

# ESTHER

GOD WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT



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Zack Flipse



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## Bibliography

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>Setting the Stage</b> .....	<b>5</b>
	<i>The Setting</i>	
	<i>The Theology</i>	
	<i>The Stage</i>	
<b>2.</b>	<b>The Bumbling Persians</b> ( <i>Esther 1</i> ) .....	<b>15</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Enter Esther</b> ( <i>Esther 2:1-18</i> ) .....	<b>23</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Mordecai vs. Haman I</b> ( <i>Esther 2:19-3:15</i> ) .....	<b>31</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Repentance</b> ( <i>Esther 4</i> ) .....	<b>39</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Esther's Requests</b> ( <i>Esther 5:1-8</i> ) .....	<b>45</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Mordecai vs. Haman II</b> ( <i>Esther 5:9-14</i> ) .....	<b>51</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>Justice for Mordecai</b> ( <i>Esther 6</i> ) .....	<b>55</b>
<b>9.</b>	<b>Judgment for Haman</b> ( <i>Esther 7</i> ) .....	<b>63</b>
<b>10.</b>	<b>Two Competing Edicts</b> ( <i>Esther 8:1-9:17</i> ) .....	<b>69</b>
<b>11.</b>	<b>Purim Festival</b> ( <i>Esther 9:18-10:3</i> ).....	<b>77</b>
	 <i>Addendum: Esther's Additions</i> .....	 <b>83</b>



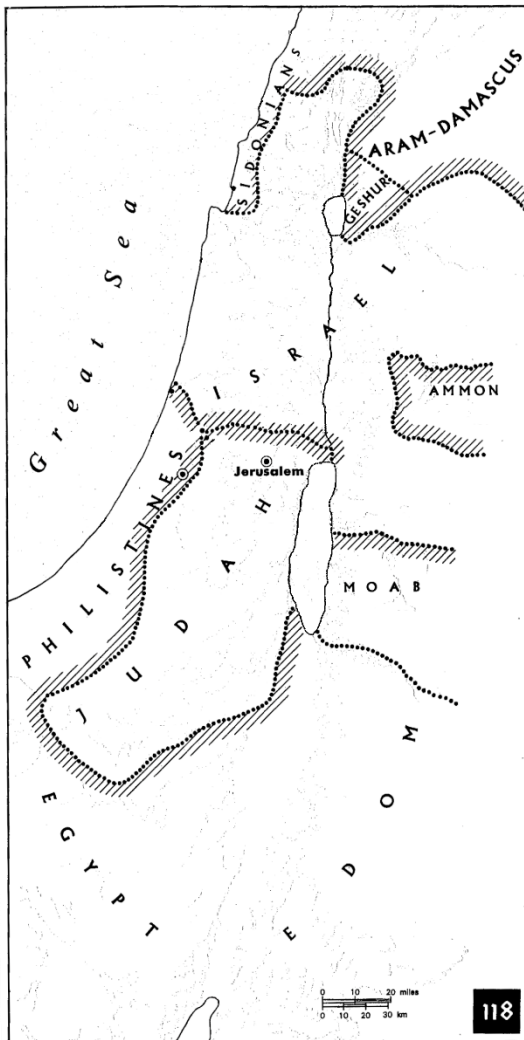
# 1

## SETTING THE STAGE

### *The Setting*

- Esther is a Jewish girl in Susa, Persia in 483 BC. How did we get here?
- A brief history lesson is required to best understand the setting and circumstances surrounding the story of Esther.
- Not long after the Israelites finally take possession of the Promised Land, the sinfulness of their kings rips the kingdom in two (1 Kings 17). The northern tribes become Israel, and the tribe of Judah remains to the south.
- Despite repeated calls from prophets to repent and walk in the way of the Lord, both kingdoms—Israel and Judah—chase idolatry and immorality.

*(map adapted from the Carta Bible Atlas, 118)*

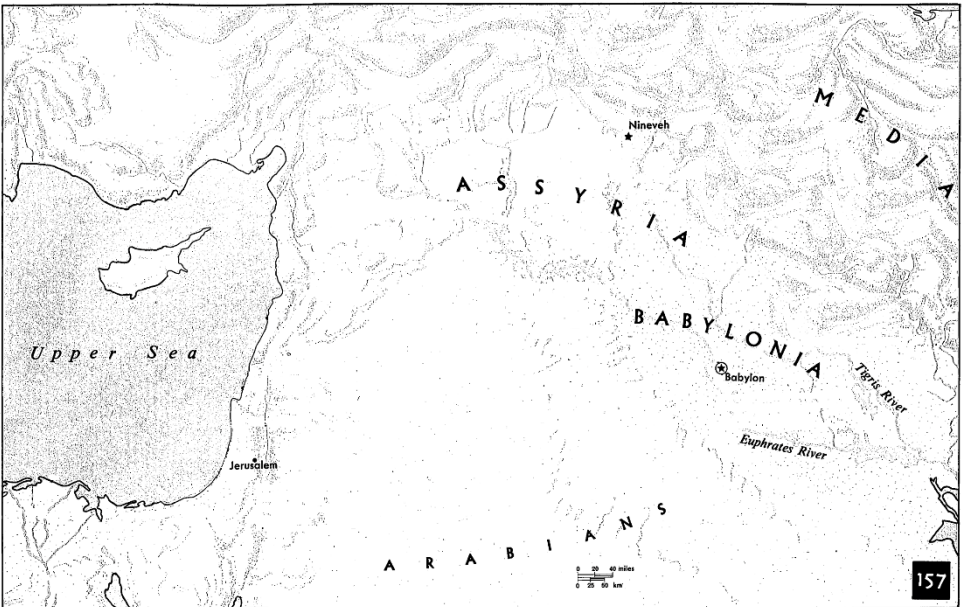


- As a result of their sin, the northern kingdom of Israel is conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. The people are carried into captivity.

“Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up to attack Hoshea, who had been Shalmaneser’s vassal and had paid him tribute. But the king of Assyria discovered that Hoshea was a traitor, for he had sent envoys to So king of Egypt, and he no longer paid tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore Shalmaneser seized him and put him in prison. The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes.”

(II Kings 17:3-6)

- Assyria is the first of three consecutive major world powers to develop north of Israel and Judah. Their capitol is Nineveh, the setting of the book of Jonah. Assyria will be followed by Babylon and Medo-Persia (“Media” on map 157).



(map adapted from the Carta Bible Atlas, 157)

- Many of the kings of Assyria are mentioned in Scripture.



<b>The Major Kings of the Assyrian Empire</b>			
<i>King</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Biblical Reference</i>	<i>Prophets</i>
Adad-nirari III	810-782		
Shalmaneser IV	782-746		Jonah
Tiglath-pileser III	745-727	II Kings 15-16, I Chron. 5	
Shalmaneser V	727-722	II Kings 17-18	Hosea
Sargon II	722-705	Isaiah 20:1	
Sennacherib	705-681	II Kings 18-19, II Chron. 32, Isaiah 36-37	
Esarhaddon	681-669	II Kings 19:37, Isaiah 37:38, Ezra 4:2	
Ashurbanipal	669-625	Ezra 4:10	Nahum

- As Assyria begins to fall, Babylon is the next major world power to develop. The prophet Jeremiah prophesies of exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

“Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: ‘Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.’”

(Jeremiah 25:8-11)

<b>The Major Kings of the Babylonian Empire</b>			
<i>King</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Biblical Reference</i>	<i>Prophets</i>
Nabopolassar	626-605		Nahum Zephaniah Jeremiah Ezekiel Daniel
Nebuchadnezzar	605-562	II Kings 24-25, I Chron 6:15, II Chron 36, Ezra, Nehemiah 7:6, Esther 2:6, Jeremiah 21-52, Ezekiel 26, 29-30, Daniel	Jeremiah Ezekiel Daniel Habakkuk
Belshazzar	556-539	Daniel 5-8	Daniel

- It's during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar that the southern kingdom of Judah falls to Babylon in 586 BC. King Nebuchadnezzar destroys the temple and carries the people into exile, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. Notably for our story, the wealthy and influential people are carried into exile and the poorest people are left in the land.

“In the eighth year of the reign of the king of Babylon, he took Jehoiachin prisoner. As the Lord had declared, Nebuchadnezzar removed all the treasures from the temple of the Lord and from the royal palace and took away all the gold articles that Solomon king of Israel had made for the temple of the Lord. He carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans—a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left.”

(II Kings 24:12-14)

- After Babylon comes Medo-Persia, the third major world power in the time of the Old Testament. It is called “Medo-Persia” because king Cyrus had a mother from Media and a father from Persia and under his rule the two nations were united.

<b>The Major Kings of the Persian Empire</b>			
<i>King</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Biblical Reference</i>	<i>Prophecies</i>
Cyrus	550-529	II Chron. 36, Ezra, Isaiah 44-45, Daniel 1:21, 6:28, 10:1	Daniel
Cambyses	529-522		Daniel
Darius I	522-486	Ezra 4-6, Nehemiah 12:22, Daniel 5-11, Haggai 1:1, Zechariah 1:1, 1:7, 7:1	Daniel Haggai Zechariah
Xerxes	485-465	Ezra 4:6, Esther	Daniel
Artaxerxes	465-425	Ezra 4, 7-8, Nehemiah 2:1, 5:14, 13:6, Daniel 9:1	Daniel Malachi
Darius II	424-405	Daniel 9:1	Daniel

- Still, God provided hope for His people. He was with them, and through the prophet Jeremiah promised they would return to Israel one day—precisely 70 years after their exile.

“This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.’”

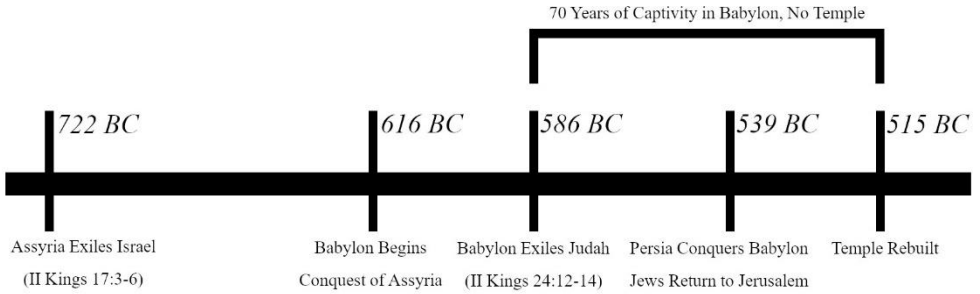
(Jeremiah 29:10-14)

- God uses Cyrus to fulfill His prophecy through the prophet Jeremiah.

“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: ‘This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The Lord, the God of Heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”’ Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.”

(Ezra 1:1-5)

- The Kingdom of Judah had been exiled to Babylon in 586 BC. God had prophesied 70 years of captivity. In 539 BC Cyrus allows the people to return to Jerusalem and by 515 BC, precisely 70 years after their exile, the temple is rebuilt.



- What does this have to do with Esther? The story of Esther opens in 483 BC— in Persia during the time of King Xerxes. The Jews have been able to return to Israel for over 50 years. The temple was rebuilt and dedicated 30 years before. Still, Esther and her family have chosen to remain in Persia. Apparently, they were not among “everyone whose heart God had moved” (Ezra 1:5).

“What made the temptation to assimilation particularly pressing was the fact that most of the really enthusiastic ‘As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord’ people among the exiles had left and returned to Jerusalem at the time of Cyrus’s decree in 538 B.C., or during the generation that followed. Now, more than fifty years after that event, those who remained in Susa...were strongly tempted to settle into a comfortable (perhaps too comfortable) coexistence with the generally benign autocracy that surround them. Exile had been kind to them.”  
 (Duguid, 6)

- The setting speaks to the lack of spiritual fervor in Esther and her family. They were content to go with the world and all its comforts. Their relationship with God was not particularly strong—at least not stronger than the desire for worldly comforts.

“What is more, it was disobedience that kept Mordecai and Esther’s family in exile...Many stayed, comfortably settled where they were, outside the land of promise. Compared to a backwater like Jerusalem, Susa seemed a much better place to make progress and advance in the service of the empire, as Mordecai discovered.”  
 (Duguid, 27)

- It's not hard to imagine Jews in Persia, like Esther, feeling "left out" or even forgotten by God. God was, in their mind, in Israel with the more faithful people.
- Perhaps this attitude exists in our congregations today. We wonder if put ourselves outside of God's sphere because we've been too unfaithful or too disobedient. We think God is better off with our more faithful family or friends—He certainly wouldn't be interested in us anymore (or so we think).

"There is a beautiful message here for anyone who has ever experienced brokenness, for anyone who has ever been crushed by life, for anyone who has ever felt that his past is so discolored, so disjointed, so fractured that there is no way in the world God can make reason and meaning out of it. We are going to learn some unforgettable lessons from Esther."

