

## Inductive Study of Esther

### Historical Background

Chronologically, Esther falls in the middle of Ezra, probably between chapters six and seven, around 485 BC during the early years of the reign of King Ahasuerus (Creelman 1917, 291). Since Ezra returned to Jerusalem in about 475 BC, the book probably spans a period of ten years (Hughes 2001). The Jews that remained in Persia for this period of time were being disobedient, as they were supposed to have returned to Jerusalem with the rest of the Jews to rebuild the temple (Kelly 1873). Without the book of Esther, however, and the saving of the remainder of the Jews, the remaining Jews would not have returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, as is reported in the book of Nehemiah (Creelman 1917, 305).

The book of Esther takes place fifty years after Zerubbabel led the first group of Jews from Babylon back to Judea and shortly before the return of the second group. The book takes place quite a bit East of Israel in the capitol of the Persian Empire, which is modern-day Iran. Historically, God has continually rescued his chosen people from annihilation, and the book of Esther is a perfect example of how this happens yet again. The book is set in the province of Susa, so it took place near the Persian Gulf (Richards 1987).

Finally, Esther is yet another example of God's unfailing promise from Genesis and Deuteronomy. Since the Jews are God's chosen people (Genesis 12:2-3), they cannot be completely wiped out; they can be assured that God will be true to his promise. Esther is an example of the nation prevailing and Mordecai, who was largely in part a tool that God used to deliver the nation, appears to prosper, as well as the rest of the kingdom of Persia.

### Providential Happenings

1. Queen Vashti is a stubborn woman who refuses to do her husband's, King Ahasuerus, bidding, causing the king to search the kingdom for a new queen (1:12).
2. Esther is one of the most beautiful and pleasing women to the king above all other women in the kingdom (2:17).
3. Mordecia, who is the queen's guardian, is the one that sits by the king's gate where he overhears an assassination plot against the king (2:21-22).
4. Esther is put in a place of great influence towards the king at a time when her people are at their greatest need (4:14).
5. The king extends the royal scepter to her, even though she is breaking the law, not only allowing her to talk to the king about her Jewish people, but also saving her life (5:2).
6. The king is in an extremely gracious mood, willing to grant Esther almost anything she could want (5:3).
7. The king is restless the night before Haman wants to hang Mordecia, so he reads the historical record of how Mordecia once saved his life (6:1-2).
8. Haman comes see the king to discuss the hanging of Mordecia just after (though the amount of time that has passed is unknown, it is likely within the same morning) the king is ready to bestow some great honor upon Mordecia for saving his life (6:4).
9. Again, the king is in an exceptionally gracious mood, willing to grant Esther anything she asks (7:2).
10. The king allows Esther to write whatever she deems appropriate for the Jews in his name, using his seal, which means it cannot be rescinded (8:7-8).
11. The Jews prevail over their enemies since, according to queen Esther's decree in the king's name, they are now able to assemble and stand up for themselves (9:1-10).
12. The king continues to be gracious, allowing Esther to command the hanging of Haman's ten sons (9:13-14).

### Ironic Twists

1. The queen deliberately breaks the law of the king and is rewarded for it (allowed to come into the presence of the king), though the previous Queen Vashti also deliberately disobeyed the law of the king and was punished severely for it (5:2).
2. After describing the way Haman himself would want to be honored, Haman is forced to do all of these things publicly to honor Mordecai, whom he was just planning to hang (6:6-10).
3. Just after Zeresh, Haman's wife, and all his friends finish telling him that Mordecai will be his downfall, the king's eunuchs arrive to take him to the banquet (6:13).
4. Haman is hung on his own gallows, which he built to hang Mordecai, because he planned to kill Mordecai (7:9-10).
5. The king gives the very same signet ring which was once worn by Haman, who plotted to kill Mordecai and all the Jews, to Mordecai (8:2).
6. Mordecai, who would have lost everything including his own life had Haman had his way, inherits Haman's entire estate (8:2).
7. The king essentially contradicts himself, now allowing the Jews to protect assemble and stand up for themselves against his own original decree which would have wiped them out (8:11).
8. *Purim*, a Hebrew word meaning “a lot” or “a Jewish feast” which originally referred to a day of destruction for the Jews in the twelfth month, was now a day of celebration for the Jews (9:20-26).

