

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

INTRODUCTION

There are, to be sure, some seemingly enigmatic and perplexing books in the Old Testament. One of those books is Ecclesiastes, a book which on the surface seems to be the words of a man, Solomon, who is back-slidden and pessimistic. But when you come with a fresh approach to this book without preconceived ideas or with what you have heard other commentators say, you discover it is anything but a skeptical, fatalistic book. Instead, it is a book of astute biblical wisdom on how to live life. There is, however, another book in the Old Testament that is puzzling and problematic, at least on the surface. In fact, one commentator utters these remarks about this questionable book:

In the life of the church it is one of the least popular texts for preaching.

Much of the dislike toward (this book) is summed up by the following comment: ‘a Christian minister ... faithful to the context, ... will not take a text from (this book); and if the leader of a church-school shows any Christian discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, and piety.’ (B.W. Anderson in *Knox Preaching Guides*, page 39)

This commentator’s remark isn’t an isolated tirade. Many in the scholarly ranks raise the red flag concerning this book. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, this book was the only one which was not represented. Martin Luther himself declared that he wished this particular book did not even exist! But it does exist, it is God-breathed and one of the sixty-six that God has preserved for the Christian community throughout the ages. If it is part of the

whole counsel of God, then we should embrace, study and ponder its importance for the believer. The Book? Esther! Tucked before the voluminous books of Job and Psalms, this brief ten-chapter book of historical significance is an easy reader for most and unfolds an interesting twist and turn of events in its pages. Many of us have read it more than once and marveled at the irony within. But as we approach this Book of Esther, we must allow the text to speak for itself and therefore allow our ideas and thoughts to be formed and directed by the Scriptures. We do not want to be guilty of eisegesis – that is, reading into the text our opinions. Instead, we want to be exegetes – whereby we allow the Scriptures to bring to us their intent and purpose, thereby reproving us and our ideas instead of us attempting to prove our ideas.

THE UNIQUENESS & PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

€ Uniqueness of the Book

There are several unique dimensions which surface from the Book of Esther. First, of the 39 books of the Old Testament, Esther and Ruth are the only two books named for a woman. That in and of itself should tell us that something different and out of the ordinary is about to unfold in this book. Certainly the woman, like man, has been created in the image of God and is specifically set apart from all of creation as the apex of His creation. As man and woman, however, God has ordained differing roles and responsibilities for each one. One of those, leadership, has clearly been thrust into the hands of men throughout the Scriptures. That is God's plan, not humanity's. Man didn't dream it up; God decreed it. So when a woman is seemingly thrust to the forefront, we should take note of why this is so and how God will use it

in the affairs of mankind. Secondly, the Book of Esther is also one of several Old Testament books that are not quoted from in the New Testament. This is noteworthy, especially by some skeptics who use it as further proof that this book has questionably little if any value in the Bible or who see it as fictional and not an historical account. If it was valuable, the reasoning goes, then the writers of the New Testament would have relied upon it and thus quoted from it. Not necessarily. Thirdly, the Book of Esther is one of two books that does not mention God. Song of Songs or Solomon is the other. This alone makes it a direct target of criticism and another strike against its canonicity or acceptance as a God-breathed and thus inspired book. What spiritual value or theological contribution can Esther make as a book from God if it has not even one mention about God in it. Never mind that God is certainly in the background and His providence weaves itself throughout the narrative. What is noteworthy is that beyond its exclusion of God, the Book of Esther also fails to mention the Law, sacrifices, the covenant, prayer, the temple, or offerings. So many things near and dear to the chosen people of God are missing. There are reasons for this which we shall soon see. Fourthly, it is one of two books, the other is Exodus, that deal specifically with persecution of the Hebrew people. This is always in the background in Esther and quite regularly moves to the forefront, seemingly driving the intensity and urgency of action among the main characters. Finally, the Book of Esther is the only Old Testament book in which the entire narrative takes place in Persia. It is on foreign territory and not in Israel that the exiled people of God finds themselves, displaced from their homeland. More specifically, according to 1:2, this account takes place in Shushan the citadel. Shushan or Susa, as some versions have it, was unbearably hot. In fact, Strabo the Greek

geographer said Shushan was “so hot that lizards and snakes burned to death if they crossed the street at noon and that cold water placed in the sun could be used for a bath immediately!” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, page 798). Thus Shushan was the winter citadel of the king and was not his year-round palace. This is where the action in the Book of Esther unfolds for the entirety of the ten chapters. Taken altogether, these five factors make the Book of Esther a rather unique book among the thirty-nine of the Old Testament.

