

Greek Esther

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

The Greek version of Esther is a significant expansion of the earlier version that is part of the Hebrew Bible. The Greek version has six sizable additions to the original. The first is a dream that comes at the beginning of the book. Other additions include the texts of two royal edicts of the Persian king Ahasuerus (named Artaxerxes in Greek), one condemning the Jews to death, the other saving them, and two prayers (one by Esther and one by her uncle). The final addition is an interpretation of the dream added at the beginning of the book. All of these additions were probably completed by about 75 BCE. When Jerome translated this book into Latin (late fourth century CE), he put all these additions at the end, following chapter 10, rather than where they belong in the story. The book remained in that form past the time when sections of the Bible were assigned chapter numbers. This means that the first addition to Esther is chapter 11. In many contemporary translations that include the additions, they appear in their proper places in the narrative. So, in such translations the first chapter of the book of Esther is marked chapter 11, which is followed by chapter 1. The other five additions are inserted in the same way so that the numbering of the chapters is interrupted each time one of the additions appears.

SUMMARY

The Hebrew and the Greek versions of Esther tell the same basic story. After the Persian king deposes his queen, Esther becomes the new queen. Meanwhile, her uncle Mordecai, a high-ranking Jewish official, runs afoul of Haman, an even higher-ranking official in the Persian kingdom. To respond to a perceived slight, Haman devises a plan to kill all the Jews in the kingdom. Mordecai informs Esther and she, at significant risk, outsmarts Haman and has the king issue a new decree that tells Jews to

defend themselves on the day they are to be killed. Then Haman is executed on the very gallows on which he intended to hang Mordecai. So Esther saves her people.

The practical purpose of the book is to give the reason for the feast of Purim. The Hebrew word *Purim* means “lots.” Lots are a kind of game much like rolling dice. Haman rolled the dice to decide on the date for the killing of all Jews in the kingdom. The feast of Purim celebrates the rescue of the Jews from this plot. It is difficult to know whether the feast or the tale of Esther came first. The feast was probably begun as an alternative to the Persian New Year celebration. Having their own feast was a way to keep Jews from participating in the polytheistic Persian holiday. Soon, however, the story of Esther was attached to the Jewish feast as an explanation for its origin.

DIGGING DEEPER

Critical interpreters recognize that this is a fictional tale composed to encourage and instruct. The Greek version of Esther intends to accomplish at least two main things. Like the Hebrew version, the Greek version wants to help Diaspora Jews think about how to live in a world that is often hostile to their way of life. The Greek version modifies the outlook of the earlier version in a notable way. In the early version, no concern about kosher eating or associating with Gentiles surfaces. But in the Greek version, Esther says that even though she eats at the king’s table, she eats only “clean” food and she says she hates sleeping with her uncircumcised husband, the king (14:15-18). So the Greek version calls for more distance from the surrounding culture than the Hebrew version does.

The second important thing the Greek version does is make the presence of God more explicit and active. In the Hebrew version, God is never spoken of directly. God’s providential care seems to be present in the background, but it is not explicitly mentioned. The Greek additions, on the other hand, mention God over fifty times. For example, when the Hebrew version says that King Artaxerxes receives Esther favorably into his presence while he is at court even though she is uninvited, the Greek addition says he was at first angry but that God moved him to receive her (15:7-8). So God becomes much more present and directly active in the story in this later telling.

As in Judith, the main protagonist of this story is a woman. While she is the queen, she still has a low status in comparison with others. Her position and life are wholly dependent on the will of the king. She may be seen as a representative of the experience of Jews in the Diaspora. They may have status within their own community, but remain an oppressed people who are viewed as low-status by others. These Greek additions to Esther assure the community that when they face difficult times in their relations with their neighbors, God is with them—even if that presence is hard to discern.