

The Wonderful Story of Esther

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[0:00] Hello and welcome, joined today by Devin Phillips, by Stephen Wedgworth and James Bajan to discuss the amazing book of Esther.

This show has been largely commandeered by Stephen, who decided that he wanted to discuss this issue. And although I am technically hosting it, it's Stephen who wanted to have the conversation and chose who should participate.

So I'll throw it over to Stephen to just say, why has this been a topic that's been on your mind? What are some of the questions that have animated you? And what do you hope to achieve in this conversation?

Yeah, so a short story. I am a preacher and Bible teacher at a church in Vancouver, British Columbia. And my wife has been asking me for a while now to do something with Esther.

You know, she said she loved that book growing up. And I've already in the past taught on Ruth. So she said, hey, why not Esther? And for for probably a year, I ran away from that.

[1:00] I said, no way, because it's a book that stumps me. I really don't know what to make of it. But then I forget exactly when a few months back, I saw this thread of tweets on the book of Esther from Devin, who is now joining us.

And it was great. It really kind of opened up a lot of new avenues to the book and it got me excited. So I said, oh, I'm going to I'm going to get into this now. And then I saw that you, Alistair, had done a bunch of work on it as well.

And you pointed at some resources have been very helpful. And then James is just a guy I read all the time. Anything he writes about the Bible, I want to know about. And he will reply to me when I ask him questions on Twitter.

So that's a warning to anyone out there. If you reply to me, I might I might pull you into something. So I just really wanted to to continue exploring what Esther is all about.

I have a couple of big questions have been plaguing me, plaguing, I guess, in a good way, though, because they're leading me to to good things. And then I'd like to talk about how we apply Esther as Christians today.

[2:05] And so what we can really do with this book for our Christianity and our Christian life. Devin, I'll be interested to hear from you. And Stephen mentioned your thread on Twitter.

And I'm sure that many of the people listening to this, first of all, don't know who you are. Could you introduce yourself and also say something about your thoughts on the book of Esther and what you found particularly interesting about it?

Absolutely. Well, my name is Devin Phillips, and I am very much a lay person in this gathering. So I know that I'm in the presence of Bible scholars and I myself am not a Bible scholar, but I do enjoy studying God's word.

And I set myself a challenge for this pandemic year to go through the biblical feasts when they came on the calendar and to write a short meditation on the scripture that the particular feast is kind of based in.

And so a couple months ago, it was the time for Purim. And I live in Israel, so I'm very much aware of all of these holidays as they come through.

[3:22] And so I spent some time reading the book of Esther and working my way through it. And Stephen had mentioned that he had seen a thread of mine on Twitter, which is very interesting because probably two years ago, I saw a thread of James's on Twitter.

It was probably over 100 tweets long and it was on Esther. It was his annual poem thread. And so that was kind of a little spark of inspiration, I think.

So I can already see the interconnectedness of the learning in this group. But I learned a great deal from James and took a lot of that and put it into a Twitter thread and eventually an article.

So can you tell us? We can expect Passover from you soon. Yes, it's in the editor's hands now. So as I was thinking about what we were going to talk about today, I kept having to say, no, no, no, that's Passover.

Get back to Purim. That is one of the interesting things about the book of Esther. Seems to involve other feasts as well. There are connections to Passover.

[4 : 39] There's connections to the Day of Atonement. And maybe that's something we can puzzle through as we get on in our conversation. James, you're famous for Twitter threads as well.

And I've seen you write on this particular subject. What have been some of the questions that you found most perplexing or animating about the book of Esther? Goodness, I'm not sure.

All sorts of different things. I mean, one of the things Stephen mentioned, which I thought was interesting, was he mentioned, what is the book all about? And I find that a really hard thing to start to answer because I've got numerous things which I think are going on in the book.

Numerous themes and sub-themes. And in a sense, I'm not sure how to say, well, this is the main one. This is what the book is all about. So I'd be interested in talking through that a little bit with you guys.

Something which I think is quite well recognized is the way in which the book seems to replay the rivalry between Saul and Agag. And there are numerous analogies to that.

[5 : 50] One of the parallels to that. One of the first which drew my attention as I was going through the book quite some time ago was when the book starts coming towards its conclusion, you think, great, it's going to end now.

And then it just sort of keeps on going, you know, and it seems like there's a lot of unnecessary stuff. And there's all this business about not taking the plunder.

The Jews are given permission to destroy their enemies and then to lay their hands on the plunder. And it's repeated three times and that they don't. And that kind of started to forge a connection to Saul's sin and Saul's insistence on keeping the plunder from his destruction of the king of the Agagites.

And of course, Haman is his descendant. So that was something that intrigued me. We could perhaps dig into that in further detail later on. But it certainly grabbed my attention.

The book certainly seems to have a number of characters that perplex people. I mean, how should we understand the character of Ahasuerus? How should we understand the character of Mordecai?

[7 : 06] Is his action in refusing to bow to Haman, is it a negative or a positive thing? Is he engaging in some act of rebellion, as James Jordan has suggested, for instance?

Or is this a refusal to submit to idolatry? Is it something else that's going on? The question of his motivation is a tough one to answer at that point.

We can also think about the way that the plot is playing out. There are puzzles. I mean, you mentioned that the plot goes on for a long period of time after it seems to have reached its resolution.

And Haman is hung. And surely that should be the end of the story. But yet it seems to go on considerably long after that. It seems as if that has not actually achieved the resolution that Mordecai and Esther were hoping for.

And so these sorts of questions, although when you first read the text, you might think it's a straightforward text. It invites a lot of real puzzling to actually work out how to understand some of these junctures within the text, some of the characters within it, some of the motivations that people have.

[8 : 17] And that study, I think, can be very rewarding. And not least because you notice, as you just mentioned, James, some of the parallels with other stories in Scripture. So perhaps at this point, it might be worth trying to put out some of the pieces on the table.

Some of the stories and the sort of counter melodies that we've seen to the melody of the text of Esther itself. Stephen, do you have any thoughts on some of the stories that you found illuminating to read alongside the story of Esther?

Well, yeah. So the first thought I always have is to say, you know, where is this in the Bible? What's going on? What's the where are the maybe contemporaries with Esther?

And that is not an easy question to answer. You know, does this book happen immediately after Daniel, you know, kind of along the same time as Ezra Nehemiah? Is it much, much later? Are we talking, you know, several generations later? That's probably the dominant contemporary view. Or perhaps as the source that you turned me on to, Alistair, Rabbi David Foreman.

[9 : 24] He argues it might even be before Daniel. So there's a lot of there's just a lot of confusion to try to say, where is this story? I've noticed that if you're not, you know, I'm going to just say liberal because I don't know an easier way to say it.

But, you know, if you're not committed to the historical integrity, then you just say it's fiction. You know, this is a fairy tale. This is a fiction story. That's kind of the easiest way out.

But if you're committed to really rooting it in history, that's a hard question. Where does this occur? I'm not sure we can answer it with 100 percent certainty. But then you start to say, to what extent is this a parallel of Daniel?

You know, is this a continuation of the things we saw in Daniel? How does this king, how is he like or unlike the king and Daniel or the kings and Ezra and Nehemiah?

Those are those are the first questions I have. And then maybe the parallels, because Daniel is very much like Joseph. And so is this a story that we can see following that same kind of pattern of God's elect being taken into exile, but surprising to modern sentiments, working with the powers that be and being a loyal subject and then bringing blessings to that group?

[10 : 46] That certainly seems to be something going on. And then does it point to the future? Do we see anything like it in the New Testament? Yeah. Devon, I'll be interested to hear what parallel narratives you found helpful in reading the story of Esther.

Well, I think, as James mentioned, the Benjaminite and Agagite rivalry, I think, is a really huge framing story for the book of Esther.

But one of the things that I find the most fascinating is how much it goes back to the books of Moses. You said you mentioned Joseph.

There's you can trace through with the Balaam oracles. There's just a lot of strong connections back to the book of Moses.

And as Stephen was saying, there's a strong foreshadowing element for the New Testament as well. So you have threads weaving both ways.

