

Two Year Bible Trek
Week 77
Esther; Jonah

Key Concepts: God saves God's people and loves the world as well

Stories: Esther opens with the Persian Queen refusing to serve her husband then continues with a search for the new queen, a Jewish woman, Esther, being named queen, the saving of the king by Mordecai the Jew, the plot of Haman to kill all of the Jews, Esther's discovery of the plot and her plan to avert the slaughter, the King's recognition of Mordechai's service, Esther's dinner party and accusation against Haman, Haman's plea to the queen, Haman's hanging, the king's permission to the Jews to slaughter their enemies and finally the dedication of the festival of Purim. Jonah opens with God's command to the prophet to proclaim God's forgiveness to Nineveh followed by Jonah's refusal to go, his being swallowed by a large fish, his miraculous escape, his lackluster proclamation, the positive response of the people, Jonah's anger at their response and finally God's last words to Jonah..

Brief Summary: I have placed these books near the end of the Old Testament because they were probably written just before or just following the return from exile. There are several reasons I say this. The first reason is that the stories treat the enemies of Israel/Judah with great respect. While Persia was had been good to the Jews, allowing them to return, the Jewish people were still under constant pressure from their Persian overlords. The Assyrians, whose capitol was Nineveh, were brutal and utterly hated by the Jews. No one during the time when the story supposedly takes place would have had God sending a prophet to covert the Assyrians. The second reason is that the actions taken by the two heroes, Esther and Jonah are out of character with persons of that day and time. Esther would not have allowed herself to become a queen in Persia. A good Jew would have rather died, literally. Jonah would simply have refused to go regardless of the consequences. Finally the language, images and stories are much more closely aligned to the late Jewish and early Greek period than to the periods described in the books.

Esther is an unusual story in that it does not mention God, has a female heroine and allows Esther to do very un-Jewish things (see comment above). Though there may be some historic basis for this story, perhaps a local liberation of the Jews, there is no record of Jews ever being threatened in this way. The story itself is rather fanciful and reads more like a soap opera than a true Biblical epic. The story is that Esther, a Jew, because of her beauty is made Queen of Persia. Her favored position allows her to undermine the plot to kill all of the Jews in Persia. Her opponent, Haman, is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for the Jews, and the story concludes with the Jews being allowed to slaughter all of their enemies (again, something that would never had happened in the Persian Empire).

Jonah, on the other hand concerns a Jew, Jonah, who does not want to help God in saving the Assyrians. The story is that God calls on Jonah to preach repentance to the Assyrians. Jonah refuses and runs away. God forces him to obey (by causing a shipwreck and having Jonah swallowed by and then vomited up by a large fish). When Jonah complies, his evangelism is at best half-hearted. The people however find Jonah's message utterly compelling and seek forgiveness from God. The core of this story is that Jews were supposed to be telling the world about the love of God. They were not supposed to stay isolated as a community (think of Ezra-Nehemiah) but were to go out into the world helping people live up to God's expectations. The story concludes with a comment that God even cared about the cattle as well as the people.

1. What is your favorite part of the Esther story?
2. What is your favorite part of the Jonah story?
3. How do you see these stories as trying to counter other Biblical themes we have covered?