



# ESTHER

## Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

Fall 2006

### Introduction

#### Name & Location

The book is titled Esther in both the Hebrew and the English/Greek bibles. In the English edition, Esther is considered one of the historical books and is located after Nehemiah as would be proper chronologically.

In the Hebrew bible, Esther is the final book of the Megilloth (or the Scrolls). Each of the books in this section is read at a different Jewish festival. Esther is read during the festival of Purim.

#### The Festival of Purim

Purim is one of only two Jewish holidays which was not established in the Torah (Hanukkah being the other). Purim has a carnival like atmosphere, with much drinking and carousing. While Esther is read in the synagogue, it is traditionally accompanied by boisterous reactions by the congregants as they “boo” whenever the name of Haman is read. Purim is a “feast of reversals,” as Esther is filled with abrupt reversals of fortune. As a result, people dress in masquerade, including cross-dressing, to emphasize the role reversals found in Esther. The wearing of costumes also reminds us that Esther hid her heritage.

#### Reversals of Fortune in Esther

- A queen deposed while a Jewish orphan becomes queen.
- A prime minister is hung on gallows intended for his enemy
- A minor court official (Mordecai) is supposed to be hung but is made prime minister
- The Jews are about to be slaughtered and end up slaughtering thousands

#### Date & Author

The author is anonymous. There are two primary dates given to the writing of Esther. One shortly after the events (4<sup>th</sup> century BC) and one much later (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC). There is about equal evidence for both datings.

The events of Esther takes place during the exile of the Jews in Persia under the reign Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in scripture). This is nearly 50 years after King Cyrus’s proclamation allowing the Jews to return to their homeland.

#### Purpose

- To explain the historical background to the feast of Purim (Esther 9:20-32).
- To assure the Jews that God was still involved in their protection even while in exile.
- To teach God’s providential care for the Jews even if they ignored him.

#### Structure

The Queen Deposed	Esther Becomes Queen	Haman's Plot Against the Jews	Esther Learns of the Plot	Esther Throws a Banquet	Haman Forced to Honor Mordecai	Esther Reveals Haman's Plot	Mordecai Promoted. Proclamation Issued	Jews Defend Themselves	Mordecai Praised by the King
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

## The Story

### The Queen Deposed (Chapter 1)

After a 6 month long party, in which the king is showing off his wealth and power, he decides to show off another example of his greatness by commanding the queen to present herself and her beauty to the party guests. The queen refuses the request. We do not know why Vashti refused. There is nothing in the text that suggests that there was anything sexual in the king's request, so it was not a moral issue. She may have not wanted to be considered just another of the king's possessions. Nonetheless, the king is humiliated, and so that the example of Vashti doesn't inspire rebellion in households throughout the empire, the queen is removed from her position as queen.

### Esther Becomes Queen (Chapter 2)

The king's advisers suggest an empire wide contest to find a new queen. Mordecai, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin suggests that his ward, Esther, enter the contest. She does so, gaining the favor of the eunuch in charge of the concubines. However, she does so by hiding her Jewish heritage.

The contestants go through a 12 month beauty treatment and training session. Then each contestant is given one night with the king to demonstrate her beauty and skill at pleasing the king. There is no mistaking that the contest is based purely how much the king enjoys having sex with them, for after their one night with the king, the contestants are moved from the house of the virgins to the house of the concubines.

Esther, this young Jewish woman, has been prepared in the Persian way for 12 months. Contrast Esther's training in the king's court with Daniel's training in Daniel 1. In the midst of his training, he keeps the Torah and wins the favor by his courageous acts of faith. Esther wins her favor by blending in and hiding whatever faith she might have.

Esther spends her one night with the king demonstrating to him her sexual skills. The king is evidently pleased, for he makes her his queen. So here is our story's heroine. Esther wins the favor of the king through her moral character or her deep devotion to God. She wins the favor of the king by violating the Torah, hiding her heritage, and being the best at pleasing the king sexually.

Meanwhile, our hero Mordecai has been encouraging and providing advice to his niece as to how to win this contest. Good old uncle Mordecai has sold his niece into sexual slavery for the king.

### Haman's Plot Against the Jews (Chapter 3)

Haman becomes the king's prime minister. Mordecai, however, refuses to bow down before Haman. Mordecai's refusal, however, is not a statement of faith. Mordecai was not avoiding idolatry, but was deliberately snubbing Haman.