[11 : 56] I think one of the things that becomes patently obvious when you spend time with Esther is just how canonical a book it is. It is wrapped into all these other parts of Scripture.

And the more that you trace these different elements, you begin to see it's drawing themes that take us all the way back to the beginning, the very beginning, and then bring us all the way forward.

There are ways in which it foreshadows the story of Christ. And one of the things I found interesting to reflect upon is some of the ways in which it can play off against the story of the very beginning of Adam and Eve.

And this is something that Rabbi David Foreman has commented on that I found very helpful, where he talks about the husband and wife themes, the Adam and Eve themes that are playing through.

So you see Haman and Zeresh, you have the characters of Ahasuerus and Esther, you have Mordecai and Esther, and those three pairings that are playing out in different ways within the framework of the Adam and Eve themes.

[13 : 03] The theme of good and evil as plays through the text, and then the question of the forbidden fruit and the way in which particularly the character of Haman wants to have that forbidden fruit.

He wants to have even Mordecai hung upon his tree, which is a very strange sort of thing that's going on, but it seems to be a forbidden fruit theme.

It's the one thing that is forbidden. He's got everything, but he wants that one thing that's beyond his right, which seems to be, Rabbi David Foreman argues, the place of the king himself.

So I'll be interested to hear whether you find that particular line of argumentation illuminating, whether you think that there are elements of it you'd want to push back against, things that you'd add to it, or other areas that you want to hone.

I must say, it's not something personally I've thought about a huge amount. I mean, to throw a different dimension into it all, I mean, Stephen was talking about the chronological relationship to

Daniel, and whether or not we can sort out the chronology.

[14:16] There's certainly a commonality of backdrop to the whole thing. When we're introduced to Esther, she has two names, which is going to be significant.

She can kind of navigate and operate in two different worlds. And we've met other people like this in the biblical narrative. Daniel would be a great example, who again has two names.

Interestingly, Mordecai doesn't. And in fact, he's generally referred to as Mordecai the Jew. And so his identity is sort of writ large and stated at the outset, and he reveals it before Haman.

But Esther doesn't. And so she's in this slightly more ambiguous role. And when she becomes queen, you think, oh, great. Now she's got power.

Now she's got influence. But, I mean, in a sense, she hasn't. I mean, Vashti didn't have a great deal of influence, you know, when she stepped out of line. The king got rid of her, you know.

[15:12] And so the way in which she is to exercise power is a lot more subversive, you know. And so there's that whole dynamic, I think, going on in the whole book.

Yeah, I was struck as I've been preparing my sermons. I try to read the commentaries and the Christian commentators and the Jewish commentators, how different they are.

And some of this probably has to do with just their place in history. There aren't a lot of Christian commentaries on Esther until the modern era. You know, I tried my best to look them up.

And there are a few, you know, Matthew Henry, he has it a little bit. But there's not that many compared to other books. Whereas for the Jews, this is a big book. I mean, they really focus on this. It, you know, we read, you see Rabbi David Foreman and he's seeing Haman in Genesis.

You know, what Christian has even got Haman on their brain, right? They're not even, that wouldn't occur to them to look for a Haman character somewhere. But for the Jewish commentators, for the most part, they really emphasize Esther as being obedient.

[16:28] She's submissive. She's obedient. She's listening. And as I was listening to modern Christian commentators, they might touch on that a little bit. But they're much more interested in kind of battling the perception of misogyny, right?

They're seeing the king as a bad guy who is a power hungry guy and would never want to put women in that sort of situation. That's kind of their main interest, which I agree with that sentiment. But it's always striking when the commentators from other areas take it in a totally different direction, right? And they say she's being obedient. She's being submissive. And I think that highlights what James is saying.

She is showing us how to use influence, you know, how to change a powerful person while still in that obedient mode, right?

She's not just defying the king. She's not running in and telling him off. She's not making a big public demonstration. But she nevertheless is trying to change him. She's trying to get him to do something different than what he did.

[17:37] And so she's a model of that, you know, how to make a change when it doesn't look like you can. You know, you're sort of outbatched. You're an oppressed, exiled group in a superpower situation.

Even perhaps a lesson for women that might find themselves in a mixed marriage, right? An unhappy, a difficult situation. How are you to be submissive and yet also take a stand for what's right?

How do you guys see the role of the king? I tend, in some senses, just to see him as a source of power who doesn't have a particular will or desire of his own.

But, yeah, I don't know. What do you make of him? I generally, in the commentaries and even just from a straight reading of the book, finds that the king seems to be a pretty weak-willed person or easily influenced and concerned with his popularity and concerns that he's seen in a positive light by the people.

And I think in a lot of ways it serves the narrative, obviously, that the king would not be willful in one direction or the other, but subject to the maneuverings of the people beneath him.

[19:07] Not to say that that makes, of course, it doesn't make him a wicked character or an irredeemable character, but it is kind of necessary for the events to unfold for the king to not enforce his will, I think, on the other characters and what they're doing.

And the ironic thing is that the edicts that are given by the king cannot be revoked. And so on the one hand, he's being maneuvered. On the other hand, his word is in stone.

So you have that little bit of irony as well in the story. The king is an interesting character so far as I don't think he's directly set forward as someone that the text is concerned to criticize so much. He's a figure who's important in particular scenes, but we do get an image of him in different respects. As you say, there are certain aspects of him that seem to be weak. I think there is something of a shift from the very beginning where he is going to ask counsel from all these different people to a point where he sets up Hamman over all the other officials.

And so it's almost as if he's changed the whole order of his regime and exalted this one figure, whereas formerly he had a multitude of different counselors. And he hands over power to Hamman to give him the signet ring, allows him to establish the edict.

[20 : 35] And he takes a more hands off approach. He trusts Hamman very directly and implicitly, but he loses something of the responsibility that he had formerly with many counselors and then deciding according to their advice.

The other thing that you notice about him is many people, I think, want to have a very negative portrayal of him. And I don't think the text is concerned to give us that negative portrayal of him. He's a more ambiguous character. And the way that he's presented is very much like what you'd expect a figure like that to be. He's not someone who's particularly wicked, but he is someone who is he's someone who needs to be won over to the truth.

He's someone who's quite willing to hand over power to Hamman to enact this great genocide just because he's been slighted.

Now, that's not the sign of a good king. He needs to be won over to the good. And I think the way that Stephen mentioned the role of Esther here, there's a juxtaposition between two figures who are the wives who have to relate to an evil plot on the part of their husbands or something their husbands are implicated in.

[21 : 55] And in the case of Zeresh, she goes along with and actually supports and encourages Hamman in his plot. In the case of Esther, this is something Rabbi Dave Foreman gets into, which I found very perceptive.

The way that she works upon the terms good and evil, if it pleases the king and exploring the sense of good in the sense of desire and pleasing. And then later on, moving to the sense of if it's fitting. And then the later movement to say that this evil has been declared against the people is far more thick, objective sense. And so this movement from this sort of delight and the goodness that Eve sees when she sees the forbidden fruit to the more moral goodness, which is represented by the actual division between good and evil.

And so she must win her husband over in a way that takes him through those stages and changes him, doesn't just leave him as he is. So his ambiguity needs to be wrestled with.

He's not a character who's where he ought to be. And so she needs to address him in the capacity that she has as his wife.

[23 : 10] And she is that in that sense, she really stands over against the character of Zeresh, who's a very negative portrayal of maybe someone like Jezebel in many ways, or can think about Herodias in the New Testament, where that whole theme comes up again, the half the kingdom.

Yeah. So the king here, one of the things that I think is so amazing, he just doesn't seem to care about certain things that are of such importance. You know, Haman says, hey, there are these people out there and they're a threat to the empire.

They don't keep the king's laws. Can I kill all of them? He says, yeah, whatever, you know, do what you need to do. And he doesn't even ask who they are, you know, how many of them are there? What's, you know, what's this going to cost? Just, yeah, do what you need to do. And that sort of also highlights the fact that Esther could keep her identity secret.

I mean, does the king not care? He doesn't ask at all. This is, these are really perplexing. But I think he really represents the condition of exile itself.

