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Introduction to Esther, 2

Esther 1:1-3a

In his book *A is for Ox*, Barry Sanders makes the case that an essential part of learning is an orality stage, or storytelling. Reading to a child or storytelling is much more than a warm fuzzy experience. It turns out that it is essential for proper brain development in young children. Sanders wrote this:

Without a full experience in orality a person cannot truly embrace an animating and invigorating literacy. Orality is the armature, the framework, on which literacy takes its particular shape and fills out its contours. Orality makes social

and emotional development possible.

To say it more graphically, literacy fits over orality like a protective glove, following every contour and outline that orality hands it. Orality provides the rhythms, the intonations and pitches, the very feelings, that find final expression in writing. Orality thus serves as a preparation- a necessary and powerful foundation- for the construction we call literacy. (Sanders, 1995, pp. 34-35)

As I read this book, I thought of God's word and the large place that storytelling holds in God's communication with His children. Think of the narratives:

- Nathan's confrontation of David — it involved a story.
- The Song of Solomon — which is one long story.
- The books of Ruth, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
- The historical books of the Old Testament — Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles — all stories.
- The many parables of Christ.
- Each of the four gospels!
- The book of Acts.
- And the book of Revelation!

The question that came to mind was this: "Could the narrative portions of Scripture 'provide the rhythms, the intonations and pitches, the very feelings, that find final expression in' the rest of the Bible?" Martin Luther wrote this:

I am persuaded that without skill in literature, genuine theology cannot stand. (Luther, 2010, pp. Eoban Hess, 29 March 1523)

Paul L. Holmer, in his book *C. S. Lewis: The Shape of His Faith and Thought* put it this way:

Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become. (Holmer, 1976, p. 28)

James Williams wrote this:

Biblical narrative represents a dynamic mode of thinking whose aesthetic properties support and enhance the process of arriving at knowledge. (Williams, 1982, p. 15)

You say, "So, I just have to read the narrative portions of the Bible and that will make me more orthodox? No, the call is to place yourself in the story and relive it. Think of the

Lord's Supper. What is the call involved when partaking in it? "Do this in remembrance of Me."

Recall that the word for "remember" in the Hebrew is **זָכַר** (*zākar*) which means far more than simply calling to mind. The word is vivid, implying a mental exercise where we place ourselves in the event that we are remembering. This is why in Passover the Jewish father in Christ's day did NOT say, "My great, great, and so on grandfather was a slave in Egypt." BUT "*I was a slave in Egypt!*"

Truly an essential part of orthodoxy and orthopraxy is reading, understanding, and allowing ourselves to live in and so "remember" the narrative portions of Scripture.

- To live through the agonizing offering up of Isaac!
- To walk with God's people into exile!
- To sit in the upper room with the disciples as Christ taught them.
- To stand at the foot of His cross. And then...
- To rejoice as you discover the resurrection of Christ!

For the next several weeks, it will be our privilege to live for a moment each Sunday morning in the life and times of God's people in Esther's day. The call therefore is NOT simply to be amused or fascinated by the literature. RATHER, it is to enter in and so allow ourselves to be moved by what we see, hear, and experience unto our growth in grace!

However, to do that, I want to discuss the literary elements of *Esther*.

Esther's Structure.

Esther involves a large Chiasm which spans the whole of the book:

Chapter 1: The Opening

 Chapters 2-3: The King's First Decree

 Chapters 4-5: The Clash Between Haman and Mordecai

 Chapter 6: The Crisis, "During that night the king could not sleep..."

 Chapters 6-7: Mordecai's Triumph over Haman

 Chapters 8-9: The King's Second Decree

Chapter 10: The Epilogue

By design, the focus and whole of this book points to and flows from chapter 6 which makes this the pivotal chapter/message in this book.

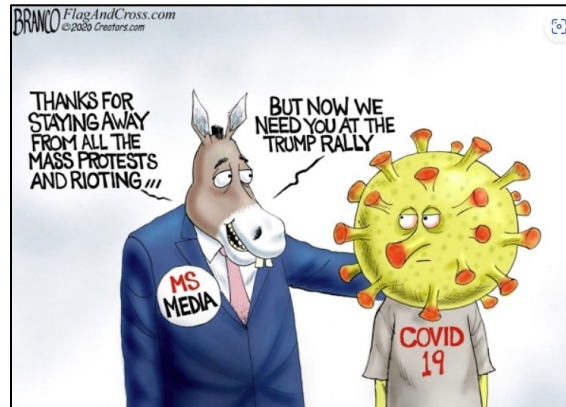
Now that doesn't mean that chapters 1-5 and chapters 6-10 are unimportant. They

are. What it means is that when we consider these chapters, we must have on eye on chapter 6, a chapter in which God effects the deliverance of the Jews while they slept!

Esther's Timbre

What is timbre? According to Merriam-Webster, “[Timbre] is the quality given to a sound by its overtones: such as... the quality of tone distinctive of a particular singing voice or musical instrument.” So, your ability to recognize my voice from another is due to the timbre of my voice.

