

-2-

The Message of Esther

J.K. McKee

The Book of Esther is one of the most important books in the Bible. While Esther is commonly considered during the season of *Purim*, the specific concepts it communicates often go under-appreciated. Esther is much, much more than just cheering when the name “Mordecai” is mentioned or booing to “Haman” when the story is shared in the congregation, or dressing up and participating in a play. Esther gives us a snapshot of the Diaspora Jewish community following the fall of the Babylonian Empire, the complexities of the Jews having to live under Persian rule, the antiquity of anti-Semitism long preceding the time of Yeshua, the workings of God behind the scenes through normal people, and most especially how God uses women to accomplish His tasks. Esther also tells us what happens after God’s people are spared from certain doom, and how they are to protect themselves.

The story of Esther begins during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus or Xerxes, who reigned between 486-465 B.C.E. While Bible readers most often know this king for the role he plays in the Book of Esther, history at large knows Xerxes as the Persian king who failed to conquer Greece.¹ The account of Esther opens up when Xerxes intends to display “the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty” for “a full 180 days” (Esther 1:4, NIV). In the midst of a great banquet he holds after the time of celebration (Esther 1:5-8), the intoxicated king intends to display his wife Vashti to those gathered. Nothing is stated in the Biblical text regarding why he asks of this—only saying that Xerxes wanted to “display her beauty” (Esther 1:11, NIV)—but one can only imagine a woman walking into a crowd of drunken men and what they were thinking, perhaps wanting to rip her

¹ Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 716; note on Esther 1:1.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

clothes off (if she were not already nude). Vashti, as one can only expect, refuses the request of the king who “became furious and burned with anger” (Esther 1:12, NIV).

King Xerxes consults with his closest advisors, wanting to know what is to be done with his wife (Esther 1:14-15). They tell him that if something is not done, wives all over Persia and Media will imitate Queen Vashti, and there will be gross disrespect of husbands and men in general (Esther 1:17-18). They rule that Queen Vashti not be allowed into his presence again, and specifically that “the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she” (Esther 1:19, NIV). So significant was this, that “He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in his own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household” (Esther 1:22, NIV).

After this declaration and with his own anger subsided, King Xerxes is advised, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king” (Esther 2:2, NIV), and commissioners are sent to the provinces of the Persian Empire to search for a new queen. In the capital city of Susa, a Jewess named Hadassah, “also known as Esther, [who] was lovely in form and features” (Esther 2:7, NIV), had been taken by her older cousin Mordecai as a daughter. The search commences, and she was found to have all the right qualities and won the favor of the leader of the king’s harem. Leaving, Mordecai tells her not to reveal her Jewish heritage (Esther 2:10). We are told that Esther “had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women. . . And this is how she would go to the king” (Esther 2:12, 13, NIV). Esther was the one woman who “the king was attracted to. . . more than any of the other virgins” (Esther 2:17, NIV), being made queen.

As these events occur at the palace, Mordecai was sitting outside at the gate (Esther 2:19). Minding his own business, perhaps wondering what is going on inside, he overhears a conversation between two of the king’s officers. These two men, Bigthgana and Teresh, “became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes” (Esther 2:21, NIV). Mordecai relays the news to Esther, who reports it to the king on his behalf (Esther 2:22). As a result, the two were executed and their bodies publicly displayed or “hanged” (Esther 2:23, NIV).

Following this we are introduced to Haman, one of the Persian nobles, and a man whom the author of Esther considers to be an Agagite.² King Xerxes honors Haman, yet “Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor” (Esther 3:2, NIV). Mordecai enraged Haman, who was promptly told that “he was a Jew” (Esther 3:4, NIV). “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged” (Esther 3:5, NIV), and rather

² Agag was the deposed king of the Amalakites, whom King Saul let live (1 Samuel 15).

than wanting to just do damage to Mordecai or bring him harm, "Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes" (Esther 3:6, NIV). The scheming Haman then goes before his king, and speaks the insidious words,

"There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of other people who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business" (Esther 3:8-9, NIV).