[24 : 19] You know, the Jews, obviously, they'd rather not be in exile, but they're the people who are in power kind of go back and forth between being, you know, beastly persecutors and then being benefactors.

Cyrus, you know, and other places of scripture is called the Lord's anointed. How can that be? And so, yeah, I think he represents that, the condition they find themselves in.

And he can turn various ways and they, in some sense, they're at his mercy. But in another sense, they have, they have agency that they can do to try to, to help be loyal to him and win his favor,

which ultimately they do.

It's interesting that you mentioned the king and him, yeah, being fairly casual about finding out who these people are. He's allowed someone to massacre, you know. But then you've got a slightly similar thing going on with Hammon and Zeresh, because when sort of he comes to speak to Zeresh, she says, well, you know, if Mordecai is one of the Jewish people, then you must surely know that, like, he will overcome you.

And you think, well, she could have mentioned this before. You know, that might have been handy to know. Yeah. Yeah. So one of the big questions, you know, Alistair mentioned it earlier, and it's on my mind.

[25 : 41] This week, I actually have to preach it. So I have to figure out an answer. You guys can, you know, sway my mind now. Why doesn't Mordecai bow to Haman?

What's the reason there? You know, there are a few different suggestions throughout history that, you know, this would be idolatry to do this. That's one of the most common.

Or more popularly, people now kind of, I mean, not all, but lots of commentaries suggest this was actually an error. You know, Mordecai probably should have just bowed. And you might parallel him to Vashti.

You know, his refusal to do something like this brings about great punishment. But the text is not totally clear. You know, in the English reading, it just says it matter-of-factly.

You know, the people all bowed to Haman as the king commanded, and Mordecai didn't. And then all the counselors say, why do you disobey the king? That's their interpretation.

[26 : 39] And so, yeah, what's the reason there? What's happening? And is he right or wrong to Mordecai? Well, I read a rabbinic text, which has a brilliant answer to this.

Make of it what you will, which is that when Jacob comes back from Paddan Aram and him and his sons all bow down before Esau, Benjamin hasn't been born at that stage.

And so Benjamin doesn't bow before Esau. And this particular commentator then goes on to say that, you know, because Amalek and ultimately then the Agagites are descendants of Esau, this is why Mordecai the Benjamite doesn't bow before them as well, which is, I think, an astute observation.

I'm not quite sure how much work it does in terms of working out what's going on in the stories concerned. But, yeah, I like it. I had heard the same thing as James, that as a Benjamite, he was not wanting to bow before Esau.

And I think that it helps play into that larger narrative that we were talking about earlier, the narrative of the rivalry between the house of Benjamin and the Agagites.

[27 : 56] So to me, it's part of that ancient rivalry that's playing out in the courts of Persia. I think we're going to answer the question. We probably need to consider some of the things that would bring to bear upon it.

How do we determine whether an action is good or not? I think one of the things we need to pay attention to is the outcome of the action. We need to pay attention to the way in which the characters are represented, the sort of actants of the story.

Is this the good guy? Is this the bad guy? We need to think also if there are any parallels that we find elsewhere in the text itself or elsewhere in the biblical canon.

And I think in all of those fronts, we do have some evidence that can give us some hint. In the case of the story itself, you have the fact that later on in the story, it seems that Mordecai is vindicated. He is put in the position of Haman himself. Haman actually has to lead the way before him as he goes out in a triumphal procession.

[29 : 03] So you have that element. You also have the way that Haman throughout is presented as a bad guy. And Mordecai is presented very positively. And there's no sense of criticism of him within the text itself.

Now we can read a bit around the text and maybe suggest that he should be criticized. But I don't think we derive that from the text itself. One of the more interesting things, and this is something that very few commentators really get into, but some do.

Anthony Tomasino in the recent Lexham Press commentary mentions this, but talks about the parallel between the story of Joseph and the story of Mordecai.

And particularly a verse within Genesis chapter 39, when Joseph is asked day by day by Potiphar's wife whether he will sleep with her.

Now, the interesting thing is that same language is used of them asking Mordecai day by day, the king's servants, why is he not bowing? And the argument that Rabbi David Foreman makes that I find very suggestive is that Haman is trying to take over the place of the king.

[30 : 17] He has already been raised up above everyone else. There's only one thing left for him to achieve, and that's the top slot. And in many respects, what he's doing throughout the text is threatening that.

He and the king obviously has this fear in the back of his mind, the way that he relates to Esther later on that comes out when he asks, what should he do to the man that the king delights to honor? Play royal dress up and go out and be praised like the king. And looking back at the story of Joseph, there may be a clue there, because there's one thing in the house of Potiphar that Joseph is not allowed, and that's Potiphar's wife.

Everything else is under him. And the loyalty that he owes to his master is something that he's amply demonstrated in a number of different situations.

As we see with Mordecai, he's actually foiled a plot. But then there's this temptation to bow to the usurper or the person who's trying to take over.

[31 : 21] And in the same way as Joseph resists Potiphar's wife, who would be usurping her husband or undermining her husband, and she gets notably the servants of her husband on her side, Mordecai resists and does not bow.

And I find that a very interesting parallel and suggestive reading. I'll be interested to know what you guys make of that, because I've not heard anyone else make it apart from Rabbi Foreman.

Yeah, well, that parallel, Alistair, you mentioned the Lexham Press series. It's noted by Adele Berlin in the Torah commentary series as well, but doesn't do anything with it.

It just says this is a parallel that we see in Genesis. So the phrase gets attention, but yeah, what do you do with it? I find what you just articulated very interesting, and it seems to match up, especially later.

My one question, though, is to what extent would, in chapter three, is Haman making a play for rebellion? Is that clear?

[32 : 31] Or is maybe the fact that it's not clear part of the point? When you said making a play for rebellion, what do you mean, Stephen?

So the argument that Rabbi David Foreman makes, which Alistair was summarizing, is that Haman wants people to treat him as if he is indeed the king. And Foreman even goes farther, and this would be something I'd love to hear your thoughts on.

And Foreman argues that the text itself can be read to suggest that Haman didn't actually have this right, that Haman was going further than was justified.

I don't know if I buy that. You know, it takes a little bit of slicing and dicing. But the general idea would be that Haman is wanting people to give him loyalty that really should only be given to the king.

To me, I think the place where it's clearest, and Rabbi Foreman might have covered this in his teaching, but is when Mordecai is talking, or sorry, not Mordecai, when Haman is talking and he is saying, here's how you should honor the person who the king wants to honor.

[33 : 47] And everything is, it's the king's horse, it's the king's robe, it's all, he should have a crown on his head. And all of these are just his subconscious coming to the forefront saying, actually, I want to be king.

That's interesting just how dissatisfied Haman can be when he's got just about everything. And that one thing that he can't have, particularly Mordecai, he wants to hang him as a matter of personal vengeance, that can eat away at him so much that he can be utterly miserable.

Something that just accentuates a lot of that in terms of the flow of the book, which I was thinking about just as I was preparing for this, is the flow of time in the whole text.

So I think it starts off in the third year, probably, like the feasting. And then Esther starts to emerge, I think, in the seventh year.

And then it's the 12th year by the time it all kicks off. So actually, as you're reading the chapters and you're thinking, this is just sort of developing a nice pace. That's covered a good nine years.

[35 : 00] And then we've got these two feasts or three days really going on, where you've got a huge, you know, contraction going on, I suppose.

There's a lot of events packed into that really climactic moment. And to me, that really draws attention to all that manipulating that's going on at the feasts and the way things are being set up. And I sort of glossed over that flow of time aspect of it the first time I read it. But I find it effective. It's interesting to see also, you mentioned the feasts.

It is a book about feasts. It starts off with a great feast. It ends with the Feast of Purim. And then you have these feasts of wine in the middle. And so much of the action is about, takes place in these contexts.

And one of the things I've found curious, and I think James probably has some thoughts about this, are the numbers that we have in those contexts. We have the 127 provinces mentioned in the first verse.

[36 : 07] The fact that the feast or the celebration of his pomp is for 180 days. There are a number of other numbers and dates within the book that seem to be suggestive of some significance.

