

Notes on Esther

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Introduction

TITLE

The title of this book comes from its principle character, Esther. In this it is similar to many other Old Testament books (e.g., Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Job, et al.).

WRITER AND DATE

The writer did not identify himself in the text. References in the book show that he was familiar with Persian culture and literature (2:23; 10:2). The writer also wrote as though he was an eyewitness of the events he recorded. He was pro-Jewish and was probably a Jew. It is possible, though not certain, that Mordecai wrote the book.¹ The idea that the writer was Esther has not found support mainly because female writers were uncommon in ancient patriarchal societies such as Israel.

This book would have been a source of encouragement to the Jews who had returned to the Promised Land after the Exile. Consequently many scholars believe a Jew may have written it for this purpose. Perhaps he was a Jew who had returned to the land from Susa, the site of the events recorded in the book.

The writer could have written it any time after 473 B.C., the year the Jews defended themselves and instituted the Feast of Purim, the last historical events in the book (9:27-28). If a contemporary of these events composed it, he probably did so within a generation or two of this date. The first extra-biblical reference to the book is in 2 Maccabees 15:36, which dates from late in the second century B.C.

GENRE

"From the literary point of view, the book ranks high as an outstanding example of narrative art."²

¹Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:6:1.

²Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:1 (March 1976):44. For a very interesting article that points out many artistic literary features of the book as well as showing how the literary structure illuminates the theology revealed in it, see Francis C. Rossow, "Literary Artistry in the Book of Esther and Its Theological Significance," *Concordia Journal* 13:3 (July 1987):219-33.

"The genre of the Book of Esther is historical narrative. As such, biblical narrative is characterized by the cooperation of three components: ideology (socioreligious perspective), historiography (use of historical persons and events in a narrative), and aesthetic appeal (its influence and persuasion of the reader).³ Each of these three elements can be readily seen in Esther. The ideology is the orthodox faith of ancient Israel. The book is theological in that its primary purpose is to teach about God and his continuing relationship with his people. It is historiographical in that it is an account of historical persons and historical events as they occurred. It is aesthetic because it is full of drama and suspense and draws its readers to anticipate happenings and events that often are the reverse of what the reader expects."⁴

Most scholars today regard the Book of Esther as a historical novel.⁵ However, bear in mind that most scholars are not conservative in their view of Scripture.

"I believe it would be true to say that a study of literary themes has done more to promote an understanding of the book than all the discussion about historicity, which so occupied scholars earlier this century."⁶

SCOPE

The events of the Book of Esther took place during the Persian period of ancient history (539-331 B.C.) and during the reign of King Ahasuerus in particular (486-464 B.C.).

CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER	
483	Ahasuerus' military planning session in Susa
482	The deposition of Vashti
481	The beginning of Ahasuerus' unsuccessful expedition against Greece
480	Esther's arrival in Susa
479	Ahasuerus' return to Susa Esther's coronation
478	
477	
476	
475	
474	The issuing of Ahasuerus' decrees affecting the Jews

³M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 41-57.

⁴Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 287. See also Forrest S. Weiland, "Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:634 (April-June 2002):151-65.

⁵Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, pp. 33-34.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 29.

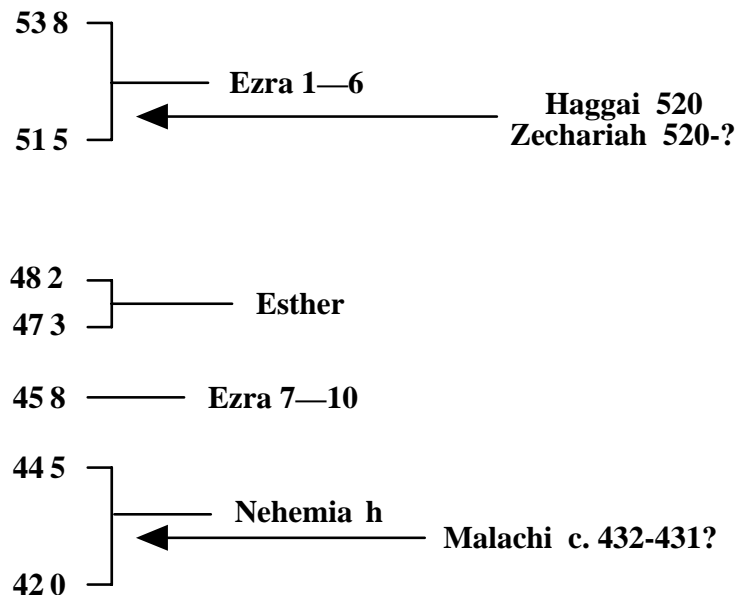
CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER	
473	The Jews' defense of themselves The establishment of the Feast of Purim

The first historical event to which the writer alluded seems to be Ahasuerus' military planning session at which he plotted the strategy for his ill-fated campaign against Greece (1:3-21). The king held this planning session in the winter of 483-482 B.C. The last recorded event in Esther is the institution of the Feast of Purim that took place in 473 B.C. Therefore the events recorded in the book spanned a period of about 10 years.⁷

By the time Esther opens many Jews had returned from the Exile to Palestine to reestablish the institutions of Judaism (Ezra 1—6). Most of the Jews in exile did not return even though their law (Deut. 28) and the prophets (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6) encouraged them to do so. They preferred the comfort and convenience of life as they had come to know it outside the Promised Land to the discomfort and privation involved in obeying God. Esther and Mordecai were among those who chose not to return.⁸

The events of Esther fit chronologically between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra.

Chronology of the Restoration Period



⁷See Steven Horine, "Esther's Organizing Metaphor: The Feasting Motif," a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 15, 2000, Nashville, TN.

⁸In 1893 the Babylonian expedition of the University of Pennsylvania discovered some extra-biblical documents that show how wealthy and influential some of the Jews who remained in Babylon were. See Siegfried H. Horn, "Mordecai, A Historical Problem," *Biblical Research* 9 (1964):22-25.

PURPOSE

There seem to be at least two purposes for the book. First, it demonstrates God's providential care of His people even when they were outside the Promised Land because of disobedience. Second, it explains the origin of the feast of Purim with a view to commending its observance to the Jews (9:24-28).⁹ Ancient histories, the Greek history of Herodotus being one, were often written "for public recitation at private gatherings or public festivals."¹⁰ Esther was evidently written for the same purpose. The Jews retold the story of Esther at Purim each year.

"The importance of the book for modern historians can be gauged by the fact that, whereas Josephus included the Esther story in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Martin Noth in his *History of Israel* makes no mention of it, and Geo Widengren dismisses it in thirteen lines. 'It is without much historical value.'¹¹ John Bright mentions the book by name but that is all.¹² Whatever others say, in practice historians ignore the book of Esther. Whatever the reason for this neglect of the book may be, we are justified in assuming that present-day historians do not take seriously the threat it records to the very existence of the Jewish race."¹³

A third purpose may be to warn readers against anti-Semitism (cf. Gen. 12:1-3).

"Esther says to the Christian that anti-Jewish hostility is intolerable to God."¹⁴

"It is easy to see why the book is valued by Jews, who have suffered so much through the ages and have clung to the assurance implied by Purim that, however severe the threat upon their race, they have a future."¹⁵

MESSAGE¹⁶

The events of this book took place between those recorded in Ezra 6 and 7. They have nothing to do with the people who returned from exile in Babylon. They deal with those who remained behind. Remember the dates of the three returns: 537, 458, and 444. The events in Esther took place about 482-473 B.C.