(Swindoll, 10)

- Persia in 483 BC is where you would *least* expect to find God.

## *The Theology*

- This sense of distance from God impacts the theology of the book, which famously does not mention God at all. This is among the reasons Luther and Calvin did not write commentaries on Esther (Baldwin, 442).
- But God *is*, in fact, very near to Esther—so much so we find Him on every page. We ought to be reminded along with the prophet Jonah that there is *nowhere* outside the sphere of God. His providential care in each detail of Esther's story shouts of His great power and His love for His children.

"Though God may at times seem distant, and though He is invisible to us, He is always invincible. This is the main lesson of the Book of Esther. Though absent by name from the pages of this particular book of Jewish history, God is present in every scene and in the movement of every event, until He ultimately and finally brings everything to a marvelous climax as He promises Himself Lord of His people, the Jews."

(Swindoll, 2)

- God's providential care is not limited to the Jews. We have already seen that God used "my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 25:8) and

God “moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1). God’s sovereignty extends to every corner of this broken world—there is nothing beyond His control.

- In Esther, we are given an important reminder: God’s sovereign and providential control does not excuse human activity. It was, as we’ll see, Esther’s sin and worldly compromise that placed her in such a predicament. Human activity has consequences.
- And yet, when Esther’s heart is moved to submit to God, God uses her human activity—her obedience—to bring about her own restoration and the protection of her people. In Esther, we are reminded to work for His purposes.
- Perhaps the largest theme in the entire book is that of “reversal.” God has the power to change our hearts and our circumstances for His glory. Though His name is never mentioned, the great “reversals” that occur for the faithful can only be attributed to the intervening power of the God they seek to obey.
- The story will certainly point us toward Christ, who brings about a better “reversal” in the hearts of all those who put their faith in Him.

“The Book of Esther repeatedly invites us to compare and contrast the kingdom of God and the empire of Ahasuerus [Xerxes]. There are superficial similarities between the two kingdoms, but in each case they hide deeper differences.”

(Duguid, 15)

## *The Stage*

- The book of Esther was written for the stage; it was written to be performed. It commemorates the festival of Purim, where it is read in its entirety twice—once solemnly on Purim’s Eve and a second time performed for Purim.
- More details on the festival of Purim are given in chapter 11 of this study guide.
- Purim is a carnival-like atmosphere that celebrates God’s deliverance of His people.

“Throughout the centuries the public reading of this book at Purim has kept alive nationalistic expectations. Even today, every time Haman’s name is mentioned in the Purim liturgy congregations respond with loud banging,

shouting and stamping of feet, and ‘Haman’s hats’ (triangular cakes) are eaten during the celebrations. Not surprisingly the story of Esther is better known to the ordinary Jew than any other part of the Old Testament.”

(Baldwin, 442)

- This background helps clarify the purpose and literary function of Esther. It recounts a real, historical account of real, historical people and places well-known to history. However, it does so in a hyperbolic, over-the-top, and at times silly way. I have preferred to call it a *historical comedy*.

“Satire takes the object of fear, the authority, and makes fun of it, showing its ridiculous side. The book is meant to make us laugh.”

(Duguid, 6)

“By the mood and tone of the text, folly and wickedness are ridiculed. That ridicule becomes even more effective because it is coupled with a sense of fun. Despite its subject matter there is a lightness to the story—it is a story the Jews would love to tell and celebrate; it is made easy to bear.”

(Reid, 42)

- Think of Esther as the script of a July 4<sup>th</sup> monologue performed at the local park each year where a larger-than-life George Washington crosses the Delaware to conquer a bumbling, unskilled group of red-coats. These are real people taking part in a real battle with real historical implications, but performed in such a way that the strengths and weaknesses of both sides are inflated. The goal is to evoke *celebration*; this is true of Esther.
- The text of this “script” exists in a few forms. This topic is taken up in the addendum of this study guide. However, it may be helpful to know that both manuscripts of Esther exist in both Hebrew and Greek. For this reason, some commentators chose to use the name “Xerxes,” the Greek name for the king, and others chose to use “Ahasuerus,” the Hebrew name for the king.





# 2

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## THE BUMBLING PERSIANS

### *Esther 1*

“This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush.”  
(Esther 1:1)

- Before we are introduced to Esther, we meet the Persians. King Xerxes is the grandson of Cyrus, the son of Darius (who threw Daniel into the lions’ den). He reigned over Persia from 485-465 BC.
- Greek historian Herodotus portrays Xerxes as arbitrary and tyrannical (Fox, 15), characteristics that will certainly be exaggerated in this story. Although Xerxes inherited a large and powerful army, he failed to extend its boundaries—suffering losses by much smaller Greek armies in the Graeco-Persian wars (485-479 BC).
- The comedic elements of the book are in full force in chapter one. The first note of comedy is the listing of “127 provinces.” It would have been more common to cite their 20 satrapies (a larger area encompassing many provinces). Instead, the author teases the Persians by making a great number out of a small division of land, akin to saying, “The 3,143 Counties of America.”

“At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.”  
(Esther 1:2-4)

- The third year of Xerxes' reign is 483 BC. The capital of Persia was Persepolis, but Persian kings spent their winters in Susa because of its warmer climate.
- The Persians are made to look incompetent and overindulgent—the high-ranking military and governing officials spend half a year on vacation, wining and dining with the king.

“When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality. By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.”  
(Esther 1:5-8)

- The party descends into drunken stupor. Xerxes’ tyrannical character shows here in the irony of *liberality* being *legislated*. The king must *command* each person to drink as they please.

“Herodotus described Persian royal banquets at which the kings gave gifts to his fellow Persians. ‘It is said, fifteen thousand might be his guests.’ The royal chamberlain afterwards had the duty of ‘putting his inebriated master to bed.’”  
(Breneman, 304).

- The king joins his guests in overindulgence. After seven days of feasting, he is drunk. Unsurprisingly, his drunkenness affects his decision making and the king begins acting even more irrationally than normal.

“On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas—to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the

king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious  
and burned with anger."  
(Esther 1:9-12)

- We are introduced now to the queen. She is called "Queen Vashti," which in Persian sounds like "Queen Beautiful." Some historians have identified her as Queen Amestris, known to history as the wife of Xerxes and mother of Artaxerxes. Whether Vashti is a nickname or another wife is of little importance.

"Herodotus said the name of Xerxes' queen was Amestris. Many see this as an indication that this story is fictitious and not historical. However, the king may have had other queens, or perhaps she had different names. Some suggest that Vashti, which means "sweetheart," may have been an epithet. The point of v. 9 is simply that Xerxes and Vashti were not acting in accord with each other."  
(Breneman, 307)

- In his drunken state, Xerxes desires to show off his "trophy wife" before the apparently all-male attendants. Vashti agrees with the modern reader that this is a ridiculous and degrading request, and so refuses.
- Some early Jewish Rabbis deduce that "wearing her royal crown" suggests "wearing *only* her royal crown." This seems to be a stretch based on the text, but does emphasize how Vashti is here being treated.
- Vashti is justified in refusing this request. Women are not objects for male pleasure. We ought to applaud Vashti's self-worth and moral fiber. Her confidence is contrasted by Esther, who for a time prefers quiet submission even in situations requiring her to participate in immorality.
- However, Vashti's moral stand is not well received by the king, who "became furious and burned with anger."

"Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king—Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom."  
(Esther 1:13-14)

- In the Hebrew text, Xerxes' eunuchs and advisors are given Persian names. This serves to further establish historical reliability, but may also have served as some comic relief as the names are difficult (even silly) to pronounce in the Hebrew dialect. Even as "Bigtha" and "Carcas" make us snicker today, it would have drawn laughter from the Purim crowd, too.
- Other historically validated information in the first chapter alone includes:
  - Xerxes was King of Persia;
  - The correct identification of the land from India (Pakistan) to Cush (Sudan), even down to its 127 provinces;
  - The Palace at Susa has been discovered by archaeologists and is cited as one of the most ornate palaces in history;
  - The tendency of Persian kings to throw large, indulgent parties;
  - The role of advisors and consultants to the king is well cited.
- The role of advisors to the king plays a prominent role in the development of the story. Xerxes' is continuously portrayed as bumbling, incompetent and suggestable.

“According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. ‘She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.’

Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, ‘Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, “King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.” This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen’s conduct will respond to all the king’s nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord. Therefore, if it please the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.’ The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent dispatches to

all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household."  
(1:15-22).

- Here is an example how *not* to do PR. The fear is that Vashti's refusal "will become known to all the women," and their solution is to have the story "proclaimed throughout all his vast realm," ensuring the very thing concerning them.
- This is the first of several examples in Esther where Xerxes or Haman make hasty decisions when they're angry and receiving bad advice. We will note these as they come.
- There is an aspect of God's sovereignty here, where you least expect. Though Xerxes and his advisors are ridiculous, bumbling fools, they recognize something true: wives should respect their husbands.
- Consider how this law of Xerxes reflects the law of God in Ephesians 5 or Colossians 3.

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."  
(Ephesians 5:22-24)

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."  
(Colossians 3:18)

- We wouldn't dare to suggest that Xerxes' edict is God-honoring. He certainly does not have the truth when it comes to marriage relationships. His own conduct as a husband does not stand the test of Scripture. However, he recognizes something broken in his marriage. His heart tells him that it would be better if a wife respected her husband.

"Like King Ahasuerus [Xerxes], God too decrees that men should lead their homes, but the differences are far more pronounced than the similarities...., Christian male leadership in the home and in the church is established and rooted in Christ's own self-sacrificing love for his bride. The obverse of the coin

inscribed ‘Wives, submit to your own husbands...as the church submits to Christ’ is the motto ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ This is what true love is: not husbands using their wives as objects to meet their needs and satisfy their desires, but rather giving themselves up for their wives, gently leading them to fulfill their gifts and godly aspirations. The gospel truth of Christ’s love for us is the foundation for new minds that delight to submit to his ordering of creation. If Christian husbands were more like Christ and less like Ahasuerus [Xerxes], then perhaps we would find our wives more ready to submit to our leadership.”

(Duguid, 16)

- Xerxes’ brush with truth—however jaded by his sin—proves the words of Paul in Romans 2:14-15.

“(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)”

(Romans 2:14-15)

- Even in the darkest corner of a drunken party room in Persia, God is still sovereign and true, working—however suppressed in unrighteousness—His purposes.

“The opening sets a tone of humor, even farce. The tale does not at the start seem to be of the sort that will report a supreme Jewish national crisis. We encounter a story that spares the time to describe gentile ostentation and folly. As we move into a tale that reports events of utmost gravity, we bring with the knowledge that not everything and everyone is to be taken with full seriousness. Buffoons rule the empire (if not the domestic roost), and ironies and confusions are rife.)

(Fox, 25)

“The chapter ends on a note of suspense, preparing the reader for the next episode. The narrative suddenly closes on the present scene and opens to the entire empire. Since the author was Jewish, three things need to be said. First,

the reader now knows that a new character is needed to replace Vashti. The anticipated character is Esther, a Jew. Second, it will be a woman. Like Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, and others before her, the new character in this story will emerge as a heroine of her people. Third, God is present implicitly, but not explicitly. Already the reader anticipates that Xerxes as a Gentile will be superseded by God's sovereign choice of a new queen, even the Jew Esther.”  
(Breneman, 311)





# 3

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## ENTER ESTHER

### *Esther 2:1-18*

- Esther 2 places us in 480 BC, three years after the previous chapter. This would fit nicely in the historical account of the Graeco-Persian Wars. Xerxes has just finished a rather unsuccessful campaign in Greece (famously the Battle of Thermopylae against Leonidas and the Spartans in 480 BC).
- If this is accurate, Xerxes returns to his summer getaway looking for comfort and companionship.

“Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, ‘Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.’ This advice appealed to the king and he followed it.”  
(Esther 2:1-4)

- For the second time in as many chapters, Xerxes relies on the advice of personal attendants to come to emotionally charged decisions.
- The text suggests that he is still fond of Vashti. However, as we’ll see, edicts from the king are irreversible. There is no going back, Vashti is permanently deposed.
- The personal attendants propose a rather obvious solution: find a new wife.

“A rather obvious idea, but Xerxes tends to rely on others to supply even his obvious thoughts.”  
(Fox, 27)

- The king’s attendants propose a search for women meeting only three criteria: beautiful, young, and virgins.

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Johoiachin king of Judah.”  
(Esther 2:5-6)

- We meet Mordecai next. From the description given, his family must have been prominent in Israel. As we’ve noted, II Kings 24 tells that Nebuchadnezzar “carried into exile” the prominent members of society, leaving behind “the poorest people of the land.”

