

# A LOOK AT A BOOK: ESTHER

## November 10, 2013

### ESTHER 1 – PRELUDE TO THE STORY OF ESTHER

The story of Esther takes place during “*the days of Ahasuerus*” (v. 1). Scholars almost unanimously identify Ahasuerus with the Persian king better known by his Greek name, Xerxes. He reigned from 486 to 465 B.C., after Cyrus (Ezra 1) and Darius (Ezra 5-6), but before Artaxerxes I (Ezra 7-10).

In the “*third year of his reign,*” Ahasuerus threw an opulent party for the leaders of his kingdom (v. 3). This party, which lasted for an unbelievable period of time (180 days), gave Ahasuerus an opportunity to exhibit “*the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty*” (v. 4). The hyperbolic language of verse 4 underlines the outlandish pomp of the whole affair.

Even after six months of partying Ahasuerus was not finished. Immediately after ending his exclusive fete, he “*made a feast*” for all the residents of Susa, including the “*little people*” (v. 5). This open celebration displayed the king’s luxurious interior decorations, as well as his generous provision of wine “*in golden vessels*” (vv. 6-7). Not only did Ahasuerus have a golden goblet for each party goer, but each goblet was unique in design. This detail emphasizes again the unspeakable wealth of the king, who had enough golden vessels for every citizen of the capital.

Verse 9 introduces another character in the story, “*Queen Vashti.*” Though the text does not explain why, it states that she “*made a feast for the women.*” (Persian custom did not force men and women to celebrate separately.) Though it is brief, verse 9 not only introduces Vashti, but sets the stage for the next segment of the story when the Queen is absent from the king’s banquet.

According to 1:4-9, King Ahasuerus spent the 186 days prior to the day indicated by verse 10 in one extended party. On the final day of his celebration, “*the heart of the king was merry with wine*” (v. 10). Since Hebrew speakers considered the heart to be the center of thought, we might paraphrase the verse in this way: “*On the seventh day, when wine had gone to the king’s head....*” Accordingly, such a drunken state would explain his curious behavior in the following verses.

The king commanded his “*eunuchs*” to bring Queen Vashti into the celebration in order that her dazzling beauty might be displayed to all of the party goers (vv. 10-11). Queen Vashti’s response, however, is surprising, given the authority the king had over her very life. Why did she refuse to come before the king and his party (v. 12)? Some ancient Jewish theorists have proposed that Ahasuerus intended for Vashti to appear only in “*her royal crown*” (v. 11), but the original text does not support this reading. B. W. Jones theorizes that when Persian wives attended banquets with their husbands, they departed when the heavy drinking began leaving behind only the concubines and prostitutes. Therefore, Vashti’s appearance at this advanced

stage of the party would be an insult to her royal dignity. The text does not explain Vashti's response; rather, it emphasizes the king's response to her refusal: "*therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him*" (v. 12).

After Vashti refused to appear before the king, he consulted with his royal advisors, who are called "*wise men*" (v. 13). If the Hebrew text is accurate, then these wise men were astrologers, people who "*understood the times,*" and experts in "*law and justice*" (v. 13). Kings in the ancient world, like political leaders today, surrounded themselves with advisers.

When Ahasuerus asked his wise men what to do about Vashti's disobedience (v. 15), one of the advisers, "*Memucan,*" responded by pointing out the dire implications of her behavior. He suggested that her insubordination would incite a nationwide insurgence of uppity wives against poor downtrodden husbands. Memucan pressed the king to act quickly (v. 18) since news of Vashti's refusal was already spreading among the upper class women of Persia. He proposed that soon there would be no end to "*contempt*" from wives and "*wrath*" from their despised husbands (v. 18). Given the undisputed dominance of men within the Persian empire, Memucan's estimation of Vashti's crime is a comical exaggeration.

Verse 19 also contains a significant phrase that figures prominently in the story of Esther: "*so that it will not be altered.*" A better translation would be: "Let [a royal decree] be recorded in the laws of the Persian and the Medes, *which cannot be repealed.*" The impact of the conclusion of the story in chapters 8-10 depends heavily upon the fact that Persian royal decrees could not be revoked (see 8:7-8).

By the standards of the proverbs, Ahasuerus miserably failed "Leadership 101." His behavior in chapter 1 shows him to be the sort of ruler people dread, according to a series of sayings in Ecclesiastes:

Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child  
And your princes feast in the morning!  
Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles,  
And your princes feast at the proper time –  
For strength and not for drunkenness!  
Because of laziness the building decays,  
And through idleness of hands the house leaks.

