

## Bible Study Course

# ESTHER

### Introduction

The book of Esther is one of the only two books of the Bible that bear the name of a woman. As we read it, we are immediately arrested by its direct and vital style, as also the difference of its atmosphere when compared with the other books of the Old Testament. It is thoroughly Gentile in atmosphere, customs, and even phraseology, almost to the point where it appears to shun the things of God. It is this aspect which caused its inclusion in the canon of the Old Testament to be hotly questioned and occasional controversy and discussion.

On the other hand, the book of Esther has always been given an esteem which is truly remarkable. It was commonly believed in Jewish circles that in the days of the Messiah only the law and the book of Esther would remain. We ought also to note that the feast of Purim, which commemorates this event, has always been meticulously observed by the Jew from that day to this.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Esther is found in the third division, called the writings (kethubim), in a section called "The Five Rolls," of which it was the principal book. It is instructive to note that under the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit this book was moved to its present position as the final word of Old Testament history.

In Ezra-Nehemiah we have seen God's ways with those who returned, but what was the Lord's attitude to the great majority who remained comfortably in exile and how did he deal with them? In the book of Esther we discover the answer to our question. Twenty three chapters (Ezra and Nehemiah) deal with the remnant that returned, and ten chapters (Esther) deal with the vast majority who remain. Esther is a great corrective, on the one hand, to the narrow prejudice and dogmatism which "restrict" God to one's own realm of work and understanding, and on the other hand, to that sentimental looseness and insensitive non-discernment which would involve itself in anything that is "being blessed," as if that in itself was the criterion of God's full committal of Himself to it.

### Authorship and Date

We have nothing internal or external that would give us a clue as to the authorship of Esther but whoever wrote it was minutely familiar with Persian customs and life, and obviously lived in Persia. This can also be seen from his use of terms.

From earliest times Mordecai has been suggested as the author and in all probability there is much of his work in this book. The Talmud attributes it to Ezra and the Great synagogue. Nehemiah has also been suggested. The book is much more Persian than Jewish, and there can be little doubt that the present record is based on Persian documents from the Royal archives (see Esther 10:2). This could argue in favour of Mordecai's authorship.

The date of the story can be fixed with some certainty between the sixth and seventh chapter of Ezra (i.e. in the 60-70 years between the first and second stage of the return from Babylon to Jerusalem), in the reign of the famous Xerxes (486-465B.C.), or Ahasuerus as he is called in the book of Esther. "Ahasuerus" is probably the Hebrew transliteration of a Persian title and not a name.

The book commences with the third year of his reign (483 BC), and progresses to his marriage to Esther four years later in the seventh year of his reign (479 BC). Five years after that, in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of his reign (474 BC), Haman hatched the plot, which lies at the heart of the record. See Esther 1:3; 2:16; 3:7. Thus this book covers a period of approximately 10 years.

There is little indication of the actual date of compilation, but the language used suggests that it was compiled some time after the events described. On the other hand, there is much detail that would suggest a contemporary compilation, and, furthermore, the style has a real similarity to that of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, even though thoroughly Gentile. It could be substantially therefore the work of Ezra based on a document compiled by Mordecai.

## **Especial Note: The Background of Esther**

Xerxes, or Ahasuerus, was one of the greatest of the Persian kings. He was proudly self-willed, amorous, and given to terrible moods. His empire extended from India to Ethiopia and to the borders of Greece, including the Mediterranean Isles. He reigned from 486-465BC.

It has never been clearly established whether Esther, (or indeed Vashti) was “the Queen”, or “a Queen”, because Ahasuerus had a number of wives, and many concubines. Vashti is known to us from history as a cruel and profligate woman.

We also know from history, that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign (483BC), Ahasuerus engaged in a disastrous campaign against Greece and in 480 BC first lost his fleet at Salamis, and later saw his army badly crippled at Thermopylae. It was after this defeat that he returned home in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign (479 BC), and busied himself with matrimonial matters.

