

Unit 2 Introduction

A Closer Look at the Book of Esther

Introduction to Esther

The book of Esther is one of those surprising Old Testament accounts. It tells of a plot to destroy the Jewish people living under Persian rule during the time of Xerxes (ZUHRK-seez; 486-465 BC; also known as Ahasuerus, uh-haz-yoo-EHR-russ). It contains the heroic actions of how two brave people averted a holocaust.

The result was the institution of Purim, a Jewish celebration remembering the defeat of their enemies and the continued existence of the Jewish people. This festival, held on the 14th and 15th days of the Jewish month of Adar (usually March), is the most joyous and festive of the Jewish holidays. The focus of this article centers on the surprises and sacred messages found in this often-overlooked sacred writing.

Surprises

When one compares the book of Esther to the rest of the Old Testament, two surprising facts come to the foreground. The first is this: the book focuses on, and is named for, a woman. For 21st-century western readers, that may not raise an eyebrow. However, to the patriarchal audience who first read this book, this was quite astounding! Only one other biblical book has this distinction: Ruth. In that book, non-Jewish Ruth marries Jewish Boaz. They had a son, Obed, the grandfather of King David. Nearly a thousand years later, Mary gave birth to Jesus, who was of the house and lineage of David (Luke 2:4)—and Ruth!

The book of Esther tells the story of a remarkable woman, Esther, who lived approximately 450 years before the birth of Jesus. On the advice of her cousin Mordecai, Esther concealed her Jewish identity when she was taken to become part of the Persian king's harem. She was so beautiful and pleasing to the king that he made her his queen.

Her high position in the court enabled Esther to intercede for her people—though at the risk of her own life—when Mordecai discovered a plot to destroy the Jewish people. Because of her heroic action, the king destroyed the plotters, and allowed the Jews to defend themselves against their attackers.

The second surprise is that the author never mentions God. Both Jews and Christians have debated how a book that never mentions God, but rather concentrates on the schemes of people, could be worthy of sacred status. Yet, though the unknown author never mentioned God, the book depicts a series of “strange coincidences” that might help us to understand why both Jews and Christians ultimately affirmed the canonical status of this book.

- The king happened to choose Esther above all the other women (2:17).

- Mordecai happened to hear about the plot to kill the king and warned him (2:21-23).
- The scribes happened to write Mordecai's warning in the Royal Chronicle (2:23).
- The king happened to decide to see Esther instead of allowing her execution (5:3).
- The king could not sleep one night and asked for a reading of the royal chronicles, where he happened to discover Mordecai's warning (6:1