

The Book of Esther



A Self-Study Workbook by Nathan Combs

Introduction to Esther

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Author and Title

Like many OT books, Esther is an anonymous work. The only hints of its origin are the references it contains to some of the key events of the story being committed to writing in either official court records (2:23; 6:1) or edicts issued by the king or his representatives (3:12–15; 8:8–14). It is possible that the author was someone like Mordecai, who had access to such material and a keen interest in Jewish affairs. His familiarity with Persian customs of the time suggests that he lived not long after the events described.

However, certain features of the book have troubled both Jewish and Christian readers: it does not mention God, it promotes a festival not prescribed in the Law of Moses, and it has an apparently vindictive spirit that some have found offensive. As late as the Reformation, Martin Luther criticized it on the grounds that it was too aggressively Jewish and had no gospel content. Nevertheless, it was recognized as Scripture by the Jews well before the time of Christ—a long tradition clearly evident in Jewish writings just after the NT. For example, Josephus says that the Jewish Scriptures were written from the time of Moses “until Artaxerxes” (Against Apion 1.40–41), and elsewhere he identifies this Artaxerxes as “Ahasuerus” in the book of Esther (Jewish Antiquities 11.184). Therefore he apparently counts Esther as the last book to be written in the Jewish canon. And the Mishnah has an entire tractate (Megillah) that discusses the time and manner of reading Esther publicly on the Feast of Purim. The Jewish scholar Aquila included Esther in his translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek around A.D. 130. In the Christian church, Esther was listed among the books of the OT canon at the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 but was widely and perhaps universally accepted in the Western church before that time (though doubts about its canonicity had persisted among some in the Eastern church).

Date

Since the book of Esther is anonymous, it cannot be dated by the years of its author. However, it matches well the time period in which it is set (the reign of Ahasuerus, 486–464 B.C.); hence it is probably from this time or soon thereafter.

Theme

The book of Esther tells how a Jewish girl became the queen of Persia and saved her people from a plot to destroy them. She is assisted in this by Mordecai, her cousin and guardian. It also explains how a special festival, called Purim, was established to recall and celebrate the deliverance that the Jews had experienced.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

As its content makes clear, Esther was written to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim and to ensure that it would be observed by all future generations of the Jewish people (9:28). It is also clear that it has achieved this purpose, since Jews have continued to observe Purim to the present day, with the book of Esther being read as part of the festivities.

The word Purim is derived from the Persian word *pur* (“lot”) and recalls how Haman, the enemy of the Jews, cast lots to determine the best day to carry out his plan to exterminate them (3:7). Of all the Jewish festivals, Purim is the most secular in flavor, and one of the most joyful. These days it is normally celebrated on only one day, the fourteenth of Adar (in February/March), preceded by a day of fasting. Children are given gragers (rattles) so that, when the story of Esther is read, they can make a loud noise to drown out the name of the wicked Haman whenever it occurs. Other festivities include exchanging presents, giving food parcels to the poor, performing Purim plays, and wearing costumes. In Israel, a Purim carnival is held. It has become a celebration, not just of the deliverance experienced in the days of Esther and Mordecai, but of the amazing survival of the Jewish people for thousands of years in spite of persecution and hardship.

In terms of biblical history, Esther belongs to the period after the Babylonian exile, when Persia had replaced Babylon as the ruling power. The story is set in Susa, the Persian capital, during the reign of King Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes I (486–464 B.C.). Some Jews had returned to Jerusalem, where they enjoyed a reasonable amount of control over their own affairs as described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Others, like Esther and Mordecai, were still in exile. As a minority group, the Jews were viewed with suspicion and sometimes faced threats to their existence from people in a position to harm them. In this respect Esther and Mordecai’s situation was similar to that of Daniel and his friends a century or so earlier.

Apart from the book of Esther itself, the main sources of information about Persia in the relevant period are the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 485–425 B.C.) and a limited amount of relevant archaeological evidence from Susa and elsewhere. Esther herself is not mentioned in these sources, and Herodotus gives the name of Xerxes’ wife as Amestris. However, Xerxes may have had more than one wife, and it was Esther who was of special interest to the biblical author. In other respects the details of the book agree with what is known of the period from other sources (e.g., see notes on 1:1; 1:2–3; 1:4; 2:5; 2:6; 2:7; 2:15; 2:16; 2:18).

Relevance for Christians Today

Esther is part of a much larger story that runs all the way from Abraham to Christ and, through him, to the church. If Haman had succeeded, the Jewish people as a whole would have been destroyed, and the story of God’s saving work in and through Abraham’s descendants would have come to an end. There would have been no fulfillment in Christ, and therefore no gospel and no Christian church. Nothing less than that was at stake. That is why Christians should read the book of Esther, not just as a story about the Jews but as part of their own heritage. It is because of this fundamental connection between God’s purposes in the OT

and NT that Christians are to value and learn from the whole Bible as the Word of God (see 1 Cor. 10:11). This side of the cross, Jews and Gentiles have been made one new people in Christ (Eph. 2:11–16). Christians are not obliged to observe the Feast of Purim, but they are to take to heart the truth that God providentially watches over his own, and that no power leveled against them can ultimately prevail (Rom. 8:28).