Esther's Jewish name was Hadasseh, which means myrtle. The myrtle tree was native to Babylonia, but the returning exiles took the myrtle tree with them to Palestine. There this

⁹Breneman, p. 289.

¹⁰Baldwin, p. 19.

¹¹J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, eds., *Israelite and Judean History*, p. 493.

¹²John A. Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 417, 420.

¹³Baldwin, p. 24. Conservative scholars give the book more consideration.

¹⁴Breneman, p. 297.

¹⁵Baldwin, p. 37.

¹⁶Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:266-82.

tree became a symbol of the nation of Israel transplanted from Babylon in Palestine. Zechariah used the myrtle tree as a symbol of Israel in Zechariah 1:7-11. Esther's parents probably named her for this beautiful tree. Most of the students of this book have recognized her as a symbol of the Jewish people living among Gentiles.

Esther's Persian name was Esther, which means star. Another view is that she was named in honor of Ishtar, a pagan goddess. The myrtle tree bears a beautiful star-like flower. Esther may have received her Persian name because she was the flower of the myrtle tree, full of beauty and grace. In life she became just that, the flower of Israel, its loveliest production. She was not just physically beautiful, but she became a great blessing to her people and a great blessing to the Gentiles as well. She became what God intended Israel to be.

This book is unique in the Old Testament in several respects. The writer did not mention God's name once in its pages. E. J. Young wrote in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, "Since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the name of the covenant God is not associated with them."¹⁷ Matthew Henry wrote, "But, though the name be not in it, the finger of God is, directing many minute events for the bringing about of his people's deliverance."¹⁸ There are no references to the Law of Moses, the temple, or Jewish worship. There is one reference to a fast and one to a feast that are very general and show only that the Jews in exile maintained some religious habits. There is also no reference to Jerusalem, except the one in 2:6 that says Mordecai's great-grandfather went into exile from Jerusalem. Yet even without these familiar references it is impossible to read this book without being conscious of God. The great value of this book is its revelation of God acting in providence.

There are several other unique features of Esther. No New Testament writer quoted or referred to it. No church father wrote a commentary on it. It never mentions prayer. It mentions nothing explicitly supernatural. Martin Luther wrote that he wished it had never been written. It is the only Old Testament historical book that records a history of the Jews outside their land during the times of the Gentiles. The "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) began with Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Jerusalem and will continue until Christ's second coming. It is the time when Israel's fortunes and fate are in the hands of Gentiles.

Like Ruth, the Book of Esther is an illustration. It records a slice of life out of the exilic period that illustrates a great revelation. Ruth illustrates redemption. Esther illustrates providence.

Let me clarify this term. This is a term that many Christians have abused and misunderstood. Providence means foresight. Our word comes from Latin (*pro video*) and means to see the affairs of life before they happen. The acquired meaning of providence, what it has come to mean through usage, is activity resulting from foresight. We can see

¹⁷Edward J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 378.

¹⁸Matthew Henry, "An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the Book of Esther," in *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 550.

at once that people can never exercise providence as God can. We have very limited powers of foresight. We do not know what a day will bring forth (Prov. 27:1). God, on the other hand, foresees all things and can act because of that foreknowledge.

The theological doctrine of providence is that God both possesses and exercises absolute power over all the works of His hands. Psalm 11 is a great passage that sets forth this revelation. The Book of Esther illustrates God's providence. The writer did not speak of God directly, but His acting as a result of His foresight is obvious in what he wrote. God hid Himself but was at work in Esther.

Esther reveals three things about divine providence.

First, it reveals the method of providence.

It shows that even though people do not acknowledge God's presence He is always at work. His control becomes especially clear at the end of the book (10:3). Events had turned around completely from the way they were at the beginning of the book. Instead of being in peril, the Jews were now at peace. God not only rules over the major issues in life, but He also uses the trivialities of life to accomplish His purposes. Some of these trivialities were: the king's decision to summon Vashti after he got drunk, Vashti's refusal, Haman's hatred for Mordecai, the king's insomnia, and the passage his servant read to him.

God's providence is all-inclusive. That is part of its method. No person or detail of life escapes God's control (Rom. 8:28). "All things" includes all individuals and all events.

Second, Esther reveals the principles of providence.

God proceeds on the basis of perfect knowledge: intimate, accurate, absolute knowledge (Ps. 11:4).

Another principle of His providence is His undeviating righteousness. God's providence works in harmony with man's freedom. It never coerces people. The king made his own decisions; God did not compel him to act as he did. Haman plotted his own intrigues, made his own arrangements, built his own gallows. The same was true of Mordecai and Esther. Yet the sphere in which they made their decisions was God's sovereignty (Acts 17:28a). Haman built his gallows, but God hanged him on it.

A third principle of God's providence is that of absolute power. God is great enough to give people genuine freedom and yet cause things to turn out the way He wants them to. God causes human freedom to contribute to His divine purpose. We cannot comprehend this truth completely. We cannot contain revelation within reason. That is why it is impossible to bring all of revelation into a comprehensive philosophy. Philosophy is what is reasonable, but revelation goes beyond reason. Not that it is irrational; it simply transcends reason.

Third, Esther reveals the results of providence.

On the human level there are two results. To those who recognize divine providence comes great confidence and courage. However to those who do not come panic and punishment. We can see this most clearly in the characters of Esther and Mordecai, and in Haman.

On the divine level the result of providence is that God progresses toward His ultimate goal. Throughout all of Scripture we see this identical mighty movement.

The message of this book is that God is, and God acts through history to accomplish His purposes regardless of whether humans acknowledge Him or not.

There are many arguments for the existence of God. The argument from providence is one of these, though apologists do not usually give it as much emphasis as some other arguments. The fact that human events are harmonizing with God's ultimate purposes as He has revealed these in Scripture testifies to God's existence. When people forget God, He still molds history and governs life in harmony with His purposes. We cannot escape God's hand; we only change our destiny. We become His friends or His foes by our attitude toward Him (Dan. 5:22-23).

The great application of the message of this book is take God into account. This is the essence of biblical wisdom, by the way. Trust Him and cooperate with Him or you will suffer destruction. God's providence may seem very impersonal and austere. However William Cowper has reminded us that, "Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."¹⁹ Romans 8:28 is perhaps the most concise word on the providence of God that the Scriptures contain. God will complete His plans. We determine our own destiny as we cooperate with His will or oppose it. Our choice affects our destiny, but it does not frustrate His plan. Consequently it is very important that we know God's plans and make them known to others. He has revealed His plans in His promises in Scripture. Therefore we should pay very careful attention to the promises of God. The biblical covenants are his comprehensive formal promises. Even though many people in the world today ignore God, His plans will become reality eventually. This fact should make us confident and optimistic in the present.

¹⁹William Cowper, *Olney Hymns*, 35 in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 161.