∄ Purpose of the Book

As to the purposes of the book, the total absence of God in its pages does not in the least suggest that there is no biblical purpose to be found. On the contrary, the fact that we find the Book of Esther among the 39 books of the Old Testament is evidence enough that this God-breathed work has been given to us for our edification and growth as the children of God. The first purpose of the Book is to teach God’s providential care of His people. There is no luck, happenstance or fortunate activity with the people of God. Instead, we have a God who is in total control and whose plans and decrees have been established before time as we know it began. Several incidents in this book clearly point to the providential care of God for His people, even when His very name and divine activity appear absent. First, the dethronement of Queen Vashti in chapter one and the ironic selection of her successor, Esther herself, in chapter two speaks volumes about the providence of God in moving Esther into a key and necessary role as the dreadful, shocking fate of the Jews is soon to be exposed. Secondly, the ironic discovery by Mordecai the Jew of the deathly plot against the king of Persia and this dissemination of information to the queen in chapter two is still another example of God’s providence for His

people, even when they are in foreign and far away lands. Thirdly, the “chance” turn of events in chapters five, six, and seven where the Gentile Haman builds the gallows in which to hang the Jew Mordecai and yet instead becomes the place where Haman himself is hung is nothing less than the providential care of God for His chosen people, no matter how distressing or difficult the situation the child of God finds himself. Commentator Edward Young says:

“The Book of Esther serves the purpose of showing how Divine Providence overrules all things; even in a distant, far country, God’s people are yet in His hands” (An Introduction to the Old Testament, page 1099).

These three incidents, let alone a whole host of other “chance” events in this book clearly point to the providence of God, even when His very name and divine activity appear absent. Such an absence does little to squelch the reality that God is alive and well and at the forefront of this unfolding of activity in Sushan involving the four main characters: King Ahasuerus, Haman the prince, Esther the newly crowned queen and Mordecai her cousin. But there is a second purpose in the Book, a purpose that flows from the absence of God and, more specifically, from the absence of His verbal interaction with anyone in the Book. The second purpose for this Book is to show that God’s displeasure may be manifested by His silence. Indeed, the silence of God is deafening in Esther. The silence of God can be equated with the feeling that God is very distant. This experience occurs several times in the Scriptures as individuals cry out to God about His seeming lack of divine nearness or activity. The Israelites under bondage in Egypt cry out to God in Exodus 2. The Israelites repeatedly cry out to God in the time of the judges. And then there is the prophet Habakkuk who cries out:

“O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear?” (1:2)

To be sure, God’s displeasure may be manifested by His silence. In Ezekiel 11, the glory of God departed from the temple and the city itself and stood on the mountain as evidence of His displeasure with His people due to their evil and wickedness. The silence of God can be deafening as He shows His lack of approval regarding the actions, thoughts and intentions of His people. Commentator F.B. Huey asserts:

“God’s people sometimes fail to consult Him prior to acting, do things that are contrary to His will and consequently experience His displeasure by His silence.”

Huey’s assertion is true of the Book of Esther. God’s silence is purposeful. The absence of His divine name and activity are intentional. The actions of God’s people in this book need to be reexamined. Too often, we look with approval at what Mordecai and Esther did throughout these ten chapters. Since it all turned out for good, we may wrongly stamp an approval on the means to the ends achieved. Not so quickly! The deliverance of the Jewish people at the end of this book does not prove that the means used were good or pleasing to God! The very fact that God did not order them to do what they did is evidence enough.

CONCLUSION

A. Suffice it to say, what is usually assumed to be the providence of God working silently but effectively on behalf of His people in the Book of Esther should be reexamined. Perhaps God’s silence should be interpreted as evidence that the people of God were working out their own human affairs without even consulting Him. How so? Though there are numerous examples of

this in the book, here are but a few:

– The rise of Mordecai to a position of prominence in chapter ten does not automatically equate to God’s approval of his actions. His concealing of Esther’s Jewish identity, his refusal to humbly bow before the public official Haman, and his joining with Esther to bring vengeance on his enemies are not necessarily God-approved actions in the book. Such actions may teach us that if we use human means to achieve our purposes, we will receive only human rewards. Perhaps this was the ultimate payoff for Mordecai – a strictly human reward but not a heavenly one.

^ The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had urged Israel to leave Babylon after seventy years and return to the place of covenantal blessing. Many had returned while many had stayed, either content with their lot in life though in the wrong land or indifferent to the prophets’ exhortations. The very fact that many of the exiled Jews had returned to the land of promise, but that Mordecai and Esther had not shouts loudly that Mordecai and Esther may not have been where they should have been spiritually.

∨ Beyond the absence of God in this book, the lack of mention of sacrifices and prayer and offerings may in and of itself suggest that the Jews were not following God’s will. Could it be that Mordecai and Esther were remaining in a foreign land, resistant to the word of God, and thus outside the will of God? If that is true, is it any wonder if some of their actions were clouded, inappropriate or self-initiated?

B. Perhaps it is time to challenge our superficial, typical preconceived ideas when it comes to the Book of Esther. Too long we have given unquestioned support and approval to all that transpires in the book. But could it be that the very absence and silence of God is purposeful? Could it be so because God is not pleased with the actions of His people in this book? Could that be true of where you find yourself this very morning? God seems to be silent or distant and your relationship with him a bit chilly. A look in the spiritual mirror is a necessary step if you find yourself here in that situation. As you look anew at this God-given, God-inspired book of the Old Testament and as you delve into the riches of this exceptional book, may God be pleased to impress upon you what He is saying from the Scriptures and not what you have heard others

say about the Scriptures, which may be inaccurate. May to God you be model the example of the Bereans in Acts 17:11, who listened to the preached word from the Apostle Paul. But,

“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

And may we heed the exhortation of 2 Timothy 2:15,

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”