

ESTHER, THEOLOGY OF.

In a strict sense, there is no "theology" (i.e., "study of God") in Esther, since God is not mentioned in the book. In addition, there is no reference to religious institutions or practices (except fasting), making the task of adducing a "theology" of the book doubly difficult.

A. Historical Context. The events in the book of Esther take place in Persia, during the reign of Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.), known in Esther as "Ahasuerus" (the LXX incorrectly identifies Ahasuerus as "Artaxerxes"). Xerxes was an ambitious, ruthless, intolerant ruler, administrator over a vast empire, a brilliant warrior (although defeated by the Greeks in 479 B.C., marking the beginning of the end of the Persian empire), and a jealous lover, according to Herodotus (Histories, Books 7-9) and others (including the Bible).

The story in Esther is of Jews who had not returned to their homeland, but rather who were living settled lives in a foreign land, where their ancestors had been taken generations earlier. The historicity of the book often has been questioned (Paton, 64-77; Moore, xxxiv-xlvi), but it has been ably defended, as well (Wright; Shea; cf. also Gordis, 382-88).

B. Literary Analysis. The literary history of the story of Esther is complex (see Clines, Scroll). Yet, the simple story in the MT is a well-told tale. It concerns the fortunes of the Jews under Persian rule, particularly as embodied in the fortunes and actions of two Jews. The story begins with Esther, a beautiful Jewish girl, rising to a position as queen, and Mordechai, her cousin and adoptive father, informing the king, through Esther, of a plot against his life (chaps 1-2). Mordechai, however, runs afoul of Haman, a high official, and Haman's revenge is to order the extermination of all Jews (chap 3). When Mordechai appeals to Esther to intervene on the Jews' behalf, she does so successfully: Haman's plot against the Jews is exposed, and the king is favorably disposed toward the Jews because of his love for Esther and his appreciation for Mordechai's

earlier role in saving him. Haman then is hanged on gallows he had prepared for Mordechai (chaps 4-7). Mordechai then is exalted in Haman's stead, a decree is issued counteracting Haman's decree, and the Jews defend themselves well against their attackers (chaps 8-9). The book ends with instructions for the festival of Purim, which commemorates their deliverance, and with the exaltation of Mordechai (chaps 9-10).

The story of Esther is built predominantly upon action, not character development or theological reflection. A major feature of the story is the motif of reversal of fortunes (Berg, 103-13; Fox, "Structure"). By the end of the book, Mordechai, Esther, and the Jews all have been exalted and delivered from their enemies through dramatic turns of events.

C. Themes. An important motif that emerges from the book is the nature and significance of the festival of "Purim" ("lots") (Berg, 31-57). The lottery itself is not a major component of the book, but it is a part of the reversal motif (cf. 3:7; 9:26), and one of the book's appendices (9:20-32) gives formal instruction for the festival's celebration (B. S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, 603-5).

Another significant motif is that of royalty (Berg, 59-72). The story unfolds in a royal setting, and Esther -- and even Mordechai (cf. 6:7-11; 10:1-3) -- are royal figures. A message here was that the Jews could flourish even in a foreign land and (more subtly) that their hopes for their own monarchy should not be entirely abandoned.

The absence of any direct or indirect reference to God in the book is the key issue, however, in any consideration of its overall message or purpose. That God has been kept out of the book deliberately -- rather than incidentally, as in the Song of Songs, the only other OT book that does not mention God -- is clear, since there are numerous occasions where the author easily could have mentioned God, but chose not to, such as the occasions of fasting (4:3, 16), the assurance of Haman's wife and friends that he could not prevail against a Jew (6:13), or Mordechai's statement about deliverance arising for the

Jews from one source or another (6:13-14). The author also could easily have mentioned God as being behind any of the numerous "coincidences" in the book, such as a Jewish girl's being in the right place at the right time to help her people, the king's sleeplessness on precisely the night preceding Esther's request for help (chap 6), or Haman's presence in the king's courts when the king wanted to honor Mordechai (chap 6).

To say that the author deliberately suppressed reference to God is not to say that s/he did not believe in God, however, nor in God's controlling influence in the world.¹ Indeed, God's providential care of his people certainly is one of the major themes of the book. The book was not written in a vacuum; it was written for and about a people whose God constantly and actively had interceded on their behalf over the centuries.