The story we have in Esther took place at Shushan (or Susa), one of the three capitals of the empires. A general conference was held there in the third year of Xerxes' reign, when the Greek expedition was planned. It was during this conference that the incident took place, which was to have such unhappy consequences for Vashti.

In Persians inscriptions the great feast, as recorded in the first chapter of Esther, is described as being preparatory to the expedition against Greece. This expedition is also described as comprising an army numbering two and a half million.

As near as can be stated, Esther became Queen in 478 BC, and the suggested date for the deliverance from the massacre is 473 BC

## **The Key to the Book**

The word “God”, the name of God – YHWH, the promised land, the city of God – Jerusalem, the house of God, the law of God, the commands of God; even the word of God, are not mentioned in Esther!!

In fact, the LXX scholars in their translation of this book were so embarrassed by this lack that they elaborated on the Hebrew text to make up for it. In marked contrast, the Persian King is mentioned 192 times, his kingdom 26 times and his personal name, or title, 29 times.

Mark also the amazing difference between Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther:-

In Ezra-Nehemiah

The city of God

The Lord

The word taught carefully

The law of God observed

All worship

Separation for witness

Mixed marriage condemned

In Esther

Shushan, a gentile capital

A Gentile King

The word of God not mentioned

The law of God not mentioned

No worship

Esther not known as a Jewess

A mixed marriage condemned

Furthermore, we must add to this the fact that the name Esther was foreign, and not a Hebrew name, corresponding to ‘Venus’, and implying ‘good luck’. Esther’s Hebrew name was ‘Hadassah’ which means ‘myrtle’. (Esther 2:7)

In all Jewish homes of the dispersion, idolatry was forbidden, and the law of God was respected, if not understood. Yet the Jews described in Esther remained where God's purpose could not be realized, God's house could not be built and God's Messiah could not be born.

It is in this atmosphere that the story of Esther takes place. Everywhere we discover the hidden sovereignty of God working for His people. And working for them in spite of their location, their ignorance, their compromise, their lack of devotion and zeal.

It is most clearly seen in the hidden manner in which the name of God appears in Esther. Four times and always at points of crisis in the story, the name "Jehovah", appears in Hebrew in acrostic form (Esther 1:20; 5:4; 5:13; 7:9). In the first two instances, it is initial letters; in the last two instances it is spelt backwards; in the second and fourth, it is spelt forwards. This evidently can be no coincidence! Beyond these four instances, the name of the Lord "I AM THAT I AM", appears in Hebrew once, also in acrostics (Esther 7:5). See Chart I. Note that where initial letters are used, the facts are final; where they are spelt backwards, it is God's overruling, and where forwards, it is God's direct working.

What does all this teach us? It reveals the sovereign grace of God toward all those who are His own wherever they may be found and this lesson is illustrated in Esther by the remarkable deliverance, and the honour and joy which followed it. The lesson appears to be that God would not build His Temple in Babylon, or Shushan; He would not dwell among them, but He was for them. We need to recognize, therefore, that at that time the people of God were to be found in two realms, the exile or the land, and through the saving grace of God was the same toward all of His own in whichever realm they lived, the principles upon which He dealt with them were different.

In the first realm, the exile, it was all acts, blessings, things, experiences. It was all real, wonderful and practical but it was not the 'building of His house and city'. It knew of the Lord as Saviour, Deliverer, Healer and Provider, but it was in Shushan or Babylon, exiled from the Land. It was a real knowing of the Lord but in a place where both His house and home could not be built, or His purpose concerning the coming of the Messiah be fulfilled. They knew God visiting them, saving them, blessing them, delivering them but not making His home among them.

It is in the second realm, the land that we come to the heart of the matter. For if the prophetic promise of the Messiah's coming was to be fulfilled, then the house of God and Jerusalem had to be rebuilt, the land repopulated, Bethlehem rebuilt and Galilee restored etc. See e.g. Isaiah 9:1, 6; Micah 5:2-4

Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews in exile could have lived, or died, but it would have made no difference to God's purpose concerning the coming of the Messiah. For even if there had been no deliverance of the Jews in exile, it would not have adversely affected the fulfillment of God's program. That was dependant upon those who had returned to the land.

