

The Book of Esther

Israel, the Potter's Vessel Preserved

The Wrath of Man Will Praise God

Lesson 1 | Esther 1:1-21

OUTLINE:

- I. The Book's Theme: God's Providential Preservation of His Chosen People – the Jews
- II. The Primary Human Characters
 - A. Ahasuerus
 - B. Those Surrounding Ahasuerus

INTRODUCTION: What thoughts come to your mind when the book of Esther is mentioned?

- Perhaps you consider elements about the book of Esther itself.
 - That the timing of the book falls into the post-exilic period of Israel's history; it falls chronologically between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7.
 - That the book is the only book in the Old Testament where the whole story takes place outside of Israel, focusing on the "remnant" in the Persian Empire that had not returned to Israel under Zerubbabel. We may want to be critical of them for remaining behind, but Scripture never does. In fact, some of these who remained helped to fund Zerubbabel's excursion (Ezra 1:5-6).
 - That from the caves of Qumran, every book of the Old Testament was found except for the book of Esther.¹
 - That Esther is not quoted in the NT (other books also are not quoted)
 - That there is a longer version of Esther in the Septuagint (LXX) containing an additional hundred verses.
 - That Esther has a place within the Hebrew *Megilloth* (lit. "the scrolled story"); other books are part of the *Megilloth*, but the *Megilloth* is considered complete only with the book of Esther. It is the most prominent portion for Jews. One could miss other portions, but not Esther.
- Perhaps you consider elements within the book.
 - That the book is masterfully laid out in 12 literary sections (see Robert Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books*, ©2010, 188).
 - That the book omits the direct mention of God, and key features of Jewish life – the sabbath, the covenant, the Law, the Temple. Probably most intriguing about these omissions are that there are many natural places where each could have been inserted into the story (see Bell, 193-194). The "law" emphasized in this story is the allegedly irreversible law (1:9; 8:8) of the Medes and Persians (20 times), not the law

¹ Bolen, Todd. "Why No Esther in the Dead Sea Scrolls." *Bibleplaces.com Blog*, 3 May. 2012, <https://blog.bibleplaces.com/2012/05/why-no-esther-in-dead-sea-scrolls.html>

of God. Amazingly, the unthinkable happens – the irreversible law gets reversed (8:5-8).

- That the book has a somewhat kindred connection to the opening chapters of Exodus where the people of God find themselves under adverse circumstances under foreign rule in a foreign land.
- That the heroic characters make some choices that are not so spiritually heroic (i.e., the seemingly willing participation in intermarrying with a Persian king, the accommodation to immoral aspects of court life that would have been part of Esther's being considered, etc.). We are going to see the intermarriage issue rise in Ezra 9-10 and in Nehemiah 13; perhaps it was instigated in part by the seeming "success" of Esther's marriage.
- That these absences suggest the book is written in a way that reflects the views of the Jewish actors in the story. Perhaps they themselves are not thinking very much of God and of their spiritual heritage. They seem to esteem their ethnic and cultural heritage and their national identity; they seem to illustrate the historic ability of Jews to rise in unusual circumstances to positions of influence, and yet do not seem to be personally worshipful of God. "Their theocratic spirit . . . was weak" (E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, ©1989, 358).
- That the book highlights the degree to which Jews assimilated into the pagan culture prior to the exile and during it: "If immoral practices among the Israelites are found in the preexilic period (idolatry, adultery, lying, etc.,) why should anyone be surprised to find other expressions of ungodly conduct in the postexilic period (e.g. in Malachi)?" (F. B. Huey, Jr., "The Chronology of the Old Testament," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., Frank Gaebelin, ed., ©1988, 2:786).
- That the book highlights the kind of pragmatic thinking that led to the sins that eventuated in their exile.

These characters so greatly used of God do not appear to be Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – open faced, upfront worshippers of Jehovah.

" . . . the entire book should perhaps be seen as a subtle but powerful reminder that God's people sometimes fail to consult him prior to acting, do things that are contrary to His will, and consequently experience His displeasure by His silence" (Huey, 786).

