

Understanding Esther: A Tale of Two Feasts

by Jeff Lacine

(All direct scripture quotation taken from the ESV)

The book of *Esther* has been avoided by many bible teachers and readers, in effect being treated as a non-essential book of the Old Testament. *Esther* is probably best known for being the only book in the Hebrew canon void of any direct reference to God. To many it seems as though *Esther* is a secular book in the midst of the Hebrew canon, and for this reason it is often listed among the so-called *antilegomena* (spoken against) of the Old Testament. Furthermore, there is no shortage of unique interpretations of the book. Some think the book of *Esther* was written as an attempt to instill a confidence in the reader that God will always preserve his people. Others suggest that the book's cardinal intention is to encourage the reader to believe that God is at work even when they cannot see how. At worst, the book has been secularized and relegated to a lesson on the benefits of shrewd behavior or the promotion of Jewish nationalism. What is this curious book really about, and why would the most magnificent author of the universe choose to write it in such a way? The purpose of this compendium is to suggest a literary approach to the interpretation of the book of *Esther* as *a tale of two feasts*¹, as well as to briefly touch on *Esther*'s contemporary application and its role within the entire canon of Scripture.

A Literary Approach to Esther as a Short Story Narrative

All too often the most obvious and essential elements of interpretation are overlooked in the midst of a detailed exegetical analysis or extra-biblical historical research. A reader should

¹ The use of the word "tale" is not intended to minimize the book's historical accuracy, but rather to emphasize its literary character. Because the designer of this narrative short story is also the Author of history, the story can be infinitely rich in its creative implementation of literary devices *and* absolutely historically accurate. The employment of the same interpretive techniques used to understand other literary works does not infer that the authority/historicity of these other works is proportionate to the authority/historicity of *Esther*.

only use the more scientific processes of investigation inasmuch as they aid in approaching a text on its own terms, as a work of literature intending to express an idea. *Esther* is organized as a typical short story narrative and should be read as such. Short story is a literary phenomenon common to most cultures since the advent of written word. In this way, *Esther* is like other literature of its genre; though, it carries with its message unrivaled authority, standing as the very word of God.

If read in one sitting, as a short story is intended to be read, the reader will notice that the book starts with a feast and ends with a feast. The narrative plot of the book unfolds in the time elapsed between the initiation of these two feasts. The first feast is appointed by the ruler of the Persian Empire, King Ahasuerus, the most powerful human being on earth (1:3-8). After a show of “his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days” (1:4), a feast was appointed in celebration of his glory (1:5-8). At this feast, “drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict: ‘There is no compulsion.’ For the king had given order to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired” (1:7-8).

In the midst of this grand celebration, the king fancies how he might further demonstrate his sovereignty. He calls to his trophy wife that she might display her beauty to his patrons (1:9-11). She says no (1:12). No? The most powerful human on earth cannot make a single individual, even his own wife, do his bidding? He determines to humble his rebellious wife and sets out on a search for another, more willing paramour, to replace her (1:19-21). In this way the plot of *Esther* intensifies, as a human king tries to assert his foiled sovereignty to avert his own awareness of its artificiality.

By way of contrast, the book of *Esther* ends with a feast much different from the first, *the feast of Purim*. This feast is “a day on which [the Jews] send gifts of food to one another... and

gifts to the poor” (9:19,22). Contrary to the first feast, *this* feast is not marked with dissipation and lasciviousness, rather, it is marked by benevolence.²

Benevolent versus self-indulgent behavior is not the most significant contrast that is drawn out by these two feasts. The first feast celebrates the sovereignty of a visible human king after a great show of his majesty. Yet the reader quickly learns that the king’s sovereignty is *artificial*, as he cannot even get his own wife to do his bidding. The second feast celebrates the *true* sovereignty of the invisible King of the Universe after a magnificent show of his power. This King of kings is shown to control history in such a way that he can even make Haman to build the gallows for his own hanging (7:9-10) and the wicked to be destroyed by their own scheming (9:1)! In the book of *Esther*, it is the never-mentioned main character, the king of the universe, who arranges the events of the story. In this way, the fact that God is never mentioned in the middle of the canon stands as a kind of intentional literary irony in the midst of a chain of startling apparent coincidences.

Contemporary Application

Today, just as in the book of *Esther*, God is presently invisible, yet he controls the plot of every story. Though the result of his work can be seen in creation and the movement of his hand can be detected in the unfolding of history, the un-glorified human eye cannot presently behold his person. The book of *Esther* encourages its reader not to be shaken in the quest to serve a God who is presently invisible, for it is this God who controls all things. Those who trust in things that can be seen, such as riches and pomp, will be disappointed. Though the multitudes marvel at the present display of the artificial sovereignty of earthly kings in all of their splendor, there is a

² This same motif of self-indulgence versus benevolence is also played out in a contrast of characterization, between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai. In the opening of the book King Ahasuerus “showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness” (1:4). In the last sentence of the book Mordecai is described as one who “sought the welfare of his people” (10:3).

day coming when the sovereign King of the Universe will be seen in a glory not to be compared with the glory of any human king. On that day every mouth will drop and every knee bow at the unfathomable sight of *the King of Glory!*

Esther: a Microcosm of the Whole

In this contrast of feasts, the book of *Esther* is a microcosm of the whole canon. The Bible itself is also a tale of two feasts, two feasts that are also much different in nature. The first feast involves Adam and Eve, feasting on the forbidden fruit, trying to be “like God” (Genesis 3:5-6). It is this feast that thrusts the reader into the narrative story of the Bible and the unfolding plot of existence. The good news is that the Bible ends with the marriage supper of the Lamb, a feast much different than the first (Revelation 19:6-10). This is a feast of fellowship with a perfect God who loves unworthy sinners, conquers sin and death for them, and calls them to his table. He is the One who is truly sovereign over all!

Along with King Ahasuerus, Adam, and Eve, all of mankind has eaten at the first feast, a feast that celebrates man’s artificial sovereignty in a quest to be God. In light of this, the book of *Esther*, along with the whole of Scripture, confronts its reader with a question. “Will you eat at the second feast?” The reader of the Bible has been offered an invitation. The question remains, will the reader *believe* in the One who came to rescue sinners, *repent* of feasting to a false self-sovereignty, *and bow* to the King of the Universe?