

Esther Resources

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The Book of Esther: An Introduction

The book of Esther is so called because of the primary human character of the book. Its fascinating story¹ is revered by Jews and relished by both Jew and Gentile.

Esther is found among the "historical" books (Joshua-Esther) of the English Old Testament. It is the final book in this section because it is the latest chronologically.

The Jews actually placed Esther among the "Writings," the third section of the Hebrew Old Testament (the first two being the "Law" and the "Prophets"). More specifically, it was one of the five books known as the "Five Scrolls." These five were read by the Jews at special occasions.² The book of Esther was (and continues to be) read annually during the Feast of Purim, which falls between late-February and late-March.

The Author of the Book

The human author of the book of Esther is unknown. Names that have been suggested include Mordecai (based on 9:20), Ezra, and Nehemiah. Whoever the author, it is likely that he was a Jew living in Persia, for he seems to be intimately familiar with both Jewish and Persian life.

The Date of the Book

The events of the book of Esther took place during the Persian period (539-331 B.C.). More specifically, during the 10-year period from 483-473 B.C. (cf. 1:3 and 3:7) in the reign of the Persian king, Xerxes (his Greek name) or Ahasuerus (his Hebrew name), who reigned from 485-465 B.C.

Canonically, the events of Esther take place between Ezra 6 & 7.³

¹ "To say that the story of Esther is well told is an understatement. It is 'by any standards a brilliantly written story, to be savored—even chuckled over'" (Breneman, p. 288, citing J. G. McConville).

² The other four books were the Song of Solomon (read at Passover); Lamentations (read on the 9th of Ab, the commemoration of the fall of Jerusalem); Ecclesiastes (read at the Feast of Tabernacles); and Ruth (read at the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost).

³ See chart on page 70 of Walton (included at the end of this lesson). See also Benware (p. 129).

Based upon the fact that the reign of Xerxes had come to an end⁴ (1:1 and 10:2), the book could not have been written prior to 465 B.C. Based upon the intimate knowledge the author seemed to have of the events of the period, it is doubtful that the book was written very long after the time these events occurred. Since Susa was destroyed in 435 B.C. and there is no mention of this in the book, it has been surmised that the book had to have been written prior to this time. Most place the date of writing in the early fifth century B.C. This would make Esther one of the last of the Old Testament books.

The Place of the Book

The events of the book of Esther took place in the city that was home to the winter palace of the Persian empire, Susa (1:2), located in modern Iran. The Jews living there were among those who chose not to return to the Promised Land following the end of the Babylonian captivity.

The Purpose for the Book

The purpose for Esther appears to be the legitimization of the Feast of Purim. Since this feast was not prescribed in the Law (the same holds true for Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights), it may be that there were some Jews who questioned its observance.

⁴The reign of Xerxes came to an end in 465 B.C. with his assassination by his close advisors.

The Theme of the Book

The theme of Esther is the providence of God⁵, His placing of the right person at the right place at the right point in time for the right purpose. In the words of Esther 4:14, it is His placing someone in such a place as this at such a point in time as this for such a purpose as this. "More than any other biblical book, Esther is a tribute to the invisible providence of God" (Swindoll, p. 1). "God's providence is the driving force of the narrative. The author of Esther wanted his readers to see the mystery of God's hand in history" (Breneman, p. 295).

Though God's name is not mentioned⁶, He is at work behind the scenes, effecting the deliverance of His chosen people by preventing a wholesale holocaust, thus perpetuating their existence in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (see Genesis 12:2a and 17:2-6) and preserving the Messianic line. Jobes (p. 38) states in this regard: "The major theological point of Esther is that throughout history God fulfills his covenant promises through his providence."

⁵God's work of providence is to be distinguished from his work of miracles. Miracles are direct acts of primary causation, whereas providence involves indirect acts of secondary causation. Since God is just as much the source of providential acts as He is of miraculous acts, He is to be credited and glorified for the one as He is to be for the other. J. Sidlow Baxter (cited in Layton Talbert, "Esther, Part 2: Theology, Purpose, and Problems," *Frontline*, Nov/Dec 2007, p. 30) writes: "This mysterious reality which we call providence, this sovereign manipulation of all the ordinary, non-miraculous doings which make up the ordinary ongoing of human affairs, so as to bring about, by natural processes, those results which are divinely predetermined, is the mightiest of all miracles."

⁶The non-mention of God's name in the book does not mean His absence. "The *name* of God does not occur in the book but the *hand* of God is clearly manifested" (Geisler, p. 171). "Though God's name is nowhere to be found in this book, His fingerprints are everywhere" (Green, p. 82). "Though the main Actor is never mentioned, the eye of faith sees Him center stage. He dominates the drama. He has the lead role. In fact, God is not only the principal actor, but also the divine director and the sovereign screen writer. He wrote the script, though He doesn't appear in the credits. He gave the cues, though He never appeared on stage" (Green, p. 77). It may be that the author purposefully omitted God's name for effect, a classic case of "conspicuous by its absence." In other words, this omission may have been a device to draw the reader's attention to God's providential dealings in the book. As Layton Talbert ("Exploring the Book of Esther," *Frontline*, March/April 1994, p. 22) writes: "Whatever the *reason* for the omission of God's name, the certain *effect* is, ironically, to focus attention on God's activity by showing Him at work in the world and in behalf of His children—not through spectacular supernatural intervention—but through sovereign and providential ruling of common, everyday human events."

Canonical Questioning

Throughout history, the canonicity of Esther has been questioned by some (including Martin Luther⁷), thus making it one of the biblical books called the "antilegomena" (literally, "to speak against"). The reasons for this include the absence of the name of God⁸ (while the name of a pagan king is mentioned some 190 times); the fact that Esther is not quoted in the New Testament (though other Old Testament books are not either, such as Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, the Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Obadiah, and Nahum); the fact that Esther is the only Old Testament book not represented among the Dead Sea Scrolls; and the fact that the Feast of Purim is not found in the Pentateuch. None of these facts, however, are insurmountable. The simple fact of the matter is that Christ established the confines of the Old Testament canon (see Luke 11:50-51 and 24:44), which included Esther.

