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ESTHER

*The Jews are saved from genocide*

SETTING

In Susa, the capital of Persia, 483 - 473 BC.

KEY VERSE

*"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 your royal position for such a time as this?"*

4:14

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## Introduction

Chronologically, the book of Esther comes between Ezra chapters 6 and 7, as Xerxes I was king of Persia from 486-465 BC. Many of the Jews in Babylon never returned to Judea, and this book provides insight into what happens in Susa, the Persian capital. At the same time, the book is about all the Jews in all the provinces of Persia, including those who had returned to Jerusalem.

After Esther has become queen, the king sets the Agagite Haman over all the nobles, and all kneel before him - all except Esther's older cousin Mordecai because he is Jewish (Mordecai is of Saul's lineage, while Haman may be descended from the Amalekite king Agag in 1 Sam 15. This old enmity between God's people and the Amalekites seems to be part of the picture.). Haman becomes so angry that he wants to exterminate all Jews throughout Persia because of this. Esther uses her position and plans carefully to get Xerxes on her side and expose Haman. In this way, she saves all the Jews throughout Persia, and this becomes the background for the Jewish holiday Purim (which is not mentioned in the Law of Moses). The word comes from "*pur*" the Persian word for "lots", because Haman cast lots to determine which day he would carry out his evil plan (3:7).

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, but he is in the scenes and in the "coincidences" that happened (and indirectly in 4:14). The author demonstrates very good storytelling skills, in addition to the fact that the event has the ingredients of a good story: a beautiful and brave heroine, romance, a serious threat to the good protagonists, a thoroughly evil villain, tension, irony, twisters, and a happy ending. Haman is portrayed as ridiculous, and we are meant to laugh at him, perhaps because God laughs at those who make evil plans against him or his people (Psalm 2).

Although God is not mentioned, Esther is nevertheless an important part of the great narrative in the OT and our history as Christians. Had Haman succeeded, Jesus would not have come. But 4:14 shows that God would have saved the Jews no matter what Haman and Esther had done. Nothing can stop His plan.

Where are you on a scale of 1-10 where 1 represents "Most things are coincidences. It takes a lot for me to say it was God.” and 10 represents “There are no coincidences. I interpret everything as directed by God.”

Is the Book of Esther more important to the Jews than to Christians? The book is about life in Persia after the return. It tells about the origin of the holiday of Purim (which is not mentioned in the Law of Moses). God is not mentioned.

### Setting

Dating: Includes Persian loanwords. After Xerxes' reign. A mix of numbers and names of months. → late 4th century, perhaps under Artaxerxes I.

Ahasuerus (Heb.) / Xerxes (Gr.) Probably two versions of the Persian *xšayāršā*

Josephus and the LXX have Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC)

The majority: Xerxes I: 486-465 BC

The action in the book: 483-473 BC.

Between Ezra 6 and 7

### Xerxes

Herodotus says that he was mean and despotic towards his own house, not to mention towards foreigners.

The 180-day party in Ch. 1 (483 BC) may have been the great war council for planning the invasion of Greece. He was then at war in 481-479, which he lost (the movie *300*).

This war drained large parts of the treasury. Haman's offer of 10,000 talents (3:9) would then come in handy. (An enormous sum, by the way.)

When he returned home, he sought comfort from his harem (according to Herodotus). This is also the year Esther becomes queen (2:16).

The rest of his reign revolved much around harem intrigues and arrogant courtiers and eunuchs—confirmed and parodied in Esther.

### Themes

Large reversals

Saul (2:5) vs. the Amalekites (3:1) →1. Sam 15 → Exodus 17 (God's People and Their Enemies)

How to live as God's people in a secular world (Is that why God is not mentioned?).

### Purpose

Make sure they do not forget this story, hence also Purim.

Gives hope that God does not abandon his people.

Inspire them to live as God's people in foreign countries.

### Genre: How historical is it?

Purim must have come from a historical event to become so popular.

Opens like Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel (“And it happened…”). The author clearly wants to present it as history (e.g., 10:2), but there is an equally clear emphasis on good storytelling.

*"And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had promoted, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?"* 10:2

Historical short story? Historical, but creative with some artistic freedom. The story is told in a creative and entertaining way.

Comedy? The purpose is to create “feel good” entertainment and ridicule evil (Psalm 2), not to criticize. Exaggerations, ridiculous coincidences, stereotypical characters, and twists

Seems like a unique genre. Maybe a little bit of everything.

Are 127 provinces (vs. 20 in Herodotus) an expression of the Persians' bloatedness from the point of view of others? Or does this correspond to the 120 satraps in Dan 6:1?

Is Haman's 25-meter-high stake ironic about his pride and wickedness?

*"Such 'unhistorical' features of the book do not threaten its historical value but rather provide interpretive depth to the story."* K. H. Jobes

The description of Persian royal palaces, parties, décor and customs agrees with Herodotus, Xenophon, and Aristophanes.

We have little literature from this Persian period and should be careful when judging from a modern point of view.

