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# Esther: Preaching the hidden God from a neglected text

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What do you make of the book of Esther? You may have little sympathy with Luther's somewhat untypical comment, "I am so hostile to it that I wish it did not exist for it Judaizes too much and displays too much pagan behaviour".<sup>1</sup> But when did you last preach or hear a sermon on it? In his commentary, David Clines suggests with some insight that, "Esther may...perform a valuable critical function for the Christian reader as a test case for whether one truly accepts the Old Testament as a legitimate and necessary part of the Christian Scriptures".<sup>2</sup> Since Evangelicals are well served with commentaries such as those of Baldwin and McConville<sup>3</sup> perhaps it is time that Esther received more attention in our preaching. This brief article aims to stimulate fellow preachers to tackle this much neglected portion of Scripture.

## **Discerning the Book's Theological Purpose:**

Valid application of Scripture, bridging the historical and cultural distance between 'then' and 'now', depends very much on our discernment of the overall theological purpose of the text. This is especially so for narrative. So what is the point of this book? It bears no mention of God and it has been criticised as being vengeful, bloodthirsty and totally secular in outlook!<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, on the surface, the book's purpose is to describe the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim, to justify its celebration and to regulate its observance, since it had no basis in the Law. However, a careful reading reveals a more fundamental purpose which underlies the significance of Purim and which applies to the people of God in every era. The book indeed appears to be carefully constructed to raise and answer the question, "What governs the destiny of God's people? Human power and effort? Blind chance or predetermined fate? Or the sovereign providence of a hidden God who rules over all things?" Faithful to the historical events that the book describes, the author uses all his literary skill to raise this question in the minds of his readers and **to bring about the conviction that this pattern of events could only be explained by the unseen hand of a God who is transcendently almighty yet intimately and personally present to care for His people.**

This understanding of the book is supported by the following features of the text.

1. **The complete absence of God's name**, which has caused a problem for many, can plausibly be seen as a literary device designed to raise questions for the reader about God's relation to these events. Such questions are made especially urgent by the apparent dominance of human power and the role of chance or fate, symbolised by the lot, in the early chapters of the book.  
"The silence about God is quite deliberate, not to make the point that He is inactive in human situations, but on the contrary, that He is hidden behind all events.... The story can become, therefore, a powerful statement about the reality of God in a world from which He appears to be absent".
2. There are several oblique references to **God's hidden presence, activity and purposes** throughout the book.

- a) Mordecai's words in 4:14 provide more than a hint of this. They raise questions and invite the reader to reflect on what was happening. From what "other place" might deliverance come? Why should it do so? And who indeed does know whether Esther has been raised for such a time as this?
- b) The Jew's fasting in 4:3,15,16 clearly implies prayer to God. As we reflect on this, Esther's apparently fatalistic words, "If I perish, I perish" (4:16) are set in quite a different light. They stand as words of "determination which sees that faith permits only one course of action"<sup>6</sup>; indeed, words of trust, committing her life into the sovereign hand of God, whether He delivers her or not (cf Dan 3:17,18).
- c) Yet further reflection is invited by the passive forms of the verbs in 9:1,22. The month had been turned from sorrow to joy. But by whom?
3. The account's **complex coincidence of apparently unrelated events** to produce a coherent pattern is such as to cry out for further explanation. As Clines puts it, "The greater the number of 'coincidences' necessary for the salvation of the Jewish people, and the more implausible they seem, the more directly the role of God is pointed to. God, as a character of the story, becomes more conspicuous the more He is absent".<sup>7</sup> Among these 'coincidences' we see:
- a) Vashti's deposition which leads to Esther's unsought rise to a key position (1:9-2:18);
- b) Mordecai's discovery of a plot against the king yet his loyalty going unrewarded (2:19-23, cf 6:1-3);
- c) Haman's casting of lots and sending of the fateful edict was on 13 Nisan (3:7,12). The fact that this 'just happens' to be the day before Passover raises the question as to whether the Jews can again be delivered as they had been one thousand years earlier;
- d) the king's unlikely (cf 4:10,11) receiving of Esther and his willingness to grant her request (5:1-3);
- e) Haman's unwitting preparation of the gallows for his own death (5:14, cf 7:9,10);
- f) the king's insomnia at the crucial moment and his 'chance' discovery that Mordecai has gone unrewarded (6:1-3). Notice that at this point there is no further room for merely human initiative. Haman intends to arrange Mordecai's death in the morning so that he might attend Esther's banquet in a happy mood (5:14). Short of divine intervention, Esther's plan will be too late to save Mordecai;
- g) the presence of Haman at that key moment and his comic misunderstanding that makes him both the author and executive of Mordecai's exaltation and his own humiliation (6:4-14);
- h) the king's return to the room just as Haman falls on Esther in supplication. Haman's apparent violation of the queen's virtue seals his fate (7:7,8). Events have been such that Haman has unwittingly threatened the life of the king's servant, Mordecai, together with that of the queen. From Xerxes' viewpoint this can be nothing less than an assault on his own honour and royal dignity.
- Perhaps then, it is no mere etymological coincidence that while the Persian name given to Haddassah (2:7) may derive from the Persian word for 'star' or from 'Ishtar' a deity, when written (as originally) in unpointed Hebrew text, Esther's name has exactly the same form as the verb, literally translated, 'I will hide myself'.<sup>8</sup> This not only fits Esther's role (1:10,20) but may indeed point beyond itself to the hidden, sovereign God.
4. **The ironic course of events** with its turning of the tables on the enemies of the Jews clearly points to the activity of a higher power who brings about poetic justice on their