OUTLINE

- I. God's preparations 1:1—2:20
 - A. Vashti deposed ch. 1
 - 1. The king's feast 1:1-9
 - 2. The queen's dismissal 1:10-22
 - B. Esther elevated 2:1-20
 - 1. The plan to replace Vashti 2:1-4
 - 2. Esther's selection 2:5-11
 - 3. The choice of Esther as queen 2:12-20
- II. Haman's plot 2:21—4:3
 - A. Background considerations 2:21—3:6
 - 1. Mordecai's loyalty 2:21-23
 - 2. Haman's promotion 3:1-6
 - B. Haman's proposal 3:7-15
 - 1. The casting of lots 3:7
 - 2. Haman's request 3:8-9
 - 3. The king's permission 3:10-15
 - C. Mordecai's reaction 4:1-3
- III. Esther's intervention 4:4—9:19
 - A. Mordecai's instruction 4:4-17
 - B. The plot exposed chs. 5—7
 - 1. Esther's preparations ch. 5
 - 2. Mordecai's exaltation ch. 6
 - 3. Haman's fall ch. 7
 - C. The Jews' deliverance 8:1—9:19
 - 1. The rewarding of Esther and Mordecai 8:1-2
 - 2. Esther's request for her people 8:3-8
 - 3. The royal decree 8:9-14
 - 4. The joy of the Jews 8:15-17
 - 5. The Jews' self-defense 9:1-19

- IV. The Jews' rejoicing 9:20-32
- V. Mordecai's greatness ch. 10

Exposition

I. GOD'S PREPARATIONS 1:1—2:20

A. VASHTI DEPOSED CH. 1

This chapter records the providential circumstances whereby Esther was able to rise to her influential position with the Persian king.

"Though no mention is made of God's providence, it nevertheless plays a prominent part, and may even give the book its *raison d'etre*."²⁰

Joyce Baldwin concluded that the writer composed the book in a chiasmic structure that focuses on the providence of God in the king's sleepless night.²¹

- A Opening and background (ch. 1)
- B The king's first decree (chs. 2—3)
- C The clash between Haman and Mordecai (chs. 4—5)
- D "On the night the king could not sleep" (6:1)
- C' Mordecai's triumph over Haman (chs. 6—7)
- B' The king's second decree (chs. 8—9)
- A' Epilogue (ch. 10)

1. The king's feast 1:1-9

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name of the Persian king, Khshayarsha, whom we know better in ancient history by his Greek name, Xerxes.²² He reigned over the Persian Empire from 486 to 464 B.C. and was the son of Darius I (521-486 B.C.). His vizier, Artabanus, assassinated him.

Xerxes is famous in secular history for two things: his defeat at the hands of the Greeks, and his building of the royal Persian palace at Persepolis. In 481 B.C. he took about 200,000 soldiers and hundreds of ships to Greece to avenge his father Darius' defeat at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.). However, he suffered defeat in a three-fold manner. His soldiers lost the battle of Thermopylae to the Spartans, his army also lost at the battle of Plataea, and the Greeks destroyed his navy in the battle of Salamis.

The writer mentioned the vast area Xerxes controlled (cf. Esth. 8:9; 10:1). Perhaps he did this to avoid confusion with another Ahasuerus (Dan. 9:1) whose son, Darius the Mede, governed the Babylonian provinces under Cyrus the Great from 539 to about 525 B.C. "India" refers to the territory that is now West Pakistan. "Cush" was the upper (southern) Nile region including southern Egypt, the Sudan, and northern Ethiopia.

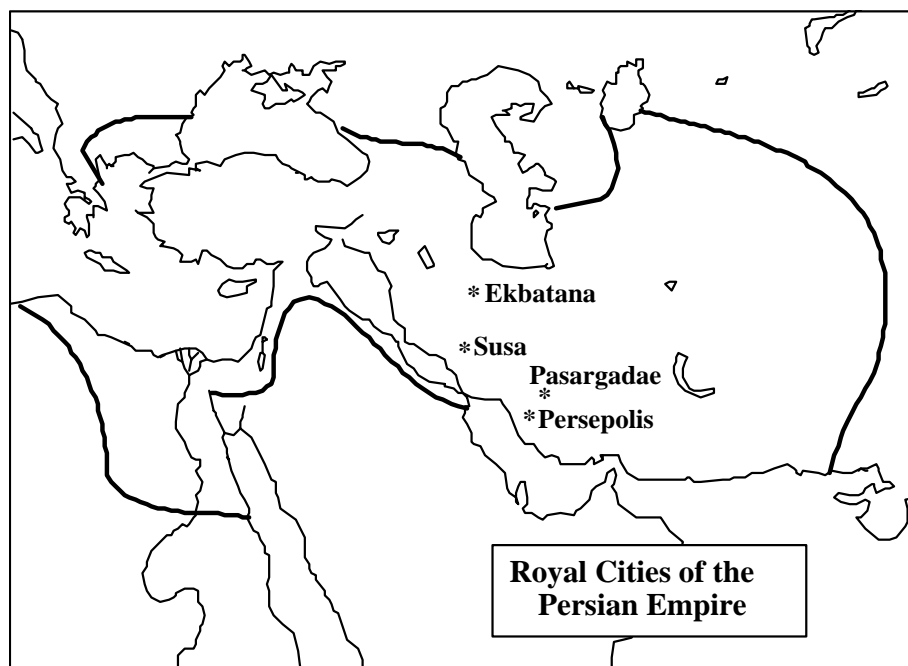
²⁰Ibid., p. 13.

²¹Ibid., p. 30.

²²Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 54. Cf. Ezra 4:5-7; Dan. 11:2.

The 127 "provinces" (Heb. *medina*) were governmental units of the empire. These were political subdivisions of the satrapies (cf. 3:12).²³

"Susa" (v. 2) is the Greek name for the Hebrew "Shushan." It was a winter capital and had formerly been the capital of the kingdom of Elam. Susa was the name of both the capital city and the royal fortress that occupied a separate part of the city.²⁴ Other Persian capitals were Ecbatana (200 miles north of Susa; modern Hamadan; Ezra 6:2), Babylon (200 miles west; Ezra 6:1), Pasargadae, and Persepolis (both 300 miles southeast).²⁵ Persepolis was Xerxes' main residence.²⁶ A generation after the events the writer described in the Book of Esther, Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, Xerxes' son (cf. Neh. 1:1—2:1).



The Hebrew word translated "capital" (NASB) or "citadel" (NIV; *habirah*) refers to an acropolis or fortified area that stood 72 feet above the rest of the city. A wall two and one-half miles long surrounded it.²⁷

The third year of Ahasuerus' (Xerxes') reign was evidently 482 B.C. For 180 days (six months) he entertained his guests (v. 4). This was evidently the military planning session that Ahasuerus conducted to prepare for his campaign against the Greeks. The Greek

²³F. B. Huey Jr., "Esther," in *1 Kings-Job*, vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 798.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 298.

²⁵See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Achaemenid Capitals," *Near East Archaeology Society Bulletin*, NS8 (1976):5-81.

²⁶Breneman, p. 304.

²⁷*Ibid.*

historian Herodotus referred to this meeting and said it took Ahasuerus four years (484-481 B.C.) to prepare for his Greek campaign.²⁸

"While labourers received barely enough to live on, even though they were producing works of art that are still unsurpassed, life at court was extravagant beyond imagining. The more lavish the king's hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy."²⁹

White and violet (blue, v. 6) were the royal colors of Persia.³⁰

2. The queen's dismissal 1:10-22

The Persian kings castrated many of the men who served the king and his family (v. 10) so they could not have sexual relations with the female members of the royal court and start dynasties of their own.

"Vashti" ("best," "the beloved," or "the desired one," v. 11) was evidently the Persian name of the queen whom Herodotus referred to as Amestris (her Greek name).³¹

It is not possible to determine why Vashti refused to obey the king's summons (v. 12).

"The Rabbis added midrashic embellishments to the story of Vashti, holding that her refusal was the king's order that she appear naked before his guests. . . . According to the Talmud the queen refused to come because Gabriel had smitten her with leprosy."³²

The important point for the writer was that she did not appear, not why she did not.

