

Esther Confirms the Feast of Purim

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Esther confirms the feast of Purim as a universal celebration by the Jews of their victory
2. aim – to cause us to understand that the proper response to grace and mercy is worship
3. passage – Esther 9:17-10:3

b. outline

1. The Feast of Purim Inaugurated (Esther 9:17-28)
2. The Feast of Purim Confirmed (Esther 9:29-32)
3. The Feast of Purim Considered (Esther 10:1-3)

c. opening

1. the **direction** of our exposition of the book
 - a. **chapters 1-2** lay out *in detail* how it is that Esther (a Jewess) was able to rise to Queen of Persia
 - b. **chapter 3** is the “center” of the book – the plot by Haman to destroy the Jews
 - c. **chapters 4-7** outline the *response* to the edict instituted by Haman (by each player)
 - d. **chapters 8-10** outline the *resolution* to the edict and how it is overturned (positively)
 1. most of section involves the writing and implementation of a new edict to overthrow the first
 2. (**now**) the book closes with the response of the Jews to their **success**
2. the **importance** of the final section of the book
 - a. it is *here* that the “historical” purpose of the book becomes apparent – or, why was it written?
 1. true, the book outlines the threat that came against the Jews and how they overcame it
 - a. **e.g.** the rise of Esther (the namesake) to the throne is clearly superintended as the *means* by which the Jews are able to defend themselves against a threatened genocide
 - b. **e.g.** the revealing by Mordecai of a plot against the king becomes another *means* by which the threat of Haman is thwarted (although it is Mordecai *himself* who forces Haman’s hand)
 2. however, the embracing of the book into the Hebrew canon is *primarily* due to what is outlined in these final verses – it answers the **question**: what is Purim and why do Jews celebrate it?
 - b. so, the best approach (**IMO**) to these verses (which are quite *tedious*) is to step back and discuss the feast from a more “biographical” perspective (**i.e.** via an overview)

I. The Feast of Purim Inaugurated (Esther 9:17-28)

Content

a. the details of this feast

1. its **name** – Purim (*poor-im*)
 - a. the name is established in the book itself – **vv. 24-26**
 1. although (**based on v. 26**) the name was established more by custom than by decree
 - b. the name is derived from the Persian word for “lots” – a commemoration of the fact that, on one specific day, chosen by lot, Haman’s own plot to kill the Jews would be turned back
 1. **i.e.** in **3:7**, Haman begins to cast lots to decide what day he would have the Jews annihilated
 2. the casting of lots is a very *Old Testament* concept – the use of a device to produce a “random” result was thought to be a means to determine the divine will (**Proverbs 16:33**)

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”

 - a. there are only two (2) specific cases of lots in the N.T. being used to determine an outcome:
 1. the soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ cloak, the disciples casting lots to appoint Matthias
 - b. **note**: both events are *before* the coming of the Spirit and the advent of the church age
 - c. thus, a *New Testament* worldview no longer advocates “chance” or “coincidence” as a means of determining the divine will – it is revealed now by the Spirit through a closed canon
2. its **date** – on *both* the 14th and 15th day of the month of Adar (**i.e.** the twelfth Jewish month; **v. 21**)
 - a. on the 14th for the rural areas (**v. 17**) – they were able to kill all their enemies on the 13th day
 - b. on the 15th for the urban areas (**v. 18**) – they needed an additional day due to 1) their enemies being better armed, 2) the close quarters of the fighting, and 3) the density of the enemy
 1. today, only in Jerusalem and some of the larger cities is it celebrated starting on the 15th
 - c. so, Mordecai instituted the feast to last *both* days (**v. 27**; why limit the party to just one day?)