*Ecclesiastes 10:16-18*

## **CHAPTER 2 – ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN**

A period of time passed between chapters 1 and 2, although the phrase "*after these things*" does not specify precisely how much time (v. 1). Apparently, it was enough time for "*the wrath of King Ahasuerus,*" which had been so intense, to subside. Although not expressed explicitly, this verse seems to imply that Ahasuerus regretted his rash response to Vashti's refusal to permit herself at his party. The response of the king's servants also implies that he regretted his decision to banish Vashti (vv. 2-4). They suggested a way to follow through on Memucan's opinion that Vashti's "royal position" be given "to another who is better than she" (1:19). An

official search would be made throughout the entire Persian empire, so that “*all the beautiful young virgins*” might come to the palace. The young women would be gathered into “the women’s quarters,” (in Hebrew, “the house of women”; v. 3), a sequestered area of the king’s palace. There they would join the king’s harem, to be used for his pleasure, whether or not they became the new queen.

The next passage introduces the reader to “*Mordecai*” and “*Esther*,” the two major characters of the book. The Hebrew wording, which emphasizes Mordecai’s Jewishness, reads “A Jewish man was in Susa the citadel and his name was....” The odd phrase clarifies beyond a shadow of a doubt the ethnic identity of Mordecai – a major factor in the plot of Esther. According to the rules of Hebrew grammar, verses 5 and 6 state that Mordecai had been deported from Judah by “*Nebuchadnezzar*.” If this were true, however, then Mordecai would have been over 100 years old by the time of Ahasuerus. For this reason the translators of the NKJV agree with many scholars who regard Kish, not Mordecai, as the subject for verse 6, even though this is grammatically odd.

In verse 7 we are introduced to Esther. Like many Jews living in foreign lands, she had two names, a Hebrew name, “*Hadassah*,” and a Gentile name, “*Esther*.”

The next section of Chapter 2 describes how Esther the Jewish orphan became Esther the Queen of Persia. Verse 10 adds the significant detail that Esther did not reveal to the Persian authorities her Jewish background. It is likely that this factor could have eliminated her from the royal competition, for according to Herodotus, only daughters of noble Persian families could become queen. Although we are not told why Esther kept her lineage a secret, the intent of verse 10 is to portray her, not as scheming or deceitful, but, rather, as obedient to her surrogate father. Mordecai continued to be concerned about the fate of Esther. Thus, although he was not permitted to communicate with her directly, he walked “*in front of* [or, “near”] *the court of the women’s quarters*” in hopes of hearing something about her welfare.

Verses 12-14 describe the process by which the virgins were prepared and then presented to the king. First of all, each woman received a year of cosmetic treatments, including six months of treatments with “*oil of myrrh*” and six months of aromatizing with a special type of incense burner (v. 12). (The phrase “*perfumes and p reparations*” actually means “fumigation with other cosmetics.”) Once a young woman had spent a night with King Ahasuerus she was virtually banished to the harem. In reality, the women in Ahasuerus’ contest were sentenced to a life of unfulfilled loneliness. The author wisely omits the details of Esther’s first night with the king, but he does tell us that rather than exiling her to the harem, Ahasuerus placed the “*royal crown*” upon her head, thus identifying her as his new queen. So great was his joy that he sponsored another giant feast, this time in Esther’s honor (v. 18). Moreover, he proclaimed a national holiday and gave many gifts with liberality. When Ahasuerus was angry, he raged uncontrollably; when he was glad, he celebrated prodigally!

As the story continues to unfold, verses 21-23 relate a simple but portentous event. As Mordecai sat in his place “*within the king’s gate*,” he overheard two of the royal servants plotting to assassinate the king (v. 21). Subsequently, he related this information to Queen Esther, who passed it along to the king “*in Mordecai’s name*” (v. 22). At this point, this brief scene appears

to play a minor role in the book of Esther, though it does indicate the growing influence of Mordecai and his continued relationship with Esther. It also testifies to Mordecai's loyalty to the king, as well as to Esther's loyalty both to the king and to her adopted father.

### **CHAPTER 3 – HAMAN ISSUES A ROYAL DECREE**

Verse 1 introduces "*Haman*" as "*the son of Hammedatha*," whose identity is not known. More importantly, Haman is identified as "*the Agagite*," a descendant of the Amalekite king, Agag. This pagan king brought about the downfall of King Saul before Agag was dismembered by Samuel (1 Samuel 15:8-33). "The Agagite" label distinguished Haman as an ancestral enemy of the Jews. King Ahasuerus disregarded Haman's non-Persian status and promoted him to a high position with the government, perhaps as "prime minister."