behalf. There are many parallels between earlier and later parts of the book where this turning of events can be seen. In these cases, similarity in Hebrew wording indicates the author's intention to point to this:

- a) the honouring of Haman (3:1) and of Mordecai (10:3);
- b) Haman and the lot (3:7) and the 'lot' of Haman (9:24);
- c) Haman receives the signet ring (3:10) which is passed on to Mordecai (8:2a);
- d) Haman's orders (3:12,13) and those of Mordecai (8:9-11);
- e) copies of Haman's edict (3: 14) and those of Mordecai (8:13);
- f) Susa bewildered (3:15) and Susa rejoicing (8:15b);
- g) Mordecai and the Jews mourning (4:1-3) and Mordecai's exaltation and the Jews rejoicing (8:15-17);
- h) Haman's exaltation (5:9-13) and his grief (6:12-14);
- i) the gallows prepared by Haman (5:14) and used for his execution (7:9,10).

While there is no precise chiasmic arrangement here, the theme of reversal is clearly stressed and the complex of events is seen to pivot around the fateful night described in 6:1-11.

With such features in mind, it is a useful exercise to make an outline of the main sections and subsections of the book and to attempt to state how each part functions to make the book "work" as a whole. This can help to crystallise one's thoughts on the book in preparation for preaching and helps to avoid 'not seeing the wood for the trees'.

### **Applying the Book's Message:**

Given the tight integration of its story, perhaps Esther is best preached as a whole text, though it may be applied over several sermons. Certainly, the first challenge for the preacher is to convey something of how the book "works" so that the congregation has a grasp of its basic message. And this must surely be done in a way that communicates the book's literary artistry, engaging the minds, wills and emotions of the people. As John Frame puts it, "To say that Scripture is authoritative is not only to say that its propositions are true, it is also to say that its commands are binding, its questions demand answers of us...its exclamations should become the shouts of our hearts ....its promises must be relied upon... Each speech act is a form of biblical authority; Scripture exercises its authority over us by the speech acts it performs. It calls us to believe God's assertions, to obey His commands, to sympathize with His joy and grief, to laugh at His jokes!"<sup>9</sup> (cf Westminster Confession xiv 2).

Are we not called to smile along with God as the sham of earthly power, riches and splendour is exposed? Despite his magnificent display of glory in chapter 1, Xerxes has domestic problems and appears to need "the legal experts and the flower of Persia's aristocracy to formulate a response which any self-respecting male chauvinist could easily dream up for himself".<sup>10</sup> And though he brings the whole might of royal decree against Vashti and any potentially insubordinate females in the Persian Empire, we eventually find him mastered by the charm and courage of a submissive young Jewess! Should we not respond with both laughter and horror at the blind folly and self-seeking vanity of the evil Haman in chapter 6 as he talks at cross purposes with the king and thereby contributes to the exaltation of the man he planned to kill? And should we not respond with joy and wonder at our God who works hiddenly and mysteriously in all things for His glory and for the good of His people?

Having said these things to encourage a lively presentation that reflects the 'life' of the book, I would suggest that three major areas of application flow out of the text.

1. The comfort of God's sovereign providence

We live in an age when the process of secularization and the impact of naturalistic thought can work to produce a sense of God's absence or distance from ordinary life, even in the believer. Here Esther works to correct our misaligned perspective.