I'd be interested to hear what thoughts James has, particularly. You're the numbers guy. I have had thoughts on them, but I can't remember what the thoughts were.

I'm afraid. Something that has occurred to me about the feasts, which is interesting, and I'm not sure quite how much to make of it, is the way in which you have this feast, and it's kind of on the 13th of the 12th month, and then it spreads over to the 14th and the 15th.

And the whole thing that goes on there is an act of deliverance, and there is a nighttime event mixed in with it in terms of the king's remembrance of what's gone on.

And there is a third day, which is important. And so you're instantly sort of thinking Passover. And the kind of nature of the calendar, the nature of the Jewish calendar has this strange quirk whereby, you know, you're inserting every now and again extra adars, extra 12 months in order to make the lunar calendar kind of follow the seasons correctly.

[37 : 35] And in Jewish calendar literature, there are always these disputes about sort of when to intercalate, and this was sort of generally announced in Israel, and sometimes people were doing it differently in the diaspora.

And you have then this odd quirk whereby it could, in a sense, be the Passover somewhere, somewhere. But if someone else is intercalated differently, it would be Adar, you know, and so it would still be the 12th month.

And this is something that is even part built into the Jewish remembrance of Purim today with the sort of 14th and 15th, and in some cities being given an extra day.

Devin might be able to explain more about that to me, more about that than I can. But it's interesting that the calendar kind of allows that merging of Esther's events with the Passover.

There's even teaching that while the Jews in Susa were fasting with Queen Esther, the rest of the Jews in the greater Persian Empire were actually celebrating Passover.

[38 : 48] And so you get this kind of overlap of the two feasts where you would not normally, now that the calendar has been more regularized.

So I think that there are some important parallels, definitely, between what you would be thinking about and pondering on Passover and what you would be thinking about and pondering on Purim. Certainly the theme of the death of the firstborn and the threat to the nation is very prominent. One thing that has been mentioned by a number of commentators, Jewish commentators particularly, is the connection between the repeated number referring to the provinces and the age of Sarah.

It's interesting, actually, it's given in different order. So in Genesis, it's 100 and years and 20 years and seven years. Here it's seven and 20 and 100.

But there are these same numbers. And then also 80 and 100 days, it's connected with the age of Isaac. That invites, I think, some reflection upon the connections between the character of Esther and Sarah.

[40 : 05] And there are connections. Both of them are taken into the harem of a pagan king, have to hide their identity. There's a threat to their people.

And in both cases, there seem to be some parallels. Sarah is described as a sort of regal figure. Her name is Princess. And then you have the character of Esther, who would be the nearest, in many ways, counterpart to her in that respect.

And there are a number of other connections that we might perhaps draw. What should we make of this? This was something that sent me down, you know, a rabbit hole that was really fascinating because I was reading these commentaries and one of the commentators pointed out that in, I think

it's a Babylonian Talmud, they actually argue that Esther is Mordecai's wife.

I thought, well, that's crazy. That's one of those weird things of history, you know, that they just made up. But then it's also in the Septuagint. And you say, well, huh, okay. So, you know, obviously a lot of early Christians would have held that view as well.

I'm not persuaded. You know, when I looked into the details, it still seemed a bit fishy to actually assert that, you know, totally because of the factors that are mentioned in Esther.

[41 : 23] You know, she's very young. She's a virgin. Mordecai seems to be very old. And some of their rationales for translating it were, you know, they seem to be motivated. I think they were worried about the propriety of a young Jewish woman marrying a Gentile.

So they would, you know, wanted to change it a bit. But having said all of that, you know, throat clearing, that makes the connection to Abraham and Sarah's trial with Pharaoh.

And then a little bit later with, is it Abimelech? Is that the second? Yeah. Chapter 20. Yeah. It just really kind of makes your mind go there. Okay. Wait a minute. This husband and wife potentially, or close kinship who the female is taken, but sometimes, but taken with a little bit of subterfuge, right? They're keeping her true identity secret. And then while she's in the king's court, the enemies are cursed and the people of God are blessed.

Yeah. That just really came alive. And I thought, wow, there's definitely something here. And the only places, those two numbers you mentioned, Alistair, you know, if you just put it into a Bible search, they only show up in Esther and in Genesis.

[42 : 36] That's it. On that front, it's also interesting that within some Jewish tradition, Sarah is seen as the niece of Abraham, referred to as his sister in that regard, but she's Isca, who's mentioned in chapter 11.

So Nahor marries Milcah and Sarah or Isca marries Abraham. And they're both daughters of the dead brother, Haran. And Sarah is described as being beautiful.

And I think it even says good form, right? So that same parallel that Esther has given. I was watching on Twitter, these questions going back and forth between you guys.

And it was very interesting to me because I have never heard anything different than that. Mordecai and Esther were first cousins.

You know, how it repeats the daughter of his uncle, the daughter of his uncle, and that they had, you know, that they were the same generation, but it's different sides of that generation.

[43 : 44] So Mordecai was on the older side and Esther, and it makes sense because her parents are both dead. So she would be the youngest to come from that generation as well.

But I was very interested to hear what you were saying in terms of the other possible relationships that went with that. One set of connections that I've mentioned a bit already that I'd like to unpack a bit more are possible relationships between the story of the very beginning of Genesis in the garden and with the temptation concerning the tree and the story of Esther.

So there is a parade of women who are inspected, as it were, by Ahasuerus, and he has to choose one.

And he has the one that he chooses, he will call by name. There are other details about just the way that the scene is set. It's not something we typically find in scripture, the sort of elaborate scene setting that you have at the beginning of the book.

There's a lot within that that evokes something even earlier that evokes something earlier on in the biblical text. One of the most surprising connections of all, which is the account of the tabernacle and the initiation of the priests after a seven day feast of seven day period of time, they are set up.

[45 : 11] And so there's a similar sort of thing that seems to be taking place, similar precious elements are mentioned and materials. You have the way in which it's in Exodus chapter 28, the various parts of the garments of the high priests or the other materials that are taken at that point.

The emphasis upon not drinking wine, the death of Nadab and Abihu who approach when they should not have approached. And the way you have the death of Teresh and Bigthan at the end of that chapter, another possibility that has been raised, the two guardians of the threshold, and they're both killed.

And it seems that there is at least something suggestive about this, that maybe point to themes of priesthood and the background for the day of atonement or Yom Kippur.

And many people have seen Purim as something that's like the day of atonement and even playing upon the names to draw the connection between the two of them.

But that story begins in chapter 16 of Leviticus with the death of Nadab and Abihu, referring back to what had happened previously. And then there's dressing up in a special way to go into the throne room to be accepted or not.

[46 : 34] There's the casting of lots concerning these two creatures. And then there's two divergent fates. And it seems that there might be something going on there.

And this is something that a number of Jewish commentators have pointed to, that there is this affinity between these two things. There's the fasting and the threat of death. And all of this taking place against the backdrop of Edenic themes.

So there's the great setting up of this situation. There's the forbidden food, the command that Esther has been given, that she should not reveal lest she die.

She has to find some way to communicate that forbidden knowledge. And then there's the giving of food. There's the themes of good and evil and other things like that. And it seems as though it's in part drawing our mind back to the very beginning of the Hebrew scriptures at the end and resolving some of its themes.

And so Esther as an inverse of Eve, what do you make of it? Alistair, I have a bunch of questions right there for you to explain some of that.

[47 : 42] But one thing, too, that you amazingly didn't say, so I'm going to get to add into that. Many of these scenes in Esther are happening in a garden. And so chapter one, the feast is in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

And so I think that's very explicit that we're in a garden and we're in a sanctuary, a temple kind of setting, even down to the idea of Esther, her name, right?

Her name is a flower. She is Lily, I believe, right, is what that is. Or Myrtle. Myrtle, I'm sorry.

Susanna is Lily. That's right. Yeah, she's a Myrtle.

And Myrtle shows up in, I believe it's Zachariah. He uses a lot of Myrtle imagery in his prophecies. There's something going on with this.

This is very intentional. Also, the Myr, you know, that's a sort of thing that we see in the priests in the temple. To me, that's clearly going on.

