

The book of Esther has stymied biblical historians. They can't say for sure when it was written. And although historians have widely believed that the king in this story, Ahasuerus, is really Xerxes, it's not certain.

Seemingly absurd things happen in the story for reasons that aren't explained.

And, to quote my seminary professor, the one line of the book worthy of a sermon was in last week's reading – perhaps you have come to this position for just such a time as this. So I found myself a bit stymied as to what to preach this week.

If you missed last week, Haman is the bad guy in the story. After Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, Haman gets the king to send out an edict to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jews.

In the last part of the story, Esther does go to the king. She gets him to throw a little party and invite Haman.

Well, as you can see the tables turned. Haman is found out. The king executes him on the gallows Haman built for Mordecai.

There is a grand reversal from grief to joy. And of course, if we've paid any attention at all, we know that's kind of how God works.

Lifting up the lowly – in this case Esther and Mordecai and the Jews – and bringing down the mighty – Haman.

It's also a story of some extraordinary coincidences that readers are to see not just as coincidences, but God at work in and through the characters in the story. That will preach, too.

But from there the story loses me.

After Haman is executed, Esther and Mordecai get the king to issue an edict that the Jews were to be allowed to seek revenge on their enemies. In all the towns and provinces of the empire the Jews assembled and began to kill. According to the story, they killed 75,000 of the people they considered enemies.

And that's where I decide, OK – I'm going to join the many scholars who don't believe this story of Esther describes a historical event.

Something that comes up in commentaries as evidence to support that belief is the repeated exaggerations in the story. They're what make the Jewish Purim plays so raucous

and funny. It's also what makes those Purim plays easily worked into satire targeting more current events.

So let's look at the exaggerations. First, there's the six-month party King Ahasuerus threw at the beginning. There's no mention of what was being celebrated, but six months of partying is ridiculous for anything.

Then, for a relatively minor infraction – failing to bow down and honor Haman – he not only wants to kill Mordecai, but all of the Jews...presumably some who did in fact bow down to Haman.

And, in order to get the King to order this done, he offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver! One source said this was roughly 2/3 of the total cost to finance the empire for a year.

Then, Haman constructs a pole, or gallows on which to execute Mordecai. It was 50 cubits high. That's 75 feet!

And then, the Jews are allowed to kill all their enemies – and they kill 75,000 people! And this in a time when honestly the Jews were not being particularly persecuted. The Persians were in fact pretty accepting of the different cultures and ethnicities of those living in the empire.

And, there is no historical evidence that this actually happened. That's another clue that this may well be something other than the account of an historical event.

As I was puzzling with what to preach, it struck me that the exaggerations might not be just a side part of the story – maybe they were actually the point. And if so, what point is being made?

When I started down this path, I ran across a fascinating analysis by a Dr. Stephen Cook, a professor at the University of Sydney in Australia.

He listed all the exaggerations and absurdities of the story and concluded it was satire. He's not the only scholar who does that. But he went further to try to discern what the target of the satire was.

The gist of his argument is that when satire is written, the author usually tries to at least thinly disguise the real target behind something else.

There is other precedent for this in the Bible. Jonah is also likely satire.

Some of the apocalyptic writing does something similar. For example, the story in the book of Daniel is set in Babylon, the evil empire. But the real target of the apocalyptic visions of Daniel's time was Antiochus Epiphanes IV of the Seleucid Empire years after Babylon.

Likewise, Revelation also depicts Babylon as the evil empire, but really the target is Rome and Caesar.

Dr. Cook's theory is that the real target of the satire in Esther was Alexander the Great. Ostensibly set in Persia, Cook traced through evidence that Persia in the story was really the Greek empire, and Ahasuerus was really Alexander the Great.

OK, fascinating as that was I'm not going to go through all that here.

But nonetheless I am persuaded by his article and other things I've learned over the years that Esther is probably satire.

Now, that doesn't have to take away from what has come to be the central message of Esther...Esther's courage and willingness to risk her life to save her people.

It doesn't take away one of the most treasured lines in the Old Testament – perhaps you have come to where you are for just such a time as this. That all still powerfully tells a story about God's work through Esther in a surprising way.

But viewing it as satire gives us a bit more of an anchor for the rest of the story.

If the original target of the satire was Alexander the Great, our response would probably be meh...so what. Alexander the Great literally never comes up in my day-to-day life or thought processes.

But the beauty of satire is that it is layered. And it can be transported across time to a new target. Or to a timeless target.

So if we were to view it as satire in our own time, what might it be satirizing?

King Ahasuerus could represent any powerful ruler whose arrogance, self-centeredness, and foolishness make him dangerous.

But what mostly catches my eye is the over-the-top violence. So, here's how that might work as satire.

First, Haman, after a relatively minor slight, sets a plan in motion to achieve a massive slaughter of all the Jews in the Empire on a given day.

Foiled, he is gruesomely executed on a ridiculously tall gallows.

And then, in retaliation, the Jews kill 75,000 people.

And that's the punch line for us – because satire tells the truth in a different way than fact.

And the truth is that kind of violence does happen. It's happened in Palestine in the present day. It's happened in other wars where inexplicable violence is inflicted that far outweighs any kind of military objective. It's happened when actions go against the best human attempts to put boundaries on war.

As satire Esther invites us to see that this tit for tat violence only escalates into something that is impossible to control...it preys on something in us that wants to see pain inflicted on those we perceive as enemies.

Through the eyes of satire, we are forced to confront how ludicrous our attachment to violence is as a way to solve problems.

Ok so maybe you think I'm all wet with this idea.

But this story still is an invitation to read scripture critically. We could read this and say, well God must condone this massive violence as long as it's against the so-called right people and not our people.

We don't even have to leave the Old Testament to find plenty to contradict that.

But as Christians, we especially can't read it that way. When Jesus said to turn the other cheek, it was exactly that sort of retaliatory violence he was speaking against.

Our Lutheran way of reading scripture is to read it all through the lens of Christ and the cross.

And really the whole message of the cross is a condemnation of violence. The message of the cross tells us that human love for violence is what put Jesus on the cross.

The message of the cross is that what defeats for good violence and death is not more violence. Instead, it's self-giving love.