

## Esther 06-02-14A

This is Tuesday, the 14th of February, 2006, Valentine's Day. Happy Valentine's Day to all you Valentine-type people. Good old Catholic saint from way back.

Don't really know why he's famous, but it's his day nevertheless. We begin tonight, appropriately enough, a study of one of only two books of the Bible that is named for a lady, and it is the book of Esther. We will, as is our custom, begin by taking a moment to exercise our individual priesthood, go before the Lord and ensure that we have qualified ourselves for the ministry of God's Holy Spirit to teach us from God's Word.

Shall we pray? Father, we are thankful for this opportunity to spend time in fellowship, receiving the blessing that comes from association with believers of like mind and the exercise of the gifts that you have distributed amongst us. We thank you for the opportunity to study a new book from your Word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will give us enlightenment, help us to find within these pages the truths that will equip us for every good work so that we can reflect the glory of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ask it in His name. Amen. This is the book of Esther.

You know from your general familiarity with the Bible that it is, A, in the Old Testament. B, it is in the section of the Old Testament that is the writings. You have the three great classifications, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

In Hebrew, this is the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim. The Nevi'im, of course, Nevi is the word for prophet, Ketuv, from Ketav, to write. So you have Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, and when you string the first part of those together, you get Tanakh, and that is the Hebrew name for their Bible, the Old Testament, what we would call it, Tanakh.

And this falls in the category of the writings, also known as in the section of not poetry and not wisdom literature, but history. It is a historical book. The primary authorship of the book is unknown.

We don't know who set these events down in writing. We do know from observation that the date of writing is very near to the events that it records. The late 5th century or early 4th century B.C. is the most probable time when this was set down.

We know this from some of the details that the book contains that were not available to later historians who were looking back at the time of the Persians, such as where palaces were located and so on. We also know this from language, linguistic evidence. There is also a favorable attitude toward the Persian king, and of course this is characteristic of a particular time in history.

The purpose of the book, we talked about the authorship, we talked about the date. What is the

occasion? Why was this book written? Well, of course, all scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness so that people of God can become mature, perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. This book has its contribution to make to our understanding and our maturity.

The specific or immediate goal is to tell the story of Esther and Mordecai and Haman in the context of the palace and the rule of Xerxes, and it culminates in the establishing of a feast, the Feast of Purim, which has been celebrated pretty much without interruption ever since these events took place. Many times you have scholars and others who want to question the factual nature or the historicity of a book of the Bible, but it's pretty tough to argue with Esther when this feast has been celebrated ever since these events took place. The feast didn't just invent itself, and they didn't celebrate and then say, we need an explanation for the celebration, let's make up a story.

Obviously, this series of events brought about the celebration, and the celebration is the best evidence for the historicity of this account. So, once the book came into being, of course, the question of its inspiration and its place in what we call the canon of Scripture is the next question, because obviously the books of the Old Testament circulated independently for a time after they were written. The prophecies of Jeremiah, the prophecies of Daniel, the prophecy of Ezekiel, the prophecy of Isaiah, and the minor prophets, these existed independently and were gradually collected, especially after the return from exile, the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, and many scholars believe that Ezra, in particular, was responsible for gathering and editing together into a compilation the earlier Scriptures, copies of the Torah, copies of the various prophets that had been circulating in both the northern and southern kingdom before the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721, and the carrying away to Babylon beginning in 605 and culminating in 586 with the destruction of Jerusalem.

So, one asks oneself, well, what about these poor Hebrews, these people from Israel, northern kingdom, southern kingdom, whatever, what did they use for a Bible before there was such a thing, before the Tanakh was assembled? And it really didn't reach its final form until sometime after these events, and we're going to see that this is taking place in the 400s BC, which is the 5th century BC. And so, at what time did people really have a Bible which was a collection of books? And it certainly existed in more or less its final shape by the time of the translation of the Septuagint, which is the rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek that took place in the 300s BC. And so, not long after the composition of Esther, which of course is also not long after the return from exile that we've been studying in Ezekiel and Daniel, you have the putting together of the Old Testament Scriptures into a collected form.