[48 : 46] Yeah, this is a temple, maybe an exile, right? Maybe this is, you're not at the temple in Israel, but you have this temple thing going on here. But I had a question, Alistair.

You said something about they shouldn't be drinking. The drinking is not allowed in the temple.

Yeah. So after the death of Nadab and Abihu, one of the commandments that's given in chapter 10, I think it is of Leviticus, is that they should not drink wine.

And the impression that number of people have drawn is that there is the wine being drunk by Nadab and Abihu in a celebration led them to take that presumptuous action of going in and presenting the strange fire.

And so you have this contrast between the true installation that occurs in the tabernacle and then the false situation that you're having in Ahasuerus' feast.

So the drinking in the book of Esther would be a negative thing, something that we're to pick up on as bad? Not necessarily negative, but there is a contrast at that point.

[49 : 56] Something that you said, Alistair, reminded me of a way that I see Esther framed in kind of the greater narrative of scripture is that it does have kind of apocalyptic tones to it.

Because the good ends happily, the bad unhappily, there seems to be kind of some ultimate justice, a day of judgment. And it all happens when the king remembers.

It's echoing when God remembers his covenant and when he comes and judges the nations. And it comes at the end of the year, the Jewish year, and it does, it has this kind of chiasmic reflection of the beginning.

So it is kind of, it's at the end of the writings in the Hebrew Bible, it has this kind of nice conclusion.

And yet you have the still unanswered, you know, are we going to be in exile forever? Will we be brought back to the land?

[51 : 03] Will we, will the promised seed emerge? All of these kind of ongoing questions. But for where it is in the scripture and where it is in the calendar, it seems to be a kind of point of conclusion in the narrative.

And the day of atonement seems to serve something of that purpose. In the book of Hebrews, we're told that the whole fact that most of the things that occur in the tabernacle or temple occur in the sort of antechamber of the holy place.

And that the holy of holies is closed off and only entered once a year. That's symbolic of the present time. And there is this entrance into the most holy place or the holy of holies that occurs through Christ.

And that's anticipated in the day of atonement, but it's not yet been realized. Almost all of the activity occurs outside of the holy place.

And so the day of atonement is anticipating that great day of the Lord where there will be this final division. And there will be the entrance into the holy, holy place or the most holy place.

[52 : 11] There is also that sense in which the enemy is defeated by means of his own devices, which is quite present in a lot of passages in scripture, isn't it?

The sense of what would you call it? Ironic justice or something. You could think about Daniel's enemies being thrown to the lion. You could think perhaps less obviously of the way in which, let's say, the snake, the plague of snakes is cleansed by or forgiven, ultimately, by means of a bronze snake.

And a fair bit of wordplay going on there between like *nechoche* and *nechash*, between the words for bronze and serpent. And ultimately, of course, on the cross, the way in which death is defeated by means of death.

So playing into some of that apocalyptic imagery that Devon was talking about is the whole sense of a real ironic justice to it. So, Alistair, if this is if we're thinking about inner chambers and you can only enter them sometimes, does this mean Esther's approach to the king is, you know, sort of entering into the holy of holies?

Is this, you know, is this a day of atonement? Is this a sort of an ascension kind of activity here?

And then how does that work if the king is not a good guy?

[53 : 37] I don't think the king needs to be a good guy to fill in a certain slot in the story, as it were. And there are a lot of things that he represents in terms of power that have a bit more of an ambivalent character to them.

They can be at certain points seen as the source of the threat, but also he's the source of the solution. And so I think like any text in scripture, there is a musical deployment of the themes, which is not just a straightforward recapitulation in a sort of mechanistic way, as if you're just repeating it as it has occurred previously.

There's all sorts of variations and twists and inversions. And the themes that we hear in the book of Esther are very highly developed ones.

It takes back to Genesis, the garden that takes us back to the story of Jacob and Esau to the stories of Joseph. And then other stories elsewhere, we can think maybe the fact that it's a Benjamite interceding for Judahites, the relationship between Judah and Benjamin back in the very story of Joseph again.

And so I think there are a lot of these things working alongside each other that enable us to see characters serving a number of different purposes within the same narrative.

[54 : 58] And one thing that's interesting, you mentioned incense, is the fact that Mordecai within, you mentioned Jewish commentators, searching for connections between names.

And so the Haman is connected with the, have you indeed eaten of the tree back in Genesis chapter three? And then Mordecai is connected with the anointing oil that sets things apart as holy. So it's something that's forbidden, but also something that sanctifies. And so Mordecai is someone who, on the one hand, serves to command Esther concerning the thing that she should not reveal, her true identity.

And also he's the one who's the forbidden fruit within the sort of Haman part of the story that he wants to take. And so there is a sense that he's serving both of those roles in two different concurrent narratives.

He's the one who's mediating between those two stories that are going on alongside of each other. And the other thing about that, which is interesting, is the way that you have the incense and the anointing oil and the myrrh, in this case, the pure myrrh.

[56 : 18] And the way that that is maybe connected with themes of atonement. You can think about the incense that is brought out into the among the people in the book of Numbers, chapter 16, I think it is, when the plague breaks out among them.

And Aaron and the others have to get the incense on the censer and bring it out and go among them to prevent the disaster. So interesting things like that, which I find suggestive given the other

possible temple, day of atonement, other sort of themes that are going on.

Does this make the king God? I mean, in the same way as you could see Isaac playing the role of God in the offering of the food of Jacob, not in any strong sense, but he's serving in something of that capacity symbolically.

But that opens up some very interesting avenues, right? Because if the king is on one hand, this ambivalent question of, you know, is this right or wrong? Are we living in a universe of chance or justice, right?

Exile itself. But then he's also God. Then that brings those two questions together, right? In our minds. We're not only asking, is the universe random, but we're asking, is God, you know, just? [57 : 40] Is he remembering us? Is God, is he going to keep his word, which is written in his law? Has he been misled and swayed by false counsel or, you know, is a true advocate going to come?

You know, that's a lot there. Which maybe raises another question. If that's the interpretation that's given of Mordecai's name, the interpretation of Esther's name that has been put forward by many Jewish commentators is that her name is connected with hiding.

So she hides, but then also God seems to hide. And that's a theme that takes us back to the very beginning, the story of the garden once more, that man and woman hide from God.

And there is this hiding of God within the book. It's one book of the Bible where God just is not mentioned. So what is what is God doing in the text?

Is he present? Where can we see him present? How do we read a book where we know it's part of the canon? We believe that some great deliverance is taking place, but God is nowhere mentioned.

[58 : 44] I think the key verse for me is when Mordecai is giving his famous speech to Esther in chapter four. And he's in the midst of trying to convince her to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people.

And then he says this sentence, which doesn't seem very persuasive. He says, if you don't do this, God will, or he doesn't say God, another deliverer will rise up.

So to me, I think that's one of the most defining verses of the whole book, because Mordecai is saying, I have faith that we're a people of covenant.

It looks like there's a risk of being wiped out entirely. It can't it can't be if, you know, if we are faithless, God is faithful. So I think that in this sense, you can see this rock underneath Mordecai.

He knows that there will be some deliverer who will come to save them. And maybe it will be with a lot of loss. Maybe it will be with a little loss.

[59 : 57] Maybe it will be that means that their house, the house of King Saul, will suffer utter disgrace, but that the rest of Judah will be saved.

There's risk involved, but there's certainty at the same time. And so you see that the faith of Mordecai is what I think is what persuades Esther in the end to to make the sacrifice that she does. I think that's really helpful. Just a brief comment on when Stephen and Alistair were talking about how Artaxerxes is to be seen. You know, to liken someone like him to God, on the one hand, feels incredibly strange, given his moral character in the book.

But I think at the same time, there are ways in which he can play the role of God in a sense. So in his hands are life and death, you know, at least in terms of just physical life and death.

So he has that authority to make those decrees and, in fact, to make a law which is unchanging.

And so he can have sort of certain divine traits and functions without us saying he's a godly person, I think.

[61 : 20] You mentioned, Devin, you mentioned Saul. I think it's interesting as you read through the story, just how many allusions there are back to earlier stories.

