

Introduction to Ruth and Esther

There is something deep inside us all that is hard wired to respond to a good story. The books of Ruth and Esther stand out among the great stories of human history for their pathos, high drama, honest humanity, good humor, and spiritual depths. Unique in biblical literature, these two accounts focus on the lives of two women – a fact that immediately propels them to a place of special relevance in our cultural moment.

Ruth is a Moabite who married into a Jewish family. Hers is an outsider's tale; a story of desperation and marginalization, of hope almost lost and wonderfully regained. As we watch her find a home among the people of God in Bethlehem we learn to trace the threads of divine providence that bring her, not only into the heart of the covenant community, but into the heart of God's plan for the salvation of the nations. Ruth's story teaches us that God loves to save Moabites, and if there is room in His kingdom for Ruth, surely there is room for us. But it also teaches us something bigger. Not only does God delight to save outsiders and makes them insiders, He also loves to make use of unlikely instruments to accomplish His grand designs. From the union of Ruth and Boaz will descend David the King, and from David will descend Christ the King of Kings.

Esther's tale, on the other hand, begins after the exile some six hundred years later. She is a beautiful young Hebrew girl living in Susa, the capital of Ahasueras, the debauched ruler of the vast Persian Empire. While Ruth's story focuses on the rather mundane dynamics of a peasant family during the time of the Judges, Esther's story plays out in the palace precincts of a despotic king, as she maneuvers her way through the

potentially lethal intrigues of life in the imperial court. As horrific accounts of the manipulation and exploitation of women by powerful men continue to make headlines today, Esther's story rings true. The exiting pace with which the narrative develops and the laugh-out-loud ironies with which it concludes must not be allowed to obscure the dark tragedy with which it begins. It is the account of a young girl snatched from her home to live in a king's harem (with all that that implies). Here, surely, is a word for our day.

Famously, the name of God is never once mentioned in the book. But this absence, rather than obscure the spiritual significance of the story, only serves to highlight what is really going on. The absence is glaring, forcing us to conclude for ourselves what the narrator never explicitly states. And this is one of the book's most pastorally helpful contributions. While God is never mentioned we cannot avoid seeing His handiwork in every twist and turn of the narrative. And in this way the narrator trains us to trust the providence of God, even when the apparent absence of God seems to us so glaring. Despite the surface differences of time and place, culture and class, in the end Esther's story, like Ruth's, celebrates the providence of our Sovereign God, who works by improbable means to save His people (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Esther becomes the savior of her people and the destroyer of her enemies. And in this she is a type of Christ, who, though brutalized by wicked men, is made both savior and judge of all.

Ruth

Authorship and Date

We cannot assert with any certainty the identity of the author of the book of Ruth. However, the emphasis throughout on the theme of kingship, beginning in 1:2 with Elimelech (whose name means *My God is King*) and climaxing in 4:18-22 with the genealogy of King David, likely locates its composition sometime during the rise or reign of David, about 1000 b.c. The Talmud says that Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel,¹ and while this is widely disputed by scholars who point out that Samuel was dead before David rose to the throne, there are reasons why this suggestion remains at least plausible. Samuel knew God's purpose for the Davidic kingship, having anointed David privately as the future king long before his formal ascension to the throne. The exclusion of Solomon's name from the genealogy at the end of Ruth suggests that the book provides an apologetic for David's reign, which only makes sense if the book was written during his lifetime. In the end, the anonymity of the book ought to be respected and no more ink need be spilt on speculating about its author.

Purpose and Themes

The time of composition matters because it helps us understand its purpose. Ruth is not simply a love story, or a tale of a widow's redemption. It is an apologetic for David's kingship. We ought not to conclude from this that Ruth is

1. For a helpful discussion of this Talmudic tradition and the range of scholarly opinion concerning it, see John J. Yeo, *Ruth*, in *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, Miles V. Van Pelt, ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), pp. 400-01.

not history, merely a piece of Davidic propaganda. After all, if that is all that it was, why highlight his Moabite ancestry or the wrong-headed abandonment of the Promised Land that led to the destitution of Naomi's family? But none of these facts are omitted. Here is David's unvarnished family history. Of course, it is precisely in these potentially embarrassing themes, that we learn what kind of king David was called to be, and beyond him, what kind of king great David's greater son would be. He would be a king who would bring rest to His people, just as Boaz brought rest to Naomi and Ruth. He will be a king under whose reign outsiders might find refuge beneath the wings of the Almighty.

