

## Bible Study: Esther

Author: Unknown

Audience: Israel

Date: ca. 470-425 B.C.

Location: Unknown

Theme: God's providential care for His people

Genre: narrative/prose

<b>Chronology of the Postexilic Period*</b>				
<b>Persian Kings</b>	<b>Reigned</b>	<b>Biblical Events</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Cyrus	559-530 B.C.	Edict of Cyrus for the return First return of exiles under Zerubbabel The altar and temple foundation built	Ezra 1:1-4 Ezra 2 Ezra 3:1-4:5	538 B.C. 538 536
Cambyses	530-522			
Smerdis	522			
Darius I	521-486	Haggai prophesied Zechariah prophesied The temple completed	Book of Haggai Book of Zechariah Ezra 5-6	520 520-518 515
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	485-465	Accusation against Judah Vashti deposed Esther became queen Haman's plot foiled	Ezra 4:6 Esther 1:19 Esther 2:17 Esther 3:7	486 482 478 474-473
Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)	464-424	The rebuilding of Jerusalem stopped Second return of exiles under Ezra Third return of exiles under Nehemiah Malachi prophesied Nehemiah's second return	Ezra 4:7-23 Ezra 7-10 Book of Nehemiah Book of Malachi Nehemiah 13:6	ca.464-458 458 444 450-430 (?) ca. 430

\*Based on Bible Knowledge Commentary entries for Ezra & Esther

### Outline

The Fall of Queen Vashti (1:1-22)

The Rise of Queen Esther (2:1-20)

Mordecai Saves the King (2:21-23)

Haman Plots against the Jews (3:1-15)

Mordecai Appeals to Esther (4:1-17)

Esther's Gambit: Banquet Intrigues (5:1-8)

Haman Plots against Mordecai (5:9-14)

Haman Must Honor Mordecai (6:1-14)

Esther's Plea for Her People (7:1-6)

Haman Executed on His Own Gallows (7:7-10)

Mordecai Foils Haman's Plot (8:1-17)

The Jews Destroy Their Enemies (9:1-19)

The Feast of Purim Instituted (9:20-32)

Mordecai's Greatness (10:1-3)

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### Definitions

A **miracle** “is something which nature, if left to its own resources, could not produce.”<sup>1</sup>

**Providence** refers to “that continuous activity of God whereby he makes all the events of the physical, mental, and moral realms work out for his purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

### Observation

1:3 Ahasuerus (Xerxes) held a great banquet in the third year of his reign (483 B.C.)

1:4 Ahasuerus displayed his great riches and splendor for 180 days

1:10 On the 7th day of yet another feast, Ahasuerus was drunk with wine (Prv 31:4-5)

1:11 Ahasuerus summoned Queen Vashti to display her great beauty to his guests

1:12 Vashti refused to be paraded before the king’s men as a trophy, decoration

1:19 Ahasuerus deposed Vashti and banished her from his presence (providence)

### Interpretation

When was the Book of Esther written?

An inscription from the time of Xerxes’ son Artaxerxes noted that the palace was destroyed by fire sometime in Artaxerxes’ reign. Reference in Esther 1:2 to this citadel has been confirmed by archeological work at Susa. An author from a later period probably would not have known about the palace so it can be inferred that the author of this book was someone who was close to the events chronologically.... The descriptions of the decor of the king’s palace garden (1:6-7) add to the feeling that the writer had firsthand knowledge of the setting and the occasion.<sup>3</sup>

Why is the name of God missing from this book?

Some Jews regarded Mordecai as the author, and the references in 9:20, 32 could suggest this. Much of the contents may have been inserted in the annals of the king, as mentioned in 10:2 and perhaps 6:1, and this would account for the omission of the name of God<sup>4</sup>

Why did Vashti refuse to obey the king (1:12)?

Vashti’s refusal is not explained by the author. There is no implication that the king wanted her to do anything immoral or to expose herself. Perhaps she simply did not wish to be in mixed company at that time. It has been suggested that if this queen was Amestris, perhaps she refused to go to the banquet because she was pregnant with Artaxerxes, who was born in 483.<sup>5</sup>

### Application

A sin to avoid: Getting intoxicated (1:10)

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<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, c1972).