Outline

The following outline of the book of Esther is taken from Archer, p. 425.

- I. The feast of Ahasuerus and the divorce of Vashti (1:1-22)
- II. Choice of Esther as queen (2:1-23)
- III. Haman's plot to destroy Mordecai and the Jews (3:1-15)
- IV. Mordecai's persuasion of Esther to intervene (4:1-17)
- V. Esther's successful petition to the king (5:1-7:10)
- VI. Downfall of Haman and deliverance of the Jews (8:1-9:16)
- VII. Feast of Purim (9:17-32)
- VIII. Conclusion: the prominence of Mordecai the Jew (10:1-3)

⁷Luther (cited in Whitcomb, p. 20) once said: "I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees [an Apocryphal book], and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities."

⁸There is some debate as to whether or not the Song of Solomon is also devoid of the divine name. In an attempt to alleviate the dilemma of the omission of the divine name in Esther, the Apocrypha contains a 107-verse section, entitled *Additions to Esther*, which frequently mentions God by name, beginning with the words: "Then Mordecai said, God has done these things."

Esther 1

In Esther 1, the author of Esther recounts the events leading up to the deposing of Vashti as queen of Persia.

Verse 1

As mentioned in the Introductory Lesson, Xerxes (or Ahasuerus) ruled the Persian empire from 485-465 B.C. According to one source, he was 32 years old when he started his reign. His realm stretched from India (modern-day West Pakistan) to the East to Cush (modern-day southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia) to the West.⁹

Verse 2

As mentioned in the Introductory Lesson, Shushan (or Susa) was the winter palace of the Persian empire. The Hebrew word translated "palace" in the KJV may be understood as "citadel" (so NASB and NIV). Breneman (p. 304) describes it as "an 'acropolis or fortified area' raised above the rest of the city. The citadel fortress was a rectangular platform seventy-two feet above the general level of the city. It was surrounded by a huge wall two and a half miles long."

Verse 3

The reign of Xerxes began in 485 B.C. Thus, the third year of his reign places these events in 483 B.C.

The Hebrew word translated "feast" is, according to Whitcomb (p. 33), the word for drinking feast. This word is prominent in the book of Esther, appearing 20 times in the book (by comparison, it appears only 24 other times in the rest of the Old Testament). Most believe that the purpose for this feast was to share plans for an upcoming invasion of Greece, an invasion predicted by Daniel in Daniel 11:2 and well-attested in extrabiblical historical sources.

Notice that Persia is listed before Media, whereas in Daniel the order of the two is reversed. The reason for the switch is the fact that Persia had become the dominant force in the Medo-Persian empire.

⁹See map from p. 122 of the *Holman Book of Biblical Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions*, included at the end of this lesson.

Verse 4

It may not be that all who attended this feast did so for the entire 180 days. Layton Talbert ("Esther, Part 1: Setting, Structure, and Themes," *Frontline*, Sept./Oct. 2007, p. 30) calls it a six-month open house.

Verse 7

According to Jewish tradition, the vessels used were those removed from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar over 100 years earlier (see Ezra 1:7-8 and Daniel 5:1-3).

Verses 10-11

The Hebrew words translated "the heart of the king was merry" can describe one who is drunk (Judges 16:25, 1 Samuel 25:36, 2 Samuel 13:28) or one who is not (Judges 19:6-9, Ruth 3:7, 1 Kings 21:7). The former is obviously the case here. Accordingly, Bush (p. 339) translates "lightheaded with wine" (cf. NIV's "in high spirits from wine"). Such intoxication impaired the king's judgment, leading Henry (p. 1124) to quip: "When the wine is in the wit is out."

Jobes (p. 76) points out the significance of Xerxes' decision: "With his one decision to display Vashti at his war council, Xerxes sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in the deliverance of God's people, fulfilling the promise of the ancient covenant made ages before in a faraway place" (cf. comments under "The Theme of the Book" in the Introductory Lesson).

Verse 12

Though the king reigned over the then-known world (verse 1), he did not reign over his own wife. Is Vashti to be commended for maintaining her dignity or condemned for her disobedience?

Verse 13

Based on the phrase, "which knew the times," some interpreters suggest that the wise men of Persia, like those of Egypt (Genesis 41:8, 24), Babylon (Daniel 2:2f), and the time of Christ (Matthew 2:1f), were into astrology and the like.¹⁰

¹⁰Jobes (p. 78) writes: "These wise men understood 'the times'; that is, they used astrology and other forms of divination to discern the propitious course of action." C. A. Moore (cited in Bush, p. 350) calls them "court astrologers." Bush himself (p. 350) disagrees with this assessment.

Verses 17-18

Bush (p. 355) perceptively points out how their eventual decision actually brought about the very thing they were trying to prevent: "Their decision to demand honor from their wives by an empire-wide edict would have actually achieved ... the dissemination of the very rumors about Vashti's actions and the king's embarrassment that they feared and sought to quash."

Verse 19

A Medo-Persian law could not be altered (see also Daniel 6:8, 12, 15). However, a superseding law could be crafted (see Esther 8).

Not only was Vashti deposed from her position as queen, but (by implication) also divorced by Xerxes. According to Jewish tradition, she was eventually executed.

Verse 22

The Persian empire was known for its postal system, one somewhat similar to the Pony Express of the American West.

Esther 2

In Esther 2, we are told how a young Jewish girl becomes the new queen, as well as how an attempt to assassinate King Xerxes is thwarted.

Verses 1-4

After returning from his defeat at the hands of the Greeks, the thoughts of Xerxes once again turned to marriage. Fearing the repercussions should Xerxes remarry and reinstate Vashti (assuming she is still living), the king's counselors advise him to seek out a new queen, as they had previously advised (see 1:19).