“In the eighth year of the reign of the king of Babylon, he took Jehoiachin prisoner...He carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans—a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left.”  
(II Kings 24:12, 14)

- What’s more, Mordecai is a descendent of Shimei, the son of Kish. Kish is King Saul’s father (I Samuel 9:2) and Shimei is “from the same clan as Saul’s family” (2 Samuel 16:5). This detail—that Mordecai is descended from King Saul—will become an important detail to the narrative.
- If the author means that Mordecai himself was “carried into exile” by Nebuchadnezzar, he is about 120 years old. It may, however, refer more generally to his family line as being “carried into exile.”
- Perhaps his nobility contributed to the family’s comfortability in Persia, just as Daniel was given special treatment in Babylon (Daniel 1:3-4). Mordecai lives “in the citadel” and must work in or around the palace. They have been able to maintain their worldly prominence even in exile.

“Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.”  
(Esther 2:7)

- Finally, we are introduced to the main character: Esther. Her introduction is as a tagalong to Mordecai—a pretty orphan girl that lives with her patron cousin.

“When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem. Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.”

(Esther 2:8-11)

- Esther is among the young beautiful virgins selected for King Xerxes. She moves to the *Hegai’s Place for Harem Women*.
- A key detail about the family emerges: Mordecai and Esther have hidden their Jewishness. There is an underlying threat of antisemitism that rises in the book—and in many other places in history. Perhaps this is the reason Mordecai has hidden his nationality. However, it must be noted that Mordecai enjoyed the benefits of hiding his Jewishness.

“At home, he was Mordecai the Jew, faithful servant of the living God. At work, he was just plain Mordecai, faithful servant of the empire...As [Esther’s] life unfolded, though, there would come a day when she would have to decide which of those two worlds defined her.”

(Duguid, 21)

- It’s easy to connect with Mordecai and Esther on this point. Hiding our religious convictions often *does* afford us worldly status and ease. We’ll see, however, what this compromise costs them.
- These compromises begin with “beauty treatments and special food.” Esther does not protest, as far as we can tell.

- Contrast this with the behavior of Daniel and his friends in Daniel 1. Much of their situations overlap:
  - Daniel lives exiled in Babylon (Daniel 1:1-2)
  - He is among the noble families of Israel (Daniel 1:3-4)
  - He is ordered into the king's service (Daniel 1:3-4)
  - He is assigned a special diet and training (Daniel 1:5)
  - He receives special favor from the king's official (Daniel 1:9)
  - Following a testing, the king chose Daniel (Daniel 1:18-20)
- Though their stories are very similar, Daniel's religious conviction and devotion to God are never concealed or in doubt. From the very beginning, he rejects orders from the king in order to serve God faithfully.

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way...Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ‘Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.’ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.”

(Daniel 1:8, 11-16)

- Daniel's devotion to God demonstrates an important truth: obedience to God is *always* best.
- Not every situation has the happy ending of Daniel 1, though. Daniel resolves to obey God rather than man, and is blessed with success—even worldly success! His three friends nearly experienced a different fate when they were thrown into the fiery furnace for defying the king's order out of obedience to God (Daniel 3:19-20). Whether obedience to God brings success or suffering, it *always* remains the best choice for believers.
- Even the pagan Queen Vashti has *just* shown it possible to stand up against the king. Whatever the consequences, the possibility exists for Esther. Yet, she continues without even a fuss.

“Before a girl’s turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.”  
(Esther 2:12-16)

- It doesn’t take much to read between the lines:
  - She goes in the evening and leaves in the morning
  - She starts in *Hegai’s Place for Harem Women* and, after her night with the king, moves to *Shaashgaz’s Place for Concubines*.

“Though the selection of Esther is commonly thought of as a beauty contest...The actual competition, to take place after a year of beauty treatments, is a sex contest, with the winner being whoever can most please the king during her night with him.”  
(Fox, 27-28)

“The verb meaning ‘to go into/to enter’ occurs three times in these verses and it is loaded with sexual overtones.”  
(Reid, 81)

- Compromise with the world has consequences.
- The progression of Esther’s compromising is familiar to us. So often, compromise with the world starts with small things. What’s so wrong about a few beauty treatments? These compromises grow over time. In Esther’s case, it cost her her virginity.

- Whether or not our own compromises have come at such an intimate cost, we should be reminded of the example of Daniel who chose faithfulness even the small things.
- If we defined Xerxes character as arbitrary and tyrannical, we might define Esther as passive and unprincipled. She does not make any decisions for herself. She relies on the counsel of Mordecai and then Hegai. She brings nothing with her before the king. She has yet to even speak.
- Perhaps it's this passivity that Xerxes so appreciates in Esther, considering the trouble that Vashti's self-worth and self-confidence caused him.

“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.”

(Esther 2:17-18)

- Esther ends up married to a gentile, pagan king—yet another in her list of compromises with the world.
- The banquet is called “Esther's banquet,” but she has no say in the matter. The theme of *banquet* or *festival* will continue to develop with the story. These banquets mark major developments in the narrative and grow from more worldly and chaotic (the opening 180-day banquet) to more God-honoring and purposeful (the festival of Purim) as the power shifts from Persia to the God of Israel.

“The movement of the plot is punctuated by ten banquets, which are the sites of important events and which signal shifts of power...The banqueting motif is thus the vehicle for the theme of power—its gain and its loss. Banquets belong to the rich and powerful.”

(Fox, 156-158)

Xerxes' banquet for the nobility	Esther 1:2-4
Xerxes' banquet for all the men in Susa	Esther 1:5-8
Vashti's banquet for all the women	Esther 1:9
Esther's enthronement banquet	Esther 2:18
Haman and Xerxes' banquet	Esther 3:15
Esther's first banquet	Esther 5:4-8
Esther's second banquet	Esther 7:1-9
The Jews' feasting in celebration	Esther 8:17
The first feast of Purim	Esther 9:17, 19
The second feast of Purim	Esther 9:18

*(chart adapted from Fox, 157)*

- Despite her failures and compromises, we can't help but mourn for Esther. She's been used and abused, treated as a mere object and not as the image-bearer of God she is.
- The evil of this whole game ought to be condemned. So, too, we condemn it when we see it in our day. Pornography harms women, using them as objects for pleasure and financial gain. Willing and unwilling participants are *hurt* by it. Our secular kingdom needs more Daniel's, who refuse the worldly programs and demonstrate obedience to God to be the better, healthier way.





# 4

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## MORDECAI VS. HAMAN I

### *Esther 2:19-3:15*

- Scholars debate the precise situation described in Esther 2:19, “When the virgins were assembled a second time.” Two possibilities should be favored:
  - Xerxes, being the tyrant he is, organizes a *second* competition like the one Esther just won. Virgins from around the empire are assembled for their night with the king.
    - This would shed light on the predicament Esther will find herself in: she has been set aside in favor of a newer, younger queen. However, this answer should not be favored because it seems the king is yet favorably disposed to Esther as access to the king is still easy for her.
  - A second explanation should be favored. “When the virgins were assembled a second time” is meant to mean “when the contestants had all moved to *Shaashgaz’s Place for Concubines*.” In other words, the author is trying to convey that this next storyline takes place after the completion of the competition Esther has just won.
    - A potential issue here is the use of the word “virgins” to describe these concubines who had spent a night with the king. However, it’s not surprising the author chose to use the same word to describe the same group of women he had used earlier.

“When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai’s instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.”  
(Esther 2:19-20)

- The scene opens with Mordecai “sitting at the king’s gate,” where court proceedings are held. Esther 2:5 describes him as living “in the citadel,” so we deduce that Mordecai works for the king in some capacity.

- Because of his access to Esther in *Hegai's Place for Harem Women*, some suggest Mordecai himself was a eunuch, though this would not be necessary for them to communicate. Others suggest he was a doorway guard which, as we'll see, may have helped him uncover a plot. More likely, Mordecai was an official in the king's palace.
- It is repeated here that Esther conceals her Jewishness, this is an important part of the story and an important part of Esther's character development.
  - To this point, Esther is not willing to publicize her connection to God.
  - To this point, Esther remains submissive to Mordecai (and Hegai, and Xerxes). She has not yet spoken or really made any decisions herself.

“During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.”  
(Esther 2:21-23)

- Mordecai learns of an assassination attempt and, through Esther, informs the king. Interestingly, Xerxes *would* in fact be assassinated 15 years later by his military commander Artabanus and a eunuch named Aspamitres.
- Greek historian Herodotus tells how Persian kings recorded and rewarded such acts of service to the king.

“Herodotus depicts Persian kings as diligent and generous in rewarding beneficial acts. In fact, he knows of an official list of the ‘King's Benefactors’ in the royal archives...”  
(Fox, 40)

- But Mordecai is *not* rewarded. Instead, an important introduction breaks up the narrative and begins a rivalry central to the rest of the plot.

“After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.”  
(Esther 3:1)

- “After these events, King Xerxes honored...” Moredecai, right? That’s what we’d expect. Instead, it is not Mordecai who is honored but Haman!
- This is a notable moment in the Purim reading. Audience members boo and make noise whenever Haman’s name is read.

“When Haman’s name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using various home-made shakers.”  
(Reid, 151)

- This moment could be compared to entertainment wrestling, where a protagonist is about to be declared victor before the villain bursts into the ring and, from behind, knocks out our hero with a chair and takes the glory. The audience boos and hisses!
- In the noise of it all, note the fickle praise of the secular world. Mordecai has carved out a life of obedience to the state in search of its goods and comforts. He’s made compromises for his good, easy living. But justice is not a characteristic of the world. Like Mordecai does not receive his just reward from the world, neither should we expect the world to reward us well and fairly. Only with God is there true and everlasting justice.
- Haman is described as “the Agagite,” an important note to understand. Remember that Mordecai is a descendant of King Saul.
- I Samuel 15 records the battle between King Saul of Israel and King Agag of Amalek. God commanded Saul to “attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (I Samuel 15:3).
- King Saul was disobedient. Though they defeated the Amalekites, “Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good” (I Samuel 15:9).
- Samuel issued this word to King Saul:

“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.”  
(1 Samuel 15:22-23)

- Many years later in a distant land, the effects of this sin are still felt. A descendant of King Agag will terrorize a descendant of King Saul.

“If King Saul had carried out his commission properly in the first place, there wouldn’t have been any Agagites left to threaten his descendants. This is a perennial problem. Past sins have a way of coming back repeatedly to haunt us, and sometimes our children after us. How many difficult ethical decisions, over which we agonize for hours, wouldn’t even be confronting us were it not for our past sins? People’s lives can become horribly complicated to the point where the wisdom of Solomon is needed to know how to proceed. Yet in many cases, the most substantial complications come as the direct byproducts of past sins.”  
(Duguid, 36)

- Mordecai and Esther’s compromise for the good that Persia had to offer is only a microcosm of the compromises God’s people have made throughout the ages—present day certainly included.

“All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor. Then the royal officials at the king’s gate asked Mordecai, ‘Why do you disobey the king’s command?’ Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai’s behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai’s people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.”  
(Esther 3:2-9)

- Here we find another connection to the book of Daniel, where Daniel 3 tells of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the image of gold.
  - All of the people bowed before the image of gold (Daniel 3:7)
  - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are unwilling to bow (Daniel 3:12)
  - The officials report on the men (Daniel 3:9)
  - The men are questioned about their disobedience (Daniel 3:14)
  - The king is deeply offended and angry (Daniel 3:13, 19)
  - There is anger against the Jews as a people group (Daniel 3:8)
  - The men are ordered to be executed (Daniel 3:9-23)
- The same Mordecai who just a chapter earlier advised Esther to conceal her Jewishness and go with the king's program now takes a stand. The reason for the change is not given; perhaps the act of bowing was just too much compromise.
- However, Mordecai is a servant of the king and it seems unlikely that he could have avoided bowing to King Xerxes. If the act of bowing was not the straw that broke the camel's back, what was? The best explanation of his action is probably petty family allegiance: no son of Saul will ever bow to a son of Agag, for they are mortal enemies.
- Whatever the reason, Mordecai is found out and finds not only himself but his entire people in the crosshairs of an "enraged" Haman.

"In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar."  
 (Esther 3:7)

- So in the first month of 474 BC, Haman casts a lot to determine which month he would annihilate the Jewish people. *Purim* is the plural of the word *pur*.
- This is another big moment in the narrative of Esther. Imagine the Jewish audience quieted and watching closely to see on which month the lot falls, remembering the fate of their people is on the line. The lot falls on the twelfth month, the furthest possible date! The people let out a sigh of relief or even have a laugh at the bumbling Persian fools who seek wisdom from lots and astrologists. Here we see the hand of God, who has real power to control the fate of His people (Proverbs 16:33).