So, what about these people that didn't have it? Well, the first conclusion I would suggest is they didn't need it. If they needed a collection of Scripture, God would have given it to them, but they had what they needed. There was the prophetic gift and the prophetic office, the function of those national prophets in both the Northern and Southern Kingdom who told the people what they needed to hear, and it was basically messages of warning, wasn't it? When

you study through the minor prophets, and you look at Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, what is their message? Straighten up.

Here come the locusts. Straighten up. Here comes the wrath of God.

Straighten up. Here comes the cup of God's discipline. Here's the reason why you are not prosperous.

Here's the reason why foreign invaders are making incursions into the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now, you say, well, these poor people, they had one little or maybe two raggedy prophets traveling around giving them messages, and where was the Law of Moses, and where was the Books of Wisdom, and the Books of Poetry, and the Books of History, and all the rest of it that compose our Old Testament? Well, think about it. Most of this period, from the time of the divided kingdom, beginning with Jeroboam and Rehoboam, all the way down to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, 721, destruction of the Southern Kingdom in 586, and that captivity that goes all the way down to, you know, there's a 70 year period of time where the land gets its Sabbaths and so on.

The people of Israel, the people of Judah, are not in a position to learn anything of a very advanced nature, are they? They don't really need to be studying the Book of Job, or the Psalms, or the Proverbs, or the wisdom to be obtained by a verse-by-verse look at Judges, or Chronicles, or 1 and 2 Samuel. Why? The vast majority of them are out of line. Even in the time of Elijah, you have, out of a nation of hundreds of thousands of people, you have only 7,000 that haven't bowed the knee to Baal.

And God makes provision for those who are asking and seeking and knocking, and the rest are blinded. The rest stumble around in the dark. And you get the idea that they didn't need a complete collection of Scripture because the nation in general was apostate.

It was rebellious, apathetic, indifferent, and the only message God could send them that they could even begin to understand was a message of warning. Well, what is our lesson learned from observing this? We can generally tell when we're making progress in our understanding of God's Word, can't we? We know when our understanding is improving, when we have an enthusiasm for the Scriptures, where it's kind of exciting to look at a passage, or look at a category, or a doctrine, or an area of theology, or something new about the kingdom, or a better understanding of typology in the Old Testament, or insight into Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, or better understanding of what Paul was getting at in his epistles, or John, or Peter. And we know by examining ourselves to see if we're in the faith when we are really being nourished in our souls, and growing in grace and knowledge of the Savior.

We can take a look at ourselves and tell if this is taking place or not, can't we? If we don't really feel, if we don't really observe, would be a better word, a sense of progress and a sense of advance in our, not just understanding, but of interpretation and application for ourselves. If

we can't see, here's the simplest way of putting it, if we don't see that the Word of God is making a difference, giving us comfort in times of stress and challenge, giving us encouragement and guidance when we need to make decisions, giving us power to be patient and to endure when things aren't going well, we either have that or we don't. And if we don't, we need to ask ourselves, am I not really learning and am I not really advancing because I am like Israel in the Old Testament where God really can't give me anything new? Because I am not one of those whose heart is always hungry and thirsty for the things of God.

If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him? Ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened.

If you say, well, you know, I just don't really get much out of Bible class. I don't really get much out of my Christian life in general. I look around and I don't think I am doing any better than these rank unbelievers that I rub elbows with.

If that's the case, what's the problem? Is God really not powerful or are we really not seeking? The problem in Israel is that the people were not seeking and God could not give them the truth that you and I have in now 66 books and a nice, thick Bible that we can pick up anytime we want. We have no excuse whatsoever because God has given us a full-orbed revelation, both Old Testament and New Testament, tells us everything we could possibly need to know or want to know if we are inclining our ear and applying our hearts and lifting up our voice. God will always honor those prayers and answer those requests.