Verses 5-6

There is some debate as to the antecedent of the "who" at the start of verse 6. Grammatically, it seems to be Mordecai. However, this would make Mordecai over 100 years old at the time, with Esther not far behind. The antecedent is most likely Kish.

Many are of the opinion that Mordecai was named after the Babylonian god, Marduk. This would be consistent with the Babylonian ancestry of Mordecai, as indicated by the fact that his ancestor, Kish had been taken captive to Babylon. It may be that Mordecai was given this name in order to cause him to forget his Jewish name (whatever it may have been) and heritage (cf. the Babylonian names given to Daniel and the three Hebrew children in Daniel 1:6-7).

Verse 7

Hadassah, Esther's Jewish name, means "myrtle." Esther is Persian for "star." Many are of the opinion that the name, Esther comes from the name of a Babylonian goddess named Ishtar.

Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, adopts Esther. According to Whitcomb (p. 49), Mordecai was 41 at this time and Esther 26.

Verse 8

The passive voice of the verbs in this verse, translated "were gathered together" and "was brought," appear to imply that these women, including Esther, were taken against their will.

Verse 10

"Why he swore her to silence remains an unanswered enigma" (Huey, p. 806). It may be because Mordecai was already aware of the anti-Semitism in Persia that would come to the fore in 3:6.

This brings up the issue of the spiritual condition of both Mordecai and Esther,¹¹ as some suggest that their concealing of their Jewish identity was less than commendable (contrast their silence with Daniel's stand in Daniel 1:8 and 6:10). Were they even believers? If so, were they spiritual?

Though both Mordecai and Esther acted nobly at times, there are some questions regarding their spirituality. Most commentators cast them in a negative light. "The Christian judgment of the Book of Esther has been unnecessarily cramped through our feeling that because Mordecai is a Bible character, he must be a good man" (J. Stafford Wright, cited in Huey, p. 786). "The book . . . neither praises nor recommends their actions or behavior, but simply relates what took place without blame or approval" (C. F. Keil, cited in Huey, p. 786). Jobes (p. 21) writes: "The astute reader sees a disquieting moral ambiguity, at best, in the way Esther and Mordecai are portrayed." Benware (p. 135) adds: "These two do not seem to be sterling examples of spirituality." Martin (p. 701) calls them "disobedient people" and adds: "God protected and used Esther and Mordecai in spite of the fact that they were not living according to the Law" (p. 704). Whitcomb (p. 22) states: "There seems to be no evidence that Mordecai or Esther harbored any desire to relate to the heart of God's theocratic program" and concludes that they were unbelievers (p. 26). Lewis Bayles Paton (cited in Huey, p. 785) bluntly concludes: "There is not one noble character in this book."

It is interesting to note how the apocryphal *Additions to Esther* seeks to alleviate this tension by explicitly commending their character.

Leland Ryken (cited in Jobes, p. 98) sees a positive progression in Esther's character, from being a person of "weak character" to one with "heroic moral stature." Layton Talbert ("Esther, Part 2: Theology, Purpose, and Problems," *Frontline*, Nov./Dec. 2007, pp. 31-32) and Breneman are among those with a more favorable opinion. The latter (p. 297) writes: "In the characters of Esther and Mordecai we find examples of how to live the obedient life. Like Joseph and Daniel in foreign courts, so Esther and Mordecai were obedient to God's direction and plan. Esther was a model disciple of God we should imitate. She

¹¹One may want to consult an M.Div. thesis written by Carl Baker in 1977 for Grace Theological Seminary entitled "An Investigation of the Spirituality of Esther."

constantly did the right thing, made the right decision, and said the right words. Esther embodied faith." The commendation of Mordecai that concludes the book (10:3) is an argument for admiring, rather than assailing, his character.

Verses 12-16

It appears from these verses that Esther, who had earlier joined the harem of Xerxes (verse 8), had sexual relations with him (the phrase, "to go in unto" in verse 15 is a Hebrew euphemism for such relations; see Genesis 16:2, 29:21, 23, Ruth 4:13, 2 Samuel 11:4, 16:21, 22). However, it may be surmised (see comments on verse 8) that she did not do so willingly.

Notice that it was the seventh year of the reign of Xerxes when this took place (v. 16). Thus, as many as five years had passed since the deposing of Vashti. As mentioned previously (see comments on 1:3), extrabiblical historical records confirm that during much of this time Xerxes was engaged in a war with Greece.

Verse 19

The fact that Mordecai "sat in the king's gate" is an indication that he held some sort of official position in the administration of Xerxes (see Genesis 19:1 and Deuteronomy 21:19). Like Joseph, Nehemiah, and Daniel, so Mordecai and Esther were Jews who became part of a Gentile administration.

Verses 21-23

It may be that these two "chamberlains" were among Xerxes' bodyguards, which, according to Breneman (p. 304), number 14,000 soldiers.

Though this attempt on the king's life was thwarted, Xerxes eventually was assassinated by some of his close advisors in 465 B.C.

The fact that Mordecai's heroics were recorded, though not yet rewarded, is of great significance, as shall be seen in chapter 6. This is not unlike what happened with Joseph in Genesis 40 and 41.

Esther 3

In Esther 3, Haman, an official in the administration of King Xerxes, out of spite convinces Xerxes to pass a law authorizing the annihilation of the Jewish people.

Verse 1

Based on how the previous chapter concludes, with Mordecai saving the life of the king, one would expect this chapter to commence with Mordecai, rather than Haman, being promoted. With Henry (p. 1128) we also ask: "I wonder what the king saw in Haman ...?"

The fact that Haman was an Agagite is significant. Based upon an archaeological discovery showing that Agag was the name of a province in the Persian empire, it may be that Haman was a native of this area. Another possibility is that this alludes to Haman's ancestry, thus accounting for the animosity/ethnic enmity he had toward the Jews (3:5-6, 5:9). Agag was the royal title (much like Pharaoh was for the king of Egypt) given to the king of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were the first to seek to destroy Israel once it became a nation (Exodus 17). You may recall that Saul failed to utterly destroy the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. Huey (p. 811) suggests: "The author may be informing the reader subtly that the ancient feud between the Amalekites and the Israelites has been inherited by Haman, a descendent of Agag, and Mordecai, a descendant of Saul."