“Then Haman said to King Xerxes, ‘There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.’ So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ‘Keep the money,’ the king said to Haman, ‘and do with the people as you please.’”

(Esther 3:8-11)

- For the third time in the book, King Xerxes makes a decision by the emotion-charged advice of his servants. He shows no regard for the Jewish people and flippantly gives Haman control of their annihilation.
- Importantly, Haman does *not* name the Jews but refers to them only as “a certain people.” Xerxes is not aware that the Jews are the people in the crosshairs.
- Haman argues that the Jewish people observe different customs and “do not obey the king’s laws.” This hardly seems to be true of Esther and Mordecai, who have been good servants of the empire thus far. Haman’s statement, though, confirms for us that—as in the time of Daniel—there are yet Jews who remain faithful to God. Mordecai and Esther’s compromising becomes even more stark in contrast.

“Today God’s people are different and must recognize their distinctiveness. ‘Their customs are different,’ or ‘their laws are different,’ explains that their emphasis on the law, God’s revelation in the Mosaic Torah, made them different. Our basis of authority and our priorities mold our customs. If we take seriously the authority of God’s Word and allow his ethical principles to form our customs, we will be different from those who live by different authority (e.g. human reason, humanism) or ethical principles.”

(Breneman, 329-330)

- Let us not found to be like the world, but to be salt and light in it.

“The on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman’s orders to the king’s satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring. Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.”  
(Esther 3:12-14)

- What a reversal of fate! At one point, it was the Amalekites under threat of annihilation—“men and women, children and infants” (I Samuel 15:3). Now, it is the Jews under threat of annihilation—“young and old, women and little children” (Esther 3:13). This story will reveal for us who is stronger: the men of Amalek or the God of Israel.

“Spurred on by the king’s command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.”  
(Esther 3:15)

- We see the coldness of Haman and Xerxes as they celebrate their edict with a drink. Meanwhile, the edict is met with confusion outside the palace walls. In the eyes of the average Persian citizen, the behavior of the Jews—with their unique customs—is not deserving of such harsh a penalty.
- Christians today ought to know the threat of annihilation. We are sinners, and the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:23). Though the Jews may have been undeserving of such an unjust edict, we *are* deserving of such an end.

“Ironically, God himself has far more reason to act against us and our families than Ahasuerus [Xerxes] did against the Jews. We have not kept God’s law. We have refused to bow down before him and submit to him as we ought, giving him the honor that is his by rights as our creator. It is actually true in our case that it is not to God’s profit to tolerate us, since we are born cosmic rebels

against his goodness and grace. What is more, we have a cosmic enemy, Satan, who would happily present plenty of valid reasons why we should not be allowed to live. The edict for our destruction could legitimately have been signed against us by our Great King.”

(Duguid, 42)

- May we approach our sin with proper seriousness, mourning, and repentance.



# 5

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## REPENTANCE

### *Esther 4*

- So far, we have been critical of Mordecai’s character. Esther 4 introduces us to a very different Mordecai.
- If the stage has been set to observe the power of God, perhaps we find nothing more powerful than His ability to change the hearts of humankind.

“When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”

(Esther 4:1-3)

- Faced with the threat of annihilation, Mordecai repents.
- Mordecai expresses this repentance through fasting and wearing sackcloth, a practice familiar to Israel’s history—and to their history in exile.
  - In Assyria, the people respond to the Word of the Lord through the prophet Jonah and repent in sackcloth (Jonah 3:5-10).
  - In Babylon, Daniel remembers the sins of the Israelites that led to their exile and in sackcloth repents on behalf of the community (Daniel 9:4-13).
  - In Persia, the Jews put on sackcloth and repent as they prepare to reinhabit Jerusalem (Nehemiah 9:1-2).
- This work of God in Mordecai’s heart spreads among the Jews, who in every province join him in fasting and weeping in sackcloth and ashes.

“The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one’s whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and

judgment, will and affections, behavior and life-style, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.”

(Packer, 162)

- The change in Mordecai is prompted by his realization of his need for rescue. This is the evangelistic scenario Paul envisions in I Corinthians 14.

“But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’”

(I Corinthians 14:24-25)

- Understanding the full impact of our sin is important.

“When Esther’s maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why. So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.”

(Esther 4:4-8)

- Although “in every province...there was great mourning among the Jews,” Esther is clueless. She has become separated from her people. A copy of the edict and an explanation of the circumstances of her relatives must be provided for her.
- The attempt to get Mordecai to dress nicer is particularly tone deaf. Though this is probably just Esther’s attempt to get Mordecai back in the palace so they can talk about what’s going on, the offer is insensitive to say the least.

“While Mordecai is displaying his grief in one of the most visible spots in the kingdom, and Jews throughout the kingdom are fasting and lamenting, Esther, cloistered in luxury, remains oblivious to the uproar.”

(Fox, 58)

“Notice how isolated Esther had become from the rest of the covenant community. Every Jew from India to Ethiopia was mourning and lamenting Haman’s edict, but Esther had no clue...In addition, since she had done such a good job of concealing her identity, why would anyone think to inform her of the threat to this particular people? In just the same way, when we compromise with the world, we easily find ourselves becoming isolated and distant from God’s people and out of touch with God’s concerns in the world, just as Esther did.

(Duguid, 47)

- Be aware of growing distant from the people of God—the church. We are called to live together in community. Esther highlights two immediate benefits:
  - First, away from the community of believers, we become unaware of the burdens and needs of our neighbors. We are then unable to pray or meet material needs of our brothers and sisters, leaving them to carry their burdens alone.
  - Second, we lose self-awareness. We become unaware of our own burdens and weaknesses. We forgo the help of the community of believers available to us. Regular corporate confession in the gathered worship service helps remind us of our failings and needs, things we are prone to ignore or forget if left to ourselves.

“Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ‘All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.’”

(Esther 4:9-11)

- Upon hearing the report from Mordecai, a change begins in Esther, too. Nearly half way through the book bearing her name, Esther speaks for the first time. She speaks through a servant and she speaks of her doubt, but nevertheless she speaks.
- Mordecai, in asking her to intervene before the king, gives Esther a very difficult mission. Approaching the king unrequested was punishable by death.

“[This law] was instituted by Deioeces the first king of the Medes in order to increase his authority, and was adopted by the Persian kings. Esther might have legally requested an audience, but clearly feared that such a course might fail as she was not at that period in special favour, as she points out; and the failure of such a request would make its repetition or her own subsequent personal intervention extremely dangerous. A personal appeal was the only course left open to her.”

(Macdonald, 384)

- Mordecai shows the extent of his repentance and transformation: he is *sure* God will deliver him from annihilation—whether by Esther or another way. God is not dependent on human activity to accomplish His purposes. Still, He appoints and calls Esther to accomplish this purpose.

“When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: ‘Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish.

And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?’”

(Esther 4:12-14)

- Like Mordecai, we too have a great assurance of deliverance in our Savior Jesus Christ!
- Mordecai makes known to Esther that threat of annihilation extends to her. Once again, it’s this recognition that prompts repentance and transformation.

“Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ‘Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.’ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.”  
(Esther 4:15-17)

- Esther comes to an understanding of her own mortality. She joins the people in fasting.
- A new Esther emerges!
  - Though she’s still speaking through a messenger, Hathach’s name is dropped. Esther speaks more confidently.
  - Esther no longer takes orders from Mordecai, Hegai, or Xerxes; she *gives* orders.
- This developing confidence and sense of self-worth is a by-product of a life properly aligned in submission to God and distinct from the lies and abuses of the world.

“These verses also mark a dramatic change in the characterization of Esther. She develops new maturity and exhibits fearless determination as she takes up Mordecai’s challenge, and the moment of crisis resolution draws closer.”  
(Reid, 102)

- Esther, whose life thus far is marked with compromise and worldliness, proves this kind of hope and transformation is available to *all* who put their hope in God—even those who least expect it!

“It is as if someone who has risen up the corporate ladder by shady manipulation of the books, along with neglecting his family and any connection with the church, were to be asked to stand up at a board meeting for his faith over a crucial issue. His response might well be, ‘Could God really use someone like me after everything I’ve done—or failed to do?’ The surprising answer in Esther’s case is yes! God’s providence works through all kinds of sinners (which, after all, is the only material he has available).”  
(Duguid, 49)

- We see an admirable resolve in her famous words, “If I perish, I perish.” We’re reminded of the resolve of Christ who faced an even more perilous fate as he approached the Cross. Esther went out to intervene for God’s people with the *threat* of dying, Christ went out to intervene for God’s people with the *purpose* of dying.

# 6

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## ESTHER'S REQUESTS

### *Esther 5:1-8*

- The curtain falls on chapter 4 with Esther fasting in sackcloth. It opens three days later, after her fast has concluded. She dons her royal robes again and stands ominously outside the king's hall. Xerxes and Esther face each other, maybe separated by only a curtain.
- Here begins the main climax of the book: Esther boldly approaches the throne to seek rescue for the Jews. This tension, however, will be dragged out for three chapters!

“On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance.”

(Esther 5:1)

- Jewish historian Josephus, recognizing the significance of this moment, heightens the tension at points. He mentions men with axes, that Xerxes looks angry, and at one point Esther faints.

“Now the king had made a law, that none of his own people should approach him unless they were called, when he sat upon his throne; and men, with axes in their hands, stood round about his throne, in order to punish such as approached to him without being called. However, the king sat with a golden sceptre in his hand, which he held out when he had a mind to save anyone of those that approached to him without being called; and he who touched it was free from danger.”

(Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 11.6.3 205-206)

“When Esther had used this supplication for three days, she put off those garments, and changed her habit, and adorned herself as became a queen, and

took two of her handmaids with her, the one of which supported her, as she gently leaned upon her...Yet did she go in to him with fear; and as soon as she was come over against him, as he was sitting on his throne, in his royal apparel...which made him seem to her more terrible, especially when he looked at her somewhat severely and with a countenance on fire with anger; her joints failed her immediately, out of the dread she was in, and she fell down sideways in a swoon..."

(Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, 11.6.9 234-236)

- Even without additions like these, the tension in this moment is certainly raised. Our two main characters are about to square off for the fate of the Jews.

"When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. Then the king asked, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.'"

(Esther 5:2-3)

- But the fate of His people is never really left to chance. God is there in the court room with Esther and Xerxes, and He intervenes. Just as He formerly "moved the heart of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1), so now He moves the heart of Xerxes to be favorable to Esther.
- In some ways, this scene reminds us of our standing in God's throne room. We stand before a King who, according to the law, has the right to demand our life for our sins (Romans 6:23). But, by the grace of Christ, we are invited to "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).
- Remember, though, that our God is nothing like the bumbling tyrant Xerxes. Esther is spared from the law by a *new law*, whereby the king places his rod upon her neck (Josephus, 11.6.9 239). But our God *removes* the law that leads to death (2 Corinthians 3:6), taking the rod from our neck entirely and placing it on Christ.
- The reason Xerxes treats Esther favorably is not given, but we might imagine it due to her appearance. Again, our God is nothing like the bumbling tyrant Xerxes. It is not our appearance or our merit or anything else that wins us



favor, but simply by the grace of Christ who justified God's wrath on sin by taking it upon Himself!

"If it pleases the king,' replied Esther, 'let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.'" (Esther 5:4)

- Esther's moment has come, but she surprises with her request. In this moment, she does *not* ask for rescue for the Jews. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a private banquet she has already prepared.
- Esther's faith in God here parallels Mordecai's from a chapter ago. These are transformed characters!
  - Mordecai *knows* God will intervene for His people. He states, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place" (Esther 4:14). For Mordecai, it's not a matter of *if* God will save them, but only *how* He will do it.
  - Esther has come to this same kind of faith. Even *before* she approaches the king, she prepares the banquet. By whatever means, she *knows* God will save her people.

"If she were merely nervous and wanted to make it easier on herself, she would not have invited Haman to the banquet, thereby forcing a direct confrontation with her enemy. Esther is planning and maneuvering, and doing so on her own initiative. She does not follow Mordecai's instructions precisely, for he told her simply to go to the king and entreat him on behalf of her people." (Fox, 71)

- We continue to see Esther transformed into her own person, no longer an object used by the world for its own pleasure. She now speaks for herself and decides for herself. In Esther 2:18, it's the king who throws "Esther's Banquet." Now, Esther herself does the planning. She is in control.