The profound hatred between Mordecai and Haman is not just a political rivalry, but a long standing blood feud between their two peoples<sup>1</sup>. In 1 Samuel 15, King Saul was commanded by God through Samuel to destroy the Agagites. However, Saul failed to do so, and as a result of his disobedience, God took the kingdom from Saul. Mordecai is an Benjamite, the same tribe as Saul. Haman is an Agagite.

All of the problems of the Jews in the book of Esther stem from Mordecai's hatred and disrespect for Haman<sup>2</sup>. If Mordecai had shown proper respect to the prime minister, then Haman would have no reason to annihilate the Jews and Esther would have had no reason to come before the king.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Davis. "Ruth." *Genesis Through Song of Solomon*. class notes. Multnomah Biblical Seminary, Fall 2003.

<sup>2</sup> F. B. Huey Jr. "Ruth." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998).

The crises of Esther are not due to unfair persecution resulting from the profound faith of God's people, but is a result of the sinful pride of Mordecai, a long standing hatred of the Benjamites for the Agagites, and the willingness of Esther to marry a Gentile.

### **Esther Learns of the Plot (Chapter 4)**

Haman, with the king's blessing, issues a command that all the Jews are to be slaughtered and their property taken. Mordecai tells Esther of the plot and tells her that she must confront the king and get his help in this critical issue. But, according to Persian law, Esther can not approach the king unless the king calls for her. To do so would be to put her life into jeopardy. Esther is therefore hesitant to go before the king.

Mordecai tells Esther, though, that if she doesn't go before the king, she will not escape the upcoming slaughter. Why would Esther be slaughtered if no one in the court knows she is a Jew? This is actually a threat that Mordecai is making. If she does not go to the king, Mordecai is going to reveal that she is a Jew. In essence he is blackmailing Esther into going before the king.

Esther, therefore, decides to talk to the king, not because of her great courage, but because either way she is going to die. If she remains quiet Mordecai will reveal her heritage and she will be subject to Haman's genocide. If she speaks up, the king can have her killed for coming without being summoned. Her resignation is made obvious in her comment in 4:16: "if I perish, I perish."

### **Esther Throws a Banquet (Chapter 5)**

Esther goes to the king, and the king graciously agrees to see her rather than have her killed. However, rather than bring up the issue at this point, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet.

Meanwhile, Haman is becoming even more enraged at Mordecai's disrespect, and he builds a 50 foot tall gallows to execute Mordecai.

### **Haman Forced to Honor Mordecai (Chapter 6)**

One day, the king is unable to sleep and he just so happens to pick up a chronicle in which it is revealed that Mordecai once saved the king's life by revealing a plot against him. The king decides to honor Mordecai. So, in one of the greatest ironic moments in the bible, the king asks Haman how best to honor someone who has been such a great help to the king. Haman, thinking the king is referring to him, suggests a big parade and a grand announcement. The king likes the idea and tells Haman to lead the parade honoring Mordecai. This further infuriates Haman's hatred of Mordecai.

### **Esther Reveals Haman's Plot (Chapter 7)**

Meanwhile, Esther throws a large banquet for Haman and the King. At that banquet, Esther gets the king a little drunk and gets him to promise to do whatever she asks. She reveals to the king that Haman has plotted against her and her people. The king becomes greatly angry and commands that Haman be hung on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai.

### **Mordecai Promoted. Proclamation Issued (Chapter 8)**

Mordecai is then promoted to Haman's position as prime minister. However, neither Mordecai nor the king are able to revoke Haman's plot against the Jews. Persian law prevented a king from revoking a command. So instead, Mordecai suggests that the Jews be given the right to defend themselves when the day comes for them to be slaughtered. The king agrees and the proclamation is issued.

### **Jews Defend Themselves (Chapter 9)**

When the day comes, the Jews indeed defend themselves, slaughtering over 75,000. At the end of the slaughter, Esther and Mordecai institute a festival to celebrate the deliverance of the Jewish people. This celebration becomes the festival of Purim.

## Mordecai Praised by the King (Chapter 10)

The book ends with the King praising Mordecai.

### The Challenge of Esther

Esther presents a challenge for the reader. It is, at first glance, a secular book, with no references to God or spirituality. This has troubled both Jews and Christians through the centuries, leading to apocryphal manuscripts of Esther where prayers and spiritual explanations have been added to the text. Other scholars have found the name of God (YHWH) hidden in as acrostics in four related verses. However, these acrostics do not seem intentional and were discovered only as people searched in vain for some mention of God within the book.