"An observer in the world, ancient or modern, can in principle discern the immediate and superficial causes of things that happen. He may, furthermore, conclude that all things can be sufficiently explained in a natural way, thus denying that God acts - or exists - at all. The style in which Esther is written acknowledges the fact that there is often, or usually, no obvious sign that God is at work in the world. But the whole series of coincidences in the book is made to show very clearly that nevertheless, natural explanations are never enough. There is a purposefulness behind events which the pagan acknowledges by his recourse to lots, but which the godly know belongs to the nature of their Creator and Redeemer".<sup>11</sup>

Esther thus serves to remind us that our God really is in ultimate control of all events and is working out His good purposes for His people with loving care. That this control is exercised not by some distant and impersonal deity but by Yahweh, the one who is personally and actively present to deliver His people, is conveyed by the book's subtle but deliberate echoing of the Joseph story.<sup>12</sup>

While God's absolute sovereignty in all events is a truth that can be asserted far too glibly in the face of so much horrific tragedy that confronts us in the world that is fundamentally out of joint, Esther is not a glib book. It is far too realistic about the grim reality of evil for that, and dealing with the problem of evil is simply not its purpose. But it does have the purpose of calling God's people to faith and to find comfort in the fact that even when God seems absent, He is nevertheless working with all wisdom, power and love for the good of His children. The everyday lives and ultimate destinies of those who trust God are not governed by human powers or by chance and necessity. They are in the hands of a heavenly Father who is intimately involved in everyday realities whether bitter or sweet, spectacular or mundane and whose upholding and guidance of life is not a puzzle to be solved but a promise to be trusted.

He is a God who 'turns the tables' to bring about deliverance, not only in Esther's day, but even in the blackest and most awful event that this world has ever witnessed and ever shall witness (Acts 2:22-24). Is it not here, at the cross, in its apparent foolishness and weakness and absence of God, that we find the sovereign wisdom and power and love of God most fully at work? And is it not here that we find our deepest, most profound comfort? Our God is the one who works sovereignly in all things for His own glory and for the good of His people, and Esther's foreshadowing of the 'turning of tables' in His greatest act of deliverance should not be neglected in our preaching.

## **2. The challenge of human responsibility**

Esther clearly implies that God's sovereignty is not simply that of some super chess player who can turn any move of his opponents to his own advantage. God is not an after-the-event god who only acts in response to human initiative to turn men's evil deeds to His good purposes. The book would seem to support the more full-blooded view that God works out His good purposes even in and through the thoughts and actions of evil men; yet in such a way that they remain fully responsible and He remains wholly good and uncontaminated by evil (cf Gen 50:19,20).<sup>13</sup> This being said, we can rightly turn to Esther's strong emphasis on human responsibility.

The theme of conflicting loyalties that runs through the book is one feature that highlights this. "The author is convinced that loyalty both to temporal ruler and to eternal principles is possible in an alien state, though it may involve conflict".<sup>14</sup> As they struggle with this, Esther and Mordecai are beautiful illustrations of Paul's words in Phil 2:12,13. Whatever our thoughts on the matter of Esther's possible compromise in concealing her

identity (implying concomitant transgression of the food laws?) and in marriage to a pagan, we can only admire her heroic and faithful resolve in chapter 4, where she comes to the realisation that she is inescapably involved in a situation in which sides must be taken, where to do what is right involves the risk of death.

As with Esther and Mordecai, so God is sovereignly present with us in the messy complexities of our lives. As He works in and through us, we too have the responsibility to do our duty and to trust the rest to God's hands; to take courage in times of crisis; to pray and cast our anxieties upon Him because He cares for us and He will answer; to work sacrificially for the benefit of God's people and not count the cost.

God is truly sovereign, but that in no way lessens our responsibility to act and it can never excuse our failure and sin. Rather in view of His providence, we are called like Esther, to faithful, dutiful and obedient action as we seek to live as God's people in the midst of a pagan society.

### **3. The 'lot' of God's people and God's enemies**

Perhaps we can helpfully approach this by asking the question, "If God really is in control, then why did Haman come to power in the first place?" A biblically informed answer will surely recognise that in a world that is fundamentally in rebellion against God, which rejects His rightful lordship over the whole of life, God works both to bring gracious blessing and righteous judgement. Thus mysteriously, there are times when He withdraws His restraining hand on evil men so that even as they rise to power they bring about and heighten their own ultimate judgement (Prov 16:4). And even as they cruelly oppress God's people, they serve to bring about a more profound knowledge of God and deeper dependence on Him than God's people could otherwise have known - real blessing indeed!

