

INTRODUCTION:

1. **Historical Background** – The story takes place while the Jews are in exile in Persia, placing it in the historical context of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. The events depicted occur in the winter capital city of Susa. List of characters:
 - a. **Ahasuerus/Xerxes** – ruled the Persian Empire from 485-465 BC.
 - b. **Haman** – son of Hammedatha the Agagite – a descendent of Agag the Amalekite king whom Saul failed to kill... who proves to be an enemy of Israel.
 - c. **Mordecai** – from the tribe of Benjamin and descendent of Kish the father of Saul.
 - d. **Esther** – her Hebrew name was Hadassah meaning “myrtle” and her Persian name Esther means “star” from the Persian goddess Ishtar.

2. **Literary Development** – The story and its plot development are really ingenious combining a wine loving king whose queen rebuffs him and a plan to replace her amid a court full of intrigue and self-interest. In the midst of this we are introduced to Esther who wins the king’s heart and saves her people from certain destruction commemorated in the Feast of Purim. At first the story focuses upon her beauty, but as the story progresses we discover her character. Jewish tradition ascribes authorship of this scroll to Mordecai. Esther was an interesting and out-of-character book/scroll from the perspective of Orthodox Jews. The story develops amid a number of type-cast character conflicts:
 - a. What was a good Jewish virgin-girl doing in the bed of the libation-loving Persian Monarch pleasing him like no one else can? While she was certainly humble, she was evidently not modest with modesty being something the Jews prized. Hebrew culture and the Ancient Near East generally had a mindset and world view that was “shame/honor” based, and not the “illegal (guilty)/innocent (not guilty)” mindset generally characteristic of Western culture.
 - b. Jews are often characterized in Scripture as being a “stiff-necked people.” This reference is used **19 times in Scripture of the stubbornness of God’s people.** Zondervan’s Expository Commentary of the Bible states, “Scripture uses the image of the ‘stiff neck’ to portray the stubborn person who disregards all rebukes (see Exodus 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deuteronomy 9:6, 13; 10:16; 31:27; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chronicles 30:8; 36:13; Nehemiah 9:16, 17, 29; Jeremiah 7:26; 17:23; 19:15; Acts 7:51). Rebukes are typically a means of realigning someone to God’s will and purpose. The opposite of the stiff neck is a ‘bending neck’ characterizing submission and humility. The stubborn person ignores God’s warnings and obstinately disobeys God. The two Hebrew roots for ‘stubborn’ are *sarar* and *qaseh*. The first means ‘stubbornly rebellious’ and the second indicates a hard, obstinate attitude. Both are translated ‘stubborn’ and portray unbelief’s antagonistic attitude toward God as a response to his self-revelation.” **These [and other] references portray Hebrew culture generally as being rebellious and proud. In an interesting twist in this story, Haman is the epitome of this sort of arrogant and stiff-necked character, while the Jews are meek and mild with a bent-neck character. When Haman persists in his obstinance, he is destroyed. When Mordecai and Esther**

remain humble and submissive, they are preserved. This is a subtle argument in favor of virtuous character.

- c. God is not mentioned by name and only inferred in the book/scroll.
- d. The combination of these and other literary devices to be observed in section 6- “Structure and Literary Development” [below], may well be an argument that God’s people respond best to Him when they are under duress amid exile. After many years of prophetic warnings being ignored by God’s people in the Land of Promise, they may finally listen and learn the truth of 2 Chronicles 7:14 – “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” This is the combined message of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther.

3. Redemptive History – Please refer to “Part 1 – History of the Persian Empire and the Jewish Exile” at the beginning of the AD article on Ezra and Nehemiah. The three AD articles of “Chronicles” “Ezra & Nehemiah” and this article of “Esther” together provide a great insight into the culture of this era from a first-person perspective. These articles are in the literary section entitled “History-Prophecy” because they demonstrate how God worked providentially to accomplish His plan within the framework of Redemptive History.