The counsel of seven (vv. 13-14) continued in existence for at least 25 years after this event (cf. Ezra 7:14). These men were cabinet-level officials in the government.

The king's advisers feared that Vashti's rebellion would lead to a popular women's liberation movement and to a revolution among the aristocratic wives particularly (vv. 17-18).

There is extra-biblical evidence that no one could revoke Persian laws once they were official (v. 19; cf. 8:8; Dan. 6:8).³³

²⁸Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7:8, 20.

²⁹Baldwin, p. 55.

³⁰John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty*, p. 37. This palace burned to the ground about 435 B.C., toward the end of Artaxerxes' reign. A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 352.

³¹J. Stafford Wright, "The Historicity of Esther," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, p. 40-42.

³²Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:546 (April-June 1980):105.

³³See Wright, pp. 39-40.

Herodotus (ca. 484-426 B.C.) travelled in western Persia shortly after Ahasuerus' reign. He wrote the following concerning the Persian postal service to which the writer of Esther alluded several times (v. 22; cf. 8:10).

"Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it. Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to go, either by snow or rain, or heat, or by the darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second, and the second passes it to the third; and so it is born from hand to hand along the whole line."³⁴

The last phrase of verse 22 evidently means that the husband's authority in the home was evident by the fact that his family spoke only his native language.³⁵ The Persian Empire encompassed many different language groups.

"When a marriage took place between people of different ethnic backgrounds, the mother's language would normally prevail in the home and tend to become the language of the children [cf. Neh. 13:23-24]."³⁶

The first chapter, even the whole book, is highly satirical of the Persian nobility and empire.

"It is indeed a derisive eye that our narrator has cast upon the royal court he describes: A king who rules the whole known world spends his time giving lavish banquets! . . .

"From the satirical depiction of the grandiose and lavishly excessive lifestyle of the Persian court, our narrator turns to undisguised farce: the king who rules the whole world cannot bend his own wife to his will! . . .

"But its [the first chapter's] mockery has also a sinister side. It reveals a society fraught with danger, for it is ruled by the pride and pomposity of buffoons whose tender egos can marshal the state's legislative and administrative machinery for the furtherance of selfish and childish causes. Indeed, in such a setting, it will not seem incongruous to find this same machinery of state mobilized to effect the slaughter of one of its own minorities, or to find that this is an end that the king can both blissfully contemplate and cavalierly condone."³⁷

³⁴Herodotus, 8:98.

³⁵C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 332.

³⁶Gordis, p. 53.

³⁷Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 354, 355.

B. ESTHER ELEVATED 2:1-20

The fact that God placed Esther in a position so she could deliver her people even before they were in danger shows His far-reaching providence at work for His chosen people. This revelation would have been a great encouragement to the Jews of the postexilic period as it has been to all believers since then.

1. The plan to replace Vashti 2:1-4

Ahasuerus had second thoughts about having deposed Vashti (v. 1), but he evidently concluded that the action he had taken against her needed to stand. The attendants' plan doubtless appealed to the king's ego (vv. 2-4). The writer called these men "attendants" rather than "princes" (1:14). They were evidently not the same individuals who had recommended Vashti's dismissal.

2. Esther's selection 2:5-11

Evidently it was Kish, Mordecai's great-grandfather, who went into captivity with Jehoiachin (vv. 5-6).³⁸ This means Mordecai and Esther were probably descendants of the leading citizens of Jerusalem who went into exile in 597 B.C., perhaps nobility (cf. 2 Kings 24:12).

Mordecai's name is Persian as is Esther's, and it has connections with the god Marduk.³⁹ Nevertheless it was common for the Jews in captivity to receive and to use pagan names (cf. Dan. 1:7; Ezra 1:8). This does not necessarily indicate that they were apostate Jews (cf. Dan. 1:7). The Marduk tablet, an extra-biblical cuneiform document, may contain a reference to Mordecai.⁴⁰

"Hadasseh" (v. 7) is a Jewish name that means myrtle, a beautiful fragrant tree. The Jews still sometimes carry myrtle branches, which signify peace and thanksgiving, in procession during the feast of Tabernacles.⁴¹ "Esther" is Persian and means "star." It derives from the same root as "Ishtar," the Babylonian goddess of love. Esther cooperated in practices contrary to the Mosaic Law. These included having sex with a man not her husband (Exod. 20:14), marrying a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4), and eating unclean food (Lev. 11:46-47). This sets Esther in contrast to Daniel who purposed not to defile himself (Dan. 1:5, 8). God used her as Israel's deliverer even though she disregarded His will at least partially (cf. Samson). Mordecai encouraged her to cooperate with the king (vv. 10-11).

"The Persian name would enable Esther to keep secret her foreign identity."⁴²

³⁸Wright, p. 38.

³⁹Horn, p. 16.

⁴⁰See Whitcomb, pp. 47-48; and Horn, pp. 20-22.

⁴¹Baldwin, p. 66.

⁴²Ibid., p. 21.

Esther charmed Hegai, who was in charge of the king's women, and he proceeded to grant her favor (v. 9; cf. Dan. 1:9). Her ability to keep information confidential and her obedience to Mordecai (v. 10) mark her as a wise woman (cf. Prov. 13:1, 3).

There are several parallels between the story of Esther and the story of the Exodus. These have led a few scholars to conclude that the writer patterned this story after the story of Moses and the Exodus.⁴³ Similarities include the plot and central theme, the adopted child with the concealed identity, reluctance to appeal to the king at first, the execution of many enemies, the Amalekite foe, and others. Though some similarities do exist, most scholars have not agreed that the writer deliberately constructed the Book of Esther after Exodus 1—12.⁴⁴

3. The choice of Esther as queen 2:12-20

The king evidently had sexual relations with a different virgin every night whenever he pleased. The harem officials watched these girls closely to make sure they did not have some disease that they would communicate to him. The women in the harem used their time to become as attractive as possible.

"Like the semi-nomadic Arab women of the eastern Sudan in the last century, women like Esther long, long ago fumigated themselves, saturating their hair, skin, and pores with fumes from cosmetic burners."⁴⁵

After their night with the king, these young women resided in a facility with other concubines where they might live for the rest of their lives. The king might call for them again or he might not. Historians have documented Ahasuerus' amorous affairs in Persia, Greece, and elsewhere.⁴⁶

Esther had such natural beauty and charm that she required no special adornments to make her more attractive (v. 15).

"Both Josephus and the Jewish Rabbis exaggerated the beauty of Esther and elaborated on her virtues and piety. The Rabbis held that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in history along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail (*Megillah* 15a). Josephus maintained that Esther 'surpassed all women in beauty' in the entire habitable world."⁴⁷

Esther became queen in the winter of 479-478 B.C., four years after Vashti's deposition (v. 16). During that four-year period the Greeks defeated Ahasuerus in battle.

⁴³Gillis Gerleman has been the main advocate of this view.

⁴⁴See Carey A. Moore, "Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther," *Bible Review* 3:1 (Spring 1987):30-31.

⁴⁵Idem, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *Biblical Archaeologist* 38:3-4 (September, December 1975):78.

⁴⁶See Whitcomb, pp. 56-59.

⁴⁷Yamauchi, "The Archaeological . . .," p. 106.

The Hebrew word translated "banquet" (v. 18, *hanaha*) means "a coming to rest." This could mean that Ahasuerus released his subjects from some tax burdens or from military service or both temporarily.