Verses 2-3

Bowing down to or showing reverence toward political leaders was not uncommon in that time and place, in most cases amounting to nothing more than mere political protocol.

It is interesting that Xerxes found it necessary to make this practice a law as far as Haman was concerned. Baldwin (p. 72) suggests that perhaps Haman was so despised that no one would do so willingly; thus, they had to be compelled to do so by law.

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow? Verse 4 seems to indicate that it was because Mordecai was a Jew. Breneman (p. 327) suggests that such obeisance was considered by the Persian culture to be an act that bordered on worship. Thus,

Mordecai's refusal to bow was religiously motivated, a keeping of the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:5). This is reason given in the apocryphal *Additions to Esther*. Others have suggested that his refusal to bow was racially motivated, an instance of his nationalistic spirit shining through.

Verse 4

It appears that this is the first time that Mordecai reveals his Jewish identity (cf. 2:10, 20).

Verse 5

Interestingly, the name, Haman sounds much like the Hebrew word for wrath.

Verse 6

This is a classic case of overkill if ever there was one (cf. Herod's attempt to do much the same in Matthew 2:16-18). Throughout their history, the Jews have been the object of many such attempted pogroms/ethnic cleansings/genocides.

Remember that the Persian empire stretched as far west as Egypt, thus enveloping the land of Palestine.¹² Furthermore, as Bush (p. 387) reminds us, "there is no possibility of escape within the Persian empire, for it effectively comprises the known world." The perpetuation of the Jews as a people, and with it the fulfillment of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of the coming Jewish Messiah, was truly at stake.

Verse 7

Nisan is the Jewish month that corresponds to our March-April. The twelfth year of Xerxes is 474 B.C.

Here we have the first mention of the "Pur," the Babylonian word for "lot." According to Wood (p. 409), it comes from the Assyrian word, *puru*, meaning "pebble" or "small stone." Jobes (p. 122) describes such as "clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots that look almost identical to modern dice." The casting of lots was practiced in biblical days, being a means of divine revelation (Acts 1:26). Its practice takes on special significance in the book of Esther, for it was the casting of the lot that determined the doomsday

¹²See map of the Persian empire, included with notes on chapter 1.

date upon which Haman's diabolical plot was to be carried out (see 3:13). As mentioned under "The Purpose for the Book" in the Introductory Lesson, the book of Esther explains the origin of the Jewish Feast of Purim ("purim" is the plural form of "pur"). Though this lot casting was apparently done by the Persian wise men (see 1:13 and comments on) as a superstitious act to find the "lucky day" upon which to annihilate the Jews, God overruled. As Wood (p. 409) writes: "Further providential influence is seen in the result of the lot casting. It was cast in the first month of Ahasuerus' twelfth year, and the lot selected the twelfth month, giving ample time for the new order permitting the Jews to retaliate" (Wood, p. 409). This is a great example of the proverb, "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing [decision] thereof is of the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33).

Verse 8

The only Persian law that we know was not kept by the Jews was Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to Haman; thus, Haman's claim that "neither keep they the king's laws" appears to be an exaggerated one.

Verse 9

Is Haman offering the king a bribe? Ten thousand talents of silver is equivalent to over 300 tons, multiplied millions of dollars today. Several (such as Green, p. 91) claim that this amount was equivalent to two-thirds of the annual income of the entire Persian empire. It may be surmised that Haman would generate such revenue from the spoil taken from the Jews (see verse 13).

Verses 10-11

Xerxes is giving Haman the "power of attorney" in this matter by giving him his ring (cf. Pharaoh's doing of the same with Joseph in Genesis 41:42). Rather than being signed, official documents would be authorized by being imprinted with the king's ring (see verse 12). Xerxes also grants Haman all the monetary and human resources he needs.

Verse 12

The Jews could not miss the irony of the fact that this law was signed on the thirteenth day of the first month, the day before Passover. Whereas Passover celebrated the deliverance of the Jews, this law was seeking their destruction.

Verse 15

See comments on 1:22 on the Persian postal system.

While Xerxes and Haman callously caroused, the populace was perplexed. The Hebrew verb translated "perplexed" indicates "a highly agitated, bewildered, and tumultuous state" (Bush, p. 383).

Esther 4

In Esther 4, Mordecai exhorts Esther to risk her life by interceding on behalf of her people. After some coaxing, Esther consents.

Verses 1-3

The tearing of one's clothes, the wearing of sackcloth (an uncomfortable garment made of goat or camel hair), the sprinkling of ashes on one's head, fasting, and wailing were common expressions of grief in the Ancient Near East (see, for example, Jonah 3:5-9).

Verse 4

Esther sends Mordecai a change of clothes so he can enter the palace (cf. verse 2) and tell her directly the reason for his mourning.

Verse 8

Mordecai no longer wants Esther to keep her ethnic identity a secret (cf. 2:10 and 20).

Verse 11

Esther reminds Mordecai of the grave consequences she potentially faced should she heed his advice. Those allowed to come into the king's presence uninvited were few (see 1:14).

Verses 13-14

Green (p. 98) calls these verses "the pivotal text and central message of the story."

In these verses, Mordecai's reply is "Try or die."

The words of verse 14 have been taken by many as an expression of Mordecai's faith in the Abrahamic covenant (see Genesis 12:1-3). Henry (p. 1133) claims: "This was the language of a strong faith." Knowing that this covenant had yet to be fulfilled, Mordecai was confident that the "rumors of the Jews' coming

demise were greatly exaggerated." In other words, it was not a matter of whether or not God would deliver the Jews, only through whom. Another way of looking at this verse is suggested by Bush (p. 397), who interprets Mordecai's words as "a positive rhetorical question expressing a strong negation," translating (p. 390): "For, if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will not arise for the Jews from any other quarter." In other words, "Esther, you're our only hope."

