

“Not So Hidden After All”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, Feb. 7, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

Scripture Text:

Esther (Greek) 11:5-12; 10:4-13 [NRSV]
Sermon also refers to the three Apocryphal
Additions to the book of Daniel

OPENING

We wrap up this worship series today, a series I’ve called *Apocrypha: The Hidden Books of the Bible*.

Up to now, the books we’ve considered have been “stand alone” writings; that is, they are independent of anything in the Hebrew Bible (*Masoretic Text*) / the Christian Old Testament.

Today, we’re looking at Greek additions that were made to two canonical books in the Hebrew Bible (*Masoretic Text*) / the Christian Old Testament that we’re familiar with: the books of Esther and Daniel. (*Describe the meaning of the term “canonical” for subsequent use in the sermon.*)

Because reading from all of these additions would make for too lengthy a worship service, I chose the “bookending readings” from Esther that you just heard. But I’m going to start with the book of Daniel first and then come back to Esther because in terms of their respective narrative settings, the hero stories in Daniel (Dan. 1-6) come before the story of Esther.

TO THE SCRIPTURES – Greek Additions to Canonical DANIEL

- The Prayer of Azariah (Abednego) and the Song of the Three Jews.
 - Logical location between 3:23 and 3:24 in canonical Daniel, filling out the story of the fiery furnace that Daniel’s three friends were thrown into for their refusal to worship the golden statute erected by King Neb. of Babylon.
 - The Prayer of Azariah (Abednego) consists of two parts:
 1. The first, the Prayer of Azariah, proclaims the righteousness of God in His judgment of Judah for its many sins and affirms Azariah’s faith in God and that of his two friends as they’re facing incineration in the king’s furnace.
 2. The second is a lengthy psalm of praise sung by the three Jewish friends in one voice, hence its title, “The Song of the Three Jews”. It is in the style of Psalm 136 with a statement of praise of God made, followed by the refrain, “sing praise to Him and highly exalt Him forever.”
 - Canonical Daniel then continues with Neb.’s astonishment that the three Jews have survived his furnace and with his extolling their God for His deliverance of these three faithful Jews from the flames.

- Two More Hero Stories of Daniel
 1. Susanna – Solomonic wisdom and fame is in view here, in addition to Susanna’s virtuousness and faithfulness. Note the similarity to the book of Jonah in that the Jewish elders (judges) are the wicked ones, not the righteous Babylonians and Susanna and her parents who faithfully observed the “Law of Moses”.
 2. Stories of “Bel” and “the Dragon”, the latter being the reason for Daniel being thrown into the lions’ den, contra the reason given in canonical Daniel 6.

TO THE SCRIPTURES – ESTHER (Greek)

The controversy surrounding “canonical Esther”, including the Reformer, Martin Luther’s, disdain for it. For example, it mentions the name of the Persian king 190 times, but the name of the God of Israel not once [*The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, NRSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 708 HEBREW BIBLE].

The six additions to Esther – 5 of which mention God and God’s role in the story explicitly.

Addition A – an intro of Mordecai, his dream (which we heard read), and the plot against the king by the eunuchs

Addition B – the edict of the king dictated by the wicked Haman, decreeing the extermination of the Jews for Mordecai’s informing on the eunuchs and their subsequent execution. This is the only Addition that doesn’t mention the name or role of God in the story.

Addition C – the prayers of Mordecai and Esther

Addition D – the account of Esther’s courageous though fearful appearing, unsummoned, before her husband the king. (This is followed by the canonical telling of the snare she lays for Haman.)

Addition E – the edict of the king dictated by Mordecai this time, counteracting that of Haman earlier.

Addition F – the interpretation of Mordecai’s dream from the first Addition and the colophon at the end (Greek Esther 11:1).

Points of Significance

1. The filling out of the story and the inclusion of the role God plays in it, as compared to canonical Esther.
2. It is Esther’s faithfulness, not her courage, that is celebrated in Greek Esther.
3. Tie to the festival of Purim and the meaning of the Hebrew term. Purim is celebrated on 14 and 15 Adar, the last month of the Jewish calendar, which falls in early Spring. This year, Purim is celebrated near the end of this month, Thurs & Fri, Feb. 25th & 26th.

One of the traditions of Purim is the reading of the entirety of canonical Esther through the whole first night of the festival. Makes for a VERY drowsy first full day of the festival!

Another tradition is the giving of small gifts of food to each other, especially kreplach (small pasta triangles filled with ground beef or

chicken) and “hamantaschen” (small triangular pastries made with a filling of dates or other fruit preserves and poppy seeds).

CONCLUSION / WRAP-UP of the SERIES

- Reminder of the scope of the series: Apocryphal books included in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) *recognized as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church*.
 - Tobit & Judith, historical fiction / novellas
 - Wisdom (of Solomon) and Sirach, wisdom literature
 - 1 & 2 Maccabees, histories
 - Greek Additions to canonical Esther and canonical Daniel
 - The only material we didn't consider in this series that is part of the Roman Catholic Bible, simply because we didn't have time, is that associated with the Prophet Jeremiah: Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah (*brief words here about these*)
- There are other Apocryphal books that you can explore that are recognized as canonical in the Greek and Slavonic Bibles or that appear in appendices in these and in the Latin Vulgate. But, again, I felt these were outside the scope of what would be useful to us in worship. These would make for good studies by those interested in exploring this further.

- The sermon Title, “Not So Hidden After All” provides a good guide to wrapping this series up.
 - These books are really well-known and are not “hidden” in the sense of “mystery” or “intrigue” nor in the sense of “secretive” or “intentionally deceptive”.
 - They're “hidden” because they don't fit in our Protestant tradition. (*Recall the elements of Reformation, the Masoretic Text, and Martin Luther's decisions re: canonicity for reasons of ecclesial politics.*)
- Close with a review of the principles of canonicity:
 1. Authoritative source: as close to an “eyewitness” as possible
 2. Soundness of doctrine
 3. How widespread a text's use in Christian formation, i.e., how influential it was in shaping the community of faith
- These books' inclusion in the Septuagint is supported by all three of the above criteria ***for its time and place***. While they will never meet these criteria for Protestantism, they do continue to be of value to us in understanding more of our Judeo-Christian heritage and faith.

And who knows, maybe the living Word of God can speak through them to us anyway, regardless of whether we deem them canonical or not.

Let us pray...