- a. In the celebration of Purim described in Old Testament Survey by Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, Purim is described as – “A boisterous celebration, full of merriment and high spirits, in which the ordinary conventions of decorum and deportment are suspended, and a spirit of satire and fun is given full sway.”
- b. The Talmud includes this instruction on Purim – “Drink wine until you can no longer distinguish between ‘Blessed be Mordecai’ and ‘Cursed be Haman’.”
- c. Theology of Providence – It is more than interesting that God (YAWH) is not mentioned by name in the scroll of Esther, but His Presence is clearly understood and expressed in the faith of Esther, Mordecai, and the Jewish people. Zondervan’s Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says this about this important topic:

“Providence concerns God’s support, care, and supervision of all creation, from the moment of creation to all the future into eternity. Jesus Christ said, ‘My Father is working still, and I am working’ (John 5:17). Providence is God’s activity through His unlimited power and knowledge to fulfill His purpose for the whole creation, including man. ‘God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy’ (*Westminster Confession of Faith*. V. i). Two points are to be observed in the study of providence - 1) God’s control is all-inclusive and certain, 2) God does not violate the freedom of rational and moral creatures. While it may be hard for humanity to understand how this can be because there are few personal experiences to which one can compare God’s

providential working within redemptive history, but the Scriptures clearly teach that both these points are inviolate.”

God’s “Sovereignty” and humanity’s “free will” are shown as being equally in play, but the mystery of how this works out in real time cannot be fully comprehended this side of eternity. Key Biblical characters including Joseph (Jacob’s son), king David, and Esther evidence the interplay of Sovereignty and free will much like the Book of Job is evidence of the Goodness of God amid human pain and suffering. Humanity sees the conundrum while God sees Eternity and Redemptive History coalescing.

4. Themes - Zondervan’s Archaeological Study Bible observes four themes:

- a. God’s Sovereignty – Who is the real hero in the scroll of Esther? While both Mordecai and Esther performed admirable and self-sacrificing acts of faith and courage, the scroll clearly implies an *unnamed hero* orchestrating these events from behind the scenes. The twists and turns and literary devices point to too many coincidences that are just too perfectly timed to be ascribed to mere chance. Thus, the message scroll of Esther affirms that God is in control of history, often employing imperfect people who trust and obey.
- b. Faithful Service – Esther and Mordecai were ordinary people who God used in an extraordinary way at critical moments to accomplish His purpose. Confidence in God is key in allowing His Providential Grace to accomplish His work and purposes most of which we only come to understand much later.
- c. Obedience – Obedience to God in making difficult choices in the moment is always interesting and usually challenging – like Esther deciding to obey Mordecai (2:10, 20; 4:8-16) even when Persian Law suggested otherwise (4:11, 16; 5:1-2). Or like Mordecai refusing to obey the king’s command (3:2-8) but carried out Esther’s instructions (4:17). Obeying God always takes precedence over obeying humans.
- d. Human Pride – Haman is the prototype of the proud and arrogant individual (3:5; 5:9-14; 7:8-10). Haman illustrates the truth revealed in Proverbs 16:18 – “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Haman is contrasted with Mordecai – a humble man not seeking status for himself who the Lord elevated in the eyes of the king (6:1-13; 8:9-15; cf James 4:10).

5. Outline:

- a. The feasts of Xerxes – 1:1-2:18
- b. The feasts of Esther – 2:19-7:10
- c. The feast of Purim – 8:1-10:3

6. Structure and Literary Development – Note how all the details the turns and twists the author weaves into this story where God’s Providential Will is worked out in Redemptive History through humble ordinary people who arise to the occasion in faith and perseverance at a critical moment in history.