"Bring Haman at once,' the king said, 'so that we may do what Esther asks.' So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, 'Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be

granted.’ Esther replied, ‘My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.’”  
(Esther 5:5-8)

- The king, eager for another banquet, summons Haman “at once.”
- Contrast the way Xerxes and Haman approach decisions with Esther’s approach.
  - Xerxes and Haman
    - React to emotion
      1. Esther 1:12 – “Then the king became *furious* and *burned with anger*.”
      2. Esther 3:5 – “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was *enraged*.”
      3. Esther 5:9 – “...he was *filled with rage* against Mordecai.”
    - Make decisions quickly
      1. Esther 1:18 – “*This very day*...”
      2. Esther 3:7, 12 – “In the *first month*, the month of Nisan, they cast the lot...Then on the thirteenth day of the *first month* the royal secretaries were summoned.”
      3. Esther 5:14 – “...ask the king *in the morning* to have Mordecai hanged on it.”
    - Seek only favorable counsel
      1. Esther 1:21 – “The king and his nobles were *pleased* with this advice.”
      2. Esther 3:15 – “The king and Haman *sat down to drink*, but the city of Susa was bewildered.”
      3. Esther 5:14 – “This suggestion *delighted* Haman, and he had the gallows built.”
  - Esther
    - React to the facts
      1. Esther 4:5 – “Then Esther summoned Hathach...and ordered him to *find out* what was troubling Mordecai *and why*.”
      2. Esther 4:7-8 – “Mordecai told him *everything that had happened* to him, including the *exact* amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him *a copy of the text* of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and *explain* it to her...”

- Be careful and deliberate
  1. Esther 4:16 – “Do not eat or drink for *three days*, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. *When this is done*, I will go the king...”
  2. Esther 5:4 – “Let the king, together with Haman, come *today to a banquet* I have prepared for him.”
  3. Esther 5:8 – “Let the king and Haman come *tomorrow to the banquet* I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king’s question.”
- Seek the counsel of God
  1. Esther 4:14 – “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from *another place*...And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”
  2. Esther 4:16 – “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and *fast* for me.
  3. Esther 4:16 – “And if I perish, *I perish*.”
- Esther has become a picture of wisdom, seeking not her own pleasures and interests but the will of God for His people.
- Esther hatches a genius plan. The king’s agreement to the second banquet *also* guarantees her a favorable answer to her request. Agreement to the second banquet *is* agreement to “grant my petition and fulfill my request” (Esther 5:8). And when has the king not agreed to a banquet?

“Esther has now given notice that she intends to take the king’s generosity literally (contrary to etiquette), but makes it difficult for him to take his promise back: he would have to decline the invitation to the banquet—and what excuse could he give? By the end of her speech Esther has been able to represent what she wants as what the king has said; it has all been a delicate play of bargaining, while the object of the play has remained undisclosed.”

(Clines, 305)



# 7

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## MORDECAI VS HAMAN II

### *Esther 5:9-14*

- Mordecai, like Esther, has traded his sackcloth for regular clothes and reappears at his post in the palace.
- It's here our two foes, Haman and Mordecai, meet again. Mordecai continues in his steadfast resolve that God will rescue the Jews. In the presence of Haman, he continues not to bow. Not only that, "he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence."

"Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home."

(Esther 5:9-10)

- Haman leaves Esther's banquet in high spirits, but is immediately affected by the very sight of Mordecai. How could an apparent honor so high—a private dinner with the king and queen—be so quickly undone by an apparent slight so low—that one man, among many, refuses to bow.
- Haman presents an over-obvious case study on the fleeting nature of worldly joy.

"Haman's happiness depended on circumstances—in this case on his being honored. This type of happiness is not lasting, as the author quickly showed. As soon as Haman saw Mordecai, who did not honor him, his happiness evaporated. The satisfaction that depends on worldly honor and glory can be extinguished easily."

(Breneman, 341)

- This is a truth we've heard and learned repeatedly. Worldly treasures and praise never satisfy. Still, it's a reminder we routinely need.

“Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. ‘And that’s not all,’ Haman added. ‘I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.’”

(Esther 5:10-13)

- The comedic over-emphasis has returned to the story. Rarely do we see pride and discontentment so overtly displayed. Haman is portrayed as the slimy, despicable character we know him to be. All the while, the audience boos and hisses with each mention of his name.
- Though we blush at Haman’s transparency, each of us can relate to the feelings of pride and discontentment. The sin of pride must be dealt with in sackcloth and ashes—like Mordecai—confessed before the King on the throne of grace knowing that He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

“What is it that causes us to be angry out of all proportion to the offense? There is a clue that one of our idols is being threatened. What is it that makes us feel an unusually strong sense of achievement? It may be one of our idols being stroked. Our strong emotions are clues enabling us to read our own hearts better.”

(Duguid, 67)

- In keeping to form, Haman—all worked up with anger—seeks counsel that pleases him. He finds it from his wife and friends.

“His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, ‘Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy.’ This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.”

(Esther 5:14)

- The 75-foot gallows are almost certainly hyperbole. According to archaeological evidence in Susa, these gallows would have been the tallest structure in the whole city.
- Still, the symbolism is not lost: Haman wants the whole city to see Mordecai hanged.
- As we laugh at Haman’s expense, we ought to remember we did the same to Jesus. It was our sin, pride and discontentment included, that lifted him on a tree on a hill.
- Haman’s insistence on rushed decision-making is ironic. A death sentence *already* hangs over Mordecai’s head. The king’s irrevocable edict says so. But by God’s intervention, Haman must wait until the end of the year to get his revenge on Mordecai. This he can’t do; instant gratification is too much a temptation. He needs Mordecai hung the very next morning.

“In his haste he has the gallows built to end a personal feud that would have been resolved by the edict to kill the Jews anyway, if Haman’s patience had allowed the waiting time to lapse.”

(Reid, 114)

“We need to be sensitive to God’s timing and not be impatient with delays.”

(Breneman, 340)

- Perhaps the same temptation for instant gratification now exists for Esther. Has she played the long game in vain? Will Mordecai be executed before she gets around to the second banquet, before she gets around to intervening for justice?
- Though it’s unlikely Esther knows anything of Haman’s new plot, the two plans are now pitted against each other. We’ll find out which approach wins: the slow, deliberate plan of Esther or the hurried, emotional plan of Haman.





# 8

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## JUSTICE FOR MORDECAI

### *Esther 6*

- The very same night as Haman constructs his 75-foot gallows, King Xerxes is in his room struggling to fall asleep. Just as God can move the heart of King Cyrus (Ezra 1:1), He can make restless the legs of King Xerxes!

“Perhaps the noise from the construction of Haman’s spike was what kept him awake. That would certainly have been a fitting irony for a chapter filled with fitting ironies, but the text itself gives no reason for Ahasuerus’s [Xerxes’]

insomnia.”

(Duguid, 75)

- To aid him in falling asleep, Xerxes asks for the chronicles of the kings to be read. Maybe some Christians relate, dozing at the lists of kings in I and II Kings and in I and II Chronicles.

“That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. ‘What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?’ the king asked. ‘Nothing has been done for him,’ his attendants answered.”

(Esther 6:1-3)

- Rather than put him to sleep, the records remind him of a great oversight!
- In Esther 2:19-23, Mordecai uncovers this assassination attempt and reports, through Esther, to the king. “All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king” (Esther 2:23).

- We were surprised to see that, in the very next verse *Haman* is honored instead of Mordecai. Xerxes' now determines to give Mordecai the proper thanks he deserves.

“The king said, ‘Who is in the court?’ Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him. His attendants answered, ‘Haman is standing in the court.’ ‘Bring him in,’ the king ordered.”  
(Esther 6:4-5)

- In dramatic irony, Haman and Xerxes are brought together in the wee hours of the morning—Haman hoping to annihilate Mordecai, Xerxes hoping to honor him.

“The chapter has been described as ‘the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible’ and ‘one of the funniest anywhere in the Bible.’  
(Jobs and Berlin quoted in Reid, 115)

- Haman has rushed to the palace in the early morning after spending his own sleepless night building gallows taller than any building in Susa. He wants Xerxes' permission to execute Mordecai. This cannot wait until the 12<sup>th</sup> month, when the edict will take effect. It cannot even wait until sunrise.
- Haman stands in the court, much like Esther did as she waited for her audience with the king (Esther 5:1). But contrast the situations:
  - Esther spent three days fasting, and presumably praying, seeking God's wisdom in how to proceed. Haman, by contrast, rushes to the palace in the middle of the night.
  - Esther *goes in* to the king by her own volition, though it presents danger to her very life. Haman is *brought in* by the king's attendants.
- Esther continues to grow in wisdom and self-assuredness, while Haman's grip on control continues to slip. His rush for worldly praise causes him harm. We, too, ought to consider how idols and worldly treasures compromise our decisions and our lifestyle. These are sins that ruin marriages, careers, and friendships.

“When Haman entered, the king asked him, ‘What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?’ Now Haman thought to himself, ‘Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?’ So he answered the king, ‘For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”’”  
(Esther 6:6-9)

- Haman’s thirst for the praise of man continues to blind him. The idea of “honor” excites him—he repeats the phrase “the man the king delights to honor” once in his thought (Esther 6:6), and twice in his answer to the king (Esther 6:7, 9).
- Believing that these honors are coming to himself, Haman requests:
  - A royal robe worn by the king
  - A horse the king has ridden
  - A crown for the horse
  - A most noble prince to guide him
  - A proclamation of his honor throughout the city of Susa

“Haman wants to wear a royal robe that the king has actually worn and ride a horse he has ridden, with one of the king’s most noble princes in attendance. All this amounts to something comparable to a bid for the throne...”  
(Reid, 119)

“Asking for a garment the king has worn may be a genuine Persian touch. According to later Greek historians, the Persian royal robe was thought to possess magical power, in some way conferring royalty on its wearers. Plutarch reports that one of Artaxerxes’ subjects asked for the royal robe; he received it but was allowed only to touch it.”  
(Fox, 77)

- Haman might be second in command of the largest world power of his time, but he won’t settle until he’s *first*.

- However, “the man the king delights to honor” is *not* a title for Haman, but for Mordecai!

“Go at once,’ the king commanded Haman. ‘Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.’ So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’”

(Esther 6:10-11)

- What a reversal of fortunes! Haman, in seeking honor, has been brought low. Meanwhile Mordecai, whose life is actively sought after, has been raised up!

“Afterward Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.”

(Esther 6:12)

- Notice the transformation in Mordecai! This man cared so much about getting ahead that he was willing to conceal his faith and nationality, now he doesn’t care about getting ahead at all. This is the kind of transformation that accompanies true repentance!

“Nothing is said about Mordecai’s reaction to the honors. The sparseness of the description suggests that there was no particular effect. Mordecai simply returns to the King’s Gate, which is to say, to his work in the middle echelons of the palace bureaucracy. Haman, in contrast, hurries home, even more despondent than the last time he went home from the palace. He is in mourning (again we are shown Haman’s feelings), with his head covered as a sign of misery.”

(Fox, 79)

- The end of chapter six mirrors the end of chapter five. In both instances, Haman heads home from the palace, he has been dishonored by Mordecai, and he seeks the advice of his wife and friends. In chapter five, he was

advised to build the tallest structure in Susa: gallows for hanging Mordecai. This time, however, the advice is very different.

“His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!’ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.”  
(Esther 6:12-14)

- Haman’s advisors see what we do: all this irony can’t be pure chance. Though God’s name is never written here, His activity is undeniable—even among the pagan advisors to Haman!

“Elsewhere in the Bible and Apocrypha, wisdom is placed in the mouth of gentiles to show that the truth about Israel and its God is so certain and obvious that even neutral or hostile people recognize it. Even Haman’s associates see Jewish victory as a principle of history. Perhaps they are supposed to be aware of oracles prophesying Amalek’s defeat by Israel.”  
(Fox, 79)

- God’s sovereign power is undeniable. Many have seen it and testify to it:
  - Numbers 22-24 – Balaam, the pagan medium who advised King Balak of Moab, recognized that he could not overcome the Lord of Israel.
  - Daniel 2:46-47 – King Nebuchadnezzar confesses to Daniel that the God of Israel is true God.
  - Daniel 3:28-33 – King Nebuchadnezzar, after the three men survive the fiery furnace, offers praise to the God of Israel.
  - Daniel 4:34 – King Nebuchadnezzar regains his sanity and comes to realize that God is sovereign over all the heavens and the earth.
- There are other similar accounts in the apocryphal books.

“Then Achior, the commander of all the Ammonites said to him, ‘Now let my lord hear what is said by the mouth of your servant, and I will tell you the truth about this nation which inhabits this mountain region near you; nothing false shall proceed from your servant’s mouth...But if there is no disobedience to law in their nation, then my lord must pass by them, or their Lord will protect them

and their God defend them, and we shall be disgraced in the eyes of the whole earth.”