Furthermore, the main characters are not even of high moral character.

Esther becomes a concubine and wins her position as queen due to her ability to please the king sexually. Esther hid her Jewish heritage in order to become a queen. She married a foreigner, as is against the Torah. When Haman pleads for mercy, Esther demands not only his life but the life of his family.

Mordecai encourages Esther to hide her identity. He arrogantly refuses to show honor to the Prime Minister. He promotes the slaughter of thousands at the hand of the Jews.

We must remember that just because people are in the bible, that does not mean they are intended to be heroes. Samson, Jehu, Gideon and others are other recorded in the bible not as people to emulate but as negative examples. Furthermore, just because both Esther and Mordecai end up in positions of power and are thus able to deliver their people does not justify their behavior or demonstrate that their actions were within God's will.

F.B. Huey asks the question this way:

*Should Esther have refused to marry a pagan Gentile? If she had, could not God have found another way to deliver his people? If Esther and Mordecai had forgiven their enemies instead of demanding vengeance, would God have been pleased and protected his people?*

Huey continues by proposing the real message behind the book of Esther:

*Its real message may prove to be that God's people are prone to use the same means as ungodly people for achieving their goals rather than taking a bold step of faith that God will work out his purposes without human initiative, least of all resorting to immoral acts in a crisis situation.*

### Conclusion

Throughout the book of Ruth, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz refer to the providence of Yahweh. Ruth doesn't just, perchance, happen upon Boaz's field, but is directed there by divine providence. Naomi declares this when Ruth tells her that she came upon Boaz's field, for Naomi says, "Yahweh has not withdrawn his kindness to the living" (Ruth 2:20). Boaz acknowledges Yahweh's providence, for he declares, "...Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."

But was it not really Boaz's wings under which Ruth sought refuge? Was it really God who directed Ruth to Boaz's field? After all, Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, the home town of her husband. Furthermore this was actually a very small village. Of course they would find a relative there. It would be more of a surprise if they hadn't found a relative in their small home town.

And yet, this minor coincidence is seen in Ruth to be a great miracle of divine providence and as an event orchestrated by the God of Israel as part of his master plan to deliver all of Israel.

Meanwhile, in the book of Esther, we see the orchestration of God and miraculous divine appointments throughout. God raises a young Jewish girl to the position of queen. God places this girl at just the right spot and the right time to save His people. The king miraculously can't sleep and happens upon the chronicle telling of Mordecai's loyalty to the King. We see the hand of God behind the scenes all through Esther. And yet, there is no acknowledgment or even hint of awareness of this fact by any of the characters in Esther.

The contrast between these two books is stark. In Ruth, God is seen as the author of events which seem common place, local, and not that unlikely. But in Esther, where the circumstances are far more fantastic, global, and miraculous, no one is even aware that it is God behind the events.

How do we perceive the providence of God? Do we see God directing even the mundane events of our lives? Do we thank him for the small ways in which he directs, provides and protects? Or, do we ignore his divine providence even when circumstances are clearly caused by Him and obviously no mere coincidence.

With God, there is no such thing as coincidence and chance. All things are ordained and directed by Him. God is amidst both the tragedy ("the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." Ruth 2:20), and the blessing ("Blessed be Yahweh who has not left you without a redeemer today..." Ruth 4:14). But amidst it all we have confidence that

*(Romans 8:28) And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

## Bibliography

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## Comparisons Between Ruth and Esther

Ruth	Esther
The Gentile woman marries into the Jewish royal line	The Jewish woman marries into a Gentile royal line
Ruth faces the death of her husband and father-in-law	Esther faces the death of her parents
Ruth is “adopted” by her mother-in-law	Esther is adopted by her uncle
Naomi encourages and advises Ruth on how to attract her husband	Mordecai encourages and advises Esther on how to attract her husband.
Ruth embraces the Jewish faith	Esther hides her Jewish faith
Ruth was previously married (widowed)	Ahasuerus was previously married (divorced)
Ruth marries a wealthy man	Esther marries a king
Ruth seeks help from Boaz	Esther seeks help from Ahasuerus
God’s providence results in deliverance	God’s providence results in deliverance
The characters acknowledge God’s providence	The character’s ignore God’s providence