**It is here that the book of Esther has a valid evangelistic application.** It clearly illustrates the wider biblical truth that, at base, there only two groups of people - God's people and God's enemies. And there are only two ultimate destinies - God's eternal blessing or God's eternal judgement. While men's ultimate loyalties may not be expressed in violent opposition to God's people, God nevertheless knows their hearts and will judge their rebellion and enmity against Him.

Yet God does not delight in judgement, and through the work of His son He has provided the means by which His enemies may be saved from His wrath and reconciled to Him (Romans 5:6-11). Indeed, as reconciled rebels ourselves, we can humbly and thankfully preach this message from Esther, trusting in the sovereign grace of our glorious God, who, in His mercy, subdues renegade hearts, turning them to repentance and faith and transforms His enemies into His reconciled people in Christ.

## **APPENDIX : The issue of vengeance.**

The sensitivities of our people may be such that this requires some extended treatment, perhaps in a midweek Bible study. It is certainly worth emphasising that a careful reading of the text does not suggest that Esther and Mordecai were motivated by a desire for unbridled vengeance in issuing their decree (8:9ff).

- a) Esther's concern is clearly stated to be for the preservation of her people (8:3,5,6,).
- b) Since the decree of Haman could not be revoked (cf 1:9; 3:8-14; 8:8) action had to be taken to neutralise its effects.
- c) Mordecai's decree allowed Jews the right to gather for self defence and to take action only against armed forces that attacked them. Since this is clearly stated, the words "with their women and children" (8:11), as with NIV, must refer to those of the Jews and not of their enemies. This is further supported by the fact that only men are killed

(9:6,12,14).

- d) The fact that no plunder was taken by the Jews, though permitted by the decree, is surely intended to emphasise that their defensive action was free from wrong motivation (9:10,15b).
- e) That they “did as they pleased” to their enemies (9:5) does not necessarily imply bloodthirstiness. Rather, together with “rest from their enemies” (9:16,22) it is a sign of God’s blessing (cf Neh 9:24,36,37 and the use of the term for a token of royal favour in Est 1:8). Previously, the Jews were under threat of destruction but now they had rightful authority to act for their own preservation.
- f) We should be wary of reading the verb ‘to avenge’ in Est 8:13 in a wholly negative way. The Old Testament forbids the taking of vengeance unlawfully or the harbouring of vengeful attitudes (Lev 19:18; Proverbs 25:21,22). God alone has the right to avenge wrongs (Deut 32:35) though He may authorise human means in doing so (Deut 19:11-13). This background should be assumed in reading Esther.

## References

- 1 M Luther, TABLE TALK, WA XXII, 2080
- 2 D Clines, EZRA, NHEMIAH, ESTHER, NCB, MMS, 1984, p 256
- 3 J G Baldwin, ESTHER, TOTC, IVP, 1984, J G McConville, EZRA, NHEMIAH AND ESTHER, Daily Study Bible, Saint Andrew Press, 1985
- 4 A number of evangelical commentators deal with the various moral problems of Esther by suggesting that the hiddenness of God is evidence of His displeasure (cf Deut 31:17,18). Yet, while blanket approval of Esther and Mordecai is not necessary, the book undoubtedly portrays them in heroic terms. For a more negative evaluation see commentaries by J C Whitcomb, EVERYMAN’S BIBLE COMMENTARY, Moody and, to a lesser degree, F B Huey in Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol 4, 1 KINGS-JOB, ed F E Gaebelein, Zondervan
- 5 McConville, p 153
- 6 McConville, p 172
- 7 Clines, p 269
- 8 This observation is made cogently by Wim Reitkerk in a taped study “Esther - The Meaning of History” available from L’Abri Cassettes, The Manor House, Greatham, Liss, Hants., GU33 6HF
- 9 J M Frame, THE DOCTRINE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987, p 210,204. Note also Clifford Bailey’s recent article, ‘Gaining the Ear of Our People’, FOUNDATIONS 25,1990, pp 8-13
- 10 Clines, p 280
- 11 McConville, p 173
- 12 See Baldwin p 26, Clines p 267. For some more explicit uses of this literary feature see W A Gage, ‘Ruth Upon the Threshing Floor and the Sin of Gibeah’ WTJ 51, 1989, 369-75; D I Block, ‘Echo Narrative Technique in Hebrew Literature: A study in Judges 19’, WTJ 52, 1990, 325-341
- 13 For a most helpful treatment of this see D A Carson, DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY, MSS, 1981, and his more recent book, HOW LONG O LORD, IVP, 1990
- 14 Baldwin, p 28

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