<sup>2</sup>Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 1:702.

<sup>4</sup>D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary* (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962), 341.

<sup>5</sup>*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:702.

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### Observation

- 2:4 He decided to gather attractive maidens into his harem to find a new queen
- 2:5 Mordecai was a Jewish exile living at the citadel (stronghold) in Susa
- 2:7 He was raising his cousin Hadassah (myrtle), also called Esther (star)
- 2:7 When her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her (Isa 58:6-7)
- 2:10 Esther was taken to the palace but did not reveal her identity (providence)
- 2:11 Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court every day (anxious)
- 2:15 Esther won the favor of everyone; the chief eunuch helped her (providence)
- 2:16 Esther went to the king in the seventh year of his reign (479 B.C.)
- 2:17 Esther won the favor of the king, became the new queen (providence)
- 2:22 Mordecai foiled a plot to kill the king; his good deed was recorded (providence)
- 2:23 The king hung Bigthan and Teresh on a gallows (literally, tree)

### Interpretation

How could Mordecai have been taken into exile from Jerusalem (2:5-6)?

The author is alleged to be hopelessly in error in 2:5-6, when he describes Mordecai as having been taken captive in 597 BC. By this time he would have been over 120. On the principle that a translation that makes sense is preferable to one that makes nonsense, we may refer the word 'who' in v. 6 to Mordecai's great-grandfather, Kish, as the Hebrew allows us to do.<sup>6</sup>

What happened to the women when they went to see the king (2:14)?

Esther was not in a beauty contest simply to win the king's affections; the women were being prepared to have sexual relations with the king. This is suggested by the words "in the evening she would go there and in the morning return." After that they would be transferred to another harem, under Shaashgaz, which consisted of the concubines. Most of the women were relegated to living the rest of their lives in the harem of the concubines, many probably never again seeing the king.<sup>7</sup>

Why was Mordecai sitting at the king's gate (2:21)?

Sitting at the king's gate probably meant that Mordecai held an official position in the empire's judicial system. His position thus helped set the stage for the following events. This fact about Mordecai shows how he could have uncovered an assassination plot and how a feud started that threatened the entire Jewish nation.<sup>8</sup>

How were the two would-be assassins executed (2:23)?

Rather than being hanged by the neck on a modern-type gallows, the men were probably impaled on a stake or post (cf. Ezra 6:11). This was not an unusual method of execution in the Persian Empire. Darius, Xerxes' father, was known to have once impaled 3,000 men.<sup>9</sup>

### Application

An example to follow: Caring for needy relatives (2:7)

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<sup>6</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, 342.

<sup>7</sup>*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:704.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

### Observation

- 3:1 The king made Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Prime Minister (providence)  
3:2 Everyone was ordered to bow before Haman; Mordecai refused (Rev 19:10)  
3:6 Haman, filled with rage, plotted to destroy all the Jews in the empire  
3:7 In the 12th year of the king (474 BC), in the 1st month, Haman cast lots (*pur*)  
3:11 The king approved Haman's request without looking into the matter  
3:13 All the Jews were to die on the 13th day of the 12th month (providence)  
4:3 The Jews fasted; many mourned in sackcloth and ashes (2Ch 7:14)  
4:8 Mordecai asked Esther to plead with the king for mercy  
4:11 Esther objected; anyone who went to the king uninvited could die  
4:13 Mordecai argued that Esther's position would not protect her from evil  
4:14 He knew that deliverance would come; he saw God's hand working (faith)  
4:14 If Esther did not use her position to help, she would perish for her sin (faith)  
4:16 Esther agrees to try; everyone fasted for 3 days (her appearance changed)

### Interpretation

Who was Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite (3:1)? Josephus (*Antiquities* 11.209) makes him an Amalekite, presumably descended from Agag, whom Saul spared (1Sam. 15). Mordecai, who brought about Haman's fall, was, like Saul, descended from Kish (Est. 2:5; 1Sam. 9:1).<sup>10</sup> However, it seems unlikely that a high-ranking Persian official would be related to a west Semite who lived 600 years earlier. Archeologists have uncovered an inscription which indicates that Agag was also the name of a province in the Persian Empire. This probably explains why Haman was called an Agagite.<sup>11</sup>

Why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman (3:2)?