King Xerxes promptly gives Haman his signet ring in approval (Esther 3:10). Ironically enough, it was not the style of the Persians to exterminate people, as the Persians were widely known for their tolerant attitudes, unlike the Assyrians or Babylonians who had preceded them. Haman receiving Xerxes' immediate approval is a testament to his ability to connive and manipulate with lies, some of the distinct qualities of (state) anti-Semitism seen throughout later history. We are told, "Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children. . . A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that they would be ready for that day" (Esther 3:13-14, NIV).

Upon hearing about this genocidal plot against his people, Mordecai "tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly" (Esther 4:1, NIV). It is also recorded, "In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing" (Esther 4:3, NIV). Esther herself "was in great distress" (Esther 4:4, NIV). Mordecai relays what has happened to Esther via her servant, and how Haman was at the center of the plot to kill all the Jews in Persia. Mordecai "urge[d] her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (Esther 4:8, NIV).

Just going before the king of Persia was not an easy thing to do, even for his queen. Esther relays the message to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life" (Esther 4:11, NIV). Esther knows the gravity of going before King Xerxes. Yet, Mordecai is sure that she is told: "if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14, NIV). Mordecai is confident that the Jewish people will not be

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

exterminated, but if Esther fails to act there will be a price to pay as her family will die. Esther asks Mordecai for the Jews in Susa to fast for her, as she contemplates what is to be done.

After three days, Esther “stood. . .in front of the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne. . .When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter” (Esther 5:1-2, NIV). Esther was indeed in the right place at the right time, and King Xerxes is so happy to see her, that he says, “What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you” (Esther 5:3, NIV). Rather than telling the king right then and there the problem her people were facing, she asks if she can hold a banquet for the king and Haman (Esther 5:5), and it is granted.

During this banquet, both King Xerxes and Haman are found drinking wine. The king once again asks Esther what her request is, and she asks them if they can have another banquet the following day (Esther 5:7). As he leaves, “Haman. . .went out in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king’s gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home” (Esther 5:9-10, NIV). When he arrived home, Haman “boasted. . .about his vast wealth” and specifically “all the ways the king had honored him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials” (Esther 5:11, NIV). Even more interesting, Haman specifically says, “I’m the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave” (Esther 5:12, NIV). Yet this is followed by the perturbed remark, “all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate” (Esther 5:13, NIV). Haman’s wife asks that they build a structure³ up to seventy-five cubits high on which to display Mordecai’s corpse. We are told: “This suggestion delighted Haman” (Esther 5:14, NIV).

While Haman continues in his schemes to destroy the Jews, King Xerxes could not sleep. As a sure remedy, “he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bithgana and Teresh. . .who had conspired to assassinate him” (Esther 6:1-2, NIV). The king asks what kind of honor had been bestowed upon Mordecai for his act of preservation, and is told that nothing had yet been done (Esther 6:3-4). While this is happening, “Haman is standing in the court” (Esther 6:5, NIV), and upon entering the king asks him, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” (Esther 6:6a, NIV). And as it is said, “Haman thought to himself, ‘Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?’” (Esther 6:6b, NIV). Haman was so self-

³ In v. 14 Zeresh says “Have a gallows built,” yet the Hebrew source text reads *ya’asu etz* or “Let them prepare a tree” (YLT), or “wood.”

consumed that it was only natural that any reward dispensed by the leader of the Persian Empire could go to *him*. Haman tells the king,

“For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” (Esther 6:7-9, NIV).

Perhaps thinking that he will be paraded around the city in the Fifth Century B.C.E equivalent of a ticker-tape parade, King Xerxes tells Haman, “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended” (Esther 6:10, NIV). In a twist of complete irony, rather than having this honor done to *himself*, Haman must parade the man he hates with a passion—Mordecai—around the city on horseback. He has to proclaim to the city: “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” (Esther 6:11, NIV). Humiliated, Haman rushes home and reports what has taken place (Esther 6:12). Haman’s wife gives him some sound advice: “you cannot stand against [Mordecai]—you will surely come to ruin!” (Esther 6:13, NIV), and following this Haman is prepared to go to Esther’s second banquet.