- That the book helps us see how a Jew, lost in exile, perhaps born into exile and immersed in the only world he has ever known may come to trust God. It is very difficult to read the story without seeing the hand of God, even though it is never explicitly identified.
- That the book explains in vivid detail the origins of the Feast of Purim (lit. "lots"), the one main Jewish festival not found in the books of Moses

I. The Book's Theme: God's Providential Preservation of His Chosen People – the Jews

The theme of God's preservation of His people will be woven through our study. It may help at this point to hear the question raised by the unbeliever Mark Twain (1835-1910) after traveling through the Middle East:

“If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvellous fight in the world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. **What is the secret of his immortality?**²

The story of Esther is a memorable slice in the story of God's preservation of Israel. It is a story that all Jews know and cherish. In the most ironic turn, God, much as He had done when the Jews were in Egypt more than 1,000 years before, used their exile from the Land of Promise, as the means of preserving them.

“ . . . the expulsion of the Jews from their land, had paradoxically saved them from the fate that awaited other civilizations. For the Jews were exiled into survival. Once their homeland was lost, only the diaspora could save their identity. Thus, the diaspora became the essential condition for the preservation of their identity and creativity, which would have perished if they had stayed on to be massacred in Judea.”³

² “Concerning the Jews,” *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1898 (emphasis mine) - <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1898twain-jews.asp>.

³ Abba Eban (1915-2002), *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, ©1984, 95.

II. The Primary Human Characters

A notable feature of the book is the frequent, repeated use of names.

A. Ahasuerus⁴

Ahasuerus is mentioned 29 times by name and another 168 times as the “king” – ironically, the book that bears Esther’s name, perhaps should bear the name of the king. He appears more than 190 times in 167 verses.

The opening chapter of the book is a fascinating “prequel” that sets the stage for a series of events that begin to unfold roughly five-six years later.⁵ In that prequel, we are introduced to Xerxes / Ahasuerus in such a way as to be purposefully impressed (1:1-2):

¹ Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa.

1. His kingdom included modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, Libya and Arabia. He reigned from 486-465 B.C. He is the son of Darius I.
2. Millions of people from diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities gave their allegiance to this king. He was known as the Great King – the King of Kings – the only King over all the earth.
3. He was seated in the great Citadel at Susa (1:2) – the palace where Daniel was buried and the palace where his own son would one day be served by Nehemiah. Several times in the opening verses of Esther we’re told that Ahasuerus reigned and that he was sitting on his throne.
4. He has sufficient glory to display it lavishly before his rulers (1:4-9).

Feasting, banqueting, and drinking, to which we are introduced in Esther 1, will be a thread that appears frequently in the narrative. The word for feasting (*mishta*) occurs 20 times and at least ten banquets populate the book.

⁴ Xerxes is his Greek name; Ahasuerus is his Aramaic name.

⁵ Zerubbabel’s return (ca. 536); the Temple rebuilt (516), and the second return under Ezra to Jerusalem (458). The book of Esther falls in between the two ends. Esther mentions several helpful dates:

- 1:3—482 BC, Xerxes’ “open house” when Queen Vashti is deposed (3rd year of his reign)
- 2:16—478 BC, Xerxes makes Esther his queen (7th year of his reign)
- 3:7—473 BC, Haman hatches his genocidal plot against the Jews (12th year of Xerxes’ reign)

Herodotus, the Greek historian, captures the role that drinking played in Persian political affairs:

“They are very fond of wine, and drink it in large quantities. . . . It is also their general practice to deliberate upon affairs of weight when they are drunk; and then on the morrow, when they are sober, the decision to which they came the night before is put to them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act on it; if not, they set it aside. Sometimes, however, they are sober at their first deliberation, but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine.”⁶

5. He presides over 127 provinces, yet he cannot control his wife (1:10-12).

In addition, extrabiblical history also informs us between Esther 1 and 2, Xerxes initiated a massive military campaign against the Greeks in seeming retaliation for a defeat his father suffered at Marathon. (The feast in Esther 1 may have furnished opportunity to lay plans for this Greek campaign.) Xerxes’ initial military success on land at Thermopylae was followed by a stinging defeat by the Greeks in the famous sea battle at Salamis (480) and the famous land battle at Plataea (479). It was not until his return from this campaign that Xerxes turns his attention again to the issue of a queen.

Although the book of Esther spans about a decade of Xerxes’ rule (482-473), the narrator’s purpose is to develop the seemingly mundane and isolated events of a few select days as they relate to God’s people Israel.