### Characteristics of the Characters

The book opens with the disobedience of Queen Vashti (1:10-12), a stubborn woman who refused to be flaunted by her husband, even though he commanded it (positive trait). Though she is a character who does not appear throughout the rest of the book, she is extremely significant as we would not have the book without her disobedience towards King Ahasuerus.

King Ahasuerus is an extremely wealthy king who loves to party and could most likely be easily persuaded with the right amount of wine (1:4-9, 5:4-6, 7:1-2) (negative trait). He is a man who demands respect from his people, perhaps even unreasonably when he agrees to the slaughter of an entire people (3:8-11) (negative trait). He is probably a shallow person who can be bought with money, wine, and physical attraction, because after Esther, his beautiful wife, tells him she is one of those he has commanded to be killed, he takes measures to counteract his own decree (8:9-11, 9:14) (negative trait). He is a bit careless, it seems, as he continually gives his signet ring, which holds much power, to people to do what they will (3:10-11, 8:2, 8:10) (negative trait). Most of his traits are negative, and it seems that he is simply an unworthy tool which God uses.

Haman is a man who conspires against an entire race of people simply because their laws differ from his own (3:2-6) (negative trait). He is an Agagite, so his lineage has a history of hating the Jews, which offers a bit more of an explanation for this. He will stop at nothing until his vengeance is satisfied (negative trait). He is a pompous and arrogant man who is overly proud of his own position in the king's court and loves to brag to his friends about it (5:10-12) (negative trait). He has no concern for human life, not only because he wishes to wipe an entire race from the kingdom but also because he wants to make a spectacle of the death of Mordecai, whom he truly hates (3:7-11, 5:13-14) (negative trait). There is nothing about the character of Haman that should be mimicked.

Mordecai is a man who looks out for others (positive trait), but also is still living in Persia with many other Jews even after God had instructed them to go back to the Promised Land (negative trait). Since Mordecai knows his people aren't supposed to be there, he instructs Esther to keep her race hidden from the king, admirable because he's trying to protect Esther, but more so a lack of faith (2:10) (negative trait).

After Haman decides to have all the Jews in the land killed, Mordecai sees that Esther provides a means of deliverance for them, and he acts as her mentor, convincing her to talk to the king and do what is right (positive trait). Mordecai was a respected man among the Jews (10:1-3).

Esther is a character who most frequently is portrayed as a godly, virtuous woman whose character we should look up to and respect. It is more likely, however, that Esther is really an immoral woman with low standards that God uses. For instance, the book of Esther may need never have been written if Esther had not volunteered herself for the king's beauty pageant (2:8-18) (negative trait). If indeed she didn't volunteer herself, as may be the case, and she was forced into the king's harem, it still doesn't seem that she had enough faith in God to say "no" to the king's request (negative trait).

It is also seen that Esther may not be that brave of a woman, as she initially refuses to do what Mordecai says and visit the king (4:10). It is only after she learns that her own life is in danger (4:14), as well as the lives of all her people (which was previously not enough information to convince her), that she decides to go and visit the king (4:15-16) (negative trait).

Esther follows the advice of her guardian, Mordecai, when he tells her not to tell anyone in the king's court that she is a Jew (2:10). This may be seen as obedience toward Mordecai, but it seems more likely that she gladly does not admit this to anyone in the king's court to avoid persecution and especially after she hears that all the Jews in the kingdom will be wiped out (3:8-15) (negative trait).

Additionally, it may be that the reason Esther does not give the king her request at the first banquet she prepares for him is because she is afraid (5:6) (negative trait). It is only after they come to her second banquet that she admits to the king that she is a Jew (7:1-4). Another trait that I would not try to emulate. In Esther's defense, she does finally (though seemingly reluctantly) do what Mordecai tells her to do to save her people (7:1-9:17) (positive trait).