The text does not explain why being Jewish kept Mordecai from bowing down. We know that Jews were forbidden from bowing down before other gods (Exodus 20:5), but they were permitted to bow before human authorities (for example, 2 Samuel 14:4). Perhaps Mordecai's refusal was a reaction to Haman's ethnic background as an Agagite, or perhaps it was simply a result of his pride.

Verse 7 explains how Haman determined the date for the Jewish extermination. His assistants "*cast Pur (that is, the lot) before Haman to determine the day and the month.*" The Babylonian word "*pur*" denotes a lot or cube-shaped die used to make decisions. By using this device, Haman and his servants determined to kill the Jews during the month of Adar (late February, early March in our calendars). Eleven months would pass between the casting of the *pur* in Nisan, the first month, and the murder of the Jews.

After plotting with his associates, Haman approached King Ahasuerus with his plan. His proposal in verses 8-9 reflects Haman's ability to manipulate the king with deceit and bribery.

Continuing on, verses 12-15 recount the process by which the royal decree against the Jews was circulated throughout the empire. The royal "*scribes*" drafted a decree for all of the Persian leaders: "*satraps*" (divisional leaders), "*governors*" (leaders of smaller provinces), and "*officials*" (or nobles in general). Verse 13 underscores the reprehensible thoroughness of Haman's vendetta against the Jews, for the people were not merely encouraged to kill the Jews, they were instructed "*to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate*" their victims. Moreover, "*all the Jews*" were to be eliminated, including "*young and old, little children and women.*" Only total genocide would satisfy the wicked Haman. Finally, the Persians were to "plunder their possessions," either for personal gain or for the king's treasury.

Verse 15 mentions specifically that the decree was "proclaimed" in Susa, the capital city of the empire. Thus the chapter ends abruptly with a pointed contrast between the satisfaction of the conspirators and the confusion of the people, both Jews and others: "*So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed.*"

### **CHAPTER 4 – THE RESPONSE OF ESTHER AND MORDECAI**

At the close of Esther 2, all seemed well for Esther and Mordecai. She had won the king's beauty contest and had been crowned queen. She had helped Mordecai receive a royal

appointment, and he, in turn, had saved the king's life. Events in chapter 3, however, disturbed their peaceful existence. A conflict between Mordecai and the king's chief official, Haman, escalated into a royal decree that called for the extermination of all Jews.

The first three verses of chapter 4 describe typical expressions of mourning for ancient Jews. Mordecai "*tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes*" (v. 1). Jews throughout the empire joined Mordecai with "*great mourning*" (v. 3). They also engaged in "*fasting, weeping, and wailing,*" while many "*lay in sackcloth and ashes*" (v. 3).

Verses 4-5 imply that Esther did not know about Haman's plot and the king's decree. This seems strange given Esther's position as queen, but verse 11 explains her ignorance: "*I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days.*" Sequestered in her quarters, Esther had no idea of what had happened in the last month.

Esther's first response was to present Mordecai with new clothing to replace his sackcloth, presumably so he could enter the palace and explain his mourning to her. With resoluteness bordering on indignity, he refused her offer.

According to verse 12, "*they*" conveyed Esther's wise hesitation to Mordecai. Others besides Hathach entered the scene at this point though the text does not identify them by name. Mordecai responded to Esther, first with a warning that she would not escape the murder of her people.

We note with surprise Mordecai's new-found confidence that the Jews would be delivered. If Esther failed to do her duty, "*relief and deliverance [would] arise for the Jews from another place.*" Mordecai, a man wailing at the palace gate, had become Mordecai, a man of faith. But faith in what? What does the obscure phrase "from another place" mean? Both Jewish and Christian commentators on this verse have seen in it a veiled reference to God.

Mordecai's suggestion that Esther had "*come to the kingdom for such a time as this*" reflects the confession of God's sovereignty.

Apparently Mordecai's appeal to providence was successful for Esther responded affirmatively. For the first time in the Book of Esther, a woman has stepped out of the role of victim to become a person of strength, confidence, and courage. Whereas earlier chapters had emphasized her beauty, chapter 4 now shows that Esther is both beautiful and wise.