Mordecai's statement at the end of verse fourteen is an affirmation of the fact that God in His providence places the right people in the right place at the right point in time for the right purpose.

Verse 16

While Xerxes and Haman were feasting (3:15), the Jews were fasting. It is reasonable to assume that the fasting was accompanied by intercessory prayer. Before Esther sought the king's face, the Jews sought the King's face.

Geisler (p. 174) calls Esther's decision "an act of unparalleled courage." "This suggests that Esther had a genuine faith in God" (Breneman, p. 337). Obedience was her concern; the outcome was God's. Her words are reminiscent of Jacob's in Genesis 43:14.

Esther 5

In Esther 5, Esther risks her life by appearing before Xerxes uninvited.¹³ Xerxes extends to her his golden scepter, sparing her life and allowing her to make her request. Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet, at which she requests their presence at a second banquet the next day. Because of Mordecai's continued refusal to bow before him, Haman plots Mordecai's execution.

Verse 2

In keeping with Proverbs 21:1, it is safe to surmise that God moved upon the heart of Xerxes at this momentous moment (cf. 4:11).

Jobes (p. 147) sees in the golden scepter a picture of the Cross: "This scene pictures a gracious act of a king who holds life-and-death power. Had God not extended the cross of Jesus Christ to the world, all would die in his presence. 'On the third day' [5:1] after the final judgment transpired on the cross, Jesus Christ arose to imperishable life, guaranteeing safety to enter God's presence to all who reach out in faith to touch that cross-shaped scepter."

Verse 3

The expression, "to the half of the kingdom" (cf. v. 6, 7:2, and Mark 6:23) is not to be taken literally. It is an idiom that expresses a strong desire to grant what is being requested. "It simply meant that the king was disposed to be generous in meeting a request" (Jobes, pp. 144-145). Henry (p. 1136) calls it "a proverbial expression, by which he assured her that he would deny her nothing in reason."

Verse 4

Why didn't Esther make her request known to the king right then and there? Breneman (p. 340) suggests lack of privacy as the reason. Perhaps this is a case of "woman's intuition," Esther realizing that the timing was not right. "She undoubtedly realized that it was not a psychologically propitious moment" (Huey, p. 819). Commenting on Esther's strategy, Geisler (p. 174) says that

¹³Jobes (p. 144) perceptively points out: "In chapter 1, Vashti risked her life by refusing to appear before Xerxes when summoned (1:12) ... Esther now risks her life by appearing before the same king unsummoned (cf. 4:11)."

Esther was "working on the premise that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

Verses 6-8

Why didn't Esther make her request known at the first banquet? Wright (p. 374) suggests that her courage failed her. Perhaps she once again intuited that the timing wasn't right? Whatever the reason, God in His providence used it to cause the one-day delay that gave time for the magnification of Mordecai to take place in chapter 6.

Verse 9

The expression, "glad heart" is equivalent to "merry heart" in 1:10. Unlike Xerxes in 1:10, it is not certain that Haman was intoxicated (see comments on 1:10), though wine had been served at the banquet (see v. 6).

Notice how quickly Haman's happiness turns to hostility, indicative of the fact that the problem with happiness is that it is too often based on happenings.

Verse 10

According to Huey (p. 820), "Zeresh" is Persian for "golden" or "one with disheveled hair." I suspect that Zeresh told her friends it was the former ☺.

Verse 11

We learn in 9:7-10 that Haman had ten sons. In the Ancient Near East, the number of children one had was indicative of God's blessing (Psalm 127:3-5).

Verse 13

As in verse 9, Haman's happiness is held hostage by his hatred.

Verse 14

A cubit is approximately 18 inches long; thus, 50 cubits is approximately 75 feet high. The word translated "gallows" is literally "tree," leading some (for example, Martin, p. 708) to believe that Haman had a wooden stake built upon which to impale Mordecai. Its excessive height was likely indicative of Haman's hubris/haughtiness. "Haman wanted the people to see his victory over Mordecai" (Breneman, p. 342).

Esther 6

In Esther 6, the plot begins to turn, as the king is reminded of Mordecai's heroics five years earlier. Haman unwittingly advises the king how to honor Mordecai and is given the responsibility of doing so. Haman's wife and advisers warn him that these sudden turn of events are ominous.

Verse 1

Why couldn't Xerxes sleep? Was it wonder over what Esther's request might be? Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that his insomnia was divinely influenced.¹⁴ As a cure for it, Xerxes asked that he be read to sleep with the chronicles of his reign. "A modern counterpart might be the *Congressional Record*, which would be an excellent antidote for insomnia" (Whitcomb, p. 88).

This is the turning point of the book, which Breneman (p. 288) shows by the following structural analysis:

- A Opening and background (chap. 1)
- B The king's first decree (chaps. 2-3)
- C The clash between Haman and Mordecai (chaps. 4-5)
- D "On that 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)

Verse 2

Remember that it is now the twelfth year of the reign of Xerxes (3:7), so there were twelve years worth of records available to be read. Amazingly, the reader "just so happened"¹⁵ to select the portion chronicling the seventh year of the reign of Xerxes, during which time Mordecai saved the king's life (cf. 2:21-23)!

¹⁴Bush (p. 418) writes: "[Haman's] decision to speak to the king in the morning about having Mordecai hanged meets with a set of coincidences so remarkable that they can hardly be anything but the narrator's cipher [code language] for 'divinely arranged' (Clines, 307). Haman's plans are about to run head on into the providence of God."

¹⁵... [T]he king just happens to have a sleepless night. He just happens to have the chronicles of his reign read to him. The story of Mordecai's loyalty just happens to come to his attention at the same moment when Haman just happens to be plotting Mordecai's death" (Jobes, p. 152).

Verse 3

As mentioned in the comments on 2:21-23, the fact that Mordecai's deed at the time it happened was not rewarded (bureaucratic blunder is nothing new), though recorded, was highly providential, as its "better late than never" rewarding takes place at a most propitious point in time.

