

**A Preaching Methodology for Esther Based on
Bryan Gregory's Literary Approach**

Kelly B. Burton

Dr. Matthew McKellar PRCHG 7614-A/B

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How can a man called by God and anointed by the Spirit of God preach God from the Book of Esther? It is a worthy question because God is not even mentioned in the book. Esther was not written for the fainthearted. It is not attractively packaged with three points and a poem. Expositors will discover the gold in Esther by tedious planning and prayer. God is sure to reward the man who perseveres to find Him in the text. In Esther a skillful homilician will discern coincidences, sudden reversals of dire circumstances, and a vague third person author as clues to finding the hidden God. "A minister's work is usually blessed in proportion to the sanctification of his heart before God. Ministers must be what they preach, not only applying themselves wholly to their texts, but also applying their texts wholly to themselves."¹ Before preaching God in the text, one must be with the God of the text. In Esther, the man who is with God will easily see God at work.

Alistair Begg rightly states, "The preacher's task is to declare what God has said, explain the meaning, and establish the implications so that no one will mistake its relevance."² This philosophy of preaching highlights the main character of the Bible as God. Sydney Greidanus refers to this as Theocentric Interpretation.

¹ Joel R. Beeke, *Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 69.

² Alistair Begg, *Preaching for God's Glory*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 37.

A Definition of Theocentric Interpretation

According to Greidanus, a theocentric interpretation of the Old Testament is best explained by investigating Martin Luther's and John Calvin's model of interpretation.

Luther was concerned mainly about the issue of salvation and focused on justification by faith in Christ. Consequently, finding Christ in the Old Testament became Luther's priority. Calvin, though affirming justification by faith in Christ, has a broader viewpoint, namely the sovereignty and glory of God. This broader perspective enables Calvin to be satisfied with biblical messages about God, redemptive history, and God's covenant without necessarily focusing these messages on Jesus Christ.³

Greidanus argues that if Christocentric means Christ is everywhere, theocentric means God is everywhere. Indeed, readers will agree that after a thorough reading of Esther God is everywhere. He makes His clandestine appearances through coincidences in the story. Readers also note that circumstances seem to keep working out in favor of Esther and Mordecai. This is the providence of God. Moreover, the intuitive reader will discover sudden shifts in the story's circumstance. These undercover appearances of God enable this writer to conclude that a theocentric reading of Esther is the best way to interpret the story of Esther.

This paper will argue that Bryan Gregory's five literary techniques are worthy methodologies for preaching Esther. Three of Gregory's techniques will be suggested by this writer: Preaching Coincidences in Esther, Preaching Peripetia in Esther, and Preaching Providence in Esther.

Date and Authorship of Esther

Knute Larson and Kathy Dahlen conclude that Esther "covers events during the reign of Xerxes I, who ruled Persia from 486-465 B.C. It was probably written a few decades after

³ Sydney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 127.

Xerxes's reign around 400 B.C.⁴ Regarding authorship, "he is unknown. The author had either a personal knowledge of Persian Court intrigues and life or access to detailed information."⁵ Old

Testament scholar, Karen Jobe agrees:

The book of Esther does not mention its author. Very little is given regarding the date it was written. Most modern commentaries put the composition of the book in fourth or even third century B.C. An ancient Greek translation of the book was made in Jerusalem either in 114 or 78 B.C. All things considered, it is currently impossible to date the book more specifically than between the late fifth through third centuries B.C.⁶

An initial reading of Esther chapter one informs the reader that the story takes place "in the days of Ahasuerus, the king who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces."⁷

Historical Background

The unknown author wastes no time in relating to his readers the name of the monarch in the days of Esther and his massive kingdom. "Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces."⁸ This Ahasuerus is also Xerxes. The spirit or mood of Esther is introduced by the narrator as festive. Xerxes invited the nobles and governors of Persia and Media to his kingdom to show off his glory and splendor. Readers are introduced to Esther as early as chapter two.

Joyce Baldwin helps to clarify historical background when she adds:

There are several marks of history writing in the way the book of Esther is narrated, such as the opening phrase of the Hebrew, *wayhi* 'Now it came to pass.' Details of the time and place of the action follow: then name of the reigning monarch, the extent of his empire, and the year of his reign at the commencement of the story. To this, other

⁴ Kathy Dahlen and Knute Larson, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Holman Old Testament Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 281.