So there's the Agag-Saul connection. There's the way in which he's not just from Benjamin, but he has all these people in his family line, Kish and Shimei, which remind us of the people of the house of Saul from the story of 1 Samuel and later on in 2 Samuel as well for Shimei.

And it seems that how God reveals himself in the book of Esther is not so much directly, but in his hand of providence. So it's the little events of chance that people would attribute to chance, the king not sleeping at night, just picking up a particular or wanting to have a particular book read to him, coming across the fact that there had been this plot that was foiled.

Is that just chance? And the fact that the whole feast at the end is named after lots suggests that element of chance. But we clearly don't believe everything that happens in the book is down to chance.

And so there's this almost game of hide and seek that God is playing in the text that we believe he's active, but we don't see him directly. The wind blows where it wishes and you can't trace it, but you can see its effects.

[62 : 49] And I think that's very much what we see within the book of Esther. We don't really have a direct revelation of God in the middle of the book. What we have is the hallmarks of God's action throughout.

We've kind of been prepared for chance to be used in an ironic way in the Bible. I'm thinking of the book of Ruth in particular, where you get phrases like, you know, she happened by chance. It almost says there's this repetition of a given Hebrew word like she happened to fall, end up in the land where Boaz was, you know, and all sorts of other things just happened to be the case. And it's obviously meant ironic, ironically there. And I think that's to inform our reading of what's going on. A quick remark, which I've thought could be potentially helpful in terms of the parallel with Saul.

The way in which Esther and Saul are risen up and rise to prominence in both stories has got some similarities.

[63 : 55] They're both known for their attractive physical appearance. That's something which distinguishes them. And they're kind of winners of competitions in a sense, you know, a lottery in Saul's case and different competition for Esther, anointed by oil, again, in sort of different ways.

And a way in which I think that might be helpful is to think that Saul rose up in very unideal circumstances. It was really a rejection of God.

And so Samuel was frustrated by it. But nevertheless, when he presented Saul to the people, the future was still open, as it were.

He said, you know, here is your king. And if you do behave well, he will be a good king to you. And it seems that Esther's rise to prominence is also highly ideal, unideal.

He's got lots of morally questionable elements to it. But the future is still open, in a sense. If Esther takes advantage of the opportunity that she has, then even that can be redeemed, just as in the book as a whole, all sorts of past things are being redeemed.

[65 : 16] So I would suggest that that's a way in which a parallel, an intertextual parallel, can perhaps help us to make sense of some of the moral ambiguities of the book.

Maybe on the back of that, I could just ask a question. So, I mean, Alistair, you mentioned that one of the ways in which we can evaluate Mordecai, for instance, is to think of how things end up, sort of where what he does leads to in the book.

And I'm totally open to that as an idea. But it raises, in my mind at least, the question, how then do we distinguish between things which are portrayed in a good light like that?

And cases where God is using just very poorly thought out things, or even evil things, for his good purposes? Yes, I think there are, for instance, you can maybe think about the example of Joseph's brother's actions.

In those sorts of cases, I think there are a lot of other themes that clarify that there is some, that it doesn't just turn out well. They don't just fall on their feet.

[66 : 29] There has to be some correction and re-evaluation of their situation. There has to be some form of repentance. There has to be some sort of judgment upon them as well.

And so many of the events that occurred previously play out again in a corrective form. And it seems that the very fact that they end up where they do is a result of a number of things that have happened to correct what went wrong before that.

So the whole series of events with them being pursued, for instance. Again, they have a younger brother who seems to be guilty of the other mother that they do not like.

And he seems to be guilty of having ideas above his station. He wants the cup of divination, just as Joseph had had dreams. And so will they do the same thing again?

Or will they set things right? And so it seems that it's not just something that plays out and they land on their feet by luck. Rather, something has to be repaired.

[67 : 33] And so it's the fact that Judah, who had formerly been the one pushing for killing Joseph, is the one who intercedes for Benjamin.

And I think there are other examples like that in scripture. Or you have things that work out seemingly positive in the short run. But, for instance, the acts of God's anger against Israel with Assyria, they too will be destroyed in time.

And so things may seem to work out well in the short term, but ultimately that person will be brought down too. So I think the fact that the book of Esther ends on such a positive note with Mordecai, and he's presented in very Joseph-like terms.

He's the second most powerful figure on the land. He's the one who actually takes the position that had formerly been enjoyed by Haman. He's someone who, being presented like Joseph, that invites us then to read that parallel with Joseph in chapter three with a bit more weight, because it works out that way.

And also, it's not just the fate that Joseph experiences, but also the way that Haman receives his comeuppance. So I'd like to take us to more sort of applications questions.

[68 : 53] On one level, it's always tricky. You know, you always, there's, I have a reluctance to do application a lot of times, because, you know, that's a quick way to get away from the text for some people.

So, but I think that's always a question, especially if, you know, I'm going to be preaching this book, actually I've already started. When I read the different commentators, again, it's interesting to see the different approaches.

For the Jewish commentators, this is a book about the people, the nation. You know, this is a book about the people of Judah. I mean, indeed, the book uses that language, the Jews, all the time. And then Purim is a festival that the Jewish people are preserved. And, you know, Christians, that's not really how they're going to use the book, right? We're not going to take this book and then come to the climax and say, and this is about the people of Israel.

We want to do something else with it. But what? And I've noticed a lot of Christians, they just kind of focus on the characters, right? Okay, be like this person, don't be like this person.

[69 : 56] But what do we think really, Esther, is how would we apply Esther as Christians? What's the proper use of the book?

What's a Christian Purim? I think that there's a lot, there's various ways that Christians can approach the book of Esther.

I think going back to something that I said a bit earlier, the fact that God has preserved his people, even in exile, just speaks to his faithfulness.

And so I think that focusing on even the character of God is a very fruitful way to approach Esther. The fact that it's, it's the phrase that John Piper says always comes to mind, God's doing 10,000 things every moment.

And you see that he's re-switching the Judah and Benjamin. And when they're before Joseph, you see that that switch is happening.

[71 : 08] Also, you see that King Saul's switch is happening. Also, you see, you know, all of these things are happening with just one action. And so I think that focusing on God's sovereignty in that situation and his ability to bring the people through, even in a place where they're not following the law, even in a place where they're in exile, they're still bound in covenant, despite all of that.

And that faith is what is carrying them through, not even necessarily adherence to the law and things like that. I think the other thing that can be helpful is to see all of the ways in which there is a foreshadow of Christ in the story of Mordecai and Esther as well.

And I think seeing those foreshadows helps tie that in with the New Testament. To build on that a bit, I think the themes of divine sovereignty are throughout the book in its very subtle forms that discussed earlier.

And the joining together of the theme of providence and the urgency of human action is something that really comes to the foreground in the story of Esther.

She has to take action. If she does not take action, the Lord is still going to bring deliverance for his people from somewhere. But it is imperative that she does not just stand by.

[72 : 33] And one of the most suggestive ways of reading that particular discussion between Mordecai and Esther is the one Rabbi Foreman mentions, taking our attention back to Numbers chapter 30, the passage that most of us skip over or don't pay that much attention to, which concerns women taking vows and the annulment of vows under certain circumstances.

And he argues that the language of Purim is playing upon for the case of Haman, it's connected with the lots. But for the case of Esther, it's connected with her annulment of her husband's vow. And so the language that we find within this chapter is incredibly powerful in the background. So, for instance, And so he's within her husband has made this particular commitment.

And then there's this theme of day by day on a number of different occasions. There's the day by day of the taking of lots. And there's the day by day of the testing of Mordecai, of asking why he's not bowing.

And a similar thing is taking place. She cannot stand by silent because if she is silent concerning this vow that her husband has made, she is complicit and she will be caught up in the judgment. [74 : 30] So there's something of the urgency of human action there and the sense that the divine purpose will be worked out. But human action is nonetheless incredibly urgent.

The other thing with that that's very interesting is the importance of the relationship between the husband and the wife, which is a theme throughout the book. So you have the male and female pairings and the faithful woman and the unfaithful woman, Zeresh.