"Perhaps it is relevant that when the False Smerdis ascended the throne [of Persian in 522 B.C.], he granted his subjects freedom from taxation *and* military service for a period of three years (Herodotus III, 67)."⁴⁸

Perhaps the reassembling of the virgins (v. 19) was part of a procession the king designed to show off Esther's beauty compared with the other contestants in his beauty contest.⁴⁹

Evidently Mordecai received an appointment to a governmental position as a magistrate or judge because of Esther's influence (v. 19). The "king's gate" was where people settled legal matters in the capital. His position probably enabled Mordecai to overhear the plot to assassinate the king (vv. 21-23).

". . . the impression remains that Esther's Jewishness was more a fact of birth than of religious conviction."⁵⁰

II. HAMAN'S PLOT 2:21—4:3

A. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS 2:21—3:6

At this point in the narrative the writer introduced us to the villain, and we learn the reasons he hated the Jews.

1. Mordecai's loyalty 2:21-23

We know no details concerning the identities of the assassins or the reasons they hated Ahasuerus. Extra-biblical sources have not yet clarified these matters, though the commentators love to speculate. Mordecai's position in the government is another evidence of God's providential preparation to deliver His people.

"Gallows" (v. 23; cf. 5:14; 7:10) is literally "tree."

"Rather than being hanged by the neck on a modern-type gallows, the men were probably impaled on a stake or post (cf. Ezra 6:11). This was not an unusual method of execution in the Persian Empire. Darius, Xerxes' father, was known to have once impaled 3,000 men."⁵¹

⁴⁸Moore, *Esther*, p. 25.

⁴⁹Gordis, p. 47.

⁵⁰Moore, *Esther*, p. liv. Cf. v. 20.

⁵¹John A. Martin, "Esther," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, pp. 704-5.

Ahasuerus was careful to record the name, father, and town of anyone who demonstrated particular loyalty to his throne and to reward him quickly and generously.⁵²

"Xerxes is consumed with power yet powerless as sovereign events unfold."⁵³

2. Haman's promotion 3:1-6

The events we read in chapter 3 took place four years after Esther became queen (cf. 2:16; 3:7).

Agag was the name of an area in Media that had become part of the Persian Empire.⁵⁴ However, Agag was also the name of the Amalekite king whom Saul failed to execute (1 Sam. 15:8; cf. Num. 24:7). By mentioning both Kish, Saul's father, and Agag, the Amalekite king, the writer may have been indicating that both men were heirs to a long-standing tradition of ethnic enmity and antagonism.⁵⁵

Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman (v. 2) evidently did not spring from religious conviction (cf. 2 Sam. 14:4; 15:28; 1 Kings 1:6) but from ancient Jewish antagonism toward the Amalekites.⁵⁶ Mordecai did not have to worship Haman (cf. Dan. 3:17-18). Not even the Persian kings demanded worship of their people.⁵⁷ Nevertheless Ahasuerus had commanded the residents of Susa to honor Haman (v. 3). Probably people knew that Mordecai was a Jew long before his conflict with Haman arose (v. 4).

"While the fact that he was a Jew (4) would not preclude his bowing down, the faith of the exiles tended to encourage an independence of judgment and action which embarrassed their captors (Dn. 3; 6)."⁵⁸

Haman might have been successful in getting Mordecai executed. However when he decided to wipe out the race God chose to bless, he embarked on a course of action that would inevitably fail (cf. Gen. 12:3).

B. HAMAN'S PROPOSAL 3:7-15

1. The casting of lots 3:7

Haman cast the lot—*pur* is the Persian word for "lot"—to determine the day most propitious to wipe out the Jews. In the pagan ancient Near East it was unthinkable to make plans of this nature without astrological guidance. The lot supposedly revealed the

⁵²Herodotus, 8:90.

⁵³Breneman, p. 323.

⁵⁴Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 421.

⁵⁵Bush, p. 384. Cf. Baldwin, pp. 71-72.

⁵⁶Bush, p. 385.

⁵⁷Paton, p. 196.

⁵⁸Baldwin, pp. 72-73.

day most propitious for this act.⁵⁹ The official casting of lots happened during the first month of each year to determine the most opportune days for important events.⁶⁰ This may explain why Haman cast lots in the first month and chose a date so much later to annihilate the Jews. However, God controlled the lot-casting (Prov. 16:33) and gave the Jews almost a year to prepare for the conflict with their enemies. Archaeologists have found quadrangular prism type dice at Susa, and perhaps it was this kind of device that Haman used to make his decision on this occasion.⁶¹

"Though determined by lot, the day chosen seems maliciously ironical. The number 13 was considered unlucky by the Persians and the Babylonians, while the thirteenth day of the first month, the day on which the edict decreeing the Jews' destruction was dispatched (v 12), is the day preceding Passover, the commemoration of the deliverance from slavery in Egypt."⁶²

2. Haman's request 3:8-9

Perhaps Haman did not mention the Jews by name since Ahasuerus' predecessors, Cyrus and Darius I (Hystaspes), had issued proclamations favorable to them (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-12). In any case his failure to mention them by name set him up for Esther's revelation that it was her people whom Haman purposed to destroy (7:4). The Jews did indeed live a separated life, as Haman said (cf. Num. 23:9), but they were not a dangerous, rebellious element within the empire, which he claimed (cf. Jer. 29:7).

The 10,000 talents of silver Haman offered to pay into the king's treasury amounted to about two-thirds of the entire empire's income.⁶³ Probably Haman could have afforded to do this because he had plans to confiscate the Jews' possessions (v. 13). Undoubtedly he planned to make a large profit personally as well.

"The planned massacre, gruesome though it was, was not without precedents. In 522 BC, at the time of King Cambyses' death, Smerdis the Magus usurped the throne. When he was put to death in a conspiracy every Persian in the capital took up his weapons and killed every Magus he could find.⁶⁴ If darkness had not put an end to the slaughter, the whole caste would have been exterminated."⁶⁵

⁵⁹*New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Magic and Sorcery, 2. Egyptian and Assyro-Babylonian," by Kenneth A. Kitchen.

⁶⁰W. W. Hallo, "The First Purim," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46:1 (1983):19-27.

⁶¹Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 409.

⁶²Bush, p. 386.

⁶³Herodotus, 3:95. Bush, p. 387, considered this figure satiric hyperbole. He believed Haman wanted the king to understand that the benefit that would come to him by executing the Jews would be extremely large.

⁶⁴Herodotus, 3:64-80.

⁶⁵Baldwin, p. 74.

3. The king's permission 3:10-15

The imprint of an official's signet ring (v. 10) was the equivalent of his signature in ancient times (cf. Gen. 41:42; Esth. 8:2, 8, 10). Ahasuerus gave permission to Haman to confiscate the Jews' wealth and to put them to death (v. 11). The words "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate" (v. 13) probably translate the legal formula used in the decree that would have been as specific as possible. Probably the government officials and army were those who were to seize the Jews' property (v. 13) and then send some of it up the line to Haman.

"There is a skillful use of contrast in the last sentence of the chapter. While the collaborators celebrate, the city of Susa is aghast. The author is sensitive to popular reactions and notes that the ordinary citizen asked himself what lay behind such a drastic scene."⁶⁶

C. MORDECAI'S REACTION 4:1-3

We can understand why Mordecai reacted to Haman's decree so strongly (v. 1). Undoubtedly he felt personally responsible for this decree (cf. 3:2-5). However we should not interpret Mordecai's actions in verse 1 as a sign of great faith in God necessarily (cf. Mark 5:38; 1 Thess. 4:13). They were common expressions of personal grief (cf. Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh. 9:1; Lam. 3:40-66).