(Judith 5:5-6, 21)

“[Antiochus] who shortly before thought he could touch the stars of heaven, no one could now bear to carry, because of his intolerable stench. So it was then that, broken in spirit, he began for the most part to give up his arrogance, and under the scourge of God to attain some knowledge, for he was tortured with pain every instant. And when he could not even endure his own stench, he said this: ‘It is right to submit to God and, since man is mortal, not to think he is God’s equal.’”

(2 Maccabees 9:10-12)

- Where you least expect to find Him—in the vilest corners of Persian palaces, in the dark hearts of Ammonite kings, in the arrogant mind of Greek commanders—God is sovereign and in control.
- Zeresh and Haman’s advisors have heard these and other stories of this God of the Jews. They’ve seen Haman, who earlier that day went to the palace to seek Mordecai’s end, parading the same Mordecai around the city announcing, “This is the man the king delights to honor!”

“But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’”

(1 Corinthians 14:24-25)

- Let all of us see the power and majesty of God and submit to His authority, seeking mercy by His Son who has grace to forgive us our many sins.
- Haman had spent the day before at a banquet with the king and queen. He had returned home angry and spent the night building his 75-foot gallows. He was at the palace early in the morning for an audience with the king, but ended up walking through the city honoring his worst enemy. He is exhausted—body and soul.

“It is worth reminding ourselves that the sin we think will smooth our path in fact often complicates our lives in unforeseen ways and leads us into even

greater difficulties than the ones we feared. The way of the transgressor is not only morally wrong, but frequently it is also far harder than the way of obedience would have been.”

(Duguid, 100)

- It’s at this low point that Haman is whisked away for the second banquet. Exhausted, he is brought to the palace to unknowingly face judgment.

“The passivity of the last step—the eunuchs ‘hastened Haman to the feast Esther had prepared’—is significant. Haman, the skilled manipulator of the king’s will and (he hopes) a people’s destiny, is no longer in control of his own life. He is rushed out and taken to a situation that Esther has prepared. He has been brought to her territory, and the initiative is now with her.”

(Fox, 81)

- It is interesting to contrast the rise of Esther with the fall of Haman.
  - Haman started with influential power, but has been reduced to passively fulfilling palace orders. Esther was introduced as a passive pawn of the palace, but has risen to influential power.
  - It was Haman’s cunning manipulation that influenced the king to sign the edict that would threaten Esther’s life. Now Esther’s wise, unfolding plan will influence the king to take Haman’s life.





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# JUDGMENT FOR HAMAN

## *Esther 7*

- Time has come for Esther’s second banquet. It is probably the afternoon—Haman has spent the morning parading Mordecai around the city.
- The narrator depicts Esther as “queen” with every mention of her name, further developing her transformation from earlier chapters, where her title is often missing. It’s her godly character and strong faith in the power of God that identifies her as queen.

“So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, ‘Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.’ Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.’”

(Esther 7:1-3)

- For the third time (Esther 5:3, Esther 5:6, Esther 7:2) the king grants Esther a request. It’s here she makes her intentions known.
- To this point, Esther has successfully hidden her Jewishness (Esther 2:10). Haman does not know her nationality or her connection to Mordecai, or his opinion of these banquets would not have been so cheery (Esther 5:12).
- Xerxes also does not know the relationship between Esther and Mordecai, though he does know that Mordecai is a Jew—he refers to him as “Mordecai the Jew” in Esther 6:10.
- But the king does *not* know which people Haman seeks to annihilate. Haman had hidden this from the king, referring to them only as “a certain people” (Esther 3:8) and ordering the edict himself. Just as Esther didn’t know of the plot though she lived in the palace (Esther 4:5), neither did the king know it was the *Jews* who awaited annihilation in the twelfth month.

- Here, Esther reveals to the king that she is a Jew and that she and her people are threatened with death by an irreversible edict.

“For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”  
(Esther 7:4)

- At least three interpretations are given for 7:4, with preference given to the third:
  - Fox (84) suggests the disturbance to the king would be the loss of the sale—had they only been sold into slavery.
  - Other commentators assume it to mean that the sale of the Jews into slavery would certainly be a higher cost than the money lost due to their taxes. Therefore, the king would be better off financially to complete the sale.
  - Clines (311) understands it simply to mean that being sold into slavery would be too trivial a matter to bother the king. Precisely that such a situation is *not* trivial, heightens the impact of their present situation: certain death.
- The point is, the situation is not trivial. Her life and the lives of her people depend on it. Esther has risked her life to even approach the king with the matter.

“King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, ‘Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?’ Esther said, ‘The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.’  
Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.”  
(Esther 7:5-6)

- Here is the big reveal! Haman’s pride and deceit have been brought into the light.
- The reader who’s carefully followed the story rejoices here: Haman has been found out! But beware! A day like this waits for all of us who, like Haman, do evil deeds in darkness.

“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.”

(Luke 12:2-3)

- Esther and Haman represent two different judgments.
  - Esther, exhausted in body by three days of fasting and tormented in soul by the threat of annihilation, approaches the king ready for judgment but instead receives merc.
  - Haman, exhausted in body by two days without sleep parading all over the city and tormented in soul by the threat of judgment, trembles before the king and queen as he awaits his sentence.
- What’s the difference between these two ends? Esther repents and puts her life in the hands of the sovereign God. May Esther’s humility and submission be a model for all of us who desire mercy on the day of judgment!
- We are right to rejoice in seeing the judgment on sin. It proves God just and faithful. Our hope is not in a *stay* of judgment, but in a mediator *who takes our place* in judgment. Esther’s mediation on behalf of her people did not require her death, but Christ’s mediation on behalf of His people did. The difference is in the edict. The Jews were given a death sentence by an unjust bumbling king; we—by our sin—have earned our death sentence by a just and righteous King.

“The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.”

(Esther 7:7-8)

- Many commentators use this as an opportunity to poke more fun at Xerxes—he can’t make a decision without his advisors so he wanders off looking for one. But he has made a decision, and Haman realizes this. “The king had already decided his fate.”
- Haman, now seeking to save his own life, begs before Esther.

“The irony here is that Haman, who had demanded that Mordecai bow before him, was at the feet of the Jew Esther.”

(Breneman, 350)

- Esther reclines on the couch, a normal posture at a Persian banquet. How exactly Haman falls on her is not explained, but perhaps he is kissing her feet as an act of submission (Breneman, 350).

“The king exclaimed, ‘Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’ As soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face.”

(Esther 7:8)

- However it happens, the king returns from the garden and mistakes Haman’s begging for a sexual advance.

“In this verse the character of the three protagonists is brought out. Haman was a prideful man with a cowardly heart. The king was easily influenced and weak in spite of his appearance of power. Esther was courageous and steadfast.”

(Breneman, 350)

- The story swells to an even greater irony than we’ve yet seen, greater even than Haman parading Mordecai around the city: Haman takes Mordecai’s place at the gallows.

“Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, ‘A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman’s house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.’ The king said, ‘Hang him on it!’ So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided.”

(Esther 7:9-10)

“[Harbona’s] speech mirrors that of Haman’s wife and friends at 5:14, and the subject is the same, the gallows or stake fifty cubits high; only the persons of the condemned have changed places.”

(Clines, 313)

- Mordecai’s life has been spared! Haman is hanged on the gallows made for Mordecai.
- But Haman is no Christ figure, the edict still hangs over the heads of the Jews. Mordecai has spared death *this time*, but his death is still ordered in the twelfth month.

“The story is not over. The narrative has shown the rise and fall of Haman, but the edict of annihilation is still intact. More is at stake here than just Mordecai’s life; also at stake are the lives of all the Jews in the Persian Empire.”

(Breneman, 350)

- In our own great reversal, Christ is a much better sacrifice than Haman. He has not only won us a *stay* of execution—He hasn’t just bought us an extra few months—He has *canceled* the written code that stood against us.

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

(Colossians 2:13-15)

- Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!



# 10

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## TWO COMPETING EDICTS

### *Esther 8:1-9:17*

- Justice has come for Haman. Now Esther must deal with the unchangeable edict that orders the annihilation of her people.
- This chapter might give us some encouragement and practical approaches to missions. Esther and Mordecai have been saved, but they won't rest until all of God's people are saved with them. May we, too, be encouraged to share our salvation with the world until the full number of God's children have entered His fold!

“That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.”  
(Esther 8:1-2)

- Because someone died for him, Mordecai is now invited “into the presence of the king” and he receives the inheritance of the one who died. In a similar way our replacement in death, Jesus Christ, also gives us access to the King of kings and shares with us a rich inheritance.
- Earlier, we noted how Mordecai and Esther's worldly compromises made life difficult. We saw how they deviated from the conviction of Daniel. Consider how Daniel or Joseph's strong faith in God led to their blessing. Mordecai and Esther, now repentant and obedient, have found God's way to be a blessing in the same way.

“If this were a story only about the conflict between Haman and Esther and Mordecai, this scene would be the anticlimactic point where the righteous

people are rewarded for their courage and loyalty. The story, however, has almost lulled the reader to forget one very important aspect.”

(Breneman, 352)

- However, worldly prominence is not the goal. It was not what Daniel or Joseph sought after, and it’s not guaranteed. Consider Paul, whose strong faith and conviction led to multiple imprisonments, many sufferings, and eventually his martyrdom. This is the example of Christ that His disciples are given to follow.

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

(Philippians 3:7-11)

- Esther’s desire is not for worldly treasures that spoil and fade. She’s concerned about justice and life. These are elements of a heavenly inheritance that never spoils or fades.

“Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. ‘If it pleases the king,’ she said, ‘and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king’s provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?’”

(Esther 8:3-6)



- The mention of the golden scepter reminds us of the great danger Esther has risked to seek the salvation of her people. This is now the fourth request she has made of the king.
  - Esther 3:3-4 – Esther invites Xerxes and Haman to the first banquet.
  - Esther 3:6-8 – Esther invites Xerxes and Haman to the second banquet.
  - Esther 7:2-4 – Esther requests saving from Haman’s scheme.
  - Esther 8:4-6 – Esther requests the salvation of her people from the edict.
- Esther makes this request based on personal merit, “If he regards me with favor” and “if he is pleased with me.” Here is another departure from our own rescue, which is based on no work of our own (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- Still, we should see here the importance of right behavior—particularly how our behavior impacts our mission in the world.
- Consider the requirement for an elder to “have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7) or Peter’s command to “live such good lives among the pagans that...they might see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12). One of the ways we carry the Kingdom of God where we might least expect is by our conduct and character before the world.
- It’s ultimately Esther’s faithful, unwavering character that makes her beautiful. She is surely counted among “the holy women of the past.”

“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.”

(1 Peter 3:3-5)

- Esther asks Xerxes to overrule the edict of Haman, but the king explains that this is not possible—it can’t be revoked.

“King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, ‘Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows. Now write another decree in the king’s name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king’s signet ring—for no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.’”

(Esther 8:7-8)

- Though the edict cannot be revoked, the king permits Mordecai to issue a *second* edict to compete with Haman’s original edict.

“At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai’s orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king’s signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king. The king’s edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies. The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies. The couriers, riding the royal horses, raced out, spurred on by the king’s command. And the edict was also issued in the citadel of Susa.”

(Esther 8:9-14)

- All of the elements of Mordecai’s new edict are a reversal of Haman’s from chapter 3:10-14. Mordecai’s addition that the Jews would “avenge themselves on their enemies” provides moral grounds not included in Haman’s spiteful, sinful edict. This is not senseless genocide, as Haman desired; the Jews have the right to defend themselves.
- This new edict occurs “on the twenty-third day of the third month”—two months and 10 days since the first. This further emphasizes the impatience of Haman, who could not wait for his edict to take effect but rushed to execute Mordecai so quickly.
- It should also be noted that two months and 10 days is 70 days, an important number for Jews in exile. This certainly would connect them to their 70 years of exile away from Jerusalem.

- This testimony of God’s rescuing His people may have offered new hope and rejuvenated faith to those still remaining in Persia after the rebuilding of the temple. They were not among those “whose heart God had moved” (Ezra 1:5) after 70 years in exile, but perhaps the conclusion of these 70 days of threat gave them a chance at recommitment. Many of these may have joined later groups returning to Jerusalem led by Ezra or Nehemiah.

“Mordecai left the king’s presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.”

(Esther 8:15-17)

- The intervention of the strong arm of God to save His people has apparently moved the hearts of others, too!
- Curiously, these conversions are expressed as “fear of the Jews” rather than “fear of God” as we might expect. For this reason, opinions differ as to whether or not these conversions can be counted as genuine.

“Of importance is the parallel that this phrase creates with Esther’s own journey: she chose to identify herself with her people despite the risks involved; now non-Jews choose to identify themselves with Jews because they see only benefits from doing so.”

