

PREFACE

Why should Esther and Daniel be placed side by side in the same commentary? Here are some reasons.

First, both books share the same setting: the exile. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and deported her citizens. Second Kings 25:10-11 establishes this truth: “The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon.” God’s people were now living in a strange land. When we first encounter Daniel, he is in Babylon, in training for a life of service in the king’s palace (Dan 1:4). When first we meet Esther, she is living in Susa, a prominent Persian capital, and soon to be King Xerxes’ queen. The Persians had conquered the Babylonian Empire; Xerxes continued Persian rule from 485 to 465 B.C.

Additionally, both Daniel and Esther assume prominent roles in the palaces of foreign kings. Daniel became a trusted advisor to both Babylonians and Persians: to Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and to Darius/Cyrus. In fact, during the co-regency of Belshazzar, Daniel was promoted to the position of third highest ruler in the land (Dan 5:29). Esther was, as has already been noted, queen of the entire Persian realm.

The Old Testament Scriptures do not give us any hint that either Daniel or Esther resided in Palestine after the Exile had officially ended. In 539 Cyrus, king of Persia, brought Israel/Judah’s exile to an end, when he decreed, “The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up” (2 Chr 36:23).

More importantly, this man, Daniel, and this woman, Esther, use their exalted status for the benefit of God's people (like Joseph who lived long before) and for his glory.

When Daniel had completed his interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the colossus, the King said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (Dan 2:47). When God had delivered three of Daniel's friends from a fiery furnace and a certain death, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!" (3:28). Such praise for God! and on the lips of a foreign king. In another context, Nebuchadnezzar wrote of the Most High, "His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Dan 4:34-35).

The story of Esther is well known. She risked her position and life to intervene on behalf of God's people – to deliver them from the maniacal hatred of Haman. Her story is told and retold, to the praise of her God!

The Books of Daniel and Esther remind their readers that the forces of evil may prevail for a time or a season, but ultimately God will be victorious. The hatred of Haman for Mordecai and for the Jews mirrors Satan's disregard for mankind and his contempt for God's people. If Haman's plan to exterminate all God's people had come to pass, then Satan would have prevailed over God and his plan to free humanity from the powerful clutches of the Evil One (Gen 3:15). But Haman's plan failed. No Jew lost his or her life as a direct result of Haman's hatred. God had delivered his people! God had vanquished his foe! Haman died, as did his sons.

The Book of Esther recounts a recent threat against God's people. The Book of Daniel predicts a future threat. The maniacal hatred of Satan for God and his people will manifest itself in the person of Antiochus Epiphanes. Daniel predicts of him: "He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people. He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel

secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes” [that is, God] (Dan 8:24-25).

The hatred of Haman would be incarnated in the person of Antiochus, who would bring intense persecution against God’s people. But like Haman, Antiochus will be defeated and destroyed (Dan 9:25). No one, as Jesus said, not even Satan himself, can eclipse the power of God (Matt 16:18).

Every generation has known or will know a Haman or an Antiochus. The people of God have endured and will continue to endure persecution. But it is only for a “time, times, and half a time” (Dan 7:25). In God’s time “the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him” (Dan 7:27).

The Books of Daniel and Esther point to a lifestyle of faith at all times, but especially during times of distress. When faced with the prospect of death in the fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego entrusted themselves to the sovereign and holy will of their God. “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Dan 3:17-18). When faced with the threat of death, Esther entrusted herself to the Lord for “relief and deliverance” (Esth 4:14).

Each book is integrally related to an important Jewish festival. The Book of Esther served to establish and authorize within Judaism the Festival of Purim. It is a time of joy, of the exchanging of gifts, and of the celebration of freedom from oppression. In the course of the celebration, from ancient times into the present century, the story of Queen Esther is told and retold to each generation.

As has been noted, the Book of Daniel predicts the persecution of God’s people by Antiochus Epiphanes. But in time Antiochus’s hatred would be overcome by the power of God and a Jewish revolt. The Jews were then able to again take control of the temple. They tore down the altar that Antiochus had desecrated, built a new one, dedicated it, and began to offer burnt offerings with gladness. The Jews then “determined that every year at that season the days of the

dedication of the altar would be observed with gladness and joy for eight days” (1 Macc 4:59). The celebration is known as Hanukkah.

Esther was clearly a beautiful woman. According to the Rabbis she was one of the four most beautiful women in the biblical world (Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail are the other three [Megillah 15a], in case you are interested!). As a young man, Daniel was “without any physical defect, handsome” (Dan 1:4). Their respective beauty was an essential element to their entree to life in a foreign court.

The Bible teaches us, however, not to be duped by outward appearance. After all, beauty is fleeting (Prov 31:30). Rather, like God, who looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7), we should be captivated by the enduring work of God in the human heart (1 Tim 2:8-10). Esther and Daniel are enduring characters because of the providence of God in their lives. God blessed Daniel with knowledge and understanding (Dan 1:17). He was a man highly esteemed by both man and God (Dan 9:23). The beauty of God’s presence in the life of Queen Esther is forever remembered in the timeless question, “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esth 4:14).

Through fasting (Esth 4:16; Dan 9:3), prayer, and confession (Dan 6:10; 9:4-19), both Esther and Daniel discovered the tenacious resolve of faith, its uncompromising purity, and the security of its shelter. These are a man and a woman of faith. They challenge us to follow their lead.