The absence of any reference to prayer in verse 3 may be significant. Prayer normally accompanied the other practices mentioned (cf. 2 Kings 19:1-4; Joel 1:14). Perhaps many of these exiled Jews had gotten so far away from God that they did not even pray in this crisis hour. However the basis of this argument is silence, and arguments based on silence are never strong.

III. ESTHER'S INTERVENTION 4:4—9:19

A. MORDECAI'S INSTRUCTION 4:4-17

Mordecai's mourning may have been the only thing that disturbed Esther. She may have known nothing about the decree. On the other hand she may have known of both and concluded that since the king did not know that she was a Jewess she would be safe (v. 13). However, Mordecai implied that Hathach knew she was a Jewess (v. 13, cf. v. 9), and probably others did as well.

Mordecai does not come across in this book as a "spiritual" person.⁶⁷ In verse 14, for example, he made no direct reference to God that would certainly have been natural (cf. Nehemiah's frequent prayers). Nevertheless he did believe that God would preserve His people and punish their enemies (Gen. 12:3). He also concluded that if Esther remained

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁷Martin, p. 707.

silent she would die. Mordecai saw God's hand behind the human agent of her punishment who was probably the king.

Mordecai's question in verse 14 is the main basis for the view that the doctrine of providence is the key to understanding the Book of Esther.

"The book implies that even when God's people are far from him and disobedient, they are still the object of his concern and love, and that he is working out his purposes through them . . ." ⁶⁸

Mordecai perceived Esther's moment of destiny.

"Mordecai is not postulating that deliverance will arise for the Jews from some mysterious, unexpressed source. Rather, by affirming that Esther is the only possible source of deliverance for the Jews, he is attempting to motivate her to act." ⁶⁹

"The promises of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of His name obscures nothing of His identity, attributes, and purposes for His chosen people and for the entire world of mankind." ⁷⁰

"Without explicitly spelling out in detail how he came to his convictions, Mordecai reveals that he believes in God, in God's guidance of individual lives, and in God's ordering of the world's political events, irrespective of whether those who seem to have the power acknowledge him or not." ⁷¹

Evidently there was a fairly large population of Jews in Susa (v. 16; cf. 9:15). Again there is no mention of prayer though some of the Jews may have prayed since they faced serious danger. ⁷²

"Like all human beings, Esther was not without flaw; but certainly our heroine should be judged more by the brave act she performs than by the natural fears she had to fight against. The rash man acts without fear; the brave man, in spite of it." ⁷³

Esther's words, "If I perish, I perish," (v. 16) seem more like words of courageous determination ⁷⁴ than an expression of resignation to the inevitable (cf. Gen. 43:14). ⁷⁵

⁶⁸Huey, p. 794.

⁶⁹Bush, p. 397.

⁷⁰Whitcomb, p. 79.

⁷¹Baldwin, p. 80.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 81-85, contains a helpful discussion of fasting.

⁷³Moore, *Esther*, p. 53.

⁷⁴David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 303; Bush, p. 400.

⁷⁵Paton, p. 226.

"Just as Esther's fast and Jesus' humiliation (*tapeinosis*, Phil. 2:8) commenced on the same date, so too Esther's three-day period of fasting parallels the three-day period of Jesus' death."⁷⁶

If the Jews did indeed fast for three days, as Esther requested, they would not have been able to celebrate the Passover, which their Law commanded (Exod. 12), since their fasting would have begun on the eve of Passover.⁷⁷

B. THE PLOT EXPOSED CHS. 5—7

1. Esther's preparations ch. 5

Chapters 5—7 carry us to the climax of our story. They show how God providentially preserved and protected His people.

The first banquet 5:1-8

Here we have another remarkable example of how God controls the hearts of kings (v. 2; Prov. 21:1; cf. Gen. 39—41; Ezra 1:1-4; Neh. 2; Dan. 2; 3; 4; 5; Acts 2:23). "To half of the kingdom" (v. 3) is hyperbole and means, "I will grant even a large request" (cf. 5:6; 7:2; Mark 6:22-23). Esther must have had a very good reason for postponing her request of the king (v. 8) since delaying it opened the door to any number of complications. The king's mood might have changed, or Haman might have discovered the reason for the banquet.

Esther's "procedure is part of a shrewd and deliberate plan in which Esther is taking the initiative and determining the course of events, as a close reading of the narrative will clearly show."⁷⁸

"The spiritual application to the gospel message is remarkable. Because of our sin, we cannot enter the presence of an infinitely holy God. But this same God, in His incomparable love and grace, has provided a plan whereby even the worst of sinners may enter His presence and touch, as it were, His golden scepter."⁷⁹

Haman's reaction 5:9-14

God had obviously kept Haman from discovering Esther's relationship to Mordecai.

⁷⁶Michael G. Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):281.

⁷⁷David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, pp. 36-37.

⁷⁸Bush, p. 407.

⁷⁹Whitcomb, pp. 82-83.

"It was an unusual honor to be invited to a banquet with the queen, for Persian officials were protective of their wives."⁸⁰

The Persians placed great value on having many sons (v. 11).⁸¹ A person of good character overlooks slights against himself or herself, but a man or woman of inferior character magnifies them (v. 13). Haman may have erected his 75 foot gallows (or stake) on the top of a hill or building to make its total height 75 feet tall. On the other hand it may have been that high itself so everyone could see it.

"This is a fascinating example of the deceived sinner, glorying in self and hating both the true God and His people."⁸²

"Haman is a case study in that inordinate pride and arrogance that conceals a 'vast and tender ego' (Fox, 179). . . .

"Haman's plans are about to run head on into the providence of God."⁸³

2. Mordecai's exaltation ch. 6

Ahasuerus' insomnia 6:1-3

The reading of the equivalent of the *Congressional Record* would have put the king to sleep under normal circumstances as it probably had done on many previous occasions (cf. Mal. 3:16). Normally the king rewarded people who did him special services quickly.⁸⁴ Consequently when he discovered that he had overlooked Mordecai's favor, the king moved speedily to rectify the oversight.

Haman's recommendation 6:4-10

"Here the early bird is gotten by the worm."⁸⁵

Haman's pride preceded his fall (v. 6; cf. Prov. 16:18). He wanted to appear as much like the king himself as possible in the honors he recommended for the person he thought would be himself (v. 8; cf. Gen. 41:39-45; 1 Sam. 18:4; 1 Kings 1:33). The crown was on the head of the horse, not its rider (v. 8; cf. v. 9).

It was evidently "a special arrangement of the horse's hair to form a topknot between the ears."⁸⁶

⁸⁰Martin, p. 708.

⁸¹Herodotus, 1:136.

⁸²Whitcomb, p. 85.

⁸³Bush, p. 418. The quotation is from Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*.

⁸⁴Herodotus gave two examples of Xerxes doing this in 8:85 and 9:107.

⁸⁵Moore, *Esther*, p. 64.

⁸⁶Baldwin, p. 90. She based this opinion on sculptured reliefs that archaeologists have discovered on a stairway at Persepolis.

The king knew by now that Mordecai was a Jew (v. 10). However the writer did not say Ahasuerus understood that Haman had aimed his pogrom against the Jews until Esther revealed that fact (7:4). Of course he may have known it already. It seems incredible that Ahasuerus would issue such a decree without finding out whom it would eliminate. Perhaps he planned to make Mordecai an exception and spare his life.