- a. **Setting – the characters are introduced, and the events revealed that are necessary for their character development:**
 - i. 1:1-9 – The king gives a party for his court and the nobility of Susa, and the queen gives a party for the women.
 - ii. 1:10-12 – The queen refuses the king's request to present herself before the male nobility. This is astonishing because the king is the absolute ruler, and such an act was punishable by death.
 - iii. 1:13-18 – The queen's refusal creates an unprecedented uproar in the male leadership as they consider the likely repercussions, and legal options are considered.
 - iv. 1:19-2:4 – The queen is deposed, and a plan is proposed to search for a worthy successor.
 - v. 2:5-11 – The search commences, and Mordecai the Jew is introduced. Mordecai has an adopted daughter (Esther) that he enters into the search process.
 - vi. 2:12-18 – Of all the beautiful women, Esther wins the contest and is made queen.
 - vii. 2:19-20 – Mordecai and Esther's nationality are kept secret until a decisive moment. Only the readers of the text would know what's going on. This same literary feature is also employed in the Book of Job, who had no idea that God and Satan were influencing Job's life. Job only finds out near the end when God reveals it to him.
 - viii. 2:21-23 – Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king; he tells Esther who tells the king giving Mordecai credit for foiling the plot. An internal investigation proves Esther and Mordecai were correct and that they likely saved the king's life.
- b. **Major Problem Develops:**
 - i. 3:1-6 – Meanwhile, Haman is promoted in the king's court and obeisance to him is ordered by the king. Mordecai refuses to pay homage to Haman (presumably for religious reasons), so Haman decides rather than just kill Mordecai that he will seek the eradication of all the Jews in exile.
 - ii. 3:7-11 – Haman manipulates and lies to Xerxes gaining his permission to annihilate the Jews.
 - iii. 3:12-15 – Haman issues an edict throughout the empire that orders the complete annihilation of the Jews.
- c. **Jews Response #1:**
 - i. 4:1-3 – Mordecai organizes the Jews to lament... this includes Mordecai humbling himself by going to the entrance of the royal court in sackcloth.
 - ii. 4:4 – Esther sends Mordecai clothing which he refuses.
 - iii. 4:5-9 – Esther asks why Mordecai is grieving and he tells her what has befallen their people. Mordecai asks Esther to intervene on behalf of their people.
 - iv. 4:10-17 – Esther agrees to intervene but asks that Mordecai and the Jews fast and pray for three days.
 - 1. Vs 11 – Esther knows the risk of appearing before the king unsummoned.

2. Vs 14 is a key verse from Mordecai – God will deliver the Jews, but you and your family may be destroyed. “Perhaps you have come to your position for such a time as this.”
 3. Vs 16 is a key response from Esther – “If I perish, I perish.” Esther proves here that she is far more than merely beautiful; she is also a woman of character and courage.
- d. Jews Response # 2:
- i. 5:1-2 – After the three days fast and prayer requested by Esther, she approaches the king and is granted an audience. Had the king failed to grant her audience, the typical penalty would have been execution of which Esther was well aware.
 - ii. 5:3-5 – Esther now proves that she is also a woman of intelligence and cunning, inviting both the king and Haman to a banquet she has prepared for them.
 - iii. 5:6-8 – At the banquet the king agrees to grant whatever her request is of him. In response she asks that they both come to another banquet the next day where her request will be made known.
- e. Complication #1:
- i. 5:9-10 – Mordecai continues his refusal to pay homage to Haman which only further infuriates him.
 - ii. 5:11-14 – Haman accepts his wife’s and friend’s counsel to build a gallows with the intention to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it.
- f. Complication #2:
- i. 6:1-3 – The king cannot sleep and learns that no reward had been given to Mordecai for saving his life.
 - ii. 6:4-6a – The king asks who is in the court and only Haman is there, so he asks what should be done for the man the king delights to honor.
 - iii. 6:6b-9 – Thinking the honor is for himself, Haman gives the king the honor that he would like most to receive.
- g. Twist of Fate #1:
- i. 6:10-11 – The king loves the idea and instructs Haman to honor Mordecai in the manner he has described.
 - ii. 6:12 – Afterward Mordecai returns to lament at the gate and Haman goes home sullen.
 - iii. 6:13-14 – Haman’s wife sees disaster coming and while she is speaking the notice comes to attend the banquet.
- h. Complication #3:
- i. 7:1-2 – The king and Haman attend Esther’s second feast in which she had promised to reveal what she wanted of the king, and the king has already granted her request before hearing it. Thus, the reader knows the king is already favorably disposed to Esther, but Haman and the king have no clue what is about to happen.

