

5

ESTHER

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Like the stories in the Book of Daniel, Esther is perhaps best described as a ‘court tale’. It is set in Susa, in the court of Xerxes I, king of Persia (486-465BC). A Jew living in Susa, far from the land of Judah (see the map opposite) rises to be prime minister of the realm, second only to the king (echoes of Joseph in Egypt). This is because of the heroic actions of his relative, Esther, who becomes queen of Persia and intervenes to save her people from an anti-Jewish pogrom. It is not at all unlikely that the events of one such pogrom form the historical basis for this story.

It is a story to demonstrate that there need be no contradiction between being a faithful Jew and being a good citizen in a foreign land. We can find this idea being encouraged by the prophet Jeremiah in a letter written to the exiles in Babylon:

Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare ... For surely I know the plans I have for you, says YHWH, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

– Jeremiah 29:4-7,11

The story of Esther is making the point that it is by being faithful to one’s Jewish traditions that one can best support a foreign state.

In the version found in the Greek Septuagint, the story draws also on the way God intervened through Moses to save his people from slavery in Egypt. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and declared:

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then YHWH said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.

– Exodus 3:6-8

God is not mentioned in the Hebrew text of the Book of Esther, and the only Jewish religious practice mentioned is fasting (see 4:16). It is possibly the ‘secular’ nature of the text that accounts for its slow acceptance by Jews among their inspired texts. God’s presence and protective care for his people, however, can be seen in the sub-text of the Book: it is mediated through human agents who live the covenant by the way they are ready to lay down their lives for the Jewish community. The Greek Additions mention God and include prayer.

The Book is explicitly linked to the Jewish festival of Purim (see Esther chapter 9), and, since Purim is not found in the Torah, it provides a ‘historical’ setting for it. The origins of the festival are lost in the mists of history, but it may have arisen as a way of Jews celebrating the Persian New Year Festival. Another reason for Jewish reluctance to accept Esther among its inspired books may be that the Rabbis were hesitant to include a text that was linked to a festival that allowed excessive drinking (see Talmud, Megilla 7b).



Introduction

The names of the main characters point to the eastern origins of the story. 'Mordecai' echoes 'Marduk', the principal god in Babylon's pantheon. 'Esther' echoes 'Ishtar', the principal female deity celebrated in the fertility and burial rites of Babylon. 'Haman' echoes 'Humman', an Elamite god.

The festival 'Purim' gets its name from the 'lots' [פּוּרִים, pūr] cast by Haman to determine the propitious day for the pogrom (Esther 3:7; 9:24). As is the way with religious festivals Purim picked up other connections in the course of its history, notably the celebration of the death of the Syrian general, Nicanor, at the hands of Judas the Maccabee in 160BC (see 2Maccabees 15:1-37). Like other Jewish festivals it is celebrated at the full moon. The fourteenth day of Adar (March) is called 'Mordecai's Day', for reasons that will become clear as the story develops. The thirteenth is 'Nicanor's Day'. Purim celebrates Jewish identity and the conviction that Judaism will survive, whatever the circumstances.

The presence in the text of a number of Persian loan words, and the absence of any signs of Greek influence, point to the Book having its origins in the East in the fifth or fourth centuries BC. Like the Book of Daniel, it attracted additions over the years. A lot of extra material can be found in the Aramaic Versions (which, however, are from the 8th century AD). There are two distinct Greek Versions: One of these Versions (Version A) is considerably shorter and appears to be a translation from a Hebrew Version that differs from that found in the official Massoretic Text, which is translated (rather freely) in the Septuagint Version.

This Introductory Commentary follows the story as it is presented in the Greek Septuagint Version. This includes the translation of the Hebrew text with the Additions interspersed where they are found in the Septuagint. The Additions are indicated by the use of italic script. Because Jerome did not find these Additions in the Hebrew Text he removed them from their position in the Septuagint and placed them as an appendix at the end of his translation. Here in this commentary the text references to the Additions follow the chapters and verses of the Latin Vulgate.