Haman's humiliation 6:11-14

Haman covered his head (v. 12) as a sign of his grief (cf. 2 Sam. 15:30; 19:4; Jer. 14:3-4; Ezek. 24:17). His friends evidently realized that unseen forces were maintaining the blessing that they had observed following the Jews (cf. Num. 23:9, 21, 23; 24:9, 17, 19; Josh. 2:9-13). They saw in Haman's humiliation before Mordecai, the powerful honored Jew, an omen of even worse defeat to come. The tide had turned.

Verse 14 means that Haman hastened to go to the banquet. He did not want to be late. It does not mean that he was reluctant to go and that the eunuchs needed to hurry him along. He evidently looked forward to the banquet as an opportunity to lift his spirits little realizing that it would be the scene of his condemnation.

3. Haman's fall ch. 7

Esther's plea 7:1-6

This banquet probably took place in the afternoon since Haman had already led Mordecai around Susa on a horse that day and since Haman died later that day.

Esther was in a very dangerous position. She not only now identified herself with a minority group that Haman had represented to the king as subversive, but she also accused one of his closest confidential advisers of committing an error in judgment. Nevertheless she appealed to the king to do what was in his best interests (v. 4). Ahasuerus saw at once that his enemy, whoever he was, was going to rob him of his queen and his wealth. When Esther finally named the culprit, Ahasuerus had already decided to punish him severely.

Ahasuerus' decision 7:7-10

The fact that his enemy sat in his presence at that very moment evidently made the king pause before issuing his obvious verdict. He wanted to think about it for a moment and walked out into his garden to do so. Upon returning, what he saw confirmed his decision. Haman found himself trapped between an angry king and an offended queen. Ironically this enemy of the Jews ended up pleading for his life with a Jewess. Haman fell at Esther's feet to beg as she reclined, but the king misunderstood his intentions when he reentered the banquet room unexpectedly (v. 8).

"The irony here is that Haman, who had demanded that Mordecai bow before him, was at the feet of the Jew Esther."⁸⁷

". . . one must remember that in antiquity very strong feelings and strict regulations centered on the harem. . . . Had Haman knelt as much as a foot away from the queen's couch, the king's reaction could still have been justified."⁸⁸

"A Targum adds that the angel Gabriel pushed Haman as the king entered the room!"⁸⁹

Esther's words had so predisposed Ahasuerus against Haman that the king viewed Haman's posture in the worst possible light. Covering the face of a condemned person was evidently customary in such cases (v. 8).⁹⁰

Harbonah's suggestion that they hang Haman on the gallows he had built for Mordecai drove the final nail in Haman's coffin (v. 9). Certainly Ahasuerus had not known of Haman's plan to execute the king's savior.

We do not know if Esther asked for mercy for Haman or not. In either case the king carried out his execution (v. 10). Thus ended the life of one of the most hostile Jew-haters that ever walked the stage of history (cf. Ps. 9:15-16).

C. THE JEWS' DELIVERANCE 8:1—9:19

Even though Haman was dead the Jews were not yet safe. This section of the text records what Esther and Mordecai did to insure the preservation of the Jews who then lived throughout the vast Persian Empire.

1. The rewarding of Esther and Mordecai 8:1-2

Haman's "house" (v. 1) was his estate. Esther received this probably to compensate her for her suffering. The king gave Mordecai Haman's place as second in authority (cf. Joseph, Gen. 41:42; Daniel, Dan. 5:7, 29; 6:3; and Nehemiah, Neh. 1:11).

2. Esther's request for her people 8:3-8

Esther again had to argue her case, this time for clemency for the Jews. Her request involved expense to the king. Esther would not have been sure he would grant it. Ahasuerus could have spared the life of the queen and Mordecai and let the rest of their nation perish. Esther's commitment to her people, which jeopardized her own safety, was

⁸⁷Breneman, p. 350.

⁸⁸Moore, *Esther*, p. 72.

⁸⁹Huey, p. 826.

⁹⁰Gordis, p. 56; Baldwin, p. 93.

very selfless and accounts for the high honor the Jews have given her since these events transpired. Mordecai witnessed her plea (v. 7).

"The *Book of Esther* is set in the reign of Xerxes, who was heavily committed to Zoroastrianism of an orthodox variety and who reversed the practice of religious tolerance of his predecessors. He destroyed the main idol of Bel Marduk, the temple of Marduk, Esagila, and many other Mardukian temples."⁹¹

In view of the king's religious intolerance it took great courage for Esther to request mercy for the Jews.

"It is very moving to see the extent to which this young girl, who has everything money can buy, identifies herself with her own kith and kin, and is prepared to risk everything in an attempt to prevent the disaster that threatens them."⁹²

The king did not have authority in his government to cancel decrees (cf. 1:19; Dan. 6:17). This awkward policy tended to lend weight to the king's official pronouncements (as when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*).

3. The royal decree 8:9-14

The first decree to destroy the Jews had gone out on April 17, 474 B.C. (3:12).⁹³ Ahasuerus published this one allowing the Jews to defend themselves on June 25, 474 B.C. The Jews had over eight months to prepare for the day their enemies might attack them, which was March 7, 473 B.C.

The king gave the Jews permission even to take the lives of the enemy "which might attack them, . . . [their] children and women" (v. 11). The children and women in view seem to be those of the Jews (cf. 3:13), not the enemies of the Jews.⁹⁴ This extreme measure enabled the Jews to defend themselves completely. It neutralized the enemy's former advantage (cf. 3:13).

"It has often been observed that this [fourteenth verse] provides a remarkably cogent illustration of missionary work today. God's death sentence hangs over a sinful humanity, but He has also commanded us to hasten the message of salvation to every land (cf. Prov. 24:11). Only by a knowledge of, and a response to, the second decree of saving grace

⁹¹Robert J. Littman, "The Religious Policy of Xerxes and the Book of Esther," *Jewish Quarterly Review* NS65:3 (January 1975):155.

⁹²Baldwin, p. 95.

⁹³R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75*, p. 31.

⁹⁴Gordis, pp. 49-53.

through the Lord Jesus Christ can the terrible effects of the first decree of universal condemnation for sin be averted."⁹⁵

4. The joy of the Jews 8:15-17

"Crown" (v. 15) should be "turban." Mordecai's clothing reflected his important position in the government.

Evidently Mordecai read the second decree at a public meeting in Susa. Contrast the Jews' reaction here with their response to the first decree (3:15). God had blown the dark cloud that had hung over their heads away.

"Holiday" (v. 17) is literally "a good day" (cf. 9:19, 22). It refers to a religious festival.⁹⁶ This was not the feast of Purim but a celebration in anticipation of it. Many Gentiles became proselytes to Judaism as a result of God's obvious blessing on His people (v. 17). This is the only mention in the Old Testament that Gentiles "became Jews." They became religious Jews, not racial Jews. This testimony to the fact that Gentiles recognized God's blessing on the Jews would have been a great encouragement to the Jews in the postexilic period (cf. Exod. 19:5-6).

5. The Jews' self-defense 9:1-19

The king gave the Jews permission to defend themselves by killing their enemies. Evidently this meant that they not only met attack with resistance but in some cases initiated attack against those who they knew would destroy them.⁹⁷ These would have been people such as Haman's sons who would have sought retaliation for their father's death in typical ancient Near Eastern fashion. Anti-Semitism has a very ancient history. Apparently it was wide-spread at this time, but the Jews did not plunder their enemies (vv. 15-16).