⁵ Kathy Dahlen and Knute Larson, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 281.

⁶ Karen H. Jobes, *Esther, The NIV Application Commentary: From biblical text to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1999, 30.

⁷ All Scripture is taken from the English Standard Translation unless otherwise noted.

⁸ *Esther*, English Standard Version.

circumstantial details are added as the plot develops, and at the end the reader is referred to a source book for verification and further study (10:2).⁹

The Structure of the Book of Esther

Since expository preachers concern themselves with the priority of the biblical text, they intentionally structure their sermons according to the structures of their chosen text. It is likely that preachers begin by outlining their passage. “It is generally a good idea to outline the passage and, especially with narrative texts, to explore how the passage fits within the larger literary context. Longer stretches of narrative are generally comprised of episodes, each with its own beginning, middle, and end, but the larger narrative itself will also show this tripartite progression.”¹⁰

Mervin Breneman sees the main literary structure of Esther as a *chiastic* structure:

- A Opening and background (chapter 1)
- B The king’s first decree (chaps 2-3)
- C The clash between Haman and Mordecai (chaps 4-5)
- D “On the night the king could not sleep” (6:1)
- C Mordecai’s triumph over Haman (chaps 6-7)
- B The king’s second decree (chaps 8-9)
- A Epilogue (chap 10)¹¹

Roger Omanson develops the structure around the feasts in Esther:

The Hebrew text of Esther opens with two successive banquets that introduce the reader to the Persian Empire, and it ends with two more banquets that focus on matters of concern to the Jews. The outline of Esther centers around the banquets: 1. The Feast of

⁹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction & Commentary*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 16.

¹⁰ Craig C. Broyles, *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 95-96.

¹¹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, The New American Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 288.

Xerxes (chaps. 1:1-2.18). 2. The Feasts of Esther (chaps 2:19-7.10). 3. The Feast of Purim (chaps 8-10).¹²

Scholars like Jon Levenson agree with Omanson but Levenson develops his structure deeper around the banquets:

The fast pace of the action in the book of Esther can mask the substantial elements of symmetry in its narrative design. One central structuring element is the sequence of banquets throughout the book Ahasuerus's banquet for the nobility (1:2-4). Ahasuerus's banquet for all the men in Susa (1:5-8). Vashti's banquet for the women (1:9). Esther's enthronement banquet (2:18). Haman and Ahasuerus's banquet (3:15). Esther's first banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman (5:1-8). Esther's second banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman (7:1-9). The Jews feasting in celebration of Mordecai's elevation and counter decree (8:17). The first feast of Purim (9:17, 19). The second feast of Purim (9:18).¹³

Structure helps the preacher to see the flow of the narrative. But that is not all. Genre plays an important role in the interpretation process.

Genre

There are differing opinions of the genre of Esther. Paul House, in his *Old Testament Survey*, arranges the Book of Esther with The Writings. Among the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth and the Song of Songs, just to name a few, House brackets Esther into the broad category of The Writings.¹⁴ Anthony Tomasino is rather coy to call Esther *historical* in its genre. "Modern people think of history as an account of things that happened. Our book of Esther may have had a starting point in events that happened, but those events are secondary to the lessons that our author wished to convey."¹⁵ Tomasino adds "It is a carefully constructed story, full of humor,

¹² Roger L. Omanson, *The Book of Esther: The Hebrew and Greek Texts*, (New York: United Bible Societies 1997), 3.

¹³ Jon D. Levenson, *Esther, A Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁴ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Survey*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), Table of Contents.

¹⁵ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, (Bellingham: Lexham, 2016), 59.

intrigue, and irony.”¹⁶ Yet he is reluctant to conclude that Esther belongs to the historical genre of Scripture. Instead, he makes his claim simple: “Esther is above all, a work of literature.”¹⁷

Carol Bechtel argues that the author of Esther is not attempting to write history:

Attempts to force this book into that mold may actually do its author an injustice. But if not history, then what? Many educated guesses have been made as to the genre of the book of Esther. One of the most fruitful suggestions of the kind of literature Esther is comes from Adele Berlin, who identifies it as burlesque. That is, it is a kind of literary caricature or farce that can take on a tone of mock identity, often with hilarious results.¹⁸