And then on the other hand, Esther and then Vashti, another example who is a bit more ambiguous. And so you have Mordecai giving a command to Esther and then the way that she relates to that. Then you have the way that Ahasuerus has to be moved towards what is good by Esther's very careful persuading. And so she uses love as a moral force to move Ahasuerus towards what is right and to prevent this considerable evil.

And so I think that's one of the great applications of this, that we can see examples of this in negative and positive forms in scripture. Esther is the great example of a wife using her influence in a very difficult situation.

[75 : 40] The sort of marital relationship that she has with Ahasuerus is far from ideal, but she does have something of that power to be able to move him. And we've seen that in the story of Eve, that Adam listened to his wife.

We see the same thing in the story of Sarah and Hagar with Abram. We've seen the same thing in the story of Ahab and Jezebel. We see something negative like that as well in Herod and Herodias. But here we see the power of love as a moral force.

And I think it brings us back to, I'm going through the book of Proverbs at the moment, and the importance of the woman as the counsellor in wisdom. And I think that's part of what's taking place here.

To build on that, I mean, Esther's relationship to the king definitely does give her this opportunity to do great good. But the trappings of it are very clear, quite apart from the moral ambiguity of it at the start.

Insofar as Esther seems to be in this slightly strange situation, as if she's kind of shut off in the palace. So this decree has gone out and the whole Jewish people are in mourning.

[76 : 46] And yet it seems she doesn't know about it somehow. And so Mordecai then has to be the messenger who comes and tells her and even finds it quite difficult to communicate with her.

It has to be sort of staged and that someone has to shuttle to and fro between the two of them. And so while she is in that position of power, she's kind of shut off from her people.

And you get there that double-edged sense to her situation, I guess, that it can be the opportunity to do great good.

And yet the dangers of it are very present. And, of course, undergirding all that is, as Alistair pointed out, that relationship between God's divine purposes, but also the human responsibility to do something.

So God will achieve deliverance for his people. If it's not via Esther, it will be some other deliverer. But nevertheless, her decision is hugely important.

[77 : 52] And so the Bible manages, I think, to bring those two things together without compromising either side of the coin, which is a brilliant thing.

So what about all the killing? The book ends, you know, they're partying and they're killing everyone at the same time. What does that mean for us today?

How come you just get to ask all the questions? I asked the experts, and I just want to hear what you have to say.

It was interesting earlier when we were talking, it seems like Esther has this long drawn-out end after there's a logical kind of climax and you think that it's all over.

But, of course, you have that problem of the king's decree not being able to be revoked. And so the way around it for Esther and Mordecai is to say that the Jews can defend themselves.

[78 : 58] And so that part is often left out of the Sunday school version of the story, which is what most people are working off of. And so you have this tension because there are people who are still

going ahead with the original order, still attacking the Jews.

And then in self-defense, the Jewish people are responding. And we talked a little bit earlier about, you know, plunder and not plunder. But I think it's interesting the numbers again that are given. There's actually, to kind of bring it into the present day, there's a tomb of Mordecai and Esther in Iran. And they recently downgraded it, I think maybe 10 years ago, from being a pilgrimage site. And one of the reasons given was because they were, Mordecai and Esther were part of a massacre of Persians, 75,000. Of course, they're pulling these numbers straight from the book of Esther.

So there is this ambiguity as it's a just outcome. Of course, the Jewish people are ecstatic to be not part of a genocide and be able to defend themselves.

[80 : 18] On the other hand, you have 75,000 people who die. So it's an interesting and maybe not totally tidy solution to their problem.

I think the problem of the king's decree is that actually the long ending of the book highlights the fact that the actual judgment of Haman doesn't solve the problem.

It solves it. The problem is presented as a threat to Esther's own life. And once Haman is dealt with, that's over. And the decree can stand. The problem is that that's not what Esther was looking for.

Her life was not in any imminent danger. Rather, she wanted to save her people. And so they have to concoct a very wise plan to get around these things. And they are given the right of self-defense. But there's something more going on there. It's not just about having self-defense. It's having a decree that can go toe to toe with the original decree. And having, at a certain point, all the people within the provinces are going to be wondering, where does the king actually stand on this?

[81 : 28] He's made this one original decree. And now there's this other decree. And we need to discern which way the wind is blowing. And if you think that Haman and his group are in the ascendancy, then you'll go ahead and throw in your weight with the enemies of the Jews.

Otherwise, you will support the Jews if you actually think that Mordecai is the one who's on the rise. And the fact that they have this victory celebration before the event of the day when everything's going to go down, it actually sends out the signal.

It shows that the king is actually on the side of Mordecai and the Jews, not on the side of Haman. And so the hanging of the ten sons of Haman, who had already been killed, is again another sign that he's not actually supported by the king.

And in that respect, it's serving as a very strong deterrent to anyone who would actually stand up and fight the Jews. So those who do fight are those who are quite relentless and committed to this anti-Semitic cause, it would seem, rather than just those who are obeying the king's original decree. And that particular action, I think, is an example of the wisdom that's at play in this book. This is not something that arises just by bravery. And Esther and Mordecai are very canny and shrewd in the way that they go about this.

[82 : 56] And there's a theme of deception that's going through this that I think brings us back again to the very beginning. Just as the woman was deceived by the serpent, now the serpent is deceived by the woman.

And we have many examples of this in Scripture. Rahab deceiving the men of Jericho, the Hebrew midwives deceiving Pharaoh. We have Michael deceiving Saul or Rachel deceiving her father Laban and many other examples.

Jael deceiving Sisera. And here we have one other example that ends towards the end of the Old Testament. And it seems that this is yet another serpent figure who wants to have the forbidden fruit in his case.

And the woman actually deceives him and outwits him. But it's a victory achieved not just by bravery, the bravery of actually standing up and approaching the king, which she shows, but also by her wisdom and her ability to concoct this plan that can actually go toe to toe with the original decree.

And so all the other things that are part of that decree, the fact that they are allowed to take the spoils, but don't. I mean, that relates to the not taking the spoils of the Amalekites, but also relates to the fact that they weren't looking for this was not something they were they were seeking.

[84 : 11] Rather, it needed to be seen to be a really strong decree that could go every bit as far as the original decree to actually serve as an effective deterrent. Yes, it's important to remember.

I mean, these people are not collateral damage, are they? They could have not attacked. They could, in fact, have joined the side of the Jews. And many did. We talk about it refers in chapter, I think, chapter eight, those who joined sides with the Jews.

Because seemingly also there was this knowledge that really God was on the Jews' side. And we get a hint of this in what Zeresh says about Mordecai.

And so these people, we could almost liken them to the situation of the Canaanites. You know, there is this fear which has fallen on the Canaanites, just as actually it talks about how the fear of Mordecai falls upon the Persians and particularly on Hammond's forces.

And people in Canaan, they knew what God had done in Egypt. And so they had this knowledge. And the ones who perished, I guess, chose to ignore that.

[85 : 24] And so I'm not trying to sort of minimize the killing or anything. You know, this was God's judgment and it was a good thing.

But at the same time, yeah, these are people who are doing something with a certain amount of knowledge. And we know very clearly from history that things root sins like anti-Semitism aren't removed by getting people to apologize or changing laws and things.

You know, these are sins which rise up again and again. And it seems that there is a very thorough purging of it here. Yeah, and I think it may have been in Devin's tweet thread, but I know I also read it in James Jordan, the connection with Amalek.

Amalek actually, you know, the Amalekites ambush Israel as they're coming out of Egypt. And so, you know, as the people have gone in Persia, perhaps they're about to be or have already been allowed to return to the land, to the temple.

But now there's this, you know, attack on their flank, so to speak, right? The remainder that are still in Persia are being attacked by Amalekites. And so it's a replay of those battles in Exodus and then, yes, Numbers and so forth into the other Old Testament.

[86 : 51] And I definitely think about applying it forward as well. The work of Christ, he dies, he takes the penalty, yes, but then he will come again.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead. And those who are faithful are rewarded, they are exalted, they are on his side. But those who are opposed to him do receive condemnation.