## Annotated Outline

- 1A INTRODUCTION: ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN OF PERSIA 1:1-2:23  
This introductory section describes the events that transpired making Esther the queen of Persia. In an act of God's providence, Esther becomes queen in order to be available to save God's chosen people, the Jews, from complete destruction.
- 1B *Queen Vashti's Fall* 1:1-22  
When asked to appear before King Ahasuerus's guests at a part he had thrown, Queen Vashti refuses to be flaunted and does what is right by denying the king's request, though it was wrong according to the laws of the land.
- 1C The King Throws a Party 1:1-9  
King Ahasuerus, known for his lengthy and wild parties that everyone enjoyed, throws a hundred and eighty day party (1:4).
- 2C Queen Vashti Refuses to Appear Before the King 1:10-12  
In getting too drunk, the king wrongly demands that his wife appear before his friends so he can boast of her beauty (1:11). The queen's refusal is the act eventually responsible for Esther becoming the new queen.
- 3C The Queen's Punishment 1:13-22  
The king cannot allow deliberate disobedience to go unchecked or all the wives in the land would begin to disobey their husbands; the result is the king banning Vashti from his presence (1:19), an act which is suggested and approved by his wise men.
- 2B *Esther's Rise* 2:1-18  
Through acts of immorality, Esther is chosen to be the new queen in place of Queen Vashti.
- 1C The King Searches the Kingdom for a New Queen 2:1-7  
The king is a powerful man with a quick temper (2:1). After his temper cools, he begins a search for his new queen through what is essentially a beauty pageant.
- 2C Esther Is Chosen by the King 2:8-18  
Esther either chooses willingly to participate in the king's pageant or doesn't protest being forced to participate. Either way, in participating she would have participated in immoral acts, such as sleeping with the king, which would have been custom at the time, to allow the king to choose his new bride.
- 3B *Mordecai Saves the King* 2:19-23  
Mordecai hears of an assassination plot against the king and informs Esther. This is the second time that Esther has immediately obeyed Mordecai, first in not revealing her identity as a Jew (2:10), secondly in immediately informing the king of this plot (2:22). Both times she would have had personal gain from doing what Mordecai suggested.

- 2A HAMAN CONSPIRES TO DESTROY THE JEWS 3:1-4:17  
After gaining a hatred of Mordecai, Haman conspires to kill not only Mordecai but his entire race along with him, since their laws differ from the laws of the land.
- 1B *Mordecai Doesn't Bow to Haman* 3:1-6  
In accordance with Jewish law, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman when he passes. By law, it would have been required for him to bow to Haman, regardless of his religious beliefs.
- 2B *Haman Plots to Destroy Mordecai and His People* 3:7-15  
Bitterness having been instilled, Haman plots to have Mordecai destroyed.
- 1C Haman Talks to the King 3:7-12  
Knowing that the king himself is quite arrogant, Haman connivingly convinces the king that the Jews are detrimental to the kingdom and that they should be eradicated.
- 2C The Kingdom Is Informed 3:13-15  
As is custom, the king's decree to rid the kingdom of the Jews was sent out through the royal scribes.
- 3B *Mordecai Realizes the Power of Esther's Position* 4:1-17  
After mourning for his people, Mordecai realizes that Esther was placed in a position of power for such a time as this and convinces her to help her people.
- 1C Mordecai Mourns for His People 4:1-6  
Many of the Jews, including Mordecai, portrayed a lack of faith in God, not realizing that God would not allow his people to be wiped out, when they tore their clothes and mourned (4:3), assuming that God could not save them.
- 2C Mordecai Beseeches Esther for Help 4:7-13  
When Mordecai first pleads to Esther for help, she lacks faith in God and is too scared to approach the king.
- 3C Mordecai Beseeches A Second Time 4:14  
Mordecai does not give up easily and suggests to Esther that God may have put her in the position she is in now for just such a time as this.
- 4C Esther Agrees to Help Her People 4:15-17  
It is only after Mordecai reminds Esther that she too will be killed along with her people and that her position of royalty will not protect her that she finally decides to talk to the king.
- 3A ESTHER APPEALS TO THE KING FOR DELIVERANCE 5:1-8:17  
Using what the king loves best, wine and parties, Queen Esther begs the king to rescue her people.