## **CHAPTER 5 – ESTHER'S FAVOR AND HAMAN'S PRIDE**

Chapter 5 begins "*on the third day*" of the Jewish fast (v. 1). Esther dressed carefully in her finest royal garb in order to delight the king and to remind him of her standing as his queen. When the king saw Esther he did not condemn her to death, but instead "*she found favor in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter*" (v. 2). She received his gesture of welcome by touching the top of his scepter.

Obviously pleased with her appearance, Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted. He offered to give her anything, "*up to half the kingdom!*" (v. 3). This apparently magnanimous offer,

repeated again in verse 6, was a common expression that was not meant to be taken literally. It emphasized the king's pleasure in Esther's company and his desire to respond favorably to her need. A modern paraphrase would be: "I will give you anything your heart desires."

She phrased her request carefully, using traditional words of honor: "*if it pleases the king.*" Yet, we find Esther's response surprising. This was her golden opportunity. The king would grant her any request. What an opportune time to intercede for her people! Why did she delay? Although the text does not answer this question directly, it is obvious that this loss of opportunity intensifies the suspense of the story.

In verse 8, as in verse 4, once again Esther chose not to ask the king to spare her people. Instead she invited him and Haman to another banquet (v. 8). And once again the author of the book does not account for her hesitation, but uses it to add suspense. The reader wonders: Is Esther losing her nerve? Why is she procrastinating? Will she ever be bold enough to intercede for her people? What if the king tires of Esther again and chooses not to attend her banquet?

Haman's delight over having been included in Esther's banquet turned sour when he noticed Mordecai's failure to bow before him (v. 9). A more accurate translation of verse 9 would reveal that Haman was "filled with *rage* against Mordecai." Upon arriving home he gathered his friends and his wife together in order to brag about his great achievements (v. 11). His bravado is ironic, however, in that his audience certainly knew all of this already. The purpose of his boasting was obviously to bolster his own ego, not to communicate information. Yet Haman could not enjoy all of his successes because Mordecai remained stubbornly insubordinate (v. 13). The Hebrew of verse 13 literally reads, "But all of this, it is not adequate for me." Nothing could satisfy Haman as long as one man failed to honor him. It is the description of a man obsessed, driven by his need for approval, and dissatisfied even with his formidable achievements.

Verse 14 – a cubit was the length of the forearm from elbow to fingertip, ranging from seventeen to twenty-one inches. Mordecai's gallows, therefore, would rise to the ridiculous height of approximately seventy-five feet.

## **CHAPTER 6 – THE KING HONORS MORDECAI OVER HAMAN**

"*That night,*" the very night after Haman had constructed a gallows for Mordecai (v. 1; see 5:14), the king "just happened" to suffer from insomnia. He commanded one of his servants to read from "*the book of the records of the chronicles.*" The story of Mordecai's faithfulness (described in detail in Esther 2:21-23) had been carefully recorded in "the book of the chronicles." Curiously, at the time when his life had been saved, Ahasuerus had not felt inclined to honor Mordecai for this valuable deed. In the midst of his sleepless night, however, the king had a change of heart. Several scholars single out this passage as the turning point of Esther. Yet, though events from this point onward to favor the Jews, the reversal of Jewish fortune already had begun with Esther's willingness to appear before the king (4:16). However, it is true that in chapter 6 and continuing, reversal of fortune significantly shapes the plot.

In verse 6, Haman, obsessed as usual with his own pride, could not fathom that the king would intend to honor anyone other than Haman himself, so he proposed an elaborate rite. First, he suggested, "*let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn.*" In the ancient world there

was no greater honor than to wear one of the king's own robes. Expecting to be the recipient of the king's esteem, Haman devised a ceremony that would promote him before the people as the king's equal in honor and glory.

But the ax began to fall on Haman's pride (v. 10). Not only would Mordecai escape from Haman's noose, not only would Mordecai receive public adulation, not only would Mordecai receive what Haman had designed for himself, but Haman would be the one to proclaim Mordecai's greatness to the city!

After completing the unwelcome task of honoring his enemy, Haman "*hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered*" out of shame (v. 12). Quickly he recounted to "*his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him*" (v. 13). Even to his closest friends it was obvious that since Mordecai the Jew had prevailed over Haman in earning the king's favor, surely Haman's plot against the Jews was doomed to fail. His downfall was imminent.

## **CHAPTER 7 - ESTHER DEFEATS HAMAN**

At the end of chapter 6, the king's eunuchs brought Haman to Esther's second banquet (6:14), identified as being "*on the second day.*" As the trio imbibed, the king repeated his offer to grant any request Esther wished to make (v. 2; see 5:3, 6).