- ii. 7:3-4 – Surprising the king and Haman, Esther begs for her life and the life of her people who are sentenced to death.
- i. Twist of Fate #2:
 - i. 7:5 – The incredulous king asks who would dare to do such a thing.
 - ii. 7:6 – The enemy is revealed as “the vile Haman.”
 - iii. 7:7 – The king left in a rage and Haman knows he’s in big trouble, so he falls on Esther begging mercy.
 - iv. 7:8-10 – The king returns and sees Haman falling on his queen and thinking he’s molesting her sentenced Haman to hang on the gallows he built for Mordecai.
- j. Twist of Fate #3:
 - i. 8:1 – The king rewards Esther by giving her Haman’s family estate. Her trust in God and security in the king has now made her wealthy.
 - ii. 8:2 – The king rewards Mordecai by giving him his signet ring of leadership he had reclaimed from Haman before he was hanged. Esther rewards Mordecai by appointing him to be in charge of her new estate.
- k. Resolution of the Problem:
 - i. 8:3-6 – The Jews are still in harm’s way and Esther respectfully pleads with the king to undo the evil that Haman had ordered in the king’s name.
 - ii. 8:7-14 – The king writes a new edict granting the Jews the authority to defend themselves with support from his army. This was the only way the earlier edict Haman had written could be undone. This is because in the Persian court edicts couldn’t be rescinded but they could be countered with a secondary edict.
 - iii. 8:15-17 – Mordecai and the Jews celebrated their deliverance and the Jewish status in the kingdom had risen on account of these events. Instead of destruction and sorrow, there was honor and celebration.
- l. Twist of Fate #4:
 - i. 9:1-16 – “The tables were turned” – interesting euphemism we hear all too often but didn’t realize the source. Where the Jews were disrespected, they are now respected. Where the enemies of the Jews planned their destruction, now the Jews have the “upper hand” – another interesting euphemism. With the support of the king, none could stand against the Jews whose fear turned to courage and grief turned to resolve and to joy. Interestingly, the Jews didn’t take the plunder from their enemies as was customary. They succeeded in winning their security, which the author wanted to show that’s all they sought.
 - ii. 9:17-32 – The establishment of the Feast of Purim – where joy and life triumphed over fear and death.
- m. Epilogue:
 - i. 10:1-2 – The king and Mordecai are commemorated for their greatness.

- ii. 10:3 – Mordecai the Jew was second in command in the empire to the king, much like Joseph had been with Pharaoh – Genesis 41:42-43.

7. Literary Features:

- a. Motif of Feasts – first five given by the king and Vashti, second five given by the Jews. Parallel between the first and last pair of feasts... in the empire, then in Susa. The literary foil of feasting is fasting... the Jews in prayer and fasting turns to rejoicing and feasting.
 - i. Persian's Party:
 - 1. 1:3 – King's banquet for officials of the Empire.
 - 2. 1:5 – King's banquet for the residents of Susa.
 - 3. 1:9 – Vashti's banquet for the women.
 - 4. 2:18 – King's banquet for Esther the new queen.
 - 5. 3:18 – King and Haman drink after the edict of Hebrew genocide is ordered.
 - ii. Jew's Party:
 - 1. 5:4-5 – Esther's banquet for king and Haman.
 - 2. 7:1 – Esther's second banquet for king and Haman.
 - 3. 8:17 – Jew's festival after the edict granting their right of self-defense.
 - 4. 9:17 – Jew's festival throughout empire.
 - 5. 9:18 – Jew's festival in Susa.
- b. Motif of the King:
 - i. The king's person:
 - 1. The king is conspicuously present, while God is conspicuously absent.
 - 2. The king is the most powerful person on earth... and is portrayed as a self-centered despot who all are subject to and whose presence is dangerous. Coming into the "Presence of the king" is a major theme used nearly 20 times.
 - 3. Everything in the story revolves around the king and his capricious whims; everything is defined in relation to the king. However, the king is shown to be a drunk and a sham. The only decision he made was ordering Vashti to appear, and she refused. All other decisions were offered by others and ratified by the king. Thus, the most powerful person on earth made no independent decisions of his own. In the end, he is rather ludicrous and pitiful.
 - 4. However, God shows up in the character of Mordecai and Esther and their faith and prayerful dependence on God.
 - 5. God is demonstrated as the Good King in Heaven, who rules even the greatest on earth.
 - ii. The king's law:
 - 1. The role of the king is to order and manage life on earth as God's proxy but is seen as capricious and sinful. Even so, the earthly king is subject to God who is the Good King of the Universe.