That being said, what is the timbre of Esther? Satire! When it comes to an oppressive situation — ill-health, an impossible task, or an oppressive government — the observation has been made that there typically are two responses on the part of man: Fear or Satire.



For example, consider Covid. How did our world respond? There were those who were terrified by it and still are terrified by it. Then there were those who mocked NOT the disease, BUT our response to it.

It is this Satire that is the timbre of *Esther*. Ian Duguid put it this way:

[Esther] satirizes the empire, mocking its claims to power and authority. Satire takes the object of fear, the authority, and makes fun of it, showing its ridiculous side... For oppressed and powerless people, satire is a key weapon, cutting the vaunted splendor of the empire down to size. Dictatorships and totalitarian states have never had much of a sense of humor when it comes to their sense of self-importance. Books like *Animal Farm*, in which George Orwell depicted and parodied the Soviet system of government, swiftly find themselves being banned by the empire, because it fears the power of satire. If the people once perceive that the emperor indeed has no clothes, then the empire's power to command obedience and instill fear is broken... Satire is thus a powerful antidote to despair. The Book of Esther shows us that the great empire is not run by fearsome giants after all, but by petty bureaucrats. The ruling class of Persia is depicted not so much as 'The Magnificent Seven' but more like 'Ahasuerus and the Seven Dwarfs.' (Duguid, 2005, pp. 6-7)

We see this NOT ONLY in chapter 1 of Esther, BUT throughout the entire book. Mordecai's initial response in appealing to Esther rather than God, Haman's counselors. The value and importance of Ahasuerus to the Jews, what a joke! All the while our God reigns!

Truly, the timbre of *Esther* is that of David, describing the threat of every and all secular governments of the world.

Psalm 2:2-4, "The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed [this is what they say]: 'Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!' [How ought we to respond? In dread? Fear? Well, how does our Lord respond?...] He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them."

This is the effect God wanted His people to have in reading *Esther*. NOT that of mockery, BUT seeing Satan, his servants, and all secular and world powers and threats for what they really are: in the presence of God and eternity, nothing!

The Hebrew of *Esther*

Most of you have heard me reference this before. Yet the point is important to keep in mind any time we are dealing with the Hebrew narratives. The closest genre when it comes to Hebrew in our world is stage play. In stage play the audience is NOT told who the villain or the hero is. They are left to discover that from what is said or not said. What each character does and why they do it. Etc.

We see this throughout the Old Testament. It was written as a stage play.

- You want to know God's power? Psalm 29 was written so that the reader might feel God's power in the form of a Mediterranean storm as it pounds the coast of Palestine.
- Will Saul be a good king or a bad king? When we are first introduced to him in 1 Samuel 9, he has so many amazing attributes as a person- tall, good looking, quite capable, respectful to his father, and much more. Yet when it comes to the things of the Lord, nothing! The chapter is conspicuously silent. When it comes to the things of the Lord, Saul is completely ignorant! The text is showing that Saul would be a bad king!

This is important to understand because as Bible students our focus typically is the Greek New Testament which is more apt to say it than show it! How do we know God loves us? The New Testament says it over and over again!

John 3:16a, "For God so loved the world..."

Romans 8:39, "[Nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God..."

1 John 4:8b, "...God is love."

Yet to understand God's love from the Old Testament, more often than not you will be given examples of it!

- Genesis 3: we read of God clothing Adam and Eve instead of killing them.
- Genesis 6: we read of God drawing near to Noah and protecting the patriarch and his family from the flood.
- Genesis 12: we read of God taking an ungodly man named Abram who worshipped many false gods and making him a father of nations!

So, does God love Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, etc.? There is no question — NOT because God's word says, "God so loved Isaac..." BUT because God exchanged the life of the patriarch with the ram caught in the thicket (Genesis 22)!

So, in our study of *Esther* we will learn many things about our relationship with God, His disposition toward us, and His purpose and plan for His people — but all by observation! And that brings us to the major themes of *Esther*.

The Major Themes of *Esther*

The Presence of God in the Life of His People

The name of God is NOT used in this book at all. Not one time does it appear. Now, knowing the nature of Hebrew, what is being shown by this omission?

Recall, at the time of the writing of this book, God's people had become incredibly horizontal in their living and thinking. So much so that for all sakes and purposes, God was removed from their lives. *That was their view of Him... He was a far-off God!* So, what did God do? He gave these very same people a book in which His name is removed (*just as He apparently was from their lives*), and yet His love, devotion, care, and protection is intimately present, working unto their good and His glory! It is as Paul observed in Romans:

Romans 11:2-4, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. [It is easy to think this when times get tough. So Paul reminded us...] Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.' [Elijah thought that God had forgotten him and so forsaken His covenant promises...] But what is the divine response to him? 'I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'"

In other words, *I haven't forsaken you or My promises! Though you cannot see the big picture, in and through all things My eternal purpose is coming to pass!*

That is the message of Esther from which we draw this important conclusion: Even at those times in our lives when we feel most distant from God- when God seems NOT to care — God is intimately present and remains most concerned for our being, welfare, and good!