The obsequious homage of prostration, not entirely foreign to the manners of the East, had not been claimed by former viziers; but this minion required that all subordinate officers of the court should bow before him with their faces to the earth. But to Mordecai, it seemed that such an attitude of profound reverence was due only to God... Had the homage been a simple token of civil respect, Mordecai would not have refused it; but the Persian kings demanded a sort of adoration, which, it is well known, even the Greeks reckoned it degradation to express.<sup>12</sup>

### Application

- An error to avoid: Making important decisions without fully investigating them (3:11)  
An example to follow: Seeking God's help in a crisis through fasting and prayer (4:3)  
An example to follow: Mordecai had faith in God's promises and providence (4:14)

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<sup>10</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, 18.

<sup>11</sup>*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:705.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Jamieson, et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory*, Es 3:2.

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5:2 Esther goes to the king uninvited (John 15:13); he spares her life (providence)  
5:3 The king knows something is amiss; he asks Esther what she wants  
5:4 She invites Haman and the king to a banquet to draw the principle actors together  
5:8 Later, the king again asks Esther what she wants; Esther stalls for more time  
5:9 On his way home, Haman sees Mordecai still unwilling to bow; Haman is furious  
5: 13 Haman is obsessed with hatred toward Mordecai; nothing else matters to him  
5:14 He planned to execute Mordecai the very next morning when he sees the king  
5:14 He built a gallows 75 feet high, so everyone would see his triumph over Mordecai  
6:1 During the night, the king can't sleep; he reads the court chronicles (providence)  
6:3 He just happens to read about Mordecai and decides to reward him (providence)  
6:6 Haman enters to seek Mordecai's life; the king asks him to suggest a reward  
6:9 Haman spells out Mordecai's reward, thinking it will be his instead (irony)  
6: 10 The king orders Haman to honor Mordecai before everyone (providence)  
6:13 Haman returns home humiliated; his wife sees this as a bad omen (Prv 16:18)  
6:14 The king's eunuchs arrive to escort Haman to the second, fateful banquet

### Interpretation

What was a Persian banquet like (5:4)?

The Hebrew term is *mishteh*, which meant “an eating event either as a common meal or usually a special festive dinner, often including much drinking of wine” (Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*). Olearius, describing an entertainment at the Persian court, says, “The floor of the hall was covered with cotton cloth, which was covered with all sorts of fruits and sweetmeats in [bowls] of gold. With them was served up excellent Shiraz wine. After an hour's time, the sweetmeats were removed, to make way for the more substantial part of the entertainment, such as rice, boiled and roast mutton, etc. When the company had been at table an hour and a half, warm water was brought, in a [a vase-shaped pitcher] of gold, for washing; and grace being said, they began to retire without speaking a word, according to the custom of the country.”<sup>13</sup>

Why would a horse wear a royal crown (6:8)?

Because of the sentence structure and choice of words in the KJV rendering of our text—verse: “and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head,” some believe that the crown royal was set upon the head of Mordecai, but that is unlikely. Assyrian reliefs depict the practice of setting crown-like headdresses on horses, so it's more likely that the royal crest—or royal crown—was headdress that was put upon the horse, thereby denoting that the rider was on a horse that the king rode.<sup>14</sup>

### Application

An example to follow: Esther risked her life for her people (5:2)

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<sup>13</sup>*The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1995), Es 5:4.

<sup>14</sup>*Manners & Customs of the Bible*, (North Brunswick: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 298.

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7:2 The king again presses Queen Esther for her petition; he is not a patient man  
7:3 Knowing that Mordecai has been honored (7:9), Esther pleads for her people  
7:6 She exposes Haman's underhanded plot to the king; Haman is terrified (Prv 26:27)  
7:8 Haman falls on Esther's couch to beg for his life, but the servants cover his face  
7:9 The king orders Haman hanged (impaled) on his own enormous gallows (irony)  
8:1 The king gives Haman's estate to Esther; the plunderer has been plundered (irony)  
8:2 The king gives Mordecai his signet ring making him the Prime Minister (irony)  
8:3 Esther falls at the king's feet weeping and imploring him to stop Haman's plot  
8:8 The king directs Mordecai to issue new orders neutralizing Haman's plot  
8:9 New orders go out on the 23rd day of the 3rd month (2 months have passed)  
8:11 The Jews were permitted to defend themselves and plunder their enemies  
8:12 Mordecai designated the 13th day of the 12th month, foiling Haman's plot  
8:15 Mordecai wears a great crown; he occupies Daniel's former position (providence)  
8:17 Jews everywhere celebrate; many Gentiles convert out of fear (Isa 14:1)

### Interpretation

Why did the servants cover Haman's face (7:8)?

