

If you were assigned to be on a committee responsible for choosing which books to include in the Bible, you would probably have one very important rule. You would probably only choose books that talk about God or books where God plays a prominent role.

When we think about the Bible we may assume that God has a prominent place in each of the books of the Bible. Well guess what. We have a book in our Bible that mentions God a total of 0 times. We have a book in the Bible that never mentions the name of God and never talks about God. That book is the Old Testament book of Esther.

What is also interesting about this particular book of the Bible is that in the original version God does not appear but in later versions of this book God is inserted. Apparently some later translators were disturbed that God is not mentioned so they added God into the plot. But in the original version God is not mentioned.

I want to share how one commentator describes the book of Esther. She describes “the Hebrew book of Esther as an exciting, fast-paced story that has captured the imagination of Jews over the centuries, although it has been less well received by the Christian church. It contains all the elements of a popular romance novel: a young and beautiful heroine; a wicked, scheming villain; a wise older father figure; and an inept and laughable ruler. In the story good triumphs, evil is destroyed, and all ends happily. Beneath its lighthearted surface, however, the book of Esther explores darker themes of racial hatred, the threat of genocide, and the evil of pride and vanity.”

The story of Esther takes place in Persia which in our story runs from what would be modern day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq toward Ethiopia. Some scholars believe that this is a historical story while others believe it is a story of historical fiction. So we have this story in the Bible where God is not mentioned and it may not actually be historical.

So how in the heck can a story that doesn’t mention God and may not be a historical story end up in the Bible? Hopefully, as we read this story, it will become for us one of those stories which helps to capture our imagination as well.

The story of Esther begins with a woman who refuses to submit to a man. A woman who refuses to submit to her husband. And by refusing to submit to her husband this woman has her wealth and prestige removed from her.

King Ahasuerus was king of the Persian Empire around 450 years or so before the birth of Christ. Modern scholars now say that this king was really Emperor Xerxes. In our story King Ahasuerus gives a huge banquet that lasts for 7 days. There are white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. A very fancy banquet. Drinks are served in golden goblets and people get really drunk. In addition, Queen Vashti gives a banquet for all of the women.

After 7 days of this drunken festival, the king orders the queen to come in so that he can show off her beauty to all of the men present. But Queen Vashti does something that is completely unexpected. The queen refuses. The queen refuses to submit to her husband's demand.

This makes the men around the king very nervous. They fear that if other women in the kingdom hear that the queen refuses to submit to her husband then the other women will do this as well. So the king removes Queen Vashti as queen and a letter is sent throughout all of the kingdom that all women must submit to their husbands.

The king then sets out to find a new queen. The king assigns someone to invite several young and beautiful women to come and receive messages in the palace and then the king would decide which of these young women would be the next queen. One of these women is named Esther.

Esther is an orphan being raised by her cousin Mordecai. Esther pleases the king and the king eventually chooses her to be the next queen. But Esther has a secret that she did not choose to reveal. Esther is a Hebrew Jew. And the Hebrew people living in Persian were foreigners who were despised by many. This antagonism by some toward the Hebrews will play itself out in what happens next in the story.

The King appoints a man named Haman and assigns him to a very high place of authority. The king declares that everyone in the empire has to bow down to Haman. Mordecai, Esther's cousin who adopted her, refuses to bow down to Haman. Haman becomes furious. Haman is then informed that Mordecai is a Hebrew and Haman then plots to kill Mordecai and all of the Hebrews or Jews.

Haman informs the king that the Jews were not showing proper deference to the king and his officials. The king listens to Haman and then makes the following decree:

Read Esther 3:12-15

Mordecai finds out about this plot to annihilate the Hebrew people and he gets word to Queen Esther. When Esther initially hears about this she feels helpless. The rules that had been given to her said that she could not talk to the king for another month. That is when she gets this very famous reply.

Read Esther 4:13-17

Esther has been called for such a time as this. And Esther responds. Esther finds a way to communicate with the king. Esther then develops a plan to foil Haman's plot to kill all of the Hebrew people. Esther plans a banquet and invites only the king and Haman. Meanwhile, Haman has gallows built in order to have Mordecai hanged.

The king has a sleepless night and asks for the recorded minutes from his time as king to be brought to him. The king discovers that Mordecai had foiled a plot to have the king killed. The king asks if anything has been done to honor Mordecai. The king is told that nothing has been done. The king decides that Mordecai needs to be recognized in some way. The king arranges for Mordecai to receive special recognition and nice robes.

The banquet begins and the king asks Esther what he can do for her. It is at this point she informs the king of Haman's plot to kill all of the Hebrews or Jews. Let's read about what happens.

Read Esther 7:7-10

And with that the Hebrew people or Jews are saved. Jews today celebrate this event at a festival called Purim where they read the story of Esther and how the wisdom of Esther and Mordecai saved the Jewish people. This connection to Purim is probably why this book made it into the biblical canon that we use.

So what can we learn from this story where God is never mentioned? Should this book even be in the Bible? Reformers like Martin Luther did not believe that this book should be in the Bible. But since it is in our Bible and we have heard the story today what nugget can we glean from it?

I invite you back to the quote we read from chapter 4 that was said to Esther. "Perhaps, Esther, you have been prepared for such a time as this."

Now think about your own life. You may be feeling some type of calling upon your life and maybe you don't feel adequate. Maybe you are sensing that God is calling you out of your comfort zone and you don't want to go there. You want to stay in the zone where you know the rules and you know what to expect. You may be very resistant against whatever message you are getting over and over and over again.

As you contemplate whether or not you can carry out the task that you sense is being delivered to you, I invite you to hear the words toward Esther as being words being directed to you. "Perhaps, you have been prepared for such a time as this." Perhaps God is calling you out of your comfort zone to do something that is not easy for you to do. Perhaps, you have been prepared for such a time as this.

I invite you to not quickly dismiss or withdraw in fear to the challenge being placed in front of you. But to instead hear these words, “perhaps, you have been prepared for such a time as this.”

These are words which may be being directed to you individually and they may be words being directed toward this congregation. Perhaps, we here at Allison Creek are being prepared for such a time as this.

The book of Esther is disturbing because God is not mentioned. Maybe in the current challenge you are facing in your life you sense that God is absent as well. Or maybe you have to search for God because God is not always easy to see.

Blessings on your journey. And perhaps you are being prepared for such a time as this.
AMEN.

+++++++++++++++++++++

-Crawford, Sidnie White, *The New Interpreters Bible*, Esther, p. 855.

-Given: October 25, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)