- 1B *Esther Appeals to the King* 5:1-8  
The king grants entrance into his quarters to the queen when she visits him, and she invites him and Haman to a banquet she has prepared (5:1-5). Again showing her lack of faith, she doesn't have the courage to ask the king her request, so she invites him to a second banquet (5:6-8).
- 2B *Haman Plots to Have Mordecai Hanged* 5:9-14  
Feeling an inflated sense of pride in himself having eaten dinner with the king and queen, Haman boasts to his friends of his fortune and follows the advice of his wife to build a seventy-five foot gallows to hang the man he hates, Mordecai.
- 3B *The King Honors Mordecai* 6:1-14  
The king is reminded of Mordecai's loyalty when he reads how his life was saved by the man, so he chooses to honor him publically.
- 1C *The King Reads the Historical Records* 6:1-5  
Through an act of God's providence, the king is unable to sleep and chooses to read historical records that could put anyone to sleep. His attendants inform him that he never honored Mordecai (6:4), who once saved his life.
- 2C *Haman Visits the King* 6:6-9  
Through a twist of fate and irony, Haman comes to visit the king to discuss Mordecai's death at the same moment that the king wishes to discuss the public honoring of Mordecai with Haman. (And people say God doesn't have a sense of humor ...)
- 3C *Mordecai Is Honored; Haman Is Humiliated* 6:10-14  
To add insult to injury, Haman is forced to lead Mordecai through the streets honoring him, only increasing his desire to kill the man. Unfortunately, he now knows he will be unable to kill the man since the king is choosing to honor him, so he is even more bitter.
- 4B *Haman is Exposed and Executed* 7:1-10  
Esther finally exposes Haman to the king for who he truly is and the king has him executed.
- 1C *Esther Admits Her Heritage* 7:1-7:6  
The queen finally musters up enough courage at the second banquet to inform the king that she too is a Jew, which means Haman's decree to have all the Jews killed will result in her death (7:6). The king, afraid to lose his beautiful queen, is sure to act on this, and Esther knows it.
- 2C *Haman Is Hung On His Own Gallows* 7:7-10  
The king is immediately enraged towards Haman once he realizes his queen is enraged, though he seemed to be fine with Haman wiping out an entire race before. To add to the king's anger, after taking a short walk on his porch (7:7) he walks back in on what appears to be Haman trying to rape the queen (7:8). Further enraged, and through yet another act of God's irony, the king sentences Haman to be hung on his own gallows (7:9-10).

5B *The King Enforces the Jews* 8:1-8:17  
Wanting to please his queen and save her people, the king allows the Jews to defend themselves against the army which is coming to attack them.

1C Mordecai Is Promoted 8:1-2  
Yet another ironic twist, Mordecai is given Haman's entire estate; the man who wished to have Mordecai murdered is now responsible for his great success. Mordecai takes Haman's position and is given the royal signet ring.

2C Esther Pleads for Her People 8:2-6  
Just as the king was so eager to help Haman destroy an entire race, the king is now hasty to help his queen and her guardian, Mordecai, rescue their own people. Though he's helping the people instead of harming them this time, it is still a bit irresponsible how quickly he is willing to give his signet ring to others, especially for something to be written in a law that cannot be reversed.

3C The King Delivers His Edict 8:7-17  
The king allows Esther and Mordecai to decree that the Jews will be able to take up arms and defend themselves, thus not being slaughtered. Again, God has protected his chosen people.

4A THE CELEBRATION OF PURIM 9:1-32  
After the Jews defended themselves, they celebrated with the feast of Purim.

1B *The Jews Prevail* 9:1-16  
Being able to take up arms and defend themselves, the Jews prevail against their enemies.

1C The Jews Strike Down Their Enemies 9:1-12  
It seems that the king's decree only allowed them to rise up against their enemy for one day, but they gather together and prevailed.

2C The Jews Strike Down Their Enemies A Second Time 9:13-17  
Esther convinces the king to make a second decree, allowing the Jews to stand up for themselves again a second day. Again, they prevailed.

2B *The Feast of Purim* 9:18-32  
In the same month that was Haman had originally intended for the Jews' destruction, the Jews prevailed over their enemies and threw the feast of Purim to celebrate. The fifteenth day was when they rested (9:18), which became a holiday for the Jewish people; each year, on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month, they would gather together for a time of happiness and celebration to remember how God continued to protect them (9:26).

- 5A CONCLUSION: MORDECAI'S FAME 10:1-3  
In conclusion, the book talks of the spread of Mordecai's fame. In fact, it almost seems that the book is written more toward commending Mordecai than it is really talking about the good nature of Esther, especially as it generally shows that she was a dishonorable woman with little faith. The book could very well be named Mordecai just as much as it could be named Esther, if not more. Esther was, after all, simply the messenger for Mordecai, and she was a very obstinate messenger at that.
- 1B *The King's Greatness* 10:1-2  
After saving the Jewish race, King Ahasuerus's fame spread throughout the land and his people loved him more than they had before.
- 2B *Mordecai's Esteem* 10:3  
Mordecai was placed in second in command only to the king, a position of the highest honor, especially for a Jew.

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