Verses 4-10

What delicious irony these verses!¹⁶

Perhaps Haman could not sleep either, anxious to execute Mordecai at the earliest possible moment (v. 4).

What got Haman hung was his hubris/haughtiness, on full display in verse 6.

The thud you just heard was Haman's jaw hitting the ground (v. 10).

Verse 11

Proverbs 16:18, Daniel 4:37, and Luke 14:11a in action. Hubris/haughtiness leads to humiliation.

Verse 12

To cover one's head was a sign of mourning and shame in the Ancient Near East (see, for example, 2 Samuel 15:30 and Jeremiah 14:4).

Verse 13

Though pagan Persians, Haman's wife and advisers seem to have understood the implications of the Abrahamic covenant (see Genesis 12:3) and/or of Balaam's prophecy (see Numbers 24:7, along with comments on 3:1), or at least spoke better than they knew how.

¹⁶Rightly does Jobes (p. 152) write that "this is arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible."

Esther 7

In Esther 7, Esther finally tells Xerxes what she wants, namely, that she and her people be spared the fatal fate that awaits them. Esther also reveals Haman's responsibility in the matter, causing the king to order Haman's execution on the very gallows Haman had built for Mordecai.

Verse 2

For an explanation of the phrase, "to the half of the kingdom," see comments on 5:3.

Verse 4

Esther's statement, "we are sold" is in reference to the exorbitant amount of money Haman agreed to pay Xerxes for permission to pursue the pogrom (see 3:9 and comments on; cf. 4:7).

If the Jews' liberty had been on the line, Esther would have remained silent, but since their lives were on the line, she did otherwise.

Huey (pp. 825-826) calls the last half of verse 4 "the most difficult clause in all the Book of Esther to translate" and adds: "No satisfactory translation has yet been found for this verse" (p. 827). The Hebrew literally reads: "although the enemy is not equal to the damage of the king" (Whitcomb, p. 94). The NASB translates: "for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king." In like manner, the NIV translates: "because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." In other words, if it was merely a matter of a loss of liberty, it would not be worth bothering the king over. Another suggestion is that offered by the NIV's alternative translation (similar to the KJV rendering): "but the compensation our adversary offers cannot be compared with the loss the king would suffer." In other words, Esther cannot remain silent because the loss of so many Jewish lives would result in a financial loss to the king so great that it would far exceed the financial gain being offered by Haman. "Whatever had been paid for us, the loss of so many industrious hands out of his kingdom would have been more damage to the treasury than the price would countervail" (Henry, p. 1142). Thus, Esther is shrewdly suggesting to Xerxes that preserving her people would be politically prudent for Persia.¹⁷

¹⁷"To persecute good people is as impolitic as it is impious ..." (Henry, p. 1142).

Verse 6

Green (p. 115) quips: "Haman's day had just gone from bad to worse." Bush (p. 432) envisions the scene: "One can almost see [Esther] emphasizing each sharp word with a stabbing finger pointing at Haman!"

Xerxes undoubtedly "put two and two together" at this point to conclude that Esther was part of the people that Haman had convinced him back in 3:8-11 to have destroyed, based on the fact that he now knows that Esther was part of a people destined to be destroyed (v. 4) and that Haman was the one who was seeking to bring this about (v. 6). If Xerxes knew who the specific people destined to be destroyed were, then he now knew that Esther was a Jew (Haman, knowing who the people were, now knows this). However, it may be that Xerxes did not yet know this. For one, Haman used the generic term, "people" when talking to the king in 3:8. Furthermore, Xerxes apparently knows that Mordecai, whom he also knows saved his life, is a Jew [6:10], yet doesn't appear to make the connection that this man, who had saved his life and is being honored by him for it, is also a man destined to be destroyed by the very law he had allowed Haman to write. If Esther revealed her ethnic identity to Xerxes in 7:3-4, then it is safe to assume that Xerxes did not know who the people destined to be destroyed were, else he would not have had to ask who it was that was seeking the destruction of the Jews, for he would have already known it was Haman. If Xerxes does not know that Esther is a Jew at this point, he almost certainly knows it by 8:1 and certainly by 8:3f.

Verse 7

Perhaps Xerxes was not only angry at Haman, but also at himself, seeing he was the one who had given Haman the authorization to author the law, as well as the human and monetary resources to carry it out (see 3:10-11 and comments on).¹⁸ Of course, at the time Xerxes did not realize the full implications of his actions.

How ironic that the one who had sought the lives of the Jews is now pleading to a Jew for his own life.

¹⁸"*Thou art the man*, might Esther too truly have said" [to Xerxes in verse 6] (Henry, p. 1142, emphasis his).

Verse 8

The "bed" was actually a couch. The Persians would recline on couches when they ate, as did Jews (see John 13:23).

How ironic that one so intent on having a Jew bow before him now falls down at the feet of a Jew.

Somewhat humorous is the claim of one of the Jewish Targumim¹⁹ that the angel Gabriel pushed Haman onto Esther's couch just as Xerxes was entering the room (Huey, p. 826).

The "word" that went out from the king's mouth was most likely the command to execute Haman.

Covering the face of one condemned to death was a common practice among the Greeks and Romans (Whitcomb, p. 97).

Verse 10

For a suggestion of what these "gallows" actually were, see comments on 5:14.

Talk about a classic case of "poetic justice!" This is a good illustration of the truth of Psalm 7:15-16 and Psalm 9:15-16. Haman had literally "dug his own grave."²⁰ It is also a fulfillment of one of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, that those who curse the Jews will be cursed (Genesis 12:3).

¹⁹A Targum was an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Old Testament.