(Reid, 138)

“Their conversion to Judaism cannot be represented as insincere, for there is still no advantage to be gained in being a Jew; the first decree still stands, and the second decree gives the Jews rights only against those who attack them. Their fear is not that they will suffer at the hands of the Jews, for they are safe if they are not enemies of the Jews. Their fear must be a religious awe such as falls upon the inhabitants of Canaan (Jos. 2:9) and Transjordan (Exod. 15:16) and Egypt (Ps. 105:38). This uninvited proselytism is presented by the narrator as the climax of the success story that has occupied the chapter...”

(Clines, 318-319)

- We can assume that both types of conversions were present in Persia: some reflected on the power of God and turned to Him in new obedience, others sought personal security and worldly honor in false confession. Ultimately, the fruit of repentance and obedience will separate the true from the false.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”  
(Matthew 7:21)

- The western church has experienced something similar. In our post-Christian society many who once professed faith have left the church, demonstrating that their former confession was for personal gain.

“On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king’s administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful. The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men.”  
(Esther 9:1-6)

- Finally, Edict-Day arrives, the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar. Those who still seek to destroy the people of God attack in accordance with the edict of Haman. The Jews, and those who have joined them, protect themselves in accordance with the edict of Mordecai. The Jews experience great victory.
- Note also how the victory of Christ over our enemy—sin and death—far surpasses the victory of Mordecai and Esther. Revelation, for example, three times describes the advances of the enemy that wishes to destroy the people of God but *never* is a battle depicted. God simply wipes out the enemy!

“They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder. The number of those slain in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. The king said to Queen Esther, ‘The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa.

What have they done in the rest of the king’s provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted.’ ‘If it pleases the king,’ Esther answered, ‘give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day’s edict tomorrow also, and let Haman’s ten sons be hanged on gallows.’ So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they hanged the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder. This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.”

(Esther 9:7-17)

- Consider again the unfinished work of Israel against Amalek, Saul against Agag. Here in Persia, a few hundred years later, sovereign God uses a fragmented and left behind people to finish His work.

“After all, Haman the Amalekite represents all the enemies of the Jews. By destroying the enemies of God, the Jews in Persia complete the task that Saul in Israel left unfinished. For Jewish readers the parallelism with Saul’s attack against the Amalekites would not be missed, especially the specific instruction Saul received to totally destroy them, men, women, children, and infants...(I Sam. 15:3). The edict of Mordecai is therefore a means by which the evil intent of Haman, and all the enmity in history he represents, is resolved and reversed in favour of the Jews.”

(Reid, 136)

- Esther's story is a microcosm of this larger story: it's never too late to repent and obey. Hundreds of years later, in another generation, in another land, God is there reconciling His people and reconciling His world.

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# PURIM FESTIVAL

## *Esther 9:18-10:3*

- The story is over. The Jews are safe; God has delivered His people. The battle is over, the victory is won. But the Book of Esther is not only a testimony of the power and faithfulness of God, but for establishing the festival of Purim.
- The final section of Esther establishes the festival of Purim and gives its purpose and traditions.
- Esther 9:17 has just stated that Jews *outside* the city had rested on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar. In the city of Susa, however, fighting had continued on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

“The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy. That is why rural Jews—those living in villages—observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other.”

(Esther 9:18-19)

- A discrepancy emerges: Jews in rural villages establish the 14<sup>th</sup> as a day of feasting, while Jews in the city limits establish the 14<sup>th</sup> as their feast.
- Mordecai sends a letter to unify these celebrations.

“Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.”

(Esther 9:20-22)

- They find a genius solution: celebrate on *both* days! Instead of deciding to hold Purim on *either* the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>, Mordecai’s letter calls for Jews to celebrate Purim over two days.
- The celebration will be marked by a few traditions:
  - Feasting
  - Presents of food
  - Gifts for the poor
- We might liken this to our Christmas traditions, which often include generous gifts and donations, sharing food, and joyous celebration.

“So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. But when the plot came to the king’s attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. (Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word pur.)”  
 (Esther 9:23-26)

- The festival is given the name Purim, a Babylonian word for “lots”. The singular is expressed in the text itself (Esther 3:7). English speakers prefer the plural, “casting lots,” but the idea is typically singular in Hebrew, “they cast the pur (that is, the lot)...” A couple explanations are given as to why the festival is given a plural, Babylonian title.
  - The plural is consistent with the festival lasting two days (Fox, 121).
  - The plural conveys the idea of the two competing lots (or fates) of Haman and Mordecai (Clines, 164).
  - Preferred is the explanation that the plural is always used to describe Jewish holidays—Feast of Weeks, Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Lights, etc. (Reid, 147).

“Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every



generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants. So Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter concerning Purim. And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Xerxes—words of goodwill and assurance—to establish these days of Purim at their designated times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed for them, and as they had established for themselves and their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation. Esther’s decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records.”  
 (Esther 9:26-32)

- Esther and Mordecai team up to establish traditions for the festival of Purim. They add to the traditions of feasting, sharing food, and giving to the poor:
  - Annual celebration
  - Fasting
  - Lamentation
- The Jews have, in fact, continued in this tradition to this day. The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar fall in our calendars between February 25 and March 25. Some of the traditions differ from place to place and time to time.

“In Jewish history there had been a time of fasting related to the joyous celebration of Purim. In the time of the Talmud it was known as a three-day fast and observed after the Feast of Purim. From the ninth century A.D., the day before the Feast of Purim (thirteenth of Adar) has been observed as a day of fasting.”  
 (Breneman, 366)

- Today, “the Purim festival has become a Purim season” (Reid, 150). The basic traditions are:
  - The Sabbath *before* Adar is *Shabbat Shekalim* (Sabbath of Shekels). Synagogue readings encourage giving gifts of money to the poor.
  - The Sabbath before the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar is *Shabbat Zachor* (Sabbath of Remembrance). The history between the Jews and Amalekites is read.
  - On the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar—Purim’s Eve—the people fast during the day. This includes “abstention from eating, drinking, wearing of leather shoes,

washing and engaging in sexual activity” (Reid, 150). The fast concludes at sundown, when the book of Esther is read solemnly.

- Purim morning begins the festival atmosphere, and the book of Esther is read again.

“On the morning of Purim the Esther scroll is read again in the synagogue, but the mood is lighter. In fact, children dress up as the main characters in the story, and the carnival atmosphere is enhanced by the telling of jokes and the singing of songs. When Haman’s name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using various home-made shakers. Two types of gifts are sent: food parcels to friends and family, and charitable donations for the poor. Towards the end of the day, Jewish families gather together for a relaxed meal. Today it is only the Jews in Jerusalem (a walled city) who celebrate Purim on the fifteenth day of Adar—all other Jews celebrate on the fourteenth of Adar.”

(Reid, 151)

- Because of Purim, Esther is perhaps the most well-known story among the Jews today.
- We, too, ought to be moved to celebrate at the thought of God’s faithful deliverance and provision for His people! He is mighty to save; His strong arm has delivered us; He is our rock and refuge; in Him is forgiveness and eternal life!
- May this celebration, viewed through a knowledge of the Cross of Christ, not be limited to a day or even a season, but be our attitude in every moment. May we be moved to repent and be transformed, may we be moved to generosity and right living, and may we never forget to rejoice and celebrate this newness of life in the Spirit!

“King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores. And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.”

(Esther 10:1-3)

- The final note of Esther is reminiscent of the conclusion to many stories in the historical books. Often, accounts of the kings—in I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, and II Chronicles especially—conclude the same way.

“As for the other events of the reign of Joash, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah?”

(II Kings, 12:19)

“The account of his sons, the many prophecies about him, and the record of the restoration of the temple of God are written in the annotations on the book of the kings. And Amaziah his son succeeded him as king.”

(II Chronicles 24:27)

- Esther is not in Israel, but in Persia. She is away from the promised land. Xerxes is not a king of Israel or Judah. That the book of Esther closes like a piece of Israel’s history reminds us of where we started: God is here, even where you least expect. His people span time and space and yet in all things He is faithful, working out His good purpose and plan for His glory and our good.



# ADDENDUM

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## ESTHER'S ADDITIONS

- Theologian RC Sproul has said the *inspiration* of the Bible is a matter of the *expiration* of God. In other words, the words of the Bible are the words that God breathed (II Timothy 3:16).
- God inspired prophets and apostles, men of their time and place, to write words that He ordained as Scripture (II Peter 1:21).
- *Canonicity* then—the determination of the books that are included in our Bibles—is settled in the sense that *if God breathed it, it's Scripture*. Human beings do not *determine* the canon by vote or some external test, we simply learn to *recognize* what is inspired by God.
- This task of *recognizing* the canon can be difficult—especially before the internet or motorized vehicles! However, Christians in early centuries *quickly* began recognizing the same texts as inspired.
- Some books were recognized more quickly and easily than others. Esther is one of the most challenged books of the Old Testament if not the entire Bible.

Did Recognize Esther	Did Not Recognize Esther
Josephus (90 AD)	Qumran (150 BC – 70 AD)
Council of Jamnia (90 AD)	Melito of Sardis (170 AD)
Bava Bathra (100 – 200 AD)	Athanasius (367 AD)
Council of Hippo (393 AD)	
Council of Carthage (397 AD)	

- Different reasons have been given for challenging Esther's canonicity:
  - The Hebrew text does mention the name of God;
  - It's similarities to the Book of Judith, an apocryphal work that the Jews never received as Scripture;
  - The pagan behavior described in the book (Clines, 255);
  - Esther is never cited in the New Testament.

- However, Christians should consider the matter of Esther’s inclusion settled. There are several strong reasons for this.
- Special weight is given to the Hebrew Old Testament which has, despite occasional questioning, always counted Esther to be inspired Scripture.

“What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.”

(Romans 3:1-2)

“On the Jewish side, it may be significant that Esther is the one OT book not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community; but Qumran was not representative of mainstream Judaism, and the absence of Esther from its library may be an accident of the preservation of manuscripts or may be due to

Qumranic opinions about the celebration of the Purim festival...More substantive are the incidental remarks made in two places in the Talmud by rabbis of the third or fourth century AD calling into question the canonicity of the book. But here again, these opinions are clearly unrepresentative, and are mentioned only in order to be refuted.”

(Clines, 254)

- Esther was also included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint (LXX). This translation occurred sometime around 200 BC and was *widely* used. It is the version Jesus uses for Old Testament citations, according to the gospel writers. The apostles also use it when quoting the Old Testament. Christ and the apostles certainly knew of and utilized the Septuagint as the inspired Word of God.
- Once the question of canonicity is settled, we must account for variant versions of the story. At least three versions of the story exist. We’ll comment on the two most important: The Masoretic (Hebrew) Text, and the Septuagint (Greek) Text.
- In part because Esther was not preserved by the Jews in Qumran, no Hebrew manuscripts exist until the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century AD—a very late date. However, much earlier translations of the story in Aramaic and Syriac faithfully reproduce the Hebrew. This establishes that the Hebrew text existed and was circulated at an early date, even though we do not possess the Hebrew manuscripts from that time period.

“The citations of Esther in the Talmud generally support our present consonantal text. In the first or second century A.D. the rabbis adopted an official standard text of the Old Testament. In addition to the manuscripts there are many midrashim and later Jewish commentaries of Esther. They all represent the same basic text. Several ancient versions of the Book of Esther have been preserved. The Syriac version, possibly from the second century A.D., is a faithful translation of the Hebrew. A few words are added for clarification, but it is generally quite close to the original.”

(Breneman, 298)

- More manuscripts exist of the Septuagint version, which contains six long form additions (called A, B, C, D, E, and F). These 105 verses are certainly *additions* because their sentence structures are entirely Greek (as opposed to Hebrew *translated* to Greek).
- Because these sections of Esther are considered *additions* to the more original Hebrew, they are not present in the Hebrew Bible or in protestant Bibles. Protestant Christians have chosen to compile these additions into an apocryphal text named *The Additions of Esther*. Jerome made this distinction already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- The Catholic Church recognizes the books of the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture, so these additions are found in Catholic Bibles.
- The Belgic Confession encourages the distinction between inspired Scripture and other ancient works (like those in the Apocrypha), yet encourages the reading of those other works.

“We distinguish between these holy books and the apocryphal ones, which are the third and fourth books of Esdras; the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Jesus Sirach, Baruch; what was added to the Story of Esther...The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books. But they do not have such power and virtue that one could confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion.

Much less can they detract from the authority of the other holy books.”

(Belgic Confession Article 6)

- Because these additions are useful for understanding how ancient readers interpreted the text of Esther, we will add them in this addendum with brief comments.