We see then that Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah and the remnant who returned to the land, at great sacrifice, were a vital and integral part of God's purpose concerning the coming of the Messiah. Through them He fulfilled His prophetic word and realized His purpose.

The key to the book of Esther is the truth that God never leaves or forsakes His own. His sovereign grace and love is there working for them wherever they may be found, blessing them, using them, and delivering them.

Here we learn a vital lesson for our own time at the end of the age. There are two realms in which God's people are found. We are either found spiritually in that area where the Church of God, the house of God cannot be built, or in that area where it can. No matter where we are found God never forsakes His redeemed children but in His grace he blesses them, provides for them, and works miracles for them although He may not be treating them as 'living stones', which He is building into a spiritual house for His eternal dwelling place.

## The Outline of the Book

We can see in Esther a threefold division:-

- I. The sovereignty of God determining the matter before the event or crisis. Esther 1:1 - 2:23
- II. The event or crisis itself. Esther 3:1 – 5:8
- III. God sovereignly intervening in deliverance and turning the evil into honour and glory. Esther 5:9 - 10:3

We need to keep continually before us all that has been said about the background of this book and the fact that in this realm God in his grace works sovereignly in a veiled way.

### a) The sovereignty of God determining the matter before the event or crisis. Esther 1:1 - 2:23

#### a) The story

##### i) The Great conference 1:1-8

All the civil and military leaders were invited. It was a display at the Persian court of amazing wealth and luxury. There were two feasts, one at the beginning of the conference, and one at the end.

##### ii) The royal command to Vashti 1:9-12

It was during the final feast that Vashti was asked to come before the assembled leaders. Her refusal was a public affront to the King and caused great anger.

##### iii) The divorce and deposition of Vashti 1:13-22

The divorce of Vashti was by royal decree and was recorded in the state and royal accounts

##### iv) Esther chosen as Queen 2:1-18

By royal decree the replacement of Vashti was to be found through an empire-wide beauty competition. Esther is now introduced in the story, she was known for her great beauty. Mordecai was her cousin (2:7). According to Jewish tradition she was born of the line of King Saul (2:5) and of Shimei (See 2 Samuel 16:5, 6); her father died just before she was born and her mother during her birth. She was favoured by chief officer of the Harem and advanced before the other competitors. Note Mordecai's advice to keep her Jewish identity a secret. Esther chosen as Queen.

##### v) Mordecai's discovery of a plot 2:19-23

Mordecai's discovery of a plot to assassinate the king, and Esther's timely intervention which saved the king's life bringing about a good relationship to the King.

#### b) The lessons

##### i) The sovereignty of God behind the scenes

The scene may be one of absolute and autocratic world power and authority but God is there in a hidden way and is absolute Lord of all. Long before the events described, He has planned His counter-action and His deliverance. Note Vashti's deposition; Mordecai's connection with the court; Esther's selection as queen; Mordecai overhearing of the plot to assassinate the King. There is in fact no situation beyond the authority of the Lord. All is foreseen by Him and action is taken by Him accordingly.

##### ii) The sovereign grace of God in caring for His own

In spite of the compromised condition of His people, and their 'comfortable' lethargy, in His grace and love He plans their deliverance and their triumph. He arranges and uses circumstances, and takes hold of the conditions as they are, in order to deliver His people, simply because they are His own. He does things in the exile which He would not touch in the holy land. For example, in the exile He arranges the marriage of Esther to a heathen and unsaved king, yet in the land, He teaches His own through Ezra to divorce their foreign and unbelieving wives.