2. In the Persian system there is a law for everything and even the king is bound by the law. Note that edicts 1-3 are by the Persians and edicts 4-7 are by the Jews:
 - a. King's edict after Vashti's refusal – "Every man should be ruler of his own household" – 1:22.
 - b. King's edict to hold a beauty contest to find a new queen – 2:8.
 - c. Haman's edict in the king's name to annihilate the Jews – 3:13.
 - d. Mordecai's edict in the King's name (initiated by Esther) granting the Jews the right of self-defense – 8:5-9.
 - e. Esther's edict granting a second day of self-defense – 9:14.
 - f. Mordecai's edict sent to the Jews to celebrate Purim – 9:20-22.
 - g. Esther's edict of confirmation of Purim – 9:29-31.
- c. Motif of Reversal and Recognition – reversal of the situation is a change by which the action veers around to its opposite... but subject to our rule of probability or necessity:
 - i. 6:1 – Haman's reversal hinges on the king's sleepless night whereby there is a recognition in stages of the true identities of Haman and Mordecai.
 - ii. 4:13-14 – Esther's reversal from a passive to an active role hinges on Mordecai's challenge for her to recognize her true identity.
 - iii. 8:1-2 – Mordecai's reversal where he replaces Haman hinges on:
 1. The king's sleepless night – 6:1.
 2. Esther having told the king of Mordecai's relationship with herself.
 - iv. 9:1-17 – Jews' reversal from weak and abased to strong and honored hinges on God's providential action behind the scenes.
 1. Using seemingly insignificant acts to accomplish His will.
 2. God does not resort to a simple or straightforward solution, instead He works through complex situations and circumstances with great turnings and reversals and progressive revelations.
 3. Through it all... God is faithful, true, trustworthy, good, and in control. In short, God is all the things Xerxes is not.
8. Conclusion – God loves His chosen people who He uses in the hope of drawing all of humanity into relationship with Him. In the story of Esther, God's people are at risk because of the actions of individuals who are in opposition to God. In the outworking of His providential grace and love, God's people are preserved and many more are drawn into a vital relationship with Him. The message of Esther affirms two conclusions:
 - a. God's people have an adversary – as also demonstrated in the book of Job there is a supernatural menace (Satan and his followers) who oppose God and His people. This opposition affects all of God's people, both Christians as well as Jews. This conflict continues to play out throughout Redemptive History until it finds its culmination at the Cross and Final Judgment between

Messiah-Jesus and Satan and his proxies. This struggle between good and evil is at the heart of both “Anti-Semitism” and “Anti-Christian” conflicts. The message of Esther to God’s people throughout all the ages is that God will work it all out, and it will ultimately end well for God’s people. However, the enemies of God’s people are the enemies of God upon whom justice will ultimately be levied.

- b. God’s people have a champion – there is supernatural support (Messiah-Jesus, Angels, and chosen men and women through the ages) who stand up for God’s people. Whenever God’s people stand for truth and justice, God’s providential will is at play to advance the Kingdom of God. Clearly, some of humanity’s problems are just due to the Fallen nature of humanity where the self-interest of one person is denigrated or exploited to advance the self-interest of another. The Champion of what is right and true will ultimately win out if not during a particular time within Redemptive History, then certainly at the end of it when God’s Kingdom deposes Satan’s kingdom. Justice and life will prevail for God’s people.