

## **32). Aug 3-9—Esther**

### 1) Book of Esther—**Esther**, ~480 BC

Esther is one of two OT women with a book named after her (this does not include the apocryphal book of Judith). Scholars have not always accepted the book as part of the scriptural canon: it lacks God's name, it depicts a heroine marrying outside of the faith, there is no evidence of the heroine living the Law of Moses, and the book's authorship and provenance are unknown. The Book of Esther was the only book of the Bible not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor is it included in the Islamic canon. Yet Esther's story provides examples of God watching over the Jewish people during their exile. Today, the Book of Esther is included in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles.

The book describes Esther as a cooperative and obedient heroine living in the Persian Empire in the late fifth century BC. Esther's ancestry is traced through the tribe of Benjamin, though she was referred to as a Jewess (Est 2:5-7, 15). The book describes about a decade of her life, starting after she was orphaned and adopted by her cousin Mordecai. He raised her in the diaspora city of Susa (sometimes called Shushan). As a young woman, she obediently followed his advice to seek a place among the young virgins in the king's harem in hopes of replacing the banished queen, Vashti. Mordecai encouraged Esther to keep her Israelite lineage a secret (Est 2:10, 20). After a year of preparation, Esther's gentle grace and beauty won the heart of King Ahasurus, and he made her his queen (Est 2:12-18). Some scholars believe he may have been the Persian ruler Xerxes I (who reigned from approximately 485-465 BC).

In a parallel plot, the king's prime minister, Haman the Agagite, sought more power by planning to destroy the Jewish people in the land (Est 3). Mordecai attempted to thwart Haman multiple times, including asking his influential ward to appeal to the king for help (Est 4). Initially, Esther hesitated because she felt helpless to go before the king without being summoned—a risky act that could result in death. Esther's feelings of powerlessness made her a relatable role model for the Jews who felt similarly vulnerable in their exiled state.

Queen Esther came from two powerless groups: first, as a Jew in a foreign nation of Gentiles, and second, as a woman in a patriarchal society. But Mordecai persuaded her, saying, "Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. . . . Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Est 4:13-14).

Esther grew in faith and courage. She called for a Jewish fast for three days and nights, without food or water, to seek God's divine help before approaching the king. By this point, she was resolved: "if I perish, I perish" (Est 4:16). As she approached the king, God answered their collective prayers. Yet she initially deflected her true purpose even when the king repeatedly promised to grant her request, "to the half of the kingdom." She did not address the urgent issue until she prepared a second banquet for the king and Haman (Est 5:3-8). Her hesitation in the face of great personal risk was genuine, but it may have also been part of her plan to create a setting where the king was more invested in her request and more likely to help her.

She at last confessed to the king, "if I have found favour in thy sight, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" (Est 7:3-4). The king ardently defended Esther and had Haman executed on the same gallows Haman had built for Mordecai (Est 7:9-10). Esther's triumphant success gave hope to the exiled Jews.

**Handmaidens, Harems, & Heroines: Find their Messiah in the OT**—Lynne Hilton Wilson, PhD

The book of Esther assured the exiled Jews that even as they lived among Gentiles, if they remained loyal to their heritage, they would receive God's blessings. Her story is also one of sacrifice: she offered herself and all she possessed—her beauty, riches, and royal position—as a sacrifice to save her people. Through her courage, all the Jews in the Persian Empire were saved. In remembrance of Esther's sacrifice and commitment, the feast of Purim is celebrated annually. (*See \*Vashti*)

**\*Hadassah**—See *\*Esther* as Hadassah is her Hebrew name before she became queen of Persia.

2) Est 1:9-19; 2:1, 4, 17—**Vashti**, ~480 BC

The exquisitely beautiful Persian Queen Vashti is a heroine for modern women who honor assertiveness and respectability but was a cause of embarrassment to her husband, King Ahasuerus (Hebrew), or King Xerxes I (Greek). Vashti's story addressed male and female expectations in the ancient world. She refused to be treated as a sex symbol or a slave and assertively defended her self-worth. Her outcome was loss of her position as Queen, but in modern thought, that was better than the alternative. The book of Esther mixes up a few historical facts which has led many to wonder if Vashti was more historical fiction of the late Persian period.

During the third year of King Ahasuerus's reign (~485-465 BC), Vashti would have been involved in, or at least aware of, the king's 180-day display of the kingdom's vast treasures and wealth (Est 1:4). The six-month exhibit culminated in a week-long drinking banquet for the nobles from 127 provinces that stretched from India to Ethiopia to the Balkans.

Vashti's problem arose in part because simultaneous to the male binging, she hosted a celebration for the female gentry (Est 1:9). On the seventh day of the men's regalia, in a tipsy if not smashed state, the king sent seven eunuchs to fetch Vashti, to have her put on her crown and parade for his guests so they could examine her beauty (Est 1:3-8). She declined (Est 1:12).