²⁰William Hendriksen ("Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles" in *New Testament Commentary*, p. 294) tells of other such instances in subsequent human history: "Perillos of Athens, desiring to bake others to death by means of his 'metal bull' is himself baked to death in it. Hugues Aubriot, having built the Bastille for the imprisonment of others, is himself the first one to be confined in it. The bishop of Verdun, having invented the Iron Cage for the punishment of others is himself the first man to be shut up in it. And Rebert Morton is the first to lose his head to The Maiden (a kind of guillotine) which he himself devised for the decapitation of others."

Esther 8

In Esther 8, Esther requests that the law drafted by Haman be annulled. Though unable to do so, Xerxes does grant Esther and Mordecai the authority to craft a new law, allowing the Jews to legally defend themselves when the fateful day arrives.

Verse 1

Persian law allowed for the confiscation of a criminal's property (this was probably Jezebel's thinking in 1 Kings 21:7-16). How ironic that the one who had sought to confiscate the property of the Jews (3:13) had his property confiscated and given to a Jew (cf. 8:2b). Commenting on this reversal, Swindoll (p. 75) states: "The king's heart had changed from one that gave the Jews into Haman's hands to one that gave Haman's estate into the hands of the Jews."

Mordecai's coming before the king (cf. 1:14) implies a promotion (see 2:19 and comments on) to a position of greater prominence in the Persian government. From what follows, it may be surmised that Mordecai replaces Haman as prime minister of Persia (compare 3:1 with 10:3).

Verse 2

Another reversal, as Mordecai is given the same powerful privilege previously given to Haman (see 3:10 and comments on). This chapter is one full of reversals, as the following chart from Jobes (p. 156) points out:

3:10—the king gives Haman his ring
8:2—the king gives Mordecai the same ring

3:12—Haman summons the king's scribes
8:9—Mordecai summons the king's scribes

3:12—letters written, sealed with ring
8:10—letters written, sealed with same ring

3:13—the Jews, even women and children, to be killed on one day
8:11—the enemies, even women and children, to be killed on one day

3:14—Haman's decree publicly displayed as law
8:13—Mordecai's decree publicly displayed as law

3:15—couriers go out in haste
8:14—couriers go out in haste

3:15—the city of Susa is bewildered
8:15—the city of Susa rejoices

4:1—Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes
8:15—Mordecai wears royal robes

Verse 4

While some see this as another (cf. 5:2) instance of Esther risking her life by coming into the presence of the king unsummoned (see 4:11), others do not, such as Bush (p. 444): "Here the king's action of extending to her the royal scepter in v 4 is not an act of clemency as it is in 5:2, but rather a sign of favor and encouragement."

Verse 5

Interestingly, the Hebrew adjective translated "right" is *kasher*, from which we get our English word, "kosher."

Notice how Esther's suggestion is sprinkled with plenty of sugar. A lesson to be learned here: when a subordinate making a suggestion to a superior, seek to speak sweet speech.

The verb translated "reverse" is literally "to cause to return" (Huey, p. 829). Apparently, Esther was hoping that the previous law could be reversed/revoked/revoked/rescinded. However, Medo-Persian law would not allow for this (see 1:19 and comments on; cf. v. 8). "Instead of the initial decree being canceled and thus the people being given the impression that the king was guilty of making hasty decisions, a second and similarly unalterable decree had to be issued which in effect would cancel or overcome the effectiveness of the first one" (Whitcomb, p. 103).

Bush (p. 451) is among those who commend Esther for the way she lays the blame solely on Haman, thereby exonerating Xerxes of any culpability: "... [W]ith utmost tact she ... carefully conceals his complicity."

Verse 8

As he did with Haman in 3:10-11, so here Xerxes is giving Esther and Mordecai a blank check, giving them the authority to write a superseding law.

Verse 9

Trivia time: What is the longest verse in the Bible? This one.

Henry (p. 1146) makes a powerful point at this point: "Shall the subjects of an earthly prince have his decrees in a language they understand? and shall God's oracles and laws be locked up from his servants in an unknown tongue?"

Verses 10-11

The superseding law is written, sealed, and sent, giving the Jews the legal authorization to take whatever actions would be necessary to defend themselves against their adversaries on the appointed day.

There is some debate as to whether the women and children being referenced in verse 11 are Jewish women and children, who are among those being attacked (so NIV), or the women and children of those doing the attacking (so KJV and NASB). In light of the apparent parallelism between 3:13 and 8:11, the latter option seems preferable. This is in keeping with the corporate solidarity that was such a significant characteristic of ancient near eastern cultures (cf. Joshua 7:24-25).

Verse 14

Whitcomb (p. 107) sees a missionary application in this verse: "God's death sentence hangs over a sinful humanity, but He has also commanded us to hasten the message of salvation to every land (cf. Prov. 24:11). Only by a knowledge of, and a response to, the second decree of saving grace through the Lord Jesus Christ can the terrible effects of the first decree of universal condemnation for sin be averted."

Verses 15-17a

Yet another reversal (compare with Esther 4:1-3). Here is Psalm 30:11 in action (cf. Psalm 30:5b).

Verse 17b

There is some debate as to whether or not these Persian people became actual Jewish proselytes. Green (p. 120) suggests that they did not, but simply identified with the Jews. Bush (p. 436) similarly suggests that they simply professed to be Jews, adding (p. 449): "It is ... the dread of the superior political and military power now wielded by Mordecai and the Jewish community that prompts their profession."

The fearful response of the Gentiles here is similar to that of the people of Jericho in general and Rahab in particular in Joshua 2:9-11.

Esther 9

In Esther 9, the fateful day decreed by Xerxes through Haman finally arrives. However, having been given the legal right to defend themselves by Xerxes through Mordecai, the Jews rout those who seek their destruction. As a result of this great deliverance, the Feast of Purim is instituted.

Verse 1

The exact date is March 7, 473 B.C. Haman's decree was published on April 14, 474 B.C. (see 3:12). Mordecai's counter decree was published on June 25, 474 B.C. (see 8:9).

Here we have another reversal (cf. 8:2 and comments on). "This statement is the clearest example in the book of the principle of 'reversal' ... which the author has so effectively built into his story" (Bush, p. 463).