So, this book, one of the later books of the Old Testament to be written, one of the later books to be added to the collection that was growing from the time of Ezra on, is a historic account. It's probably the last of the books of history and it had some challenges in being recognized as an inspired book. One of the reasons is there are several different versions of the book of Esther.

The short version is what we have in our Bible, but the early church had a longer version that came from the Septuagint. The Septuagint translators, when they got around to translating the book of Esther and putting it in the Septuagint, had a manuscript of the book that had some additions. Now, whenever you have two copies of any particular scripture, it might just be a passage, it might even just be a phrase.

Maybe in one manuscript, there's like 6,000 manuscripts that have some portion of the Greek New Testament in them and many times they don't agree and maybe manuscript A has five words in a phrase and manuscript B has seven words in a phrase. Maybe this one says, Our Lord Jesus, and this one says, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and you say, well, which one is right? I mean, in cases like that, I don't think there's a huge worry about which one is correct and most of the differences are of that nature, but we want to know what did it originally say. How do you know? Well, you have to look at what typically happens with manuscripts and typically a manuscript will get larger rather than smaller.

About the only reason a manuscript gets smaller or shorter is if someone's eye skips from one word in a line to the same word in a lower line and misses the intervening text. We did an experiment in seminary where we took English text, like an article in an encyclopedia and just copied it out longhand and you can commit most of the errors that Bible text scribes committed if you try that. If you copy out, say, five pages longhand out of a reference work and then go back and check it against the original, you will find where your eye often will skip from one word to the same word below and you've left out half of a sentence or you've left out, in some cases, a whole paragraph or you unconsciously add something in.

You read a thing and then you look over here and you start writing and your mind adds something in that really wasn't in the original or you change a word to a synonym or to a homonym, even worse. Well, Bible scribes down through the centuries committed all of these errors and so many times we can sort of tell what happened by going back and comparing other manuscripts. But here's my point.

The text of Esther that was in the Septuagint was quite a bit longer, like a hundred verses longer than the Esther that we have in our Bible. Now, which one is correct? The long one that the early church was familiar with or the short one? Well, you have to do a little bit of detective work here. One of the reasons that there was some question about the Book of Esther is it is the only book in the entire Bible where the name of God is never mentioned.

God is never mentioned in this entire book. Well, very early on, the Jewish scribes were disturbed by this and they said, well, this is such a great book and it explains where our Feast of Purim came from and it's a wonderful thing, but God's not in it. We need to fix that.

And so what they did is, being the imaginative types, and if you ever read the Mishnah, you know how imaginative the rabbis can be. They said, you know, what this needs is, it's two bare bones, it needs some fleshing out. So what they did is, they added some things like Mordecai has a dream from God and they fleshed this out and they gave the dream and you know, behold at night Mordecai was asleep and you have this whole dream detailed out.

Mordecai prays this big, long prayer. They add that in. Esther prays a big, long prayer that they added in and this makes the book more religious and more holy because now God's in it giving visions and people are praying prayers and it's a lot more like a standard Bible book.

So it's easy to understand how that would be added into a book that never mentions God. Now, suppose that our theory is wrong and that is the original version. If you had an original book of Esther that had a dream that Mordecai had from God and prayers by Mordecai and prayers by Esther, who under God's heaven would go in and chop those out and make a shorter version of the book? How could that possibly happen? Which is easier to explain? Somebody adding those things in to make the book more acceptable or somebody saying, we don't need that dream, praying, that's boring, let's just chop that out and let's leave ourselves with a book where God is never mentioned.

It is very obvious which one is later, which one was modified. But this happened at a very early period and so by the time of the Septuagint translators, what has come to be known as the additions to Esther had already been fabricated. Some helpful scribe or two got together and said, let's fix this Bible book and make it better.

