

THE FASCINATING STORY OF ESTHER

The Old Testament book of Esther is one of the most fascinating in all Scripture. It is widely known for the fact that God is never specifically mentioned, yet his presence is seen throughout in “coincidences” and ironic reversals of fate—all accomplishing the purpose of rescuing his people.

The story is set around 100 years after the Babylonian exile in Susa, the capital city of Persia after Persia had defeated Babylon and ascended to be the world power. Although many Jews returned to their homeland after Babylon’s downfall, many did not. Esther and her cousin Mordecai were among those who had remained. The events of this book focus on them along with the Persian King Xerxes and his scheming advisor, Haman. It is full of palace intrigue, elaborate parties, surprises, danger and finally deliverance for God’s people.

The King and Esther

The story begins with King Xerxes holding a lavish 180-day banquet to show off his vast wealth and splendor. Among his trophies was a glamorously beautiful queen, Vashti. Getting drunk, the King wanted to display her to the other men (the women were having their own party hosted by the queen). She refused to be objectified, which then set the story of Esther in motion.

After banishing Vashti for her refusal to play to the king’s vanity, Xerxes and his male advisors felt threatened and issued a decree reassuring the men of the kingdom that they were in charge of their women and worthy of respect from them (less Vashti’s actions empower other women). Next came the goal of finding Vashti’s replacement—a new queen, which then led to a kind of beauty pageant being arranged. Beautiful young “virgins” from all over the kingdom were selected, elaborately prepped for a year and then finally presented to the king. Advised by Mordecai, Esther participated and when she was presented attracted the king through her beauty more than any other. As a result she was crowned queen, but even so and on Mordecai’s advise, she withheld sharing her ethnicity.

Mordecai and Haman

Both of these men are key figures in Esther’s story with a surprising reversal of fortune connecting them. Both operated within the context of the king’s palace and orbit. Mordecai first gained noticed as he overheard a plot to murder the king. He shared that with his cousin Esther who then shared it with Xerxes—saving the king’s life. Mordecai received recognition for this act in the official records—an important notation in the scope of the story.

Haman comes across as a scheming political maneuverer, who looked to take every advantage to advance himself. He was not a native Persian, but was rather an Agagite—descendant of the ancient Canaanite people. After being elevated above his peers by the king, his ego gets the best of him when Mordecai does not join others in kneeling before him as required by the king. This enrages Haman, who upon discovering the ethnicity of Mordecai convinces the king to issue a decree to kill all of the Jews in his kingdom. The timing of this slaughter was determined by a rolling of the dice (“pur”).

Esther's Courage

Upon learning of this decree Mordecai encourages Esther, as queen, to intervene saying to her that becoming queen could have been providential, to put her in position for “such a time as this.” Esther agrees, even courageously proclaiming, “If I perish, I perish” and a plan was set in motion.

Meanwhile, Haman's anger toward Mordecai continued to rage even to the point of Haman commissioning a seventy-five foot “gallows” (or impaling pole—according to interpretation) on which to kill Mordecai. Before that could happen however, Haman was humiliated. Unable to sleep Xerxes, while reviewing the official records, discovered Mordecai had never been honored for saving his life. So he orders Haman to do so, but egotistically Haman thought this honor was to be bestowed upon himself and planned accordingly. Instead the honor was Mordecai's and Haman was instructed to lead the effort. This brought great grief to Haman, but nothing compared to what was next.

Esther set her plan in motion by hosting a small party just for Haman and the king. The food, drink and Esther's beauty no doubt swayed the king who proclaimed that he would give her whatever she wanted “up to half of the kingdom.” What she wanted was a reversal of the law set to eradicate all of the Jews. This she revealed to the king—along with her own ethnicity—at her second party. Here Haman was revealed as the “vile” “adversary and enemy.” It all ended very badly then for Haman as, ironically, he was the one executed on the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

Purim

The rest of the story ends well for Esther, Mordecai and the Jews. Esther secures an order from the king that not only rescues the Jews from extinction but also extracts vengeance upon Haman's household as well as other enemies of the Jewish people throughout the kingdom.

Mordecai ended up like this—“second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews.”

And to commemorate this happy turn of events “the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and all of their descendants...should without fail observe these two days every year.” This celebration became known as “Purim”—derived from the very dice roll (“Pur”) that set everything in motion.

God is in the Story

And while not specifically referenced—God's hand is seen throughout Esther's story. It is seen in the great reversal of fortunes of Haman and Mordecai. In how unseen God brought about salvation for his people—elevating Esther as just the right time.

There is also another message here—how God uses imperfect people and works through and within our own messiness to accomplish his will. Neither Esther nor Mordecai were always virtuous. The backdrop of the whole story was one of drinking, partying and plotting. Esther herself went against God's will in marrying a non-Jew, yet God was there. We can find hope in this story to know that God continues to work in unseen ways, through our weaknesses, to continue to bring about his will even today. Who knows what we are here for at this moment!