Verse 2

"To lay hand on" is to kill (see 2:21 and 3:6).

Verse 5

That the Jews "did what they would" (or as they pleased) is a reversal of 3:11.

Verse 10

It may be safely assumed that the sons of Haman sought to avenge their father's death, but to no avail.

Notice that the Jews did not confiscate the property of their enemies (see also 9:15 and 16), though they legally could have (see 8:11), unlike Haman, who no doubt would have (see 3:13). In doing so, they followed the example of Abraham in Genesis 14:21-24 (cf. Achan in Joshua 7 and Saul in 1 Samuel 15, who were forbidden to take spoil, but did).

Verse 13

Though some (such as Zondervan, p. 343: "There can be no excuse for Esther's vindictive request She shows herself to be a child of her age.") have accused Esther of "overkill" at this point, others have suggested that she

perhaps had uncovered a plot against the Jews that was to be carried out the next day.

Hanging Haman's sons upon the gallows, though they were already dead, was not unprecedented (see Deuteronomy 21:22 and 1 Samuel 31). In this case, it was likely intended to be a deterrent. See comments on 5:14 for an explanation of "the gallows."

Verse 16

Obviously, anti-Semitism in that day ran deep. Like Haman (7:10) and the men who sought the destruction of Daniel (Daniel 6:24), those who sought the destruction of the Jews were themselves destroyed, in keeping with a promise in the Abrahamic covenant (see Genesis 12:3).

Verse 21

In our calendar, these days fall anywhere between the end of February and the end of March.

Verse 22

Once again, we see the emphasis on reversal (cf. comments on 8:15-17a). Whereas before the Jews were fasting (4:16), now they are feasting; whereas before there was sorrow, now there is celebration; whereas before there was grief, now there are gifts.

Verse 25

The author of Esther is making use of a literary device known as "telescoping," that is, reporting events separated chronologically (see 7:9 and 9:14) as though they happened at the same time.

Verses 26-28

The author of Esther reveals his purpose for writing, namely, to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim. As Jobes (p. 213) puts it: "The author tells the story of Esther and Mordecai to say, 'See, this is why we celebrate Purim as we do.'"

The Jews celebrate the Feast of Purim to this day (see picture at conclusion of this lesson, taken from p. 210 of *A Living Lens: Photographs of Jewish Life from*

the Pages of the Forward).²¹ In fact, during this Feast, the book of Esther is read, accompanied by booing and hissing at the mention of Haman²² and cheering at the mention of Mordecai.

According to Huey (p. 838), the Jews eventually made the thirteenth day of Adar a day of fasting, calling it "Esther's fast" (see 4:16).

²¹“Today Jews around the world celebrate Purim on one day, Adar 14, except those living in one of the cities traditionally considered walled at the time of Joshua, which included Jerusalem, Hebron, and Jericho, where Purim is celebrated on Adar 15” (Jobes, p. 214).

²²“When Haman’s name is read from the scroll of Esther, it is met by a thunderous roar of clapping hands, stomping feet, booing, hissing and, at times, the grinding noise of groggers (hand-held noise makers made especially for drowning out Haman’s name).”

Esther 10

The book concludes with some passing observations in chapter 10, which, at three verses, is one of the shorter chapters in the Bible.

Verse 2

The question asked seems to be a veiled appeal to the book's veracity, perhaps in response to those who may have been questioning the legitimacy of the Feast of Purim (see "The Purpose for the Book" in the Introductory Lesson).

Verse 3

The political advancement of Mordecai the Jew in a pagan land is reminiscent of both Joseph (see Genesis 41:37-45) and Daniel (see Daniel 2:48, 5:29, and 6:1-3).

This final verse of the book appears to be a case of "having the last word" in the debate over the character of Mordecai (see comments on 2:10).

Esther review questions

1. Who is the primary human character of the book? Esther
2. Who is the ultimate character? God
3. At what Jewish feast is the book of Esther read annually? Purim
4. What is the purpose for the book of Esther? Legitimization of Feast of Purim
5. What is the theme of the book? The providence of God
6. Define God's providence. God putting the right people in the right place at the right point in time for the right purpose
7. How is God's work of providence different from his work of miracles? His work of miracles is His direct and immediate intervention into the time-space-mass continuum through primary causation, whereas providence is His direct and mediate intervention through secondary causation
8. Give examples of God's providence at work in the story of Esther.
 - Vashti is deposed as queen
 - Esther is selected as a contestant in the new queen contest
 - Esther wins the new queen contest
 - Mordecai's saving of the king's life, though recorded, is not at first rewarded
 - Lot casting results in date far enough away that the Jews have adequate time to prepare for defending themselves
 - God moves upon the heart of Xerxes to spare Esther's life
 - God causes Esther to ask for a day's delay before making her request
 - The king has insomnia
 - The king's servants just happen to read about Mordecai's deed
9. What is the key verse in the book? 4:14
10. What is perhaps the most striking omission in the book? God's name
11. What is the bigger picture perspective of the book? The perpetuation of the Jewish race in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, including the promise of the Messiah
12. Did Esther have physical relations with Xerxes in 2:15-16? Yes
13. Did she do so willingly? No (based on passive voice verbs in 2:8)
14. What were the gallows like that Haman had made? Wood pole for impaling
15. What is the turning point of the book? The king's insomnia
16. What got Haman hung? His hubris/haughtiness
17. Share some of the reversals that take place in the book
 - The one who sought the lives of the Jews pleads to a Jew for his own life
 - The one who was so intent on having a Jew bow before him falls at the feet of a Jew
 - The one who had sought the confiscation of the Jews' property has his property given to a Jew
 - Mordecai replaces Haman as prime minister of Persia
 - Mordecai is given the power of attorney previously given to Haman
 - Superceding law is written
 - City of Susa bewildered at end of chp. 3, then rejoicing end of chp. 8
 - Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes at start of chp. 4, royal robes at start of chp. 8
18. What verse in Esther is the longest in the Bible? 8:9