Breneman offers the most fitting approach to discerning the genre of Esther. He makes his judgment based on how the rabbis viewed Esther. “The rabbis classified Esther as *haggada*. Haggada is narrative that is instructive, by example, in the way one is to live.”¹⁹ Convincingly and clearly, Breneman concludes, “The genre of the Book of Esther is historical narrative.”²⁰

Defining genre is an important step in interpretation. “As complex as genre considerations can become, they are indispensable in literary interpretation, for genre recognition plays a vital role in enabling readers to interpret meaning and to recognize what kinds of truth claims are being made in and by a text.”²¹ God expresses His creativity through His Word by employing different genres of communication. One approaches the Scripture with certain expectations. One approach is that God desires to communicate to His people. By utilizing

¹⁶ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther*, 59.

¹⁷ Anthony J. Tomasino, 59.

¹⁸ Carol M. Bechtel, *Interpretation: Esther*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989) 4.

¹⁹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 288.

²⁰ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 287.

²¹ Craig C. Broyles, *Interpreting the Old Testament*, 94.

different genres readers avoid interpreting every text literally. Figurative speech must be interpreted figuratively, poetry in Psalms is interpreted by reading and seeing with the heart.

Esther tells a story. Storytelling defines the Jewish teaching model. Rabbis sat down to teach stories to the Hebrew children from the Torah about their national history. Readers remember the story of Israel crossing the Jordan river led by Joshua. When everyone crossed the Jordan, the Lord Himself advised Joshua to select twelve men to find twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan River and set them up where they lodged that evening. The stones were to be a testimony to God's deliverance when their children asked about why they were there. Historical narrative in the Bible tells stories of God's deliverance. Esther is a story of God's deliverance.²²

How then should preachers attempt to tell the story of Esther in their sermons? This writer concludes, preach Esther *inductively*. Steven Smith makes the point,

Narratives are inductive. This is obvious. You don't know the point of a story until the story is over. Stories do not state their intention immediately. This is one of the things that make them great. The sermon strategy is equally as simple. Since we don't know the point of the story until the story is over, we are not compelled to resolve the story at the beginning.²³

Preachers could use Steven Mathewson's approach to preaching narrative. Mathewson recommends four key elements found in every story, *plot, characters, setting, and point of view*.

"Plot refers to action. It consists of a sequence of events that usually hinges on a conflict or

²² Joshua chapter 4. There are many more examples of these memorable teaching opportunities; too many to include in this paper. Noah's faith and obedience to God to build an ark. The faith of Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac. The Exodus out of Egypt, and David's faith in God to slay the giant from Gath. Esther belongs in these historical narratives.

²³ Steven Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Scripture*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 45.

crisis. The events in the story move through this conflict towards some kind of resolution.”²⁴

Mathewson continues regarding resolution in Esther, “In the book of Esther, the resolution takes place in 5:1-9:19 as Mordecai receives the honor Haman intended for himself, Haman receives the hanging he intended for Mordecai, and the Jews triumph over their enemies.”²⁵ Mathewson is helpful for the busy pastor who may not have the skills to work through an Old Testament narrative using the Hebrew text. Haddon Robinson avoids methodologies on his road to preaching. Instead, preachers gain more wisdom from him regarding a sermon’s structure. Robinson is helpful in the development of the sermon suggesting: “We explain it. ‘What Does This Mean?’ We prove it. ‘Is it true?’ We apply it. ‘What difference does it make?’”²⁶ Robinson indeed explains all the necessary elements of expository preaching, but one finds very little help in his methodology.

Bryan Gregory and the Narrator’s Literary Techniques

Bryan Gregory offers five literary techniques that subtly hint at God’s active presence in the book of Esther.²⁷ Gregory is the senior pastor of Brookdale Presbyterian Church in St. Joseph Missouri. He has previously served in youth, campus, and pastoral ministries. He and his wife Christy have two sons. The first technique is the use of coincidences. The sheer number of coincidences in Esther are so frequent that it is hard to deny that something more than what the

²⁴ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 44.

²⁵ Steven Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 46.

²⁶ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 77, 80, 86.