The Place of Genuine yet Compromised Servants in the Kingdom of God

The book of Esther begins with a not-so-flattering portrayal of Mordecai and Esther. Recall Iain Duguid said,

Mordecai worked so hard to fit in as a good citizen of the empire that when we hear the Jewish exiles described as those whose laws are different from those of every other people and who do not obey the king (Esther 3:8), we feel that Mordecai, at least, was being grossly misrepresented. Even though the charge should have been true of all of God's people, Mordecai was far from being an obstinate standout. He showed little enough concern over the ethical issues involved in his cousin Esther being taken into the harem of the Gentile king, with its defiling food and corrupting practices. In fact, he was the one who insisted that far from being in the least bit different from other peoples, Esther should entirely conceal her Jewishness. He was no Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego; he had been a good servant of the empire, quietly obeying all of the other laws of the king, committed to fitting in. (Duguid, 2005, p. 35)

While Mordecai is a different servant by the book's end, nevertheless both he and Esther begin as compromised Jews. In other words, they are the poster children for their generation representing every compromised child of God who has become "of the world BUT not in it!" In other words, we must see that you and I are Mordecai and Esther!

As that is the case, what is God's message to us? Though the Jews of this era felt abandoned by God (no doubt on account of their abandoning God), God had NOT abandoned them. They remained the apple of His eye and so do you!!

The "Loyalty" of God When it Comes to His People

Recall the basis of Mordecai's exhortation to Esther.

Esther 4:14a, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place..."

On what basis did Mordecai say this? The promises God made with Abraham. What are those promises? This is what God told Abraham when He called the patriarch to Himself (when God saved him),

Genesis 12:2-3, “I will make you (1) a great nation, and (2) I will bless you, (3) and make your name great; and so (4) you shall be a blessing; and (5) I will bless those who bless you, and (6) the one who curses you I will curse. And (7) in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This verse contains seven different promises all arising out of God’s love for Abraham. Now, if we were to summarize these promises with one word, what would that word be? We don’t have to guess. For the word the Bible uses is the untranslatable Hebrew word, **חֶסֶד** (*chesed*). It is used 245 times and is untranslatable because it describes (1) both the character and commitment of God to His people, as well as (2) the joint concepts of love, care, devotion, and loyalty granted to God’s people on account of God’s covenant relationship with them.

Accordingly, it is translated in the English as “lovingkindness”, “loyalty”, “merciful”/“mercy”, “devotion”, “love”, “favor”, “loyal deeds”, and more.

It is this concept that is found NOT in the words of Esther, BUT throughout the entire book. As bad as His people are — epitomized by Mordecai and Esther — nevertheless God had NOT forsaken them, forgotten them, NOR rejected them. Such an important truth God’s people needed to hear both in Esther’s day and in our own!

The Providence of God

Matthew 10:29-31, “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.”

Hebrews 1:3b, “...[Christ] upholds all things by the word of His power...”

These passages reflect the Biblical doctrine of Providence in which God NOT ONLY is present in this world, BUT is actively working to bring about His and our good at all times.

Philippians 1:6, “*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Paul, speaking of the servant of God wrote:

Romans 14:4b, “...and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Theologically, God’s providence is defined as “His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of His creatures and all their actions.” And that is what we see throughout *Esther*.

- In the rebellion of a pagan queen, Esther 1.
- In the careless choice of Mordecai in living in Susa, Esther 2:5.
- In the willing participation of Esther in the selection process for the next queen, Esther 2:9ff.
- In the rash actions of an angry pagan, Esther 3:5-6.
- In the sleepless night of a king, Esther 6. Etc...

Throughout this book, we see God's fingerprints as He upholds His "crooked" people and protects them in spite of their sin! And so, we learn from *Esther* the Doctrine of God's Providence. Consider some of the glorious truths:

- Esther 1: The Sham of Earthly Providence.
- Esther 2: The Mystery of God's Providence.
- Esther 3: The Scope of God's Providence.
- Esther 4: The Comfort/Confidence of God's Providence.
- Esther 5: The Path/Way of God's Providence.
- Esther 6: The Subtlety of God's Providence.
- Esther 7: The End of God's Providence: The Destruction of the Wicked.
- Esther 8: The End of God's Providence: The Exaltation of God's People.
- Esther 9:1-15: The End of God's Providence: The Redemption of God's People.

Let us NOT leave here without grasping this glorious truth: God is intimately involved and working in your life at all times (cf. Matthew 28:20)! Personal sin, ignorance, or spiritual numbness doesn't change this, it only stops you from seeing the Lord! If that is the case, then it behooves us all to live our lives intentionally in the presence of God!

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