Finally the time had come for Esther to present her petition. She and her people had been sold by the king when he accepted money from Haman in exchange for permission to slaughter the Jews (3:9-11), but Esther wisely omitted this detail. She used the exact language of the royal decree penned by Haman, which commanded Persians "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews" (3:12).

Esther's revelation stirred the king, who wanted to know who had done such a vile deed. As of verse 5 the king was not aware that an answer to his question would place him in the awkward position of deciding between his wife and his chief adviser. While the king was out in the garden, Haman pleaded for his life with Esther. (Notice who was in power now!)

One of the king's eunuchs named "*Harbonah*" noticed the gallows that Haman had made for Mordecai. Ironically, the extreme height of the framework, built to match the level of Haman's pride and wrath, allowed Harbonah to point out the gallows to the king. Here we have the irony of the entire book: Haman died by hanging on the very gallows that he had built for Mordecai.

## **CHAPTER 8 - MORDECAI ISSUES A NEW ROYAL DECREE FOR JEWISH SELF-DEFENSE**

Not only did Esther defeat her enemy, she also received title to his house. Ironically, the king honored Mordecai by giving him the same "*signet ring*" that he had given to Haman earlier (3:10). Yet, in spite of newly acquired power and wealth, and the defeat of Haman, the decree against the Jews still stood.

Why did Esther, who had seemed so cool in chapters 5-7, resort to hyperbolic language (verse 5)? The answer would seem to lie in the difficulty of her request. On the one hand, she was

asking the king to reverse publicly a decision he had made earlier – an embarrassing change. No leader relishes the prospect of waffling on the issues.

In verse 8, they received equal authority to that given to Haman. The reminder about the irrevocability of legislation sealed with the king's ring in the latter part of verse 8 functions in two ways: (1) it underscores the authority given to Esther and Mordecai, and (2) it reminds us that they could not simply undo the previous decree. Another solution was required.

In verse 9, Mordecai takes center stage – assuming the position of power and authority granted to him through the efforts of Esther. The content of the new decree explains why the Jews needed to be informed. Although Mordecai could not erase Haman's command for the Jews to be slaughtered, he could permit them *"to gather together and protect their lives"* (v. 11). The emphasis is on self-defense against enemies, not aggression against innocent people.

In verse 16 the Jews are mentioned specifically. Given the victory of their leaders, Esther and Mordecai, and the new decree permitting their self-defense, the Jews naturally celebrated. The Hebrew term translated "became Jews" does not clarify whether the Gentiles actually converted to Judaism or simply pretended to be Jews as a matter of safety. They did not, according to the text, convert because they wanted to worship God; rather, they wanted to escape Jewish wrath.

## **CHAPTER 9 - THE JEWS DEFEND THEMSELVES**

Verse 1 provides an overview of the events in chapter 9. Verse 2 emphasizes that the Jews prepared *"to lay hands"* only *"on those who sought their harm."* Persian officials helped the Jews because Mordecai had become their superior (v. 4).

The fact that the Jews did not take the goods of those whom they killed in self-defense underlines the integrity of their motivation: they sought only to protect their lives and their property.

Continuing on through the passage, verses 11-15 describe how the Jews in Susa happened to spend another day killing their enemies. If we take the language of Esther's request literally, then she asked only for permission *"to do again according to today's decree,"* that is, for the Jews to defend themselves against those who might attack them on Adar 14.

In verse 16 the author backtracks from the events of verse 15, which occurred on Adar 14, to recount what happened in the rest of the empire outside of Susa on Adar 13.

### ***MORDECAI AND ESTHER ESTABLISH PURIM***

According to 9:20, *"Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews."* Specifically, Mordecai established these two days of Adar as *"days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor"* (v. 22). These actions reminded the Jews of how their sorrow had turned to joy when they defeated their enemies.

The first part of verse 26 explains that Purim was named after the word *"Pur"* which is Babylonian for "lot." Verses 29-32 add Queen Esther's authority to the establishment of Purim.



## CHAPTER 10

The concluding epilogue of Esther begins, as did the prologue in chapter 1, by noting the wealth and power of King Ahasuerus, who levied taxes on land and sea. Unlike the prologue of Esther, however, in this epilogue another man shares the spotlight with the king. The royal records also include “*the account of the greatness of Mordecai*” (v. 2). Verse 3 summarizes his stature: he was second only to the king; he was great and well-liked among the Jews; and he sought good for his people, both in deed and in word.

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Mark Roberts, *Mastering The Old Testament: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Word Publishing.