3. its **establishment** – by the intention and decree of Mordecai
 - a. it began simply as a “day of rest” after the day of fighting (**note vv. 17-18 cf. v. 23a**)
 1. **IOW**: the natural reaction of defending yourself against a genocidal attack is to celebrate
 2. the Jews “*started to do*” this by a new custom (**v. 23a**)
 - b. but, it became “official” by a “*letter*” sent by Mordecai throughout Persia (**vv. 20-22**)
 1. establishing its *historical* reasons – he “*recorded these things*” (**i.e.** the history behind it)
 2. establishing it as a *national* holiday – he “*sent letters to all the Jews ... in all the provinces*”
 3. establishing its *substance* – “*make them days of ...*” (**see below**)
 - c. it seems that Mordecai made the decision to turn this into a national holiday *on his own* (**v. 23**)
 1. as the viceroy of the king, he *seems* to possess the authority to do so (**see below for more**)
4. its **substance** – a feast of gladness (**vv. 22b**)
 - a. feasting – as with most of the Jewish festivals, much eating and drinking
 1. a human trait: seeing food and drink as the substance of *life*, and celebrating around it
 - a. **note**: the early church continued this *divine blessing* by structuring its gatherings around food (**e.g. Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 11**)
 - b. gifts of food – probably to friends, as a reminder of their *communal* nature in this event
 - c. gifts to the poor – as a tangible way of recognizing their own “poverty” in the face of extinction
 - d. today, the Jews celebrate Purim with four (4) distinct obligations: listening to the public reading of the book of Esther, sending food gifts to friends, giving charity to the poor, eating a festive meal
 1. however, a number of *apocryphal* additions are now included in Purim:
 2. masquerading in costumes, particularly men dressed as women; burning an effigy of Haman; carnival in the streets; spiels (or comic dramatizations) of the book; drunkenness
 3. **e.g.** Mayim Bialik’s YouTube video as a *spiel* of the story (inaccurate!) and condoning these
5. its **purpose** – as a *perpetual* reminder of what had happened *and how they had survived* (**vv. 26-28**)
 - a. note the *redundancy* of the Jews committing to this feast into perpetuity (“*without fail*”, “*throughout every generation*”, “*never fall into disuse*”, “*nor should the commemoration cease*”)
 - b. **IOW**: the *perpetuity* of the feast itself is designed to send the message that the Jews will always survive, no matter who comes against them to destroy them

II. The Feast of Purim Confirmed (Esther 9:29-32)

Content

a. a second letter of confirmation

1. note the reference to “*this second letter*” in **v. 29**
 - a. given that everything in **vv. 20-28** is within Mordecai’s letter, “*this*” can only be a reference (although grammatically strange) to another letter written by Esther
 - b. it seems likely that the Queen wished to make this feast *fully official* in two (2) distinct ways:
 1. under the auspices of the king himself – as an official national holiday
 2. as a feast with all of the *obligation* of the other feasts established over them in the law
 - a. **v. 31b** – just as they had obligated themselves to the other “*fasts and their lamenting*”
 - b. not that this would be a celebration that included fasting and lamenting, but that it would have the same *obligation* as those other God-ordained commemorations (**i.e.** like Passover)
2. **question**: how did this feast become a part of Jewish life *in Palestine*, if the majority of the Jews within this book were *dispersed* from their homeland? **answer**: the remnant of Jews that returned to Jerusalem under Cyrus were still under Persian authority, and would have been involved in this

III. The Feast of Purim Considered (Esther 10:1-3)

Content

a. the *final act* of the book

1. simply an *epilogue* closing the story and attempting to show the *magnanimity* of Mordecai

b. the *final lesson* of the book

1. **thesis: the primary lesson gleaned from the book is from what does not appear in it**
 - a. the name of Purim is never used outside of this book (**i.e.** it does not appear in the New Testament)
 1. although a *few* have suggested that the unknown feast of **John 5** is Jesus at Purim
 2. but, if this book is written for the purpose of establishing this feast, but the feast disappears from the rest of the redemptive story, shouldn’t that tell us something?

- b. the name of God never appears in the book
 - 1. although it should be clear (esp. to Christians) that God's sovereign hand is active in it
 - 2. but, if God is so clearly at work here, why is it that he does not inspire the author to give any credit to him for the outcome, especially as it *appears* so very good for God's people?
 - 3. or, is it *possible* that God did not want his name in this book?
- c. the worship of God never appears in the book (**ask the question first**)
 - 1. **question:** what is the response that God desires (demands) from his people whenever he extends his grace and mercy to them? **answer:** consider Jesus' words from **John 4:21-23**
"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."
 - 2. although the Jews in this book **celebrate** the fact that they have survived, their response is not to **worship** God for his deliverance – there is no mention of an altar, an acknowledgement of sin, repentance, the Law, etc. – **IOW:** the *human* response, not the *divine* one
- d. **application: the book of Esther, although a wonderful example of the sovereignty of God in the lives of the Jews, is *actually* a book designed to teach this principle: the response of the true follower of Christ to the mercy of the Father is to fall before him in worship**
 - 1. **although food, fun, and fellowship are important in the life of the church, the single greatest thing we do as Christ-followers is to *identify ourselves with God in worship***