### **Addition “A”: Mordecai’s Dream**

*(placed before Esther 1:1, replaces Esther 2:19-23)*

“In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the Great, on the first day of Nisan, Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, had a dream. He was a Jew, and lived in the city of Susa, an important man, in attendance at the royal court; he was one of the captives that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had brought from Jerusalem with Jeconiah, king of Judah. And this was his dream: behold, noise and tumult, thunders and earthquake, uproar on the earth. And here came two great dragons, both ready to wrestle, and they uttered a great roar. And at their roar every nation made ready for war, to fight against the nation of the upright. And behold, a day of darkness and gloom, affliction and anguish, distress and great tumult, upon the earth. And the whole upright nation was troubled, fearing their own hurt, and they prepared to perish; and they cried out to God. And at their cry there arose as though from a tiny spring, a great river, with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the humble were exalted and consumed the glorious.

When Mordecai, who had had this dream, and had seen what God had resolved to do, awoke, he kept it in his mind, and all day sought by all means to understand it. Now Mordecai took his rest in the court with Gabatha and Tharra, the two royal eunuchs who kept watch in the court. He overheard their reflections, and inquired into their designs, and found out that they were preparing to lay hands on King Artaxerxes, and he informed the king about them. And the king examined the two eunuchs, and when they confessed, they were led off to execution. And the king wrote a memorandum about this matter, and Mordecai also wrote about it. And the king ordered Mordecai to be in attendance at the court, and he made him presents because of it. But Haman, the son of Ammedatha, a Bougaean, was in high honor with the king, and he set out to injure Mordecai and his people, because of the two royal eunuchs.”

(Esther 11:1-12:6)

- This extended version of the Esther story begins with a dream of Mordecai and closes with an interpretation of that dream (Addition “F”). The story tends to focus more on Mordecai than Esther.
- The name of God is introduced early in the story. The Greek account seeks to give more obvious credit to and emphasis on God.



- Two notable distinctions occur here:
  - Mordecai is rewarded for uncovering the plot, where in the Hebrew account this is an oversight the king later corrects.
  - The conclusion of this section suggests that Haman was part of the plot to assassinate Xerxes, and he is angry with Mordecai for disrupting it.

**Addition “B”: The Text of Haman’s Edict**

*(placed between Esther 3:13 and 3:14)*

“And this is the copy of the letter: ‘The Great King, Artaxerxes, to the rulers of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia, and to the subordinate governors, writes thus: Having become ruler of many nations, and come to have dominion over the whole world, I desire, not because I am elated by the presumption of power, but behaving always with mildness and moderation, to insure that my subjects shall live in unbroken tranquility, and in order to make my kingdom peaceable and open for travel in all its extent, to re-establish the peace which all men desire. When I asked my counselors how this end might be accomplished, Haman, who excels among us in soundness of judgment, and is distinguished for his unflinching loyalty and steadfast fidelity, and has attained the second rank in the kingdom, pointed out to us, that among all the nations of the world there is scattered an ill-disposed people, with laws contrary to those of every nation, which continually disregards the royal ordinances, so that the unifying of our realm, directed by us with the best intentions, cannot be effected. Understanding therefore that this nation, and it alone, stands in constant opposition to all men, perversely following a strange manner of life and laws, and ill-disposed to our administration, doing all the harm it can, so that our rule may not be made secure, we have decreed that the persons designated in the letters sent to you by Haman, who is in charge of our administration, and is a second father to us, shall all, with their wives and children, be destroyed, root and branch, by the sword of their enemies, without pity or mercy, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar, of this present year; so that they who all along have been disaffected, may in a single day go down through violence to Hades, and leave our government secure and undisturbed for the future.’”

(Esther 13:1-7)

- The exact text of Haman’s original edict is given in Addition “B”. The exact text of Mordecai’s second edict is given in Addition “E”.

### **Addition “C”: Esther’s Prayer**

*(placed between Esther 4:17 and 5:3)*

“And she besought the Lord, calling to mind all the doings of the Lord, and said, ‘Lord, you King, who rule over all, for all is in your power, and there is no one who can oppose you when you choose to save Israel, for you made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven, and you are Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist you, who are the Lord; you know all things; you know, Lord, that it was not in insolence or arrogance or vainglory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman, for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet, to save Israel. But I did it so as not to set the glory of man above the glory of God, and I will bow down to no one but you, my Lord, and I will not do it in pride. Now, Lord God and King, God of Abraham, spare your people, for they are looking at us to consume us, and they desire to destroy the inheritance that has been yours from the beginning. Do not be indifferent to your portion, which you ransomed for yourself from the land of Egypt. Hear my prayer, and have mercy on your heritage; turn our mourning into feasting; so that we may live, and sing praise to your name, Lord; do not destroy the mouth of those who praise you.’ And all Israel cried out with all their might, for death was before their eyes. Then Esther, the queen, overwhelmed with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord; she took off her splendid clothing and put on garments of distress and mourning, and instead of the rarest perfumes, she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she abased her body utterly, and every part that she delighted to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. And she prayed to the Lord and said, ‘My Lord, our King, you stand alone; help me who am alone, and have no helper but you; for my danger is in my hand. Ever since I was born, I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, Lord, took Israel from among all the nations, and our forefathers from among all their ancestors for an everlasting possession, and that you did for them all that you promised. But now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies, because we glorified their gods; you are upright, Lord. And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter captivity but they have made an agreement with their idols to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and destroy your possession, and stop the mouths of those who praise you and quench the glory of your house, and your altar, and open the mouths of the heathen to praise unreal gods, so that a mortal king may be magnified forever. Lord, do not give up your scepter to those who have no being, and do not let them mock at our fall but turn their plan against

themselves. And make an example of the man who had begun this against us. Remember, Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction and give me courage, king of the gods and holder of all dominion. Put eloquent speech in my mouth, before this lion, and change his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him, and of those who support him. But save us by your hand, and help me who stands alone, and have no one but you, Lord. You know everything, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked, and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. You know what I am forced to do—that I abhor the symbol of my proud position, which is placed upon my head on the day when I appear in public I abhor it like a filthy rag, and never wear it in private. Your slave has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast, or drunk the wine of the libations. Your slave has had no joy from the day I was brought here until now, except in you, Lord God of Abraham. O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evil-doers, and save me from what I fear.”

(Esther 13:3-14:19)

- Added to Esther’s fasting is a prayer to the God of Abraham, much like we would have expected to find.
- Esther repents and asks for forgiveness because the Jews in Persia “have sinned before you...because we glorified their gods.”
- Yet, Esther’s prayer speaks favorably of her position in the palace. She “abhors” her marriage to Xerxes and the sin “forced” on her. We’re reminded that, despite our frustrations over Esther’s passivity, she is being used and abused by the empire in all this.

#### **Addition “D”: Esther Before King Xerxes**

*(replaces Esther 5:1-3)*

“And it came to pass on the third day, when she had ceased to pray, that she took off the clothes in which she had worshiped, and dressed herself in splendor. When she was magnificently clad, she invoked the aid of the all-seeing God and Savior, and took with her her two maids; on one she leaned languishingly, while the other followed her, carrying her train. She was radiant with her perfect beauty and her face was happy as it was lovely, but her heart was in an agony of fear. When she had gone through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clad in all his magnificence,

and covered with gold and precious stones; he was an awe-inspiring sight. And he with the fiercest anger; and the queen fell down and turned pale and fainted, and she collapsed upon the head of the maid who went before her. Then God changed the king's spirit to mildness, and in great anxiety he sprang from his throne and caught her in his arms, until she came to herself, and he reassured her with soothing words, and said to her, 'What is it, Esther? I am your brother. Courage, you shall not die, for our command is only for the people; come near.' Then he lifted the gold scepter and laid it upon her neck, and he embraced her and said, 'Tell me!' And she said to him, 'I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my mind was dismayed with awe at your splendor; you are wonderful, my lord, and your face is full of graciousness.' But as she spoke, she fell fainting; and the king was troubled, and all his train tried to reassure her."  
 (Esther 15:1-16)

- Here the Septuagint editorializes the scene, increasing the detail as Esther approaches King Xerxes. Notable additions include:
  - Esther, weak from fasting, faints twice.
  - The king is initially angry.
  - God is explicitly credited with changing Xerxes heart

**Addition “E”: The Text of Mordecai’s Edict**

*(placed between Esther 8:12 and 8:13)*

“Of this letter the following is a copy: ‘The Great King, Artaxerxes, sends greeting to the rulers of countries in a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia, and to those who are loyal to our rule. The more frequently they are honored by the excessive favor of their benefactors, the prouder many men become, and not only seek to injure our subjects, but, in their inability to bear prosperity, they undertake designs against their own benefactors, and not only uproot gratitude from among men, but intoxicated by the boasts of foolish men they suppose they will escape the evil-hating justice of the ever all-seeing God. And often many of those who occupy places of authority have by the persuasiveness of the friends who have been entrusted with the conduct of affairs, been made accomplices in the shedding of innocent blood, and been involved in irremediable disasters, when such men by the specious fallacies of their vicious natures beguile the sincere good will of their sovereigns. And what has been impiously accomplished by the baneful

conduct of those who exercise authority unworthily, you can see not so much from the venerable histories which have come down to us, as from the scrutiny of matters close at hand. And in order to make our kingdom in the future tranquil and peaceful for all men, we will change our attitude, and always decide the matters that fall under our notice with more considerate attention. For Haman, the son of Hammedathi, a Macedonian, an alien indeed from the Persian blood, and widely removed from our kindness, being entertained as a guest by us, enjoyed the humanity that we extend to every nation to such a degree that he was called our father, and was continually bowed down to by all, as a person second only to the royal throne. But he in his unbearable arrogance designed to deprive us of our kingdom, and to compass the death of our preserver and perpetual benefactor Mordecai, and of Esther, our blameless partner in the kingdom, together with their whole nation, demanding with intricate deceptions and intrigues that they be destroyed. For he thought by these means that he would find us deserted and would transfer the domination of the Persians to the Macedonians. But we find that the Jews, who were consigned to annihilation by this thrice sinful man, are no evil-doers but are governed by most just laws, and are sons of the Most High, Most Mighty Living God, who has directed the kingdom for us and for our forefathers with most excellent guidance. Therefore please pay no further attention to the letters sent you by Haman, the son of Hammedathi, because the very man who was active in this has been hung with all his house at the gates of Susa, for God, who governs all things, has speedily inflicted on him the punishment he deserved. Therefore put up the copy of this letter publicly everywhere, and let the Jews live under their own laws, and reinforce them, so that on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar, on that very day they may defend themselves against those who assail them at the time of their affliction. For God, who governs all things, has made this day a joy to them instead of proving the destruction of the chosen race. So you must observe it as a notable day among your commemorative festivals, with all good cheer, so that both now and hereafter it may mean preservation to us and to the loyal Persians, but to those who plot against us it may serve as a reminder of destruction. But any city or country without exception, which shall fail to act in accordance with this, shall be utterly destroyed in wrath with fire and sword; it will be made not only impassable for men, but also hateful to wild animals and birds for all time.”

(Esther 16:1-24)

- Just as the text of Haman’s edict was given in Addition “B”, the text of Mordecai’s edict is given in Addition “E”. Note again the inclusion of the name of God.

**Addition “F”: The Interpretation of Mordecai’s Dream**

*(placed after Esther 10:3)*

“And Mordecai said, ‘This came from God. For I remember the dream that I had about these things; for none of them has failed to be fulfilled. As for the tiny spring that became a river, when light came, and the sun shone and there was an abundance of water, the river is Esther, whom the king married and made queen. And I and Haman are the two dragons. And those who fathered to destroy the name of the Jews are the heathen. And my nation, which cried out to God and was saved, is Israel; for the Lord has saved his people, the Lord has delivered us from all these evils, and God has wrought great signs and wonders, such as never happened among the heathen. That is why he made two lots, one for the people of God and one for all the heathen, and these two lots came to the hour and time and day when God should judge among all the nations. And God remembered his people, and he acquitted his inheritance. So these days in the month of Adar, on the fourteenth and fifteenth of that month, will be observed by them with assembling together and joy and gladness before God from generation to generation, forever, among his people Israel.’ In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said he was a priest and Levite, and Ptolemy his son, brought in (to Egypt) this preceding letter of Purim, which they said was true, and had been translated by Lysimachus the son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem.”  
 (Esther 10:4-11)

- Closes with an interpretation of the dream that introduced the book in Addition “A”.
  - The river is Esther
  - Mordecai and Haman are the two dragons, supported by their people
- An explanation for the title *Purim* is given: there are two warring lots of Mordecai and Haman (see page 78 of this study guide).
- A brief explanation is given as to how the story traveled from Persia to Jerusalem.











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[zack.flipse@firstcrcoostburg.org](mailto:zack.flipse@firstcrcoostburg.org)