### b) The event itself – the annihilation of God's people planned and timed. Esther 3:1 – 5:8

#### a) The Story

i) Haman the Agagite 3:1 – 6

Haman's greatness and Mordecai's attitude to Him. The obeisance demanded by Haman was probably of religious significance (3:2 cp v.4). Haman's anger and its result genocide planned.

ii) The plot to destroy the Jews 3:7 – 15

The lots cast and the date of the planned massacre settled. This was done according to astrology. These lots – 'pur' or 'purim' in Hebrew – are the origination of the name of the festival 'Purim'. The king approached; his assent given and the royal decree made. Is it not interesting that Haman was descended from Agag and Mordecai from Kish and Saul (3:1, cp. 1 Samuel 15)? We know that Saul did not obey the Lord's command to destroy all the Amalekites and some of Agag's seed survived. By the grace of God Mordecai triumphed where Saul failed.

iii) The reaction of Esther, Mordecai and the Jews 4:1 – 5:8

Mordecai's anguish; the Jews' fasting; Esther's concern; Mordecai's counsel; Esther's courage; the three days fast; Esther's "success."

b) The lessons

i) Satan's bitter hatred of all God's people

This bitter hatred of Satan for all of God's people continues even when they are not where they should be, when they are compromised or backsliding. His antagonism toward them is so deeply entrenched that he will always seek to destroy them because of their relationship to Christ. His plans are always carefully laid and timed and are never haphazard.

ii) The Anguish and Intercession of God's People.

His people sought His face with sincerity and urgency. It is a noteworthy fact that the Lord always allows His people to be reduced to "crying to Him" before He delivers them. (See Psalm 107). God had carefully prepared their deliverance, and yet He still awaits their cry! We must also note the sad fact that their anguish was not so much over the Lord's Name, and Honour, and Purpose, as over their own i.e. their preservation. "I" and, "we", so often characterises that realm.

iii) The Sovereign Grace of God

In His Sovereign Grace He has those who at such a time are faithful, prepared and ready.

C) God sovereignly intervening in deliverance and turning the Evil into honour and glory (5:9-10:3)

a) The Story

i) The King Honours Mordecai (5:9-6:14)

Haman's design; the king's sleeplessness and the result; Haman's humiliation

ii) Esther's petition granted (7:1-10)

A second feast; Esther's petition to the king; his wrath concerning Haman; the execution of Haman

iii) The king's former decree counteracted (8:1-17)

A Persian Royal decree was unalterable; Esther's fears; the making of a new decree; Haman's house and property confiscated; Mordecai's position.

iv) The day of destruction turned into the day of triumph (9:1-16)

13<sup>th</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> month

v) The Feast of Purim instituted (9:17-32)

The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of 12<sup>th</sup> month set aside for all time for the commemoration of the great deliverance of the Jewish People. This is the feast of Purim commemorated to this day wherever Jews are found.

vi) The Honours, Greatness and Prosperity of Mordecai and the Jews (10:1-3)

The end of the matter- Mordecai and the Jews given much honour and respect, and prosper greatly. What had been meant for their destruction turned into their advancement and honour.

b) The Lessons

i) God in His Sovereignty knows the exact point at which to intervene. He "arranged" the king's sleeplessness and the resulting deliverance of the Jews. It is comforting to know that He who keeps Israel neither slumbers, nor sleeps. He knows the exact time when to intervene, and who to use.

ii) It is instructive to note the remarkable and delicate balance between God's Sovereign working and man's cooperation- Esther, Mordecai.

- iii) The way in which God always takes the very things that caused the trouble, to work deliverance. – Haman unwittingly plan’s Mordecai’s honours; Haman builds gallows- He and his sons are hanged on them: the Royal Decree- destruction, the Royal Decree- preservation. Day of Destruction 12<sup>th</sup> of 13<sup>th</sup>- the Day of Deliverance and Enemies’ destruction.
- iv) The very things that caused the trouble are the means God uses to honour, prosper and increase His own
- v) We learn from all this that it is possible to have *real* experience of the Lord, His deliverance, blessing, provision, etc. in that realm.
- vi) We learn, too, that in His Sovereign Grace, He makes His own to be great, influential, and prosperous in that realm.
- vii) Yet we also learn that it had no real bearing upon the Purpose of God, and the coming of the Messiah. It is therefore possible to be blessed, used, etc., and not be within God’s Eternal Purpose.

