

## Reading Esther...

This week, in our reading challenge, you will begin the book of Esther. This exciting book provides a unique look at a crucial time in the history of God's people. It is also a study in the providence of God, yet in a way which actually lies beneath the surface of the narrative. So, in approaching a book like this, what should we consider in order to get our bearings?

First, consider the historical background. The book was probably written some time between 465-330 BC (between the reign of Ahasueras [also known as Xerxes I—485-464] and when Greece took power [c.330]). The author is anonymous. The narrative of Esther covers a 10-year period (483-473 BC). The Jews began to return to their land under Persian rule about 55 years earlier, yet many remained in the land of exile (like Esther and Mordecai). Ezra and Nehemiah come chronologically after the story of Esther (about 20 and 30 years, respectively). It is interesting to note that the Greek historian, Herodotus (c.490-425) wrote his *History of the Persian Wars* only 25 years after the reign of Xerxes I, devoting one third of it to his reign, providing another window into the world of Esther.

Second, consider the genre and structure of the book. Esther is an historical narrative, with a plot, selective details, and distinctive characterization. Narratives should generally be interpreted 'scene-by-scene' rather than 'verse-by-verse' (i.e. taking into account larger blocks which move the narrative along in context). A verse-by-verse study runs the risk of flattening the narrative arc and reading into the details in a manner that is out of sync with the flow of the story. The story seems to follow a structure which has an unlikely turning point, with later events mirroring earlier ones:

- Opening (Ch.1)
- King's first decree (Ch.2-3)
- Haman vs. Mordecai (Ch.4-5)
- \*Turning point (6:1)\*
- Mordecai triumphs over Haman (Ch.6-7)
- King's second decree (Ch.8-9)
- Epilogue (Ch.10)

Third, consider the purpose and main theme of the book. One purpose is to explain the meaning behind the feast of Purim (cf. 9:28). A key theme in Esther (and the rest of Scripture in terms of redemption) is *reversal of fortune*. This begs the following questions: *who turns the wheels of history? Who is really in control?* Contrary to appearances, it is not the 'powerful' human figures in the story, but rather the hidden hand of God (Note: God is never directly mentioned).

Lastly, consider application. In doing so, we will need to first consider the original audience. This would have been the post-exilic people of God, who, though back in the land, continued to face challenges and discouragement. As you read Esther, consider the following questions: *How would this book have encouraged them? How should this book encourage you in today's world? What does the book tell you about God and his working? How does it foreshadow the gospel and Christ?* Keep reading!

Jason Hunt