²⁷ Bryan R. Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther*, Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 5.

reader can see on the page is going on off-stage. Gregory claims these coincidences prove there is someone behind the scenes “ensuring that events line up in a certain way.”²⁸ The second literary technique in Esther is “the use of peripeteia.” Peripeteia is a literary device that refers to sudden change in a story’s circumstances that leads to a turning point in the plot.²⁹ An example of peripeteia is the sudden fall of Vashti which opens the door for Esther to appear before the king as the next possible queen. The third literary technique used by the narrator of Esther is the most subtle of all the techniques. When the narrator uses the *name* Esther (the protagonist) he is providing a clue of God’s divine hand at work again. “Esther is introduced with two names not one. Her Hebrew name is Hadassah, and her Persian name is Esther.”³⁰ In Hebrew Esther’s name means I am hiding. “Esther’s name was more than clever wordplay, it was an indication that the story as a whole, was one of hiding-divine hiding.”³¹ The fourth literary technique of Gregory “is the use of the third-person omniscient point of view in the narration.”³² Gregory is referring to how the reader is able to sit back and watch the story unfold from God’s perspective. The Holy Spirit impressively moves throughout the story line, stopping to disclose things that only the Spirit would know. “After all, how could the narrator know the private information about which Mordecai became aware?”³³ The fifth literary technique serves the reader by alluding to past event in Israel’s history. This way the reader can expect God to be involved in Esther even though He is not mentioned specifically.

²⁸ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 7.

²⁹ Google.com, *peripeteia*.

³⁰ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 8.

³¹ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 8.

³² Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 8-9.

³³ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 9.

How can the expositor benefit from Gregory's literary techniques? Preachers may choose to announce all of these techniques in his background introduction. But this writer sees the best approach as a theocentric one which would indeed highlight techniques *number one, two and four*. Why omit numbers three and five? Gregory's third technique is ambiguous and blurs the lines between coincidences and the names of Esther. Gregory's fifth technique detracts from the focus of the text and sets the preacher up for failure by referring to numerous other Old Testament narratives. It is best to make the structure of Esther the structure of the expositor's sermon. This homiletical method keeps the preacher tethered to his text. David Allen put it best, "Text-driven preaching stays true to the substance of the text, the structure of the text, and the spirit of the text."³⁴

Preach the Coincidences in Esther

Centering his points on these coincidences, the expositor keeps his audience centered on God throughout his sermon. To be clear, he should not make his points center on the coincidences but use them as support verses for his main points. Suggestions for the sermon points will be included later in this paper. "In Esther the sheer number of coincidences. . .begin to defy credibility and leave the readers with the unmistakable impression that something more than serendipity is going on."³⁵ Throughout the narrative of Esther the reader discovers these coincidences and is tempted to smile and think, 'Yes, *it just so happened* that way.' The first of these coincidences is in Esther chapter 1. The story opens as Xerxes is feeding his overinflated ego. He is showing the expanse of his palace to a number of important colleagues. In all his

³⁴ Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Matthews, *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 8.

³⁵ Bryan Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 6.

bravado Xerxes calls for Queen Vashti to parade herself in front of his friends. The plot develops when she denies the invitation. At this decision, Vashti can never appear before Xerxes again. The search begins for a new queen. It just so happened that Mordecai, who had been carried away in captivity, was close at hand. Mordecai was in charge of bringing up his uncle's daughter, Hadassah, or Esther. Along with many other young women, Esther was taken to the palace and paraded before the king.

This event causes the reader to notice the hand of God at work off stage. "No motive is given for the queen's refusal, but her refusal was necessary for the development of the story of how Esther saved her people."³⁶ Omanson's point suppresses the efforts of the expository preacher to try and fill in the missing blanks. Any number of conclusions could be developed about why Vashti refused to appear. The theocentric model of interpretation allows the reader to let the providence of God take center stage in the narrative. These 'just so happened' moments feature the glory of God's providence.³⁷ Karen Jobe spots the providence of God but calls it "a chain of seemingly ordinary events that culminates in the deliverance of God's people, fulfilling the promise of the ancient covenant made ages before in a faraway place."³⁸ Bryan Gregory's purpose in this literary approach is fulfilled because he exhibits to the reader that even though He cannot be seen, God can be trusted.

Esther was likely written during a time of relentless persecution of the Jews, possibly under Antioch IV in the early second century BCE. It was a time when many in the Jewish community were asking 'Where is God?' Although neither God nor prayer are

³⁶ Roger Omanson, *The Book of Esther*, 34.