For example, what was the purpose of the Jews' fasting (4:3, 16) if not to move God to act? What did Haman's wife and friends express (6:13) if not a knowledge of Israel's past history and the ultimate triumph of the Jews' cause, through their God? And, what did Mordechai's statement mean (4:13-14) if not that he believed in the certainty of deliverance for the Jews, a deliverance which ultimately comes from God, regardless of the immediate source?² The book's readers also could not have failed to detect God's presence behind the numerous timely, and dramatic "coincidences" in the book. These reflect the ordering of events by the God who had done so countless times before. Even

¹. The Masoretes, using various methods, identified several acrostics in the book that contain the consonants of God's name, "YHWH" (Paton, 8). While these are almost universally disregarded today, the one at 5:4 -- occurring in the phrase "Let the king and Haman come" (Yābô' Hammelek We-Hāmān) -- at least bears note. It is the most straightforward acrostic in Hebrew, and comes at a critical juncture in the story, where the suspense is high concerning Esther's and the Jews' fate. Structurally, it is near the book's exact midpoint (at the beginning of 5:7). It is easy to imagine that the author is whispering here, by this word choice, that God is indeed present (although silently) at this time of crisis.

². The reference in 4:14 to "another place" refers to another human agent, not to God (Fox, "Structure," 298, n. 15; Gordis, 360-61, n. 6), but it nevertheless exhibits a strong belief in the ordering of events on the Jews' behalf.

the reversal-of-fortunes motif demonstrates the belief in an ordering of history, since, in Esther, the reversals always turn out in the Jews' favor. Indeed, even the book's structure demonstrates this (Fox, "Structure").

To affirm that a major theme of the book is God's providential care for his people is to give only a partial picture of its theology, however. God's hiddenness is a major component of the remainder of the picture. This is because providence is important in many other OT books, as well, and yet they mention God frequently. The deliberate suppression of reference to God must be an integral component of the theology of Esther.

One logical deduction from God's absence is that human action is important. Time and again, Esther's and Mordechai's initiatives are what make the difference for the Jews; we do not see them passively waiting for signs from God or for God to perform a dramatic miracle of some type.

Despite many explanations of God's hiddenness in Esther (see Fox, "Religion" 135-38 and bibliography below), the best solution would seem to be that the author is intentionally vague about God's presence in events, affirming on the one hand that God indeed is involved with his people and on the other that perceiving this involvement is sometimes difficult. While the author and his readers know (rationally) that God is always present and in control, the experience of life is that the specific manifestations of his presence are not always so clear. Thus, we can discern a "carefully crafted indeterminacy" in the book that is an important part of its message. "The story's indeterminacy conveys the message that the Jews should not lose faith if they, too, are uncertain about where God is in a crisis" (Fox, "Religion," 146). But, this indeterminacy is not a sign of unbelief: "If anything is excluded it is disbelief. The author of Esther would have us hold to confidence even when lacking certainty and an understanding of

details.... When we scrutinize the text of Esther for traces of God's activity, we are doing what the author made us do" (Fox, "Religion," 146-47).³

D. Canonical Context. Esther is never cited in the NT (or elsewhere in the OT), and it is the only OT book not found among the Qumran scrolls. It has occasioned considerable doubts concerning its canonicity (Moore, Esther, xxi-xxx; Beckwith, 288-97, 312-17, 322-23; Clines, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, 254-56), and inspired strong reactions, both positive and negative (Anderson; Moore, Esther, xxx-xxx).

Esther's location in the many texts and lists of the Bible varies greatly (Moore, xxx; Beckwith, passim). It occurs in the Hebrew canon as the last of the five megillot ("scrolls"), which came to be used liturgically, read at the major festivals. Its appearance following Lamentations offers hope, since its emphasis is upon celebrations and the turning of mourning into gladness, a sharp contrast to the gloomy situation depicted in Lamentations. It immediately precedes Daniel, another book about Jews in a foreign land who prosper. In the Protestant canon, Esther is the last of the "historical" books, immediately following Ezra and Nehemiah. It contrasts strikingly with these books, with their major emphases upon religiosity and God's active presence. Its position is likely due to similarities in literary genre and post-exilic date among all three books.

In the Greek (LXX) versions, the Hebrew book is supplemented by six major additions, which serve to give it a religious tone that otherwise is missing. God is mentioned often, and he is explicitly said to be involved in the events in the book. Prayer is also a major component of the additions. Among the deuterocanonical works, the

³. Huey's suggestion that the absence of God is due to his displeasure with the actions of the characters, i.e., that the book is an example of how life should not be lived by God's people, is too radical. While there are certainly examples of less than exemplary behavior on the part of various characters, there are too many indications of God's favor and providential care to apply Huey's suggestion consistently to the entire book. Thus, we do better to look at the signs both of God's presence and his absence.

book of Judith is the most closely related to Esther, telling the story of Jewish resistance to a heathen army, but with a more obviously religious outlook.

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