As King Xerxes “and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther. . . the king again asked, ‘Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you?’” (Esther 7:1, NIV). With her husband and Haman right there, and with Haman likely unsure of what is going on, having had some wine, Esther is direct with her response:

“If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king” (Esther 7:3-4, NIV).

The king is naturally astonished, asking Esther, “Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?” (Esther 7:5, NIV). Esther’s answer is to the point: “The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman” (Esther 7:6, NIV).

Haman probably did not know what to do, and we can only imagine the kinds of bodily reactions he had when signaled out as the culprit against Esther and her people. Did he vomit? Did his stomach churn? Did he lose his voice or get a sudden headache? One thing is certain, as King Xerxes ran out of the banquet furious, “Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life” (Esther 7:7b, NIV). Returning to address Haman, the king sees him in a prostrated position before Esther. All he has to say is, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

me in the house?" (Esther 7:8b, NIV). Upon saying this, one of the king's eunuchs informs him that a structure seventy-five cubits high has been built on which Mordecai's corpse was supposed to be displayed (Esther 7:9). The king's words are direct: "Hang him on it!" (Esther 7:10, NIV). And so "the king's fury subsided" (Esther 7:10, NIV).

This is normally where the common *Purim* play ends the story—with the death of Haman. Yet the Book of Esther still has three more chapters, each of which tells us more about what happened. After Esther has just pleaded for her life, Mordecai is brought in before King Xerxes, is formally introduced, and is given Haman's estate (Esther 8:1-2). Esther, having been saved, pleads for the lives of all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire (Esther 8:3-5), telling him "For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?" (Esther 8:6, NIV). Having just called for the death of Haman, the king is moved to make another ruling:

"Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked" (Esther 8:8, NIV).

A new ruling in favor of the Jews was sent throughout the empire—"Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush [Ethiopia]" (Esther 8:9, NIV). Mordecai's ruling was sent in the languages of all, with the direct approval and signet stamp of King Xerxes (Esther 8:9b-10). The Jews were given permission to defend themselves against any aggression, and a set date was given "so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies" (Esther 8:13, NIV). Far be it from the Jewish people in the empire being the victims; they are now authorized to go and root out potential foes. As a consequence, the text tells us "many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them" (Esther 8:17, NIV). Somehow, these people realized that the Jewish people were going to take the decree seriously, and whether or not they "converted," they certainly did their best to *blend in*.

This edict was to be carried out on the 13th of Adar, and although "the enemies of the Jews. . .hoped to overpower them. . .the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them" (Esther 9:1, NIV). "The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them" (Esther 9:2, NIV). In the day of the Jews' vengeance, the administrators of Persia actually helped them because Mordecai had replaced Haman in Xerxes' government (Esther 9:3-4)! "The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those

who hated them" (Esther 9:5, NIV), and we are specifically told that the ten sons of Haman met their death (Esther 9:6) and whose corpses were displayed (Esther 9:13-14). A great number of the Jews' enemies were killed during this day.

On the day following, the 14th of Adar, the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire "rested and made it a day of feasting and joy" (Esther 9:17, NIV). The Jews had been saved from complete obliteration, and their enemies had been routed out. The people could now live in peace, wherever they were located, and could remember how Queen Esther was placed by God in the Persian court. This festival was to be "a day for giving presents to each other" (Esther 9:19, NIV), and was recorded for posterity by Mordecai (Esther 9:20). It was to be celebrated "annually. . . as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies" (Esther 9:22, NIV). It was called *Purim*, as Haman had "cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction" (Esther 9:23, NIV). However, the Jews throughout the empire had been delivered, and were specifically admonished to remember this time of deliverance "every year. . . at the time appointed" (Esther 9:27, NIV).⁴ As it was decreed:

"These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants" (Esther 9:28, NIV).

