

ESTHER: SESSION 1

A FRACTURED FAIRY TALE

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THIS BOOK?

- ◆ Named after the heroine, Esther
- ◆ God is never mentioned or referred to by name
- ◆ Tells the story which is the basis of the Jewish festival of Purim
- ◆ Only canonical text not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls
- ◆ Controversial book even in early Christian church, but found greater acceptance in the West
- ◆ First book printed in Israel was a commentary on Esther called *Lekah Tov*

WHEN WAS ESTHER WRITTEN?

- ◆ Earliest known reference to Purim is II Maccabees 15:36 in which Purim is called Mordecai's Day
 - II Maccabees written 2nd century BC
 - Sets the latest date Esther could have been written
- ◆ Setting of Esther in Persian Period gives earliest possible date of late 5th to early 4th century BC

HOW DID THE CURRENT ESTHER TEXT COME TO BE?

- ◆ Hebrew Esther is different from the LXX (Septuagint) Esther
 - ◆ Another Greek version of Esther called the A-Text derived from miniscule ms 93 first published by James Usher, Archbishop of Armagh (1581-1656). Contains same 6 additions as LXX. Long considered an inferior revision as the LXX, some now believe it represents a Greek translation of a different Hebrew text
 - ◆ Order of versions looks like this:
 - Pre-MT > Proto-AT >
 - Proto-MT > MT > Proto-LXX
- (From J. A. Clines, *The Story of the Story*)

WHAT DID LUTHER SAY ABOUT ESTHER?

- ◆ "I am so hostile to this book (II Maccabees) and to Esther that I would wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety." *Table Talk, XXIV*
- ◆ Esther includes "much that is good". *Introduction to Esther Translation*

WHAT KIND OF BOOK (GENRE) IS ESTHER?

- ◆ Historical Novel - based on Persian setting and use of Persian loan words (Purim is a Persian word made plural using Hebrew grammatical rules)
- ◆ Festival Legend - predominant view
- ◆ Historical Account - least prevalent view
 - Accepts that King Ahasuerus is historical King Xerxes I
 - Persian cuneiform text including a minor court official named Marduka has been found to date to the time of Darius I or Xerxes I
 - Esther may be a variant spelling of Amestris, one of Xerxes' queens
- ◆ Comedy or Farce
 - Lavish setting
 - Use of exaggeration
 - Clear distinction between heroine/hero and the villain
 - Travesty in the sense of its light-hearted treatment of a serious topic
- ◆ Wisdom Narrative
 - Like Ruth, is a wisdom story instead of wisdom teaching
 - Explains lack of reference to God
 - Reflects wisdom theodicy that the righteous flourish and the sinner perishes
- ◆ Persian Chronicle
 - Places Esther in a class by itself
 - Says Esther is a Hebrew story written from the viewpoint of a Persian official
 - Explains in part the lack of religious references
 - Explains frequent reference to Mordecai as the Jew
 - Explains 3rd person perspective reflected in references to the Jews
 - Explains lists of court advisors and Haman's sons
 - Explains formulaic nature of court decrees

HOW DID ESTHER COME TO BE PART OF THE CANON?

- ◆ Esther does not defile the hands" *Babylonian Megillah*
- ◆ First Christian commentary on Esther appeared in A.D. 831
- ◆ LXX Version of Esther is canonical for Eastern Orthodox
- ◆ LV (Latin Vulgate) as well as MT authoritative for Roman Catholics

QUESTIONS ABOUT ESTHER

- ◆ Why is Esther in the canon if there is no mention of God?
- ◆ Should Esther simply be ignored as though it didn't exist as Luther suggested?
- ◆ Was the MT (Masoretic Text) author responsible for leaving out previously included God language?
- ◆ What do we do with the explicit violence of chapter 9?
- ◆ Why do the heroine and hero of a Jewish book have not just Persian names, but the Persian names of Babylonian deities?
- ◆ What do the people of God do in times when *the word of the LORD* is totally absent?
 - I Sam. 3:1
- ◆ Where is God when the *word of the LORD* is rare?
- ◆ How should the people of God behave in the courts of those traditional "enemies" of God, Egypt and Babylon?
- ◆ What does it mean to be God's people in an unholy land?
- ◆ Do the actions of God's people matter? Make a difference?

- ◆ Can we remain people of God and participate in secular society?
- ◆ Does the presence of God's people bring anything of value to those who are defined as separate from us/not people of God?

ESTHER INVITES US TO PLAY WITH BIBLICAL TEXTS

- ◆ Farcical nature sets the tone of serious fun
- ◆ Comparable to an ancient "Rocky and Bulwinkle Show" with its *Fractured Fairy Tales*
 - We get the author's point because we know the real "fairy tale" so well
- ◆ Esther's author demonstrates a breadth of knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures
 - Creation
 - Passover
 - Stories of Joseph and Abigail
 - Monarchy and power issues in the Bible
 - Wisdom issues in the Bible
- ◆ Esther's author demonstrates a knowledge of the sacred myths of the surrounding cultures
 - Ishtar
 - Marduk

DISCUSSION OF FIRST CHAPTER OF ESTHER

- ◆ Read Esther 1:1-9 : What has the author told us so far? What does this setting set up for us in terms of expectations?
- ◆ Read 1:10-22 : Conflict happens - What is the problem in this story that needs to be resolved? Does the problem get resolved? Note that we get 2 versions of the law that is made: Vashti is never again to come before the king and every man in the Persian Empire is to be master of his own house. What do you notice about the king's solution of his problem? Do you anticipate any future problems as a result? What do you think about this king in general and the way he makes law? (What other laws has the king made so far?) What do you think about Queen Vashti? The king's advisors/eunuchs/officials? What kind of portrait of the Persian Empire is portrayed here?