The setting of the book is also important. Ruth occurs during the time of the Judges (1:1), when the people of Israel were wracked by repeated cycles of spiritual decline, divine chastisement, and spiritual renewal. The refrain that there was no king in Israel punctuates the book of Judges (17:6; 18:1, 19:1; 21:25). The book of Ruth tells us that God was at work to provide for His people, not only on a national scale by raising up judges to save them, but also on an unnoticed level, in the quiet return of these two destitute women from an overly prolonged sojourn in Moab. While the TV news headlines in Israel each evening would feature the exploits of judges or the damage of invading enemies, the arrival of Naomi and Ruth only caused a stir for a day or two in Bethlehem. And yet it would be here, rather than in Ehud's black-ops mission or Samson's great feats of strength that God's ultimate provision for the salvation of His people would be found.

Esther

Authorship and Date

Likely composed around 400 B.C., after the reign of Ahasuerus came to an end, the authorship of Esther is unknown. Some have argued that the original author was Persian, thus accounting for the apparent absence of God in the narrative. However, the story is a vindication of the Jewish people in the face of a terrible anti-Semitism, providing an apologetic for the feast of Purim, which commemorates the great deliverance the Hebrews experienced as a result of Esther's courage. We conclude that the author(s) of Esther were Jewish exiles, likely living in the Persian empire. They wrote to equip God's people to live as strangers in a strange land, reminding them of the hope that they may yet have in the sovereign Lord who defends His people.

Purpose and Themes

Jeremiah 29:4-7 offered what Barry Webb has called 'an appropriate lifestyle for Jews in exile, the basic principle being a recognition of the interdependence of the Jewish community and its host environment.'¹ The book of Esther makes plain however that the implementation of that policy is far from easy. That the names of the Jewish protagonists (Esther and Mordecai) are probably theonyms, referencing Ishtar and Marduk respectively, so suggesting a significant level of cultural assimilation. The lack of mention of the God of Israel, especially in the dialogue between Esther and her

1. Barry Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, IVP, 2000), p. 118.

uncle, further reinforces this impression. It is one thing for Haman or Ahasueras to sound like unbelievers. They were. But what are we to make of the absence of God even in the private speech of our two heroes?

Far from generating perplexity however, it is here that the book makes an important pastoral contribution. The narrative unfolds in a world where Esther is not in control of her own destiny and in this she is the embodiment of the fate of her people. Esther, like the exiled Jews living in Susa, is completely at the mercy of her Persian overlords. The action unfolds around a series of banquets. Life and death is meted out, the lusts of a tyrant are sated, high political office stripped away in an instant and just as quickly bestowed upon another, amidst the whimsy and indulgence of Ahasueras' latest party. There is no idealization, no sugar coating, no polishing away the rough edges when it comes to the account we are given of power and its abuse. At a time when the weak and vulnerable are victimized on an industrial scale, when the lives of women and children are trafficked around the world, when the strong leverage their power in order to gratify their lusts, Esther speaks a word we badly need to hear. For it is against this dark backdrop that the story unfolds of a sudden reversal (9:1-22), not just for Esther, who rises to become queen, but for the Jews who end the account victorious over their enemies. While the feasts of Ahasueras were fraught with moral and political danger, the narrative concludes with a new feast, a feast of the Jews, the feast of Purim, celebrating unexpected victory snatched from the jaws of inevitable defeat.

But this theme of victory in the book is, of course, only the latest round in the cosmic conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan that frames the storyline of the whole Bible. In Esther this conflict focuses on Haman 'the enemy of the Jews' (3:10; 9:24) and Mordecai. Haman is an Agagite, while Mordecai is a descendant of Kish. That the sons of Agag and Kish the Benjamite should be enemies would not have come as a surprise to Jewish readers who remember the clash between Israel's king Saul and Agag in 1 Samuel 15. Saul failed to fulfill God's will in destroying Agag. Mordecai, Saul's descendant, does not. But this ancient

rivalry is expressive of the fundamental clash between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent in Genesis 3:15, a clash that does not climax till the Cross. There we see the ultimate great reversal: life out of death, victory from apparent defeat.

And it is in this way that the absence of explicit mentions of God becomes a device to make His presence and activity glaringly obvious. The theme of an overarching providence, superintending the caprice of Ahasueras and thwarting the malice of Haman, cannot be avoided. Without once speaking of God, the book of Esther demands that we never lose sight of Him, who works whether we acknowledge Him or not, to keep His ancient promises.