### Structure: Chiasmus

Thematic reversal

A. The king gives Haman his ring (3:10)

B. Haman summons the king's scribe (3:12)

C. Letters written, sealed with the ring (3:2)

D. Jews, even women and children, were to be killed on one day (3:13)

E. Haman's decree is publicly displayed as law (3:14)

F. Couriers go out in haste (3:15)

G. The city of Susa was bewildered (3:15)

H. Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes (4:1)

I. Mordecai goes through the city crying in sorrow (4:1)

J. Zeresh advises Mordecai's death (5:14)

K. King's insomnia leads to Mordecai's honor (6:1-3)

K. Haman's insomnia leads to his dishonor (6:4-9)

J. Zeresh predicts Haman's ruin (6:13)

I. Mordecai led through the city in honor (6:11)

H. Mordecai wears royal robes (8:15)

G. The city of Susa rejoices (8:15)

F. Couriers go out in haste (8:14)

E. Mordecai's decree is publicly displayed as law (8:13)

D. The enemies, even women and children, were to be killed on one day (8:11)

C. Letters written, sealed with the same ring (8:10)

B. Mordecai summons the king's scribes (8:9)

A. The king gives Mordecai the same ring (8:2)

Chs. 1-2 Xerxes' greatness and queen drama — Esther becomes queen

Chs. 3-4 Haman's plan and Mordecai's plan

Ch. 5 Esther's 1st feast — Haman sets up the stake for Mordecai

Ch. 6 Turning point — Mordecai is honored

The threat increases until Ch. 6 before it is reversed in chapters 6-10.

Ch. 7 Esther's 2nd feast — Haman is hanged on his own stake

Chs. 8-10 The Jews defend themselves and are saved - the Purim festival

## Chs. 1-2: Xerxes' greatness and queen drama — Esther becomes queen

Ironic: The world's most powerful man has no control over his wife.

*"Won his favor"* (2:9, 15, 17): Often, it is God who is behind (Exodus 11:3, Ezra 7:27-28, Dan 1:9).

As with Joseph, without God being mentioned (Gen 39:4) — but understood as God in Acts 7:9-10 (and in Gen 50:20):

*“Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.”* Gen 39:4

*“Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.”* Acts 7:9-10

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Gen 50:20

## Chs. 3-4: Haman's plan and Mordecai's plan

Is Mordecai a godly Jew or just stubborn? He would have to bow to the king, and the rest of the OT has no problem with that.

Is it because of the old conflict between Saul and the Amalekites? (Exodus 17:16; Deuteronomy 25:17, 19)

"He said, 'Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.'" Exodus 17:16

"Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt." Deuteronomy 25:17

“When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” Deuteronomy 25:19

Haman overreacts violently. An extremely evil character.

*“Pur”* (3:7) is only used in Esther.

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

10,000 talents of silver is also a ridiculous amount. Does he think he's going to take it from the Jews?

God is not mentioned even in connection with the wearing of sackcloth, fasting, ashes, or lamentation. But apparently, it is God they focus on.

Esther is initially afraid of dying, even though all Jews will be killed.

Mordecai is sure that they will be saved somehow.

*"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 your royal position for such a time as this?”* Mordecai (4:14)

## Ch. 5: Esther's 1st feast. Haman sets up the stake for Mordecai

The king finds favor with Esther again, and Esther invites the king and Haman to a feast.

The king asks a second time what she wants (in an exaggerated way), and she invites them both to a party the next day.

To increase the tension? Or does she have a plan? It makes it even more likely that the king will do what she asks since he has now asked twice.

Biblical wisdom is knowing the right time to take action.

The chapter ends with both Esther and Haman having a plan they are thinking of telling the king.

## Ch. 6: Turning Point — Mordecai is honored

Is it coincidental or divine that the king cannot sleep that very night? (LXX: “The Lord took sleep away from the king that night…”)

Haman is surprised by the question from the king and is not allowed to come up with his wish to have Mordecai executed. His great pride makes the situation comical.

“The tables have turned.” Haman's wife and friends, who the night before proposed the execution of "Mordecai the Jew", now say that Haman cannot win because Mordecai is a Jew.

Haman is brought to Esther's second party.

## Ch. 7: Esther's 2nd feast. Haman is hanged on his own stake

Esther builds up the tension by not mentioning Haman until the king has been shocked. The final straw is that Haman has set up a stake for Mordecai, "he who once saved the king".

## Chs. 8-10: The Jews defend themselves and are saved - the Purim festival

More reversal: Mordecai gets the king’s ring and the house of Haman.

Although Haman is dead, the danger is not over.

The decree cannot be called back, so instead a new decree is issued (8:9-10 is parallel to 3:12) that says that the Jews are allowed to defend themselves.

"allowed to stand together and defend one's own life" (8:11, 9:16)

"The king’s edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies." 8:11

"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." 9:16

could “kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them” (8:11)

"those who hated them" (9:1, 5)

"those determined to destroy them" (9:2)

## Where is Jesus in this book?

The Jews were saved as part of God's plan so that their Messiah could come. "relief and deliverance for the Jews" (4:14)

Jesus gave us a model of humility, which is the exact opposite of Haman's pride.

Jesus' resurrection: The biggest twist!

## What does the book of Esther tell us?

"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 your royal position for such a time as this?” (4:14)

If Esther had not done that, God would have used someone else. We cannot destroy God's plan, but He wants to use us.

## When is God invisibly present?

Is it a coincidence, or does God direct what happens? How can we know? The book seems to ask these questions without directly answering them.

The book seems to say that God is active among His people, even outside of Israel. This applies to us to a great extent as well.

No one in the book knows exactly what God is doing while things are happening. You often only see that afterward.

Have there been any coincidences in your life recently where you should perhaps reconsider if it may have been God instead?

How should we live and relate to this?