Sadly, the evil of anti-Semitism still exists, and it would be foolish to think that Christians are immune from it. The history of the church indicates otherwise, and, as part of the Christian Canon, the book of Esther still warns against it. But the only real solution to it is the gospel, and the transformation God brings about in the hearts of those who believe it. That is a beginning, however, not an end, and Christians are called to live in a world with some striking resemblances to the one Esther and Mordecai lived in. Governing authorities are often indifferent and sometimes even hostile to the faith of believers, and especially in the West, events often take their normal course with little or no evidence of the miraculous. But the book of Esther, like the NT, teaches how to live in that world with courage and integrity, carrying out responsibilities to the best of one's ability and trusting God in his providence to protect and provide.

History of Salvation Summary

For each following generation of Jews, the book of Esther answers the question, “How is it that we are still here?” by pointing to God's often hidden purpose. In the larger story of the Canon, it shows how God has preserved the offspring of Abraham for his purpose of bringing blessing to the whole world through them by raising up the Messiah and by including Gentile believers in his people. Thus Gentile Christians own this as their story too. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.)

Literary Features

The book of Esther is a story par excellence. It has virtually all the ingredients that people through the ages have most loved in a story—a beautiful and courageous heroine, a romantic love thread, a dire threat to the good characters, a thoroughly evil villain, suspense, dramatic irony, evocative descriptions of exotic places, sudden reversal of action, poetic justice, and a happy ending.

The specific type of story represented by the book of Esther is hero story, as the action is constructed around the engaging central figure of a heroine whose Persian name Esther means “star.” But the story is also a patriotic story of national history—a rescue story in which a whole nation is delivered from destruction. The U-shaped descent into potential tragedy and ascent to a happy ending is a plot pattern known as comedy.

The heroine Esther is a developing character, not a character who displays admirable qualities right from the start. In her early days in the harem, she fits right in with the pagan lifestyle that prevails among the young women who spend a whole year beautifying themselves in a spa. People in the harem do not even know that Esther is a religious person. She has two names, hinting at the identity crisis that she undergoes when she rises to the highest level of Persian society. But Esther becomes heroic when she is transformed by the ordeal

of needing to save her nation. There is satire (the exposure of vice or folly) in the book, focused especially on the character of Haman, who is both narcissistic and vengeful.

The Persian Empire at the Time of Esther (c. 479 B.C.)

Long before Esther's time, the people of Israel and Judah (later called Jews) had been dispersed throughout the Near East by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Eventually the Persians absorbed nearly all of these lands into their empire, which reached its greatest extent during the time of Esther. Thus Haman's plot to exterminate all Jews throughout the Persian Empire would have annihilated virtually all of the Jewish people, and Esther's daring actions saved them from complete destruction.



Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–2:23)
 - A. Queen Vashti’s downfall (1:1–22)
 - B. Esther’s rise to the throne (2:1–18)
 - C. Mordecai’s success in foiling a plot against the king (2:19–23)
- II. Main Action (3:1–9:19)
 - A. Haman plots to kill the Jews (3:1–15)
 - B. Mordecai and Esther plan to save their people (4:1–17)
 - C. Esther is favorably received by the king and prepares to expose Haman (5:1–8)
 - D. Haman prepares to hang Mordecai (5:9–14)
 - E. Mordecai is honored and Haman is humiliated (6:1–13)
 - F. Esther brings about Haman’s destruction (6:14–7:10)
 - G. Esther wins the right of the Jews to defend themselves (8:1–17)
 - H. The Jews completely destroy their enemies (9:1–19)
- III. Conclusion (9:20–10:3)
 - A. The establishment of the Feast of Purim (9:20–32)
 - B. Mordecai’s high rank and beneficent rule (10:1–3)

Schedule of Classes

Date of Class	Material to Cover
4/5/17	Introduction to Book
4/12/17	Chapter 1: The King Discards His Wife
4/19/17	Chapter 2: The King’s New Woman
4/26/17	Chapter 3: Haman Hatches His Plot
5/3/17	Chapter 4: Esther’s and Mordecai’s Counterplot
5/10/17	Chapter 5: The First Feast
5/17/17	Chapter 6: Mordecai Is Honored By His Enemy
5/24/17	Chapter 7: The Second Feast
5/31/17	Chapter 8: The Order Is Reversed
6/7/17	Chapters 9-10: The Jews Slaughter and Celebrate

Chronology in Esther
(Events unfold over period of 10 years)

Reference	Event	Month	Day	Year of Ahasuerus' Reign	Year
1:3	Ahasuerus holds banquets			3	483 B.C.
2:16	Esther goes to Ahasuerus	10		7	479 B.C.
3:7	Haman casts his lots	1		12	474 B.C.
3:12	Haman issues his decree	1	13	12	474 B.C.
3:13	Date planned for annihilation of Jews	12	13	13	473 B.C.
8:9	Mordecai issues his decree	3	23	13	473 B.C.
8:12; 9:1	Day upon which the Jews could defend themselves	12	13	13	473 B.C.
9:6-10, 20-22	Ten sons of Haman are executed; Feast of Purim celebrated	12	14, 15	13	473 B.C.