"The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and remembered, and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities."⁹⁸

The absence of explicit reference in the text to God helping His people does not deny His help. Instead it reflects the attitude of the Jews who chose to refuse God's commands through Isaiah and Jeremiah to return to the land (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 29:10; 50:8; 51:6; cf. Deut. 28). They had pushed God aside in their lives as had Mordecai and Esther. Nevertheless God remained faithful to His promises in spite of His people's unfaithfulness (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13).

⁹⁵Whitcomb, p. 107.

⁹⁶Moore, *Esther*, p. 81.

⁹⁷See Baldwin, pp. 100-2.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 105.

Evidently Esther had learned of a plot in Susa to attack the Jews on Adar 14 (March 8; v. 13). The purpose of hanging the bodies of Haman's 10 executed sons on the gallows was to disgrace them and to discourage other enemies of the Jews from attacking them (cf. Deut. 21:22-23; Num. 25:4; 1 Sam. 31:8-12; 2 Sam. 21:6; Num. 16:27, 32-33; Josh. 7:24-25). Almost twice as many people died in the royal precincts of Susa as in the rest of the city. The word "capital" in verse 6 really refers to the acropolis, the royal section of the capital city of Susa.

ENEMIES KILLED BY THE JEWS			
<u>Number</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>References</u>
500 men	in the acropolis of Susa	Adar 13 (March 7)	9:6, 12
75,000 people	in other parts of the empire	Adar 13 (March 7)	9:16
300 men	in Susa	Adar 14 (March 8)	9:15

IV. THE JEWS' REJOICING 9:20-32

Evidently Mordecai issued the decree establishing the feast of Purim some time after the slaying of the Jews' enemies (v. 20). His proclamation united the two days on which the Jews had defended themselves (Adar 13 and 14) into one holiday. During the inter-testamental period the Jews called Adar 14 "Mordecai Day" (2 Maccabees 15:36, RSV), but they discarded this special designation later. Modern Jews celebrate Purim on the evening of Adar 14 (March 8). It is their most festive and popular holiday.⁹⁹

"Purim" is the plural form of the Persian word *pur*, meaning the "lot" (cf. 3:7). The name "Purim" became a symbolic reminder to the Jews of how God used circumstances, specifically casting the lot (cf. 3:7), to deliver them in 473 B.C.

Probably Esther sent her decree (v. 29) confirming Mordecai's previous declaration of the official Jewish holiday (vv. 20-21) to encourage its firm establishment. Her letter evidently began, "Words of peace and truth" (v. 30).¹⁰⁰ There was probably considerable resistance within the conservative Jewish community to adding another national festival to those prescribed in the Torah.

"The book" (v. 32) must be the one in which Mordecai recorded all these events (v. 20) that most scholars have concluded may have been a source the writer of Esther used. This

⁹⁹Esther is the only Old Testament book not found among the texts used by the Essene community at Qumran, probably because this community did not observe Purim. Bush, p. 273.

¹⁰⁰Gordis, pp. 57-58.

document was probably not the Book of Esther itself, assuming the writer of Esther was someone other than Mordecai.¹⁰¹

V. MORDECAI'S GREATNESS CH. 10

Perhaps the writer mentioned Ahasuerus' tax (v. 1) because Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps this tax reflects God's blessing on the king for preserving the Jews (Gen. 12:3).

Appeal to the official chronicles (v. 2) claimed historicity for the events recorded in Esther (cf. 1 Kings 14:19; et al.). These documents are not available to us today. They may have been Persian¹⁰² or Jewish¹⁰³ archives.

Mordecai was one of several biblical characters whom God elevated to a position of high government rank (cf. Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah).¹⁰⁴ He used his position of influence to benefit his people (v. 3). However, there is no evidence that either Mordecai or Esther had any desire to return to Jerusalem and become part of God's theocratic program there. No one prevented them from doing so either (cf. Neh. 2:5).

¹⁰¹E.g., Whitcomb, p. 124.

¹⁰²Moore, p. 99.

¹⁰³Baldwin, p. 115.

¹⁰⁴Scholars have long compared the stories of Esther and Joseph because the settings of both are in countries other than Israel, as well as because of other similarities. See *ibid.*, p. 25, n. 1, for a list of such studies.

Conclusion

The personal relationship that Esther and Mordecai had with Yahweh is a very interesting subject of study. The answer to this puzzle explains why God's name does not appear in the book and what God's purpose was in preserving this book for us.¹⁰⁵

Without question Mordecai was a man of great ability and admirable character. He also demonstrated faith in the Abrahamic Covenant and in God's providential care of His people (4:13-14). Esther too showed some dependence on God for His help (4:16). However these qualities characterized many Jews who Jesus Christ in His day said were not pleasing to God (cf. Matt. 3:9; 6:16; John 8:39). Mordecai and Esther, it seems, were eager to preserve their nation and their religion, but they give little evidence of desire to do God's will personally. In this respect they contrast with Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

No one forced Esther into Ahasuerus' harem.¹⁰⁶ She evidently ate unclean food for months (2:9; cf. Dan. 1:5, 8). Furthermore the king did not know she was a Jewess for five years (2:16; 3:7).

"For the masquerade to last that long, she must have done more than eat, dress and live like a Persian. She must have worshipped like one!"¹⁰⁷

We cannot excuse her behavior on the ground that she was simply obeying Mordecai's orders (2:20). Her conduct implicates him in her actions.

"The Christian judgment of the Book of Esther has been unnecessarily cramped through our feeling that because Mordecai is a Bible character, he must be a good man. . . . Like Jehu he may have been little more than a time-server. The Bible makes no moral judgment upon him, but it expects us to use our Christian sense. He was raised up by God, but he was not necessarily a godly man."¹⁰⁸

The Book of Esther shows how God has remained faithful to His promises in spite of His adversaries' antagonism and His people's unfaithfulness.

"The lovely story of Esther provides the great theological truth that the purposes of God cannot be stymied because He is forever loyal to His covenant with His eternally elected nation."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵For helpful insights into the writer's reasons for omitting God's name in this book, see Michael V. Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," *Judaism* 39:2 (Spring 1990):135-47.

¹⁰⁶See my comments on 2:7-11.

¹⁰⁷Carl A. Baker, "An Investigation of the Spirituality of Esther," pp. 21-22. See also Bush, p. 322, for other morally indefensible actions of Mordecai and Esther.

¹⁰⁸Wright, p. 45. Cf. Henry, pp. 785-88.

¹⁰⁹Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 205.

The writer did not omit God's name and references to Israel's theocratic institutions because God's presence was absent. He did not do so because thousands of Gentiles died at the hands of Jews, nor because the Jewish hero and heroine were personally self-willed, as some commentators have suggested. I believe he left them out because they were of little concern to Esther, Mordecai, and the other Jews who did not return to the land.

"In His providence He [God] will watch over and deliver them; but their names and His name will not be bound together in the record of the labor and the waiting for the earth's salvation."¹¹⁰

"The early Jews sought to remedy the lack of explicit references to God and religious observances by attaching six Additions to Esther (107 verses) in the Greek version, including a dream of Mordecai, and prayers of Mordecai and of Esther. These sections form part of the Old Testament Apocrypha, which was declared to be canonical for the Catholic Church by the Council of Trent in 1546 in reaction to Protestant criticisms [of the Book of Esther]."¹¹¹

"There are few books of the Old Testament more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel."¹¹²

¹¹⁰*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Esther, Book of," by John Urquhart. Cf. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 377-79; and Archer, p. 417.

¹¹¹Yamauchi, "The Archaeological . . .," p. 111.

¹¹²Breneman, p. 370.

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