

Why The Book Of Esther Still Speaks To Us Today

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The Book of Esther encourages Jews to stay Jews. It emphasizes a proud but secular Jewish identity. It teaches that Jews cannot wait for God to save them. Jews must take their fate and future into their own hands. The Book of Esther teaches it is important for Jews to acculturate into the majority culture in which they live. It is important for Jews to rise to positions of high authority within the dominant culture. The Book of Esther reassures the Jewish reader of the 4th century BCE that even as a small, dispersed minority the Jewish people would indeed survive and actually flourish in the Diaspora, because of very smart, quick-thinking and dedicated Jews, Jews like Mordechai and Esther.

In just a few weeks, we will celebrate the festival of Purim. This year Purim falls on Thursday evening and Friday, March 20 and 21.

Of course it is on Purim that we read the Book of Esther. But with all the noise from the groggers, booing Haman, and cheering for Esther and Mordechai, who can pay attention to what the story is actually trying to say? Despite all the frivolity surrounding it, the Book of Esther actually has some very serious and important messages to convey.

Let's learn some of the scholarly facts about the Book of Esther. The first and most obvious question is: is the Book of Esther true? Did it really happen? The answer is: no. The Book of Esther is best understood as a work of historical fiction.

Who wrote the book? A Jew writing in Hebrew. When was it written? Somewhere between 400-300 BCE. Where was it written? Most scholars say in ancient Persia, which is of course, modern day Iran.

What's the most important thing for us to know about the Book of Esther? The Book of Esther is a farce, a comedy. It is a satire on the Persian empire and the Persian court. It is intended to be funny, to entertain. The ancient reader laughed when he or she heard the story of Esther.

You see, the portrayal of a Persian king who cannot make a decision is meant to be funny. The idea that Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king would lead all wives to refuse to obey their husbands is meant to be a joke. The proclamation throughout the Persian empire that men are to be considered the boss in their homes is meant to be absurd.

But there is a serious side to the book as well. This book was written by someone living in the diaspora, outside the land of Israel. Through this book, the author sought to weigh in on a controversial debate of his time: will Jews be able to survive outside Israel as small minorities scattered throughout the ancient Near East? What must the Jews of Persia do to survive in a strange land?

We see the author's answer in the figure of Esther. Esther has two names (2:7): Esther but also Hadassah. One name is Hebrew and the other is Persian. Esther's Persian name is intended to convey that Esther is fully integrated into Persian society, just as we are fully a part of American society. By the way, which one is the Jewish name? It's Hadassah. Believe it or not, Esther is actually a Persian name!

When Esther becomes queen, does she reveal her Jewish identity? No, she doesn't (2:10, 20). She keeps it to herself. Mordechai tells her not to, but I think there is another reason. Esther feels ambivalent about her Jewish identity. At the beginning of this tale, Esther is an assimilated Jew, a wholly Persianized Jew who does not think of herself as Jewish and doesn't want others to think so either.

We know what happens in the rest of the story. Haman hates Mordechai and gets the king to agree to destroy the Jews of Persia. Mordechai sends word of the terrible news to Esther calling upon her to help her fellow Jews. But Esther makes up excuses of why she cannot get involved (4:11). As I suggested before, Esther is not so sure she wants to be Jewish. Then Mordechai tells Esther that she is an essential part of his strategy for Jewish survival in Persia. Let's read Chapter 4: 12-14.

The author of the Book of Esther is saying that in order for Jews to survive, individual Jews must rise to stations of high authority in the non-Jewish world. Disagreeing with those who say that it would be better for the Jews to stay distant from the ruling powers or to fight them, the author of the book of Esther says: in order for Jews to survive, Jews must become leaders within the non-Jewish establishment. Jews must intermarry and rise to the top.

What does Esther do in the end? As we all know, Esther finds her Jewish identity. She decides to be a proud Jew, even to risk her life for her fellow Jews (4:16). You go, girl.

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Together, Mordechai and Esther save the Jews of Persia. In doing this amazing feat, do you notice anything unusual about Mordechai and Esther's behavior as portrayed in the book? They don't pray. They don't observe the dietary laws. They don't talk about studying Torah or doing the commandments. And the more one thinks about it, the more one realizes there is something else very strange about this biblical book. What is that? The Book of Esther never once mentions God!

What's going on here? The Book of Esther was written by a secular Jew. Do you mean there were secular Jews in the ancient world, not just in modernity? Yes. The Book of Esther was written by someone who did not believe that God was the answer to Jewish survival. Instead, what he taught was that Jews must depend upon themselves for survival.

The Book of Esther reassures the Jewish reader of the 4th century BCE that even as a small minority the Jewish people would indeed survive and even flourish in the diaspora – not because of God -- but because of very smart, quick-thinking, committed Jews with connections – Jews just like Mordechai and Esther.

The Book of Esther emphasizes a proud but secular Jewish identity. It teaches that Jews cannot wait for God to save them. Jews must take their fate and future into their own hands. The book of Esther teaches it is important for Jews to acculturate into the majority culture they live in. It is important for Jews to rise to positions of high authority within the dominant culture. It is important for Jews to stay Jews.

Composed in the 4th century BCE, and addressed to the Jews of Persia, the Book of Esther still has much to say to American Jews of the 21st century. It says: do not hide who you are. Be a Jew. Be a proud Jew.

I hope to see you on Thursday evening, March 20 at 7pm for the reading of the Book of Esther. It will be noisy, as usual. But now you know the messages of the book of Esther and why it is so important that we read it year after year.