## **The Message of the Book**

The book of Esther is truly amazing, for what all that precedes has been at such pains to teach us, it contradicts! And indeed, more merely than contradicts, for here in this book, the very contradictions are blessed and used of God!!

To get down to the reason for this, is not only to understand the vital message of Esther, but to also understand the seemingly contradictory and complex situation today.

Esther reveals to us that there are two distinct realms in which God’s people are found - “The Land” and “The Exile”. The minority have returned to the Land and the majority have remained in the Exile. The way the Lord deals with His people in these two realms is entirely different. For what in one He would never touch, but rather judge and remove, in the other He will bless and even use! He might even arrange it!!! We can never, therefore, make what He touches, blesses or uses in “the Exile”, the criterion for “the Land”.

Today we are also at the end of a dispensation. We also have the two realms in which God’s people are found therefore we need to understand clearly the message of Esther.

With this book, we have come to the end of the second section of the Old Testament, the historical books. It is then highly instructive, that whilst there would be the so called 400 silent years before the age was concluded, the Lord’s last word as far as divinely recorded history is concerned, was to do with the majority of His people who remain where His Purpose can never be realized. And it is a glorious declaration of the grace of God toward all who are His wherever they may be found and in whatever condition!

### Recommended Books

#### Halford House Tapes

Esther (1)	BS 26
Esther (2)	BS 27
Esther (3)	BS 28

Chart I

The Name of God in the Book of Esther

- i. Esther 1:20 Initial letters; backwards.  
**D**ue **R**espect **O**ur **L**adies all  
Shall give their husbands, great and small.
- ii. Esther 5:4 Initial letters; forwards.  
**L**et **O**ur **R**oyal **D**inner bring  
Haman feasting with a King
- iii. Esther 5:13 Final letters; backwards  
Gran**D** fo**R** n**O** avai**L** my state  
While this Jew sits at the gate.
- iv. Esther 7:7 Final letters; forwards  
**I**l**L** t**O** fea**R** decree**D** I find,  
Toward me in the monarch's mind

Note that in these four instances it is the Name of the Lord, Jehovah, (YHVH).

- v. Esther 7:5 Final letter, forward.  
Wher**E** dwellet**H** the Enem**Y** that  
daret**H** presume in his heart  
to do this thing

Note that in this instance it is the name 'I AM THAT I AM; (EHYH)

(All this from E.W. Bullinger and A.T. Pierson)

Questions

1. What does the name “Esther” mean?
2. What period of history is covered by the Book of Esther, and into which part of the book of Ezra can it be fitted?
3. Write three or four sentences on each of the following: -
  - a) Vashti
  - b) Haman
  - c) Ahasuerus
  - d) Shushan (or Susan)
4. Write an account of the feasts, banquets, and conferences which are found in the book of Esther, stating their importance.
5. Show five ways in which the name of God appears in Esther. Give Scripture references
6. How vital were the people of God who remained in Babylon, to the practical realization of God’s Eternal Purpose, and to the bringing in of the Messiah. Give reasons for your answer.
7. State in your own words, what is the message of the Book of Esther. Is it possible for Christians to be in “the Land” or in “the Exile: today?
8. Describe how God takes Satan’s plans to destroy God’s people, and uses these evil plans, to bring joy and even greater security to the people of God. Does this teach you anything about the way the lord deals with Satan in world history, throughout all ages?
9. Do you find anything puzzling about God’s dealing with His people in Esther, as compared with His dealings with His people in Ezra-Nehemiah? What lesson if any, do you learn from this comparison?
10. Describe briefly the part played by Mordecai in the Book of Esther. What do you most admire about Esther herself, in this book?