

Scripture:

Jeremiah 29:4-7

New Revised Standard Version

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Message:

This message God sends through Jeremiah advises the Jews in exile to live their lives, plan for the future, and work for the good of the community in which they find themselves. Be good examples.

The Babylonian exile was for 70-years, and then Babylon was invaded by Persia. The Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, as written in the book of Ezra. But many of the exiles did not return to Jerusalem, remaining under Persian rule. So a few decades later, we find Jews in the Book of Esther who are now in their second new community.

As a disclosure, Scholars have deemed that the Book of Esther is not a work of history, but a Historical Novella. It is replete with hyperbole, silliness, and satire. God is not even mentioned in the entire book. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have debated its place in scripture, but it has remained. Personally, I will trust that The Spirit has allowed the book to survive for a purpose; it has something to teach.

Ancient history tells us the King of Persia at that time was Xerxes I, not Ahasuerus as told in the Book of Esther. This name, Ahasuerus, may be a pun on a Hebrew word; it sounds like "King Headache." Ancient sources have found a brief mention of a Visor for Xerxes named Mordecai. So, this classification as a Historical Novella seems apt. Artistic License has been taken to flesh it out for us.

After all, don't we learn from stories, whether they are guaranteed 100% accurate or not? Stories can be used to explore situations, letting us examine them in a focused light. They instruct us. For example, take Jesus' parables. They were not literal accounts of lost sheep, or coins, or sons. Chances are we have learned more from these parables than from hearing of His miracles.

So, what does the Book of Esther teach us? As well as seeing the benefit of supporting the community we find ourselves in, we will also see what happens when things are hidden. Another name that may be a pun is Esther, a Persian name with sounds like “Hidden.”

We first find the King at a drunken party. He wants to show the guys the beauty of his queen, Vashti. She refuses to come and stays hidden. Vashti is then banished, and a hilarious, reactionary, new law is issued proclaiming ALL women MUST obey their husbands.

Our lonely King then sends commissioners to his kingdoms to “gather” fresh young virgins into his harem. Now the King has a pre-screened pool of candidates from which to choose a new queen. Esther, a Jew, who had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai, is among these.

Mordecai seems to have followed the advice given through Jeremiah: to work for the good of his current city. He daily follows the goings on in the courtyard of the citadel in Susa, the summer palace. Therefore, he can tell Esther which eunuchs overseeing the harem can be trusted to help and advise her. He also reminds her no one needs to know she is Jewish. So, Esther keeps her history hidden, follows the advice of the trusted eunuchs, and is chosen as queen. Success!

Mordecai later discovers a hidden plot to kill the King. As a good citizen, he reports it and the plot is foiled. His help in saving the King remains hidden for a while, but he is eventually honored for his service to the King.

The King’s adviser Haman uses this near coup as an opportunity to convince the King to give him power to deal with such matters for the King’s protection. Haman is made Visor, and, since he has power from the King, asks for an edict that all people should bow to honor him the same as the King.

Everyone in the courtyard does bow, except Mordecai who remains standing defiantly. He recognizes Haman as an icon of power and realizes how this unstable, egocentric leader could lead to no good. Note that in this Mordecai is still seeking the good of the community – but he does it by not obeying all of the government’s representatives and edicts.

When questioned, Mordecai outs himself as a Jew before Haman and it goes downhill from there (at least for a while). Haman’s rage is extended to all Jews. As an aside, it is of note that Haman is identified as an Agagite, also known as Amalekites – a nomadic people who had opposed the Israelites during their Exodus from Egypt.

The drama now leads Esther to risk herself, putting her new life in danger to show the King how Haman has tricked him -- has manipulated him for his own purposes. Hiding his true intentions did not work out well for Haman. And, yes, Esther was manipulative too, but only so she was able to make her case to the King. If power is not ready to accept the messenger, they won’t hear the truth.

Many hidden things are now come into the open. The King now knows his queen’s history; and still loves and respects her. Eventually Mordecai is no longer has to work quietly for the good of the kingdom; he is trusted by the King and becomes the second most powerful person in the Kingdom. The Jews in the Kingdom are now publicly identified and given greater respect. They are recognized as honorable neighbors and supporters of the community. In fact, many non-Jews claimed they were, to increase their position in the community.

In addition to all this, the Book of Esther establishes the festival of Purim to celebrate the improved status of Jews in the community. When Esther established Purim, this made her the only woman to authorize a Jewish religious tradition. A festival that is still celebrated today.

So, what have we learned?

1. In many ways, our current world makes us seem like we are in exile. We, like Mordecai, often sit and watch the foolish Hamans strut by. Can we look for ways to care for our communities or neutralize damage?
2. Persia had expanded and came over many peoples, absorbing from what is now modern-day Pakistan all the way to Ethiopia. To keep peace, they allowed all their various religions, and it was expected they would Co-exist. Believing there was one True God, as did the Jews, and worshiping only Him, made people uncomfortable so they remained silent. This allowed a false harmony to continue. Can we support our communities and lead people to love our God without being controversial?
3. We can also infer that Hiding ourselves, hiding our own histories, and even our faith, serve no good purpose. Esther was forced to see this might even prove deadly -- to her people and to herself.
4. From the characters in this book, we see that imperfect people can be used in unexpectedly and powerful ways -- unbeknownst even to themselves. Are we available?
5. We can take heart in knowing that Esther herself didn't follow the laws or morals of her heritage perfectly; she was forced into a harem, married a gentile, and violated dietary rules. But this did not matter in the end; she was powerfully used for the good of her people anyway. Do we really realize our past is just that, the past, and not continually dwell upon it?
6. We also see how Esther and Mordecai paid attention to the larger purpose and acted shrewdly. We too can try focus on effective actions to help the oppressed.
7. And the most hidden thing in this book? --God -- He is never mentioned. But throughout the book we can see Him working behind the scenes, working for the good of his people and the community they find themselves part of. -- God may not be visible, front and center, but He is NOT absent -- Then or today. Can we trust He is even now working something new?