B. Those Surrounding Ahasuerus

Three characters almost seem to vie for who plays second fiddle to the king. It may be that at some level all three are manipulators and opportunists. But two are from among the people of God. One is an archenemy. About all of them we will have much more to say as the story unfolds. We are not introduced to any of them in Esther 1.

1. Esther (we’ll save her for later)
2. Mordecai

Mordecai moves between anonymity and wild popularity, between quiet mover to public administrator. We know him as a man who displays deep grief, and yet who is used to bring great joy. We know him as a convicted man with the sentence of

⁶ Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 4 vols. trans. George Rawlinson, c. 1909, 1.133
<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/the-history-vol-1>

death upon him (5:14), and yet “by the end of the book has risen in rank to second place in the empire, has achieved greatness among his people, and has been recognized as the savior and benefactor of the Jews (10:3)” (Bell, 190).

3. Haman

A fascinating point of background concerns the identity of the Israelites’ enemy, Haman. He is described as an Agagite (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24), whereas his Jewish counterpart Mordecai is traced to Kish the Benjamite (2:5). These facts seemingly allude to the story of King Saul and his failure to slay Agag the Amalekite (1 Samuel 15:1ff). The Amalekites had long been under a divine curse for their inveterate opposition to the Israelites (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Due to Saul’s disobedience, the tension between the two peoples had never been resolved. Now in the post-exilic period the Lord shows the serious consequences (even for future generations) of disobedience.

4. His counselors

Intriguingly, in the story, the great king seems to do almost nothing on his own initiative. He almost at times appears more like a powerful pawn than an autocratic king. Haman, Mordecai, and Esther will appear as counsellors to the king; however, another band of counsellors surrounds him (1:13-14), and their counsel plays a critical role in the narrative. It is they who counsel the king to punish Vashti in such a way that other ladies will also be admonished (1:19-20).

C. Vashti (1:11-20)

Vashti, whose name means “beautiful woman,” is pivotal to the story. Her actions – or refusal to cooperate – set in the motion the details of the story that sets the table for all that follows.

The Persians are known for their festive drinking; and it appears that the King, likely in a drunken state, requested the presence of his honored wife, who in her own position of honor had been hosting women in a festive banquet. As we will see later in the book, the wife of the king and even the members of his harem, were guarded heavily and cared for uniquely. They were for the king’s pleasure and his alone. Such a request, even from the king himself, that seemingly makes public sport of the queen seemed to have crossed a line. Vashti may have refused on some basis of principle, or she too, may have been as inebriated as many suspect the king to have been.

Her refusal makes the king angry, a response that introduces yet another thread – anger. Four times in the book, anger initiates a key change in the direction of the story.

These displays of human wrath—that seemingly most unpredictable and uncontrollable element in our experience—are the hinges on which the story of Esther turns.

- The wrath of the King against Vashti (1:12; 2:1) *makes way for Esther's accession*
- The wrath of Bigthan and Teresh against the King (2:21) *makes way for Mordecai's exaltation*
- The wrath of Haman against Mordecai (3:5; 5:9) *makes way for crisis*
- The wrath of the King against Haman (7:7, 10) *makes way for reversal / resolution of crisis*

We will see again and again that God turns the wrath of men to praise Him (Psalm 76:10).

CONCLUSION: Our opening lesson in some ways reminds me of the rack my wife uses to store spools of thread for sewing. So many colors of thread and sizes of spools arranged in an orderly way. In the process of sewing, various colors of thread are taken from the rack and integrated into a single garment, helping to hold the material together. In the coming weeks, we'll see the amazing providence of God on display. He is directing the whole play, but it seems most of the actors believe they are writing their own scripts. Yet when it is done, it clear that God has masterfully woven all of the details to His own intended conclusion. And it is also clear that this story is actually part of a much larger one – the one of God's loving loyalty to His people even when they are not at their best; one of God's preserving His people, so that they can fulfill the purpose for which He chose them. He had chosen them, in part, to be a light to the Gentiles. So often the Jews seemed intent on hiding that light under a bushel. So often it seemed the Gentiles were going to extinguish that light. But God sovereignly works in Gentile affairs, and just as He used Cyrus to restore a remnant of His people back to the land God had given to them, in this story, we will see how God uses a 10-year slice of Persian history to do something so remarkable that even unbelieving Jews still celebrate it to this day.