³⁷ God's providence differs from His sovereignty. Sovereignty means more about God's rule over His creation. Providence refers to His control. "We may define God's providence as follows: God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 315.

³⁸ Karen Jobe, *Esther*, 76.

mentioned in the book, the story presumes that God is present and ever caring, working behind the scenes through Mordecai and Esther, providentially bringing them together to deliver.³⁹

In these coincidences the expositor must point his listeners to the providence of God working through the main characters Esther and Mordecai. There is a greater kingdom than Xerxes' at work in and with Esther and Mordecai.

Other coincidences in Esther include how she gains winning favor with the king. Out of one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, surely the competition would be stiff. Yet the Bible spotlights *only one* whom the king loved more than all the other virgins. Another coincidence is in chapter 2. Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. "The narrator states this fact again in verse 21 because of the long parenthesis in verse 20. Quite in contrast to the previous two scenes, the events are related with staccato brevity. The note that Mordecai was serving as an official in the palace provides both the opportunity and the means for the part he will play in the following events."⁴⁰ Mordecai overheard Bigthan and Teresh plotting to kill Xerxes. Mordecai told it to Esther and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. This event is another, it just so happened, proving the theocentric theme always running in the background. Another narrative in the Bible reminds the preacher that this methodology is not limited to Esther's story. It just so happened that Joseph was taken to Egypt in Genesis 37. Years later when his brothers go to Egypt for food, 'it just so happens' that Joseph is the Prime Minister of Egypt and is able to provide his brothers with what they need to survive. The Word of God is laced with these perfect lifesaving coincidences. Mordecai's plea to Esther marks another one of these coincidences. "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time

³⁹ Tony W. Cartledge, *Can anything good come out of Susa? Preaching from the scroll of Esther*, Review and Expositor, Vol 2, Series 118, 214-223.

⁴⁰ Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth/Esther, Word Biblical Commentary*, (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1996), 371.

as this?” (Esther 4:14). Located in the middle of the book, the author aims to make crystal clear this is the ultimate illustration of coincidence.

Esther 6 signals the reader to another coincidence where no one but God should receive the glory. Better put these coincidences might be referred to as God sightings, a clever title to the only book in the Bible that doesn't even mention the name of God. The night before Haman requests to meet with Xerxes, the king is unable to sleep. Hoping that a little reading will tire his eyes, the king requests the chronicles be brought to him. It just so happened that as he was reading, he turned in the chronicles to the very place that revealed the life-saving efforts of Mordecai. Mordecai is spared and the reader glorifies God. “When chapter 6 opens, the focus rests, not on the responsibility of the child of God, but on the wise providence of the sovereign God. Just as Haman has been up all night building the gallows for Mordecai, so too, it seems, has the king, who does what we've all done when insomnia strikes. He reads.”⁴¹ These events provide all the necessary material to encourage a congregation of Christians. Even when those who follow God's commands are least aware, God is providentially behind the scenes intimately involved in their lives. “God is standing in the shadows here, keeping watch over His own. This is my reason for believing that the purpose of this book in the canon of Scripture is to teach the providence of God. The hand of God is in the glove of history.”⁴²

One more coincidence will contribute to evidence that Gregory's literary approach to preaching Esther is directly out of Esther making it worthy to model. In chapter 7 Haman is in the wrong place at the wrong time. After the king arose to go to the palace garden, Haman stayed

⁴¹ David Strain, *Ruth & Esther: There is a Redeemer & His Sudden Reversals*, (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 130.

⁴² J. Vernon McGee, *Esther: The Romance of Providence*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 93.

behind to beg for his life from Queen Esther. It just so happened that the king returned at the very moment Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was.

Had Haman knelt as much as a foot away from the queen's couch, the king's reaction could still have been justified. So serious was the king's accusation that his servants immediately treated Haman like a condemned man. The LXX has that he was confounded in the face, which means that his face grew red.⁴³

It is Haman who seals his own fate. God is intimately involved with all of His creation, cooperating with every event in their lives, to direct them to fulfill His purposes. This definition of providence comes ever true in the case of Haman. "Tragically for Haman and humorously for the reader, what brings Haman's world crashing down is not his irresponsible edict of death against the Jews, but his kneeling down before a Jewish woman."⁴⁴ These coincidences can and should be supported by Proverbs. The expositor could support his points by doing the work of biblical theology. Are there other books in the Old Testament which undergird coincidences in life that work out for the good of the upright and the downfall of the wicked? Indeed, Psalms and Proverbs make the claim that there is sort of a two-path life ethic. Those who are against the Lord are the wicked, and they choose the wrong path. The upright are those who are chosen by God to follow Him. The upright will inherit the land. In Psalm 37 David writes, "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for He sees that his day is coming." Proverbs 16:5, "Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished." That is not all. There is another literary technique in Esther according to Gregory.