And people are always trying to do this. This is why you have so many translations of the Bible. This is why you have so many interpretive translations and what they call paraphrases where the actual words of the Bible are kind of hard to understand.

We're going to render this into real natural language and we're going to paraphrase. We're just going to make it tell a story and it will be so much easier. Well, now you don't know what God put in and what God left out and what the actual words are.

Numbers change. Measurements change. Details are left out.

Other details are thrown in out of the imagination of the paraphrase writer. And you're getting a... This to me is like somebody else chewing your food and then spitting it out in your plate for you to eat. I mean, I don't need that.

I want to see God's Word and let me figure out what He said. Well, these Jewish scribes. That's why you have these other versions.

So, when the Protestant church came into being, Martin Luther, John Calvin, all the rest of it, they were looking at the Catholic Bible and the Catholic Bible had taken the books that had been included in the Septuagint, some of which were not inspired, what you call the Apocrypha, the Apocryphal books. Well, the Protestant church chopped a lot of those out and said, we don't think this really belongs. And so, when the Protestant church was looking at the book of Esther, they said, you know, Esther is an inspired book, but not this inflated version.

We have a Hebrew manuscript of the original shorter version. That's what we're going to use. So, that's how we came to have the book that we have now.

Esther is a violent book and there is some violence in this book that has also troubled people. We're going to see that you know the basic outline of the story. Haman is going to end up being hanged and Haman's sons are going to get hanged.

Why is that? Some people are disturbed by that. It seems excessively violent. Is this supposed to be a model for Christian behavior? Should we go and not just get the enemy, but get everybody associated? Well, this isn't any different than Achan and his entire family or a lot of other episodes in Scripture, but the vengeance that the Jews take on the people who had plotted to wipe them out seems extreme.

So, this caused people problems. This is why we have a Bible of 66 books. We learn the reasons and the perspective to take on these events by looking at the rest of Scripture.

They are not explained in the book of Esther. The book makes no comment on whether it was right or wrong to hang Mordecai's sons, whether it was right or wrong for the Jews to avenge themselves on the Persians who wanted to wipe them out and so on. This book, in terms of its characteristics, is very well written.

It uses the tools of literature very well. We're going to find that it has a great structure. It's going to begin with a feast and actually it's a pair of feasts.

There's a pair of feasts in the beginning of the book. There's a pair of feasts in the middle of the book. And there's a pair of feasts at the end of the book.

And that's no accident. There's a celebration at the beginning that's completely pagan. There's a celebration at the end that's all about God.

And all the way through, there's great irony in the book. The most obvious and famous irony is of course Haman being hoist on his own gallows. But there are several other great ironies in the book.

And so it uses the tools of literature and it's very beautifully and very artistically written. And it's a real joy to study it for that reason. There are things that are repeated throughout the book.

We're going to see promises repeated. We're going to see things like unto half my kingdom repeated several times in the book. We're going to see the detail that although the enemies of the Jews wanted to plunder them, the Jews did not plunder their enemies in return.

That's repeated. And several others. We'll note them as we go through.

The primary function that this book serves in the Hebrew canon in the Old Testament scripture is to give the story that generated the Feast of Purim in the same way that the first 10 or 12 chapters of Exodus give you the story of how Passover came into existence. This book falls into four major sections. Sort of a broad outline of the book.

The first section tells us how Esther came to become queen. And this is a process that actually spans years. It doesn't just happen in a couple of weeks, which is the impression I got when I was in Sunday school.

The second section of the book deals with the plot against the Jews to eliminate the Jews out of the empire. The third section is how Esther is used by God to deliver the Jews. And the fourth section is the establishment of the Feast of Purim.

That's the broad outline of the book. So, Esther becomes queen. There's a plot to destroy the Jews.

Esther is used by God to save the Jews. And the Feast of Purim is instituted as a perpetual reminder and celebration of that great deliverance. Well, that's our introduction to the book.

We will pause here and take our break. When we come back, we'll start in Esther 1.