

Tuesday Evening Bible Study  
Series #15: Historical Books of the Old Testament  
Week 7: Esther  
Tuesday, March 19, 2019

**The Book of Esther: A strong Queen saves her people**

**Summary**

Ahasuerus, all powerful king of Persia, banishes his queen Vashti for failing to appear before him when bidden. The new chosen queen is Esther, cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai, the Jew. Mordecai's bitter enemy at court is the wicked Haman, the king's right-hand man. Because Mordecai fails to bow before him, Haman plots not only Mordecai's death but also the extermination of all the Jews. Mordecai calls on Queen Esther to save her people. Esther heroically risks the king's wrath by appearing unbidden before him. She invites King Ahasuerus and Haman to two banquets where she persuades the king both to save her people and also to hang Haman on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. The king's edict to kill the Jews is reversed, and the Jews instead get revenge on their would-be persecutors and celebrate, initiating the festival of Purim.

**Themes**

The book of Esther teaches indirectly four lessons:

- 1) Maintaining community and religious identity in foreign territory is a tricky but terribly important task.
- 2) Through wisdom, wit, and courage, people can live productively in a foreign land, even when subject to the whims of a foreign power.
- 3) Even when God remains hidden, unnamed, and seemingly absent, as in the book of Esther, one can detect the presence of the divine in favorable coincidences and in the bravery of leaders who step up when needed.
- 4) All of this is taught through irony and humor, which provides the book's final lesson: laughter gives life.

**When was the Book of Esther written?**

Although we do not know who wrote the book of Esther, from internal evidence it is possible to make some inferences about the author and the date of composition. It is clear that the author was a Jew, both from his emphasis on the origin of a Jewish festival and from the Jewish nationalism that permeates the story. The author's knowledge of Persian customs, the setting of the story in the city of Susa and the absence of any reference to conditions or circumstances in the land of Judah suggest that he was a resident of a Persian city. The earliest date for the book would be shortly after the events narrated, i.e., ca. 460 BC (before Ezra's return to Jerusalem). Internal evidence also suggests that the festival of Purim had been observed for some time prior to the actual writing of the book ([9:19](#)) and that Xerxes had already died (see [10:2](#) and note). Several scholars have dated the book later than 330 b.c.; the absence of Greek words and the style of the author's Hebrew dialect, however, suggest that the book must have been written before the Persian empire fell to Greece in 331.

## **Outline of Esther**

- I. The Feasts of Xerxes (1:1 – 2:18)
  - A. Xerxes's banquets (1:1-9)
  - B. King Ahasuerus deposes Queen Vashti (1:10-22)
  - C. Esther becomes the new queen (2:1-23)
    - 1) The search for a new queen (2:1-4)
    - 2) Esther and Mordecai (2:5-18)
- II. The Feasts of Esther (2:19 – 8:2)
  - A. Mordecai discovers a plot (2:19-22)
  - B. Haman's plot to destroy the Jews (3:1-15)
  - C. Mordecai persuades Esther to help (4:1-17)
  - D. Esther's First Banquet (5:1-8)
  - E. Haman plans to have Mordecai hanged (5:9-14)
  - F. The king honors Mordecai (6:1-11)
  - G. Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise (6:12 – 8:2)
- III. The Feasts of Purim (8:3 – 10:3)
  - A. Esther saves the Jews (8:3-17)
  - B. The Institution of Purim (9:1-32)
    - 1) Destruction of the enemies of the Jews (9:1-19)
    - 2) The Feast of Purim inaugurated (9:20-32)
    - 3) Mordecai and the king (10:1-3)

### **The Banquets in Esther**

- 1. Xerxes's banquet for the nobility (1:2-4)
- 2. Xerxes's banquet for all the men in Susa (1:5-8)
- 3. Vashti's banquet for the women (1:9)
- 4. Esther's enthronement banquet (2:18)
- 5. Haman and Xerxes's banquet (3:15)
- 6. Esther's first banquet (5:4-8)
- 7. Esther's second banquet (7:1-9)
- 8. The Jews' feasting in celebration of Mordecai's glory and the counterdecree (8:17)
- 9. The first feast of Purim: Adar 14 (9:17, 19)
- 10. The second feast of Purim: Adar 15 (9:18)

## Additions to the Book of Esther (Greek)

The most troublesome problem with the canonical book of *Esther* in the Hebrew Bible is that God is never mentioned nor addressed in prayer. The most prominent events depicted are the extended feasts of eating and drinking. The religious aspect is altogether missing in the Hebrew text of *Esther*, and anciently this led some rabbis to question its inclusion in the canon. By contrast, the text of *Esther* in the Greek Septuagint features six additional chapters, totaling 107 verses. These six additions are known in the KJV as *The Rest of the Chapters of the Book of Esther*. Their whole purpose is to provide the missing religious dimension to this story. These additions mention God more than fifty times, and often underscore the role of God's gracious providence in these tumultuous events. The model prayers of Esther and Mordecai are showcased in the additional material, as well as a justification for Esther's decision to use her feminine allures.

These six extra chapters were added to the basic story line after Hebrew *Esther* was translated into Greek, to resolve this problem and to make the entertaining and suspenseful story more spiritually edifying. The Hebrew text of *Esther* never included these additions, but they have ever been part of the Greek text of the Septuagint. The additions are designed to be inserted at six points into the basic text, and in the Septuagint text of Greek *Esther* they are thus interspersed. The Greek version of *Esther* is simply an elaborated version of the Hebrew text, expanded to bring out the role of God in the story. In the late-fourth century AD, when St. Jerome was translating from the Hebrew text of *Esther* into his Latin Bible (Vulgate), he saw that these six sections were not in the Hebrew. Because of his high regard for the Hebrew text, he relocated these six chapters from their interspersed locations to be appendage chapters added on to the book at its end. The KJV continues this Vulgate practice of appending them as additional chapters running from 10.4 to 16.24.

Watch the video, "Read Scripture: Esther."

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JydNSlufRIIs>

## Resources

HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV), 1989

"Esther," <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=37>

*HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, gen.ed. (San Francisco:HarperCollins, 2000)

"Book of Esther," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/esther/>

"Esther (Additions) Introduction," <https://www.bible.com/bible/546/ESG.INTRO1.KJVA>

Chart: *The CEB Women's Bible*, 2016