These additions consist in Mordecai's dream (Addition A), which the Septuagint puts at the beginning. It sets the scene for the events of the story. The interpretation of the dream (Addition F) is placed at the end. Additions B & E (which appear to have been composed in Greek) purport to give the text of letters sent out by king Xerxes. They are located in the appropriate place of the story. Addition C inserts prayers offered by Mordecai and Esther. These, too, are found in the appropriate place. This is the case, too, for Addition D, which gives a highly dramatic account of Esther's appearance before the king. The effect of these additions is to increase the dramatic appeal of the story (this is especially the case in Addition D). Their primary affect, however, is to strengthen the book's religious character (this is especially true of Addition C).

***GREEK VERSION ADDITION A
MORDECAI'S DREAM
HE UNCOVERS A CONSPIRACY***

[Vulgate 11:2 - 12:6]

^{11:2}In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the Great, on the first day of Nisan, Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, had a dream. ³He was a Jew living in the city of Susa, a great man, serving in the court of the king. ⁴He was one of the captives whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had brought from Jerusalem with King Jeconiah of Judea.

And this was his dream:

⁵Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake, tumult on the earth!

⁶Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. ⁷At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation.

⁸It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth! ⁹And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish.

¹⁰Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; ¹¹light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured the mighty.

¹²Mordecai saw in this dream what God had determined to do, and after he awoke he had it on his mind, seeking all day to understand it in every detail.

The reference is to King Xerxes I, son of Darius. His mother was the daughter of Cyrus and the sister of Cambyses. His father failed to conquer Greece, being repulsed at the Battle of Marathon in 490. Xerxes became king in 486. He was successful in completing the magnificent royal palace at Persepolis to the honour of his god, Ahuramazda, but he failed to incorporate Greece into the empire when his navy was defeated at Salamis in 480.

Mordecai lives in the Persian capital, Susa. The year of his dream is 484. We are also told that he was deported from Jerusalem in 597. Apart from the dream, the details regarding Mordecai are borrowed from Esther 2:5-6. The story-teller does not appear concerned at the impossibility of the dates supplied.

Like Joseph's dreams (Genesis 37:7, 9), Mordecai's dream prepares the reader for the outcome of the story that is about to unfold.

The scene opens on earth in apocalyptic chaos. The struggle of two ferocious beasts (symbols of Haman and Mordecai) is symbolic of the struggle between 'every nation' (verse 7) and the Jews 'the righteous nation' (verse 7). On the verge of annihilation, the righteous nation 'cries out to God' (verse 10). As noted in the Introduction, God is never explicitly mentioned in the Hebrew text of Esther. This is the first of forty-one times God is named in the Greek Additions.

In the Hebrew version the pogrom is confined to the Persian Empire. This Addition extends it to anti-Semitism on a universal scale.

Darkness and Chaos give way to life-giving water and light. God's lowly people are exalted and victorious over their enemies.

This appears to be a later addition. The two eunuchs, no doubt thinking Mordecai was asleep, are carelessly speaking about their plan to assassinate the king. Mordecai hears this and reports the matter. The plotters are executed (verse 3) and Mordecai is rewarded (verse 5).

Verse 6 introduces us to Haman, who is high up in the king's service. The meaning of 'Bougean' is unclear. It appears to be a term of reproach. He determines to cause injury to Mordecai and Mordecai's people (the Jews) because of what happened to the eunuchs.

There are a number of inconsistencies between this account and the story as it unfolds in the Hebrew text. In the Hebrew text Mordecai is not introduced as 'a great man', and is not rewarded till after Haman's death (see 7:10 - 8:2). In the Hebrew text, it is Esther, not Mordecai, who informs the king of the plot (see 2:22). In the Hebrew text, Haman is determined to injure Mordecai, not because of what happened to the eunuchs, but because Mordecai refused to show him honour by bowing down to him (see 3:5).

¹Now Mordecai was taking his rest in the courtyard with Gabatha and Tharra, two eunuchs of the king who kept watch in the courtyard.

²He overheard their conversation and attending to their plotting, he learned that they were preparing to lay hands on King Artaxerxes; and he informed the king concerning them.

³Then the king examined the two eunuchs, and after they had confessed it, they were led away to execution.

⁴The king made a permanent record of these things, and Mordecai wrote an account of them. ⁵And the king ordered Mordecai to serve in the court, and rewarded him for these things.

⁶But Haman son of Hammedatha, a Bougean, who enjoyed great favour with the king, determined to injure Mordecai and his people because of the two eunuchs of the king.