And so I think we see that eschatological peace here in Esther. And there's a tragic comedy of it all that they're caught in their own trap. This is the plan that they had set and the snare that they had established.

And now they are the ones that are caught within it. And so there is the poetic justice there. And the whole book of Esther explores, I think, the poetic character of God's providence in history.

One thing I've found helpful as an application is just thinking about what it means to live in a situation where you are not actually in control.

[87 : 57] And in a situation of exile where your people may be threatened in various ways by decrees of authorities, what does it look like to be faithful in that situation?

We have the same sorts of things in the book of Daniel or the book of Jeremiah to some extent. And how do you relate to the situation of being under the rule of some pagan authority?

I think that can be very relevant in our situation. An interesting dynamic is the irreversible nature of the law. And in that sense, it's quite different to the situation we find in Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar is basically his own guy.

You know, he has a law that everyone's got to bow down to this statue. And then a bit later, when he decides that's not such a great law, he just changes it and says anyone who doesn't honour Daniel's God will be thrown into the fire himself.

And so he's very much in control there. In the book of Esther, it's kind of like laws have almost becoming uncontrollable themselves.

[89 : 07] They have superior superiority to the king. And I wonder if that's even got a slightly closer analogy to our present situation, where some of the things which are most damaging to Christians today are just these laws.

And they're almost detached from individuals. They have a life that go well beyond particular rulers and particular people who enforce them.

And I think there's an interesting aspect to all that. Yeah. And just the proliferation of laws. I mean, why do you need a law? Let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed.

That Bashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. That seems a bit like legal bloke to me. Isn't it funny, though, that this is really opposite of the way maybe like the Greek historians talk about the Persians, you know?

The Persians are this Orientalism where it's just a despotic leader, right? And the West, they're the people of law and order. But here, Persia is law.

[90 : 14] It's law, law, law. Even the king said, well, like, you know, what can I do? It's law. Yeah, it's amazing. It's an interesting, different perspective. But does that also take us somewhere theological, right?

The law can't just be taken away. Can't be abolished. Sure. Yeah, it does. I mean, salvation from what the law demands in terms of Jesus' sacrifice is at the back of the whole thing.

And in many senses, the cross is something which upholds God's original decree that sin, the price of it is death.

And so we have this way in which there isn't an easy way out other than the cross when Jesus speaks about it. He does speak about it in terms of necessity.

You know, wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer? And so I do think that while there are people who want to downplay that aspect of necessity and say there are many ways in which salvation could have come about, I think once God had made the statements that he made in Genesis 3, I don't personally think that is the case.

[91 : 35] I think that at that stage, the cross was necessary. Cursed is he who hangs upon a tree, right? And you do have the fact sin made the base of its operations, the law, and by that wrought death.

And in the same way, you have the villain here who has hijacked the power of the law, and he's using that as a means to kill. But the very means that he's using ends up becoming the device by which he is defeated.

And so in the very day when he thinks that he's going to have his great victory, it is actually the great day of his catastrophic and decisive defeat. A kind of parallel story where something similar takes place, but less obviously, I think is Daniel 6, where, again, it's an irreversible law.

Now, he's got a shelf life there. It's only going to last for 30 days. But Daniel, it seems, just keeps praying the whole way through, you know, and so they catch him.

It seems that they just go and catch him in prayer immediately because he never stops. So you would imagine he would have been thrown to the lions fairly early on. Now, what does the king do after it's very clear that Daniel has preserved him?

[93 : 00] Well, he decides to then, he can't just repeal this law. It's got the irreversible characteristic to it. And so he has these people, as well as their families, in fact, thrown to the lions.

And while he can repeal the law, you know, who after that has happened is going to bring Daniel back to the king on day seven and say, look, we found him in prayer again.

You know, that's not going to go well for them after Darius is there, has made this statement of what happens to people who go against Daniel.

And so there's a slightly similar situation there in that there's an irreversible law which has to be got round somehow. So it's been absolutely wonderful to have this conversation.

I've thoroughly enjoyed having you all join me for a discussion of a book which has so many mysteries and I think rewards close attention in ways that might surprise many people.

[94 : 03] And just in conclusion, what is one thought that you want to leave with our listeners about the book? Maybe something that you want to think about more yourself, something that you found especially encouraging about the book, some detail of the book that you want to explore further.

Anything along those lines. Devon. I got called on first. I think that just as you said, Esther, that Esther really replays close reading.

There's a lot of details in the genealogies, in seemingly inexplicable scenes where motivations are very unclear.

There's a lot of details in the book that an intertextual reading will shed a lot of light on. And so I think that many people approach Esther as a story they heard in Sunday school or as a somewhat fairy tale with a lot of archetypal characters.

And you have a lot of characters and you have a lot of characters and you have a lot of characters and you have a bad guy that you can just see twirling his mustache. But the depth of the details in Esther are so amazing that you can't help but worship when you start to dig deeper.

[95 : 30] James. Very similar to Devon, actually. I was reminded as I was just reading through it today, it's just an absolutely brilliant book. And sometimes I suppose I just take it for granted, having grown up reading the Bible.

You just think, well, that's the Bible. You know, that's just the way it does its stories. But just thinking about it again, I've been struck by the depth and complexity of it.

And yet kind of all that depth and complexity is submerged underneath quite a simple story in which good triumphs in the end.

And the world isn't just this place of blind luck or injustice. But, you know, God rewards and preserves his people. So, you know, a very simple bottom line that you can teach to children in a Sunday school.

And yet at the same time, it lends itself to that deep scrutiny, which I mean, is the sign of just an absolute master author, isn't it? To have something like that that can work on so many different levels.

[96 : 38] You know, the Bible isn't just a book for people who like, you know, literature and things. You know, it has been sculpted in such a way to speak to everyone and speak to so many different concerns.

So that's something big I'll take away from it. Stephen. Yeah, well, everything you have been said so far, I agree with. But one thing we didn't say yet that I think you have to point out is how funny the book is.

I mean, it is a really, even though it's got this darkness to it, there are moments in the book where I really actually laughed when I, you know, I read them out loud. And to me, the funniest part is that turning point.

Haman is so mad at Mordecai. He's built the gallows. He's ready to just go overboard. He gets summoned in to talk to the king. And the king says, what shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?

And the text tells us, Haman thought in his heart, whom would the king delight to honor more than me? So he goes and he gives this really lavish, you know, over the top reward about basically making the king.

[97 : 50] And then the king said to Haman, hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you suggested, and do so for Mordecai, the Jew. And Haman does it.

He goes and he gives this stuff to Mordecai. He puts him on the horse and he walks in front of him saying, thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

You know, can you imagine just how, you know, hilarious. It's like a Coen Brothers movie, right? And so even in the darkness and, you know, the threat that's hanging over our head, when God is on your side, you know, it's going to be good.

It's it's you're going to end happily. You're going to you're going to end in a, you know, in a comedic tone. So, yeah, that's something about the book that I really love.

I've really appreciated reading texts like this and recognizing we are not reading the Old Testament by ourselves. The Old Testament reads itself and the New Testament is reading the Old Testament.

[98 : 56] And there's this constant community of readers that we're engaging with. So, as we've noted, the connections back with places like the Book of Genesis and Leviticus and Numbers and First Samuel and elsewhere.

We realize that these texts are being engaged with by the Book of Esther and that we in its company can maybe reread those texts with new eyes. I found it's an incredible encouragement to read such intertextual passages and just realize how much it opens up on both sides.

We often focus upon the way in which a passage in Genesis might open up a later passage in somewhere like Esther. We maybe don't pay enough attention to the way that reading something like Esther can maybe open up Genesis for us.

So, that's one thought I'd like people to maybe explore. And I hope that this discussion has propelled you back into the Book of Esther. That after this, you'll want to spend some time looking through the book, seeing if these things are indeed so, and testing some of the readings coming up with a few of your own and investigating just the riches of this particular text.

Thank you so much for your time and for listening to this. Thank you to Devin and James and Stephen for joining me. It's been a delight to have you all. God bless. Thanks so much.

[100 : 23] Thanks for having us, Esther.