The Biblical text is very clear on the need to celebrate Purim *b'kol dor v'dor* or "in all generation and generation." "Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records" (Esther 9:32, NIV).

Mordecai is attested to have been alongside King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) in "all his acts of power and might," and he is listed "in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia" (Esther 10:2, NIV). He, as Jew who was once designated for execution, "was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews" (Esther 10:3, NIV).

The narrative of Esther when taken as a whole has much more to teach us than the common *Purim* play does it justice. Far be it from Esther being some kind of ironic comedy, the Book of Esther adroitly displays themes common to the human condition such as: love, oppression, goodness, evil, and justice for those who would harm others. While there is no direct mention of God in the account, one can certainly see how the Lord works through the various characters with the Jewish people in the end being saved from certain

⁴ Heb. *v'kizmanam b'kol shanah v'shanah*, "according to their season, in every year and year" (YLT).

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

extinction. As Mordecai clearly told Esther, “perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Esther 4:14, NJPS). You may have used this sort of expression before and did not know where it came from. Better yet, perhaps you have been in the right place at the right time, and have been able to be used by God for some kind of important service.

Looking at the place of Esther in the whole of Scripture, it is obvious that there are connections between the figure of Haman and the coming antimessiah/antichrist. Haman was a man filled with self-love and self-worship. He could only think about himself. While the text does not say so explicitly, were the would-be assassins of King Xerxes in Haman’s close confidence? Did Haman as a noble of Persia possibly ever see himself as deposing the king and being installed as a monarch himself? Haman was undoubtedly a man consumed with ambition, and whose negative traits have lived on throughout history.

Anti-Semitism in the world pre-dated the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah by many centuries. The Book of Esther only gives us a small snapshot of the attitudes that other people have had toward the Jews. Haman manipulated King Xerxes to get him to sign the Jews’ death warrant. But in the end as the Jews are saved, they stand up for themselves and are authorized by the government to take care of their enemies. The Jews do not play the role of the victim, instead taking preemptive action and targeting those who would do them harm. What might this teach us about not only when Jews stand up for themselves today—here on the other side of the Holocaust—but when we as Believers might be tempted to be a little too pacifistic? What might this teach us about our spirituality as Messianics, when we might be tempted to victimize ourselves because we have been treated badly? What kinds of specific actions can we take to defend ourselves?

Perhaps the most overlooked theme is the role that Esther plays not only as the person able to save her people, but as a woman. Throughout the history of the Bible, it is not as though God *will* use women; **God uses women**. Esther is one of many significant heroines in the Scriptures who are used by the Lord in a mighty way. Yet, far from Esther being a radical feminist, she works within the rules laid out by the Persian establishment, winning the favor of the king. Esther uses her God-given intellect to lay a clever trap for Haman. And, at the end Esther is able to introduce King Xerxes to Mordecai who is then placed in a position second only to his own. The Book of Esther should teach every Messianic male to respect women and highly value the role that they play, as Esther was directly responsible not only for the salvation of the Jewish people—but for eliminating a direct threat to her husband in Haman. Without Esther, the Jewish people could have been annihilated and there would have been no Messiah Yeshua born to save the world!

The Message of Esther

As you can see, the Book of Esther teaches us much, much more than what is captured in the *Purim* play. While it is good to have a laugh, and indeed God gave us as human beings a sense of humor, Esther is still a very serious story. Esther is a life and death account about how easy it was for the Persian king to be manipulated into thinking that the Jews must be eliminated. Esther teaches us about a very old problem in anti-Semitism that continues to this very day. Yet, it also shows how God orchestrates things behind the scenes, and uses willing vessels to accomplish His salvation history. Like Esther and Mordecai, each one of us can be used by Him for circumstances that require a voice of reason, a temperament of compassion, or a fiery protester who will stand firm for what is right. What message does the Book of Esther teach you? Is it something that will last far behind the holiday of *Purim*?