⁴³ Carey A. Moore, *Esther, The Anchor Bible*, (Garden City: Double Day and Company, 1971), 72.

⁴⁴ A. Boyd Luter, *Ruth and Esther: God Behind the Seen*, (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 294.

Preach Peripetia in Esther

Peripetia is Bryan Gregory's second literary approach to reading and preaching Esther. "In literary terms, peripetia is the sudden or unexpected reversal of a situation."⁴⁵ Readers may think of comical motifs that stress this literary approach. "It turns out that all stories with a Persian setting, for whatever purpose and whatever language, are bound to contain similar motifs."⁴⁶ The book of Esther is full of examples of peripetia. Preaching these sudden reversals could prove to be the most effective methodology in a series on Esther. Listeners then and now are faced with unfair circumstances that instill anger, a sense of unfairness, or worry about a situation where there seems to be no way out. Keep God the center of the story in Esther. This is theocentric preaching.

The first example of peripetia comes from the sudden fall of Vashti and the swift rise of Esther to the place of queen. This reversal makes the reader smile. As early as chapter 2 the narrator is hinting at something greater going on behind the scenes. Someone is directing the events in such a way that the Jewish people will be favored. Another case of peripetia appears in chapter 5 as Haman builds the scaffold from which he plans to hang Mordecai. These plans came about because Haman's wife and friends suggest it. As Xerxes sifts through the chronicles on his sleepless night, he stumbles upon the report of Mordecai and how he told about the plot to kill the king. The plans of Haman are suddenly frustrated to a degree that humbles him beyond repair. It was Haman who put the royal robes on Mordecai. It was Haman who placed a royal crown on the head of Mordecai. Moreover, it was Haman who leads Mordecai mounted on a royal steed through the city square proclaiming, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king

⁴⁵ Bryan R. Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 7.

⁴⁶ Adele Berlin, *The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling*, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, April 2001, Vol 120, 3-14.

delights to honor.”⁴⁷ Everything Haman suggested to Xerxes is agreed upon by the king. However, it is Haman who is ordered by the king to carry these things out on Mordecai. God again emerges from off stage to humiliate the plans of His enemy. God honors His name this way. It was God who was planning those gallows for someone other than Mordecai. All the enemies of God cannot frustrate the plans of the Sovereign. “The deliverance of the individual, Mordecai, just though it is, needs to be seen as part of this wider purpose of God to bring glory to his own name and to establish his kingdom.”⁴⁸ This is a theme found throughout the Old and New Testaments.

The expositor can relate these examples by taking large portions of the story over several chapters and teach them under this motif. “Several scholars have identified reversal not merely as a motif, but a thematic element of Esther. The reversals, as entertaining as they are, do not actually constitute a primary idea or message that the author wishes to communicate.”⁴⁹ Tomasino believes these are important to mention, but not main headings of the preacher’s outline. He sees them more as supporting evidence for the expositor’s central headings or points.

Preach Providence in Esther

This is the fourth technique listed by Gregory. Here the reader and preacher see a third-person narrator “such that the reader is implicitly placed in the heavenly viewing room to watch the events unfold while sitting alongside the divine orchestrator.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the most intimate

⁴⁷ ESV, Chapter 6:8-11.

⁴⁸ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, 91.

⁴⁹ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther*, 104.

⁵⁰ Bryan R. Gregory, *Inconspicuous Providence*, 8-9.

verse in all the Bible is in Psalm 139:16, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance. In Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.” Providence is God’s continued exercise of divine energy fused into the lives of those who belong to Him. This energy continually sustains and directs God’s people to His desired end. Readers cannot miss this providence at work in Esther. God has His hand in all of His creation’s affairs.

As the reader and preacher engage to the end of Esther it is clear that God emerges over and over as the friend of His people. He is intimately involved with all our affairs, working them for His glory and our good.