Introduction to Book: The First Class

Please answer the following questions to prepare you for class discussion:

- 1) Read through the book of Esther, preferably in one sitting.
 - a) What are some interesting or unusual characteristics you notice about this book, the characters within it, or the way in which the narrative is told to us?
 - b) What are the big ideas or themes communicated in this book? What major messages did God want His people to understand as they struggled under the reign of the Persians? In other words, why is the book of Esther in the Bible?

- 2) From what you can read in the book, what was it like to be a Jew living in the Persian kingdom of Ahasuerus (a.k.a. Xerxes)? Was it a stressful or secure time? How so?

Chapter 1: The King Discards His Wife

Write additional notes here:

1. From looking at the text of chapter 1, what are your first impressions of king Ahasuerus? What kind of man is he?
2. What is the purpose of this great feast, how long did it last, and who came to it? Also, explain the meaning of the king's edict.
3. Why did Ahasuerus want Vashti to come to him and why did he make this decision?
4. What attitudes about women do you see in the king and his officials?
5. What's ironic about the king issuing a public edict that Vashti should never come to him again?
6. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 2: The King's New Woman

Write additional notes here:

1. What plan do the king's young men come up with? Describe what would happen to the women involved?
2. What are your first impressions of Mordecai and Esther? How are we introduced to them?
3. Do you see any similarities or contrasts between Daniel and Esther?
4. What do the people around Esther think of her? Who does she please?
5. Although the name of God is not mentioned, what evidence of His hand do you see in the text?
6. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 3: Haman Hatches His Plot

Write additional notes here:

1. What is the significance of Haman's family? Why are we told that he's an Agagite?
2. What insight do we gain into the character of Haman when we examine this chapter?
3. What were the factors that caused Haman to create his plot?
4. What are the details of Haman's wicked plan? How does he cleverly entice the king to do as he wishes?
5. How long does it take to prepare everyone who's responsible for carrying out the king's edict?
6. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 4: Esther's and Mordecai's Counterplot

Write additional notes here:

1. Mordecai responds to the edict by tearing his clothing and putting on sackcloth and ashes. What is the significance of this and what other Bible characters did the same thing?
2. What clues do we get about the kind of relationship between Ahasuerus and Esther?
3. Why does Esther initially refuse to speak to the king?
4. How does Mordecai persuade Esther to go in to the king and petition him?
5. How has Esther's behavior changed from earlier parts of the book?
6. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 5: The First Feast

Write additional notes here:

1. Why are we told that Esther put on her royal robes before she went to see the king?
2. Why didn't Esther petition the king when she went into the throne room? Does she display cowardice or does she have a strategy in mind?
3. How is king Ahasuerus portrayed in this chapter?
4. What further insight do we gain into the character of Haman?
5. Hanging on a "gallows" is mentioned several times in this book. If your Bible has marginal notes, check them to see alternate translations of this word. Record your observations.
6. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 6: Mordecai Is Honored By His Enemy

Write additional notes here:

1. The events of Chapter 6 is the central point of the structure of the book - the earlier parts of Esther build toward it and the passages after build away from it. What does that tell you about the main message of the book and the characters in Esther?
2. How do you see the hand of God working in this chapter?
3. What is Haman's great flaw in this chapter? What are some Proverbs that warn against his behavior?
4. Does vs. 13 sound like another passage in the New Testament?
5. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 7: The Second Feast

Write additional notes here:

1. How does the text present Esther to us in this chapter? Hint: notice what she is repeatedly called in this chapter as opposed to earlier chapters.
2. How does the queen argue her case to the king? What arguments and tactics does she use?
3. What does Esther (wisely) not mention in her petition?
4. What ironic details do you see in this chapter?
5. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapter 8: The Order Is Reversed

Write additional notes here:

1. What reversals do you see in this chapter?
2. How does Esther convince the king to “revoke” the previous edict?
3. How is the destruction of the Jews averted in this chapter?
4. How do the various populations groups in Persia react to the news of the new edict?
5. What applications do you see for your own life in this chapter?

Chapters 9-10: The Jews Slaughter and Celebrate

Write additional notes here:

1. How did the Jews act on their appointed defense day? How many people did they kill in total?
2. What were the requests of Queen Esther in chapter 9?
3. What were Mordecai's instructions to the Jews about the Feast of Purim?
4. What lessons do we see about God in these chapters?
5. What applications do you see for your own life in these chapters?