very often tested by affliction. But sometimes prosperity is a more searching test than adversity (Esther was in a position of prosperity). What we shall do in a crisis depends upon what we have been doing all along in the ordinary routine of our lives. Every day we live we are adding to that constant element in us, or we are squandering our spiritual capital so that when a crisis comes we cannot stand it.
 - 1) Great advantages are conferred for a Divine purpose. When any of God's servants are raised to influence, wealth, or power, it is that He may make them effective instruments of His power for blessing to others. If one is made rich, it is because there are many poor waiting to be enriched by Him, etc.
 - 2) God requires that such advantages should be faithfully used for the promotion of His purposes. If God has done remarkable things for us, He expects some services from us suited to the situation in which He has placed us.
 - 3) Divine purposes cannot be frustrated ultimately. Those who attempt to frustrate them shall be injured. Those who are obedient by a faithful discharge of duty will find rich results in their own lives.
- d. The fast is ordered (vs. 15-17). There is fasting in the palace as well as in the midst of the people. They probably abstained from set meals and all pleasant food (Daniel 10:3) taking only what was necessary to sustain physical life.

2. Esther secures favor with the king chapter 5

Esther had done all that she could. The enemy had done all that he could. God's people had done all that they could. Now God could work. We cannot expect God to work until we have done all our part.

- a. God prospers Esther (vs. 1-8).
 - 1) The king holds out the golden scepter (v. 2)
 - 2) The king and Haman attend the first banquet (v. 5)

- 3) Esther invites the king and Haman to a second banquet. Esther showed herself to be wise. Perhaps her delay seemed wrong. But it was God's timing (6:1). No doubt God led her in the steps she took toward gaining her request. The king promised to come and ordered Haman to come also.
 - b. Haman goes out in great joy (vs. 9-14). The only thing which stood between Haman and the highest joy, was that Mordecai, in spite of the fact that the edict had gone out against the Jews, would not reverence him. Assisted by his wife and friends he prepares a gallows for the purpose of hanging Mordecai. He planned to hang Mordecai on the morrow, and then go to the feast of the queen, with nothing to mar his happiness. Little did he count on the interposition of God. He reminds us of the rich man mentioned in Luke 12:16-20, who did not know that on the morrow he was to die.
3. Haman compelled to exalt Mordecai chapter 6
- a. Mordecai rewarded for his faithful service (vs. 1-11).
 - 1) The reading of the chronicles (vs. 1-3). During a sleepless night the king has the records read to him. Mordecai had not been rewarded for his good deed (2:21-23) and God recommends his cause to the king. There will be a time when God will open the records and will leave nothing unrewarded.
 - 2) Haman's attempt to honor himself (vs. 4-9). Coming into the court to ask for the death of an enemy, he is asked by the king to suggest a method for honoring one with whom the king is pleased. In his conceit, he imagines himself to be the person and he suggests the highest honors which he himself would like.
 - 3) The public recognition of Mordecai's loyalty (vs. 10,11). God humbled Haman before Mordecai and in the eyes of all the people. What he thought would happen to himself happens to another. Difficult for proud Haman. Difficult for humble Mordecai.
 - 4) Haman returns home mourning and in disgrace (vs. 12-14). His wise men gave him no comfort. In the duel between the Jew Mordecai and the Agagite Haman the doom of the latter was foreordained in the scriptural predictions of the fall of Amalek (Exodus 17:16; Numbers 24:20; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15:2 ff.).
4. Esther presents and obtains her request chapter 7:1-7
- a. Esther's petition (vs. 1-4). At the second banquet Esther makes bold to make her request known to the king. The fact that the queen was one of Haman's intended victims made her plea more effective.
 - b. Haman is found out (vs. 5-7). Haman's lie is discovered and he becomes fearful as he realizes that his life is endangered.

E. The Vengeance Of The Jews Chapters 7:8-9:19

1. Haman is hanged chapter 7:8-10
"They covered Haman's face" in Greece and Rome was a signal for immediate execution. On the gallows which he had erected for his enemy, Haman was hanged himself. *"Whoever digs a pit will fall into it"* (Proverbs 26:27).
2. A new edict is written granting the Jews the privilege of defending themselves chapter 8

- a. Mordecai is made prime minister (vs. 1,2) The inheritance of the wicked is but for a short time, but that of the righteous is permanent.
 - b. Esther again appeals for the Jews (vs. 3-8). In spite of his favorable attitude the king was unable to revoke the edict. He gave Esther and Mordecai full authority to make it harmless with another edict.
 - c. The new edict (vs. 9-14). A decree is made which gave the Jews the privilege of defending themselves against any who might attack them.
 - d. Reactions to the edict (vs. 15-17). The Jews received the new edict with joy. The heathen were struck with terror. Many became proselytes to the religion of the Jews. Some doubtless did this from conviction because they had seen the hand of God so remarkably displayed on behalf of His people. Others probably from interested motives, observing the favor which the Jews enjoyed at court.
3. The Jews gain their liberty chapter 9:1-19
- Two royal edicts were not in force, both given at the court of Shushan. One bore the date of the thirteenth day of the first month appointing that on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of the same year all the Jews should be killed. Another bore the date of the 23rd day of the third month, empowering the Jews, on the day appointed for their slaughter, to draw the sword in their defense. This was a decisive battle fought between the Jews and their enemies. Both side knew of the conflict so neither side was surprised. This is a picture of the great conflict going on between God and the Devil, a conflict between the flesh and the spirit.
- a. The enemy was the aggressor (v. 2). On the appointed day the enemy attacked the Jews.
 - b. The Jews stood for the most part on the defensive (v. 2). They stood together to defend themselves. Christians today are commanded to stand together and use the weapons which God has given them to use.
 - c. The powers of the throne were with them (vs. 3,4). So we have the power of God with us.
 - d. The conflict (vs. 5-16). It is not improbable that the Jews were remarkably preserved in the midst of the fighting, for there is no mention that any of them were slain.
 - e. The Jews would not take any of the spoil (vs. 10,15,16). They showed that they were not striving for worldly things. Abraham would not take any spoil from the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:23).
 - f. A day of feasting and gladness followed (vs. 17-19).

F. Celebration Of The Feast Of Purim Chapter 9:20-32

1. A history of the battle was written and sent to the Jews everywhere verse 20
2. A festival was instituted in memory of it verses 21-32
 - a. This festival was to be held on the 14th and 15th days of the 12th month (v. 21) which is the month before Passover.
 - b. The feast was called the Feast of Purim (v. 26). The word "purim" is the plural of "pur" which in the old Persian signifies "lot". Haman had by lot determined this to be the time of the destruction of the Jews (3:7), but God, at whose disposal the lot was, determined it to be the time of their triumph.

c. Observance of the feast.

- 1) It was to be observed by all the Jews and their seed (v. 27)
- 2) At the feast they read the whole story of the book of Esther.
- 3) One day (later the 13th was chosen) was to be devoted to fasting in commemoration of the fasting of 4:3 and 4:18ff.

E. Epilogue and Conclusion Chapter 10

The greatness of Ahasuerus and Mordecai. The Greek has a continuation of this chapter which has been rejected and not given a place in our Bible.

1. Mordecai was great with the king (v. 3)
2. Mordecai was great with his own people (v. 3)
 - a. He sought the good of his own people (v. 3)
 - b. His influence brought peace to them (v. 3). History tells no more of Esther, Mordecai, or their family annals. However, we now that the Jews in the Persian Empire enjoyed prosperity and peace (no persecution) for many years until the time of the successors of Alexander the Great.