Aristotle’s accounts of friendship sheds light on how friends act through one another, enabling each other to become and do more than they would have otherwise. Aquinas’s discussion of primary and secondary causality provides compelling insight into how human agency relies upon Divine agency enabling us to move toward our true telos: communion with God. With Esther and Mordecai, one sees shared human agency: both rely upon the other to act.⁵¹

While it is a mistake to say that God relies on human agency for anything, Newman’s point is well received. She is referring to the already stated and repeated definition of God’s providence. It is better to communicate that God cooperates with human agency, He does not rely on them.

An example of the third person narrator is found when the narrator states, “And Haman said to himself. . .”⁵² Who could possibly know what Haman said to himself? Who alone could know what was in the heart of Haman? The third person narrator can only be God. The Holy Spirit is unmistakably involved in the Esther narrative.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Newman, *Where in the world is God? On Finding the Divine in Esther*, Review and Expositor, Vol 118 May, 2021, 180-191.

⁵² ESV, *Esther* Chapter 6:6.

**Suggested Outline for Preaching Esther
Featuring Bryan Gregory's Literary Techniques**

Esther Chapters 1-2 ***A Mysterious Turn of Events***

(Feature Gregory's Peripeteia)

(Feature Gregory's Coincidences)

1:1-9 A King with An Overinflated Ego

1:10-12 A Queen with A Courageous Countenance

2:1-18 Something About Esther

2:19-23 In the Right Place at the Right Time

Esther Chapters 3-4 ***A Time Such as This***

(Feature Gregory's Providence)

3:1-6 An Agagite's Cruel Plan

3:7-15 A Certain People, Different from Other People

4:1-11 Life's Disappointments Call for Spiritual Discipline

4:12-17 God Providentially Places Us to Bring Him Glory

Esther Chapters 5-6 ***The King Who Could Not Sleep***

(Feature Gregory's Providence-the third Person narrator)

(Feature Gregory's Peripeteia)

5:1-8 Fasting Answered-Faith Required

5:9-14 Pride on Steroids

6:1-11 What it Looks Like to Trip Over Your Pride

Esther Chapters 7 -8 **In the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time**

(Feature Gregory's Peripeteia)

7 Haman's Unraveling

8 Royal Robes for the Underdog

Esther Chapters 9-10 **God's Upper Hand**

(Featuring Gregory's Providence, a third-person narrator)

9:1-22 The Inauguration of Purim

10 The Greatness of Mordecai

In the above suggested outline, this writer intends to exhibit Gregory's literary techniques as only supporting the passages. The outline is not exhaustive for obvious reasons. It is a homiletical idea, one of many. The literary techniques of Gregory are not to take center stage of the expositor's sermon. The book of Esther is to be preached in an inductive style allowing the expositor to end load his application and uncover the God of the ages working off stage in every chapter. By utilizing this approach, the preacher does not feel rushed to run to the cross so to speak. He can expose the hidden God of Esther at the end of his sermon to create relief and

gratefulness. In dealing with the application, a frequent question expositors may face is how can one get to Christ from Esther? Or, how can one preach Christ from the Book of Esther? The answer is from the lesser to the greater. Focus the application on the phrase, *for such a time as this*. Paul refers to a time such as this in Galatians 4:4, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Conclusion

Esther is God’s story of deliverance, God’s plan of reversing the unfairness that every righteous person has felt in the world down here. Some scholars have hijacked God out of the text and emphasized humanity in the story. “In the Middle Ages, the identification of Esther with the church was displaced by one that became even more popular: she represented none other than the Virgin Mary. This line of interpretation became the standard Catholic teaching and continued to develop.”⁵³ But some Protestant scholars have not received the book of Esther on any better terms. Martin Luther was so hostile to the book that “he wished it had never been included in the Bible.”⁵⁴ Readers should not be surprised to learn that Luther never wrote a commentary on the book of Esther. Foreshadows, typologies, and codes only offer a more contemporary model of interpretation of Esther. Tomasino argues “Divine providence is primary since it is providence that creates the situation where human action can make a difference.”⁵⁵ A Theocentric approach

⁵³ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther*, 113.

⁵⁴ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther*, 114.

⁵⁵ Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther*, 119.

along with Gregory's literary techniques to preaching Esther keeps God the center of the saga while not explicitly stating His involvement until the end of each sermon.

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