The import of this striking action is, that a criminal is unworthy any longer to look on the face of the king, and hence, when malefactors are consigned to their doom in Persia, the first thing is to cover the face with a veil or napkin.<sup>15</sup>

Were the dispatches sent via horses or camels (8:10)?

**KJV 8:10** by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries

**NKJV 8:10** by couriers on horseback, riding on royal horses bred from swift steeds

**NASB 8:10** by couriers on horses, riding on steeds sired by the royal stud

**My translation:** and he sent letters by the hand of swift horses [men] riding the royal courier-horses steeds sired by swift (Arabian?) studs.

Were the Jews permitted to kill the women and children of their enemies (8:11)?

It is important to note the NIV translation of v 11, which captures the sense, as opposed to the NEB, JB and GNB. There is no question about the first clause, permitting Jews to organize themselves; question arises over the object of the verbs destroy, kill and annihilate, quoted from 3:13, Haman's decree. There the object was 'all the Jews—young and old, women and little children', whereas Mordecai's decree made *any armed force ... that might attack them* the object. Permission was given to plunder property but even that was limited to the one specified day, which Haman had regarded as propitious. The Jews would be ready to retaliate if they were attacked, whereas Haman had intended that they should be slaughtered in cold blood.<sup>16</sup>

### Application

A sin to avoid: Haman plotted evil against innocent people, but God avenged (7:9)

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<sup>15</sup>A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, Es 7:8.

<sup>16</sup>D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Es 8:1.

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9:2 The Jews gathered together, attacked and defeated their enemies (providence)  
9:3 The Persian nobility helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai (providence)  
9:6 The Jews killed 500 of their enemies in the royal city of Susa on the first day  
9:10 The Jews killed Haman's 10 sons but took no plunder; not acting out of greed  
9:14 The king extended the order in Susa for another day and hanged Haman's 10 sons  
9:15 The Jews killed an additional 300 men in Susa on the fourteenth day of Adar  
9:16 The Jews killed 75,000 in the provinces but also took no plunder; not greedy  
9:22 Mordecai established the 14th and 15th of Adar as fixed holidays for his people  
9:26 These days are called Purim because Haman superstitiously cast lots called *pur*  
9:29 Queen Esther wrote to confirm the establishment of Purim as a fixed holiday  
10:2 Mordecai's greatness was recorded in the royal annals of the Persian Empire  
10:3 Mordecai used his position to help his people (providence)

### Interpretation

Was Esther vindictive by hanging dead bodies and requesting more slaughter (9:13)?  
The hanging of Haman's sons involved the public exposure of their bodies to shame the offenders and deter further attacks (9:13). Esther apparently learned of a plot against the Jews in Susa that was to be carried out on the following day, so she asked the king for an extension of the decree.<sup>17</sup>

Were the Jews justified in killing so many people (9:16)?

The enemies of the Jews brought this destruction on themselves by attacking innocent people. If the 75,000 deaths are divided by all 127 provinces of the vast Persian Empire, it represents an average of only 590 enemies per province, which seems low compared to millions of Jews that would have died if Haman had succeeded; ancient and modern dictators routinely killed far more than this in their political purges. God used this event to suppress the persecution of His people at a time when they were still scattered and militarily weak.

Who else has God raised from obscurity to glory besides Esther and Mordecai (10:3)?

Biblical examples include: Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, Jesus. Christians will also be raised in glory in the resurrection and rule with Christ for a thousand years.

### Application

An example to follow: Mordecai used his power for the benefit of others (10:3)

The overall lesson: God is in control and providentially cares for His people

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<sup>17</sup>*Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 184.