Vashti's refusal erupted into anger and fear that all women across the empire would not obey each demand of their husbands (Est 1:16-20). Not only was she removed from her position as Queen, but also the king sent a proclamation to all the provinces that "every man should be ruler over his own household" (Est 1:22, NIV). This also opened the search for a new queen that led to the young beautiful Jewish virgin Esther's selection (Est 2:1-17). This account exposes the marital culture of the day for the ancient cultures affiliated with the Persian empire.

Vashti's spicy story was augmented by Deuterocanonical additions including the Midrash which claimed she was the orphaned daughter of Belshazzar. Young Vashti, not realizing that her father was dead, mistakenly sat in the lap of Darius, who sat on her father's throne. Darius, taking pity on Vashti, betrothed her to his son Ahasuerus. Another midrashic tradition has Vashti as a princess and Ahasuerus, her father's steward in charge of the royal stables. Ahasuerus acquired regal status by marriage [Esth. *Rabbath* 3:14; BT *Megillah* 12b.] The Talmud embellished the story to claim Queen Vashti was called to appear at the male banquet wearing only her royal crown. According to the Aggadah, Queen Vashti's modesty prohibited her from accepting the summons. An opposite tradition from Babylonian Rabbis claimed that Vashti was "an adulterous woman, who mistreated her Jewish servants and regularly flaunted her naked form to groups of admirers." They also claimed that she refused the invitation to appear before the king and the princes due to a skin rash (*Talmud Megillah* 12 a-b).

**Handmaidens, Harems, & Heroines: Find their Messiah in the OT**—Lynne Hilton Wilson, PhD

Returning to the Bible, Vashti's refusal spoke of her desire to balance her own honor above a demeaning erotic request from an inebriated group of possibly over a hundred men (Est 1:10-12). She set an example for all the women in her kingdom, but it was not appreciated by the male authorities at the time. In her culture, she may have known that her decision would have dire consequences to her position as Queen, but she chose to maintain her dignity. By doing so, she also honored her guests rather than leaving them to be paraded like chattel. She did not compromise what she felt was important because of spousal, political, or cultural pressure. In short, she chose to act rather than being acted upon. (*See \*Esther*)

3) Est 1:19—**Women at Vashti's Banquet** ~486-465 BC

Noblewomen and members of the royal court gathered for Queen Vashti's feast while the king entertained the men separately. They witnessed a moment that would change history: when the drunken king summoned Vashti to display herself, she refused (Est 1:10-12). These women saw firsthand what happened when someone chose dignity over obedience to power—Vashti was deposed (Est 1:19). Yet her removal opened the door for Esther to become queen and eventually save the Jewish people, showing how God can even work through very difficult circumstances to accomplish His purposes. (*See \*Esther; \*Vashti*)

4) Est 1:18-20—**Noble Ladies of Persia and Media** ~486-465 BC

King Ahasuerus' advisors feared that all the noble ladies throughout the vast Persian and Median empire would hear of Queen Vashti's refusal and follow her example in defying their own husbands (Est 1:16-18). The men's panic reveals how threatened they felt by women's potential solidarity and independent action. Ironically, their solution—a royal decree commanding all wives to honor their husbands—only broadcast Vashti's act of courage throughout the entire kingdom, likely inspiring the very resistance they hoped to prevent (Est 1:20-22). These women became unwitting participants in God's larger plan, as Vashti's removal made way for Esther to become queen and eventually save the Jewish people. (*See \*Esther; \*Vashti*)

5) Est 2:2-3, 8, 12-14, 17, 19—**Young Virgins/Women** ~486-465 BC

Many young women across the Persian empire responded to the call for a new queen. They gathered at Shushan palace (or citadel of Susa, NIV), to compete for the position. Jewish tradition and later commentaries have speculated about the numbers—some suggesting hundreds or even thousands given the size of the Persian empire—but these are not scriptural facts. They underwent twelve months of beauty preparations—six months with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet perfumes—before spending one night with the king (Est 2:12-14). Only one young woman would be chosen as queen; the others became part of the king's household as concubines. These women's gathering created the circumstances that brought Esther to the palace. The text emphasizes that Esther “obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins” (Est 2:17, ASV). Her selection was most likely divinely orchestrated, as her positioning allowed her to eventually intercede for her people when Haman plotted their destruction (Est 7:3-6). (*See \*Esther*)

6) Est 2:3, 8, 12, 14, 17—**Women of the Harem** ~486-465 BC

The women in King Ahasuerus' harem already resided in "the house of the women" at the palace before the new candidates arrived (Est 2:3). They lived under the care of Hegai, the king's chamberlain, and would have witnessed the arrival of the young virgins gathered for the king. These experienced harem members likely helped prepare the newcomers, teaching them palace customs and protocols during the twelve-month preparation period. The same women may have also been a source of rival contention—we are not told. Esther particularly "obtained kindness" from Hegai, and he gave her seven chosen maidens from the palace and moved her to the best place in the house of the women (Est 2:9), suggesting these established women played a role in helping candidates succeed (or fail) in winning the king's favor. (*See \*Esther*)

7) Est 2:7—**Mother of Esther** ~486-465 BC

Esther's mother died when she was young, leaving her daughter an orphan. The text provides no details about her life, her name, or the circumstances of her death. What we do know is that she bore and, for a few years, raised a daughter described as "fair and beautiful." After both parents died, a Jewish kinsman living in Babylon named Mordecai took Esther as his own daughter. Though this mother's time with Esther was cut short, God's purposes unfolded through circumstances she could not have foreseen—her orphaned daughter would one day stand before a king and declare, "if I perish, I perish," to deliver an entire nation (Est 4:16; 7:3-4). (*See \*Esther*)

8) Est 2:9, 4:4, 16—**Seven Maids or Young Virgins who assisted Esther** ~486-465 BC

Seven maidens were specially chosen by Hegai, the "keeper of the women" (Est 2:3, or "king's eunuch," NIV), to serve Esther. These seven female attendants and Esther were moved to "the best place in the harem" shortly after she arrived at the palace (Est 2:9, NIV). The seven maids remained Esther's trusted attendants even after she became queen. They served as messengers, bringing her the disturbing news of Mordecai's mourning in sackcloth (Est 4:4). When Esther learned of Haman's plot to destroy all the Jews and determined to approach the king unbidden—a decision that could cost her life—these maidens joined her in a three-day fast. Their willingness to fast with their queen showed remarkable loyalty and suggests that by this time, they knew of Esther's Jewish identity. They stood with Esther in her most dangerous hour, sharing in the spiritual preparation before she risked everything to save her people. They supported her in her declaration, "if I perish, I perish" (Est 4:16). (*See \*Esther*)

9) Est 3:13—**Women in the King's Decree** ~486-465 BC

Jewish women throughout the Persian empire were specifically named as targets in Haman's genocidal decree. The edict made no distinction between men, women, young, or old—all were marked for death on a single day. The decree's inclusion of women emphasizes the totality of Haman's intended destruction: he sought to erase the Jewish people entirely, leaving no survivors to carry on their covenant identity. These women faced annihilation simply for being Jewish, unaware that their deliverance would come through Queen Esther, herself a Jewish woman who had hidden her identity. When Esther learned of the decree, she risked her life to approach the king and ultimately saved these women and all her people (Est 8:11). (*See \*Esther*)

10) Est 4:11—**Woman Going Unbidden to the King** ~486-465 BC

Any woman who approached the king without being summoned faced automatic death unless he extended his golden scepter. This law applied equally to men and women, but Esther’s statement reveals how it specifically endangered her: even as queen, she had not been called to the king in 30 days and had no guarantee he would spare her life. She felt that she was in the same position as any other woman going before the king. (*See \*Esther*)

11) Est 5:10,14; 6:13—**Zeresh**, ~480 BC

Zeresh (also transliterated as *Zosara* from the LXX) was the wife and counselor of Haman, who held the highest position among the king's princes in the book of Esther (Est 3:1). The Bible describes Haman as an enemy of the Jews. He shared with his wife his excitement of how the King and Queen Esther favored him, and also his frustration at the Jew Mordecai who refused to bow to him (Est 5:10). Zeresh helped to devise a plan to eliminate Mordecai (Est 5:14). Zeresh's voice joined those who encouraged Haman to create a 75-foot gallows to kill Mordecai the Jew (Est 5:14). When Haman's plans failed, Zeresh and his counselors predicted his demise; "If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him" (Est 6:13). It is worth noting that in the Persian world of the fifth century, a wife was confided in, counseled with, and given prophetic information. (*See \*Esther*)

12) Est 7:4—**Female Slaves to Persians** ~486-465 BC

Esther distinguished between two fates for women: being sold as slaves versus being killed. When pleading for her people before the king, she acknowledged that if Haman’s plot had merely meant selling Jewish women as bondwomen (female slaves), she would have remained silent rather than trouble the king. But the decree called for complete destruction—death, not slavery. Esther’s argument reveals that while slavery was considered an acceptable outcome in that culture, genocide was not. Her willingness to speak only for the greater evil shows both her understanding of Persian values and her strategic wisdom in appealing to the king. Ultimately, her intercession saved Jewish women from both slavery and death (Est 8:11). (*See \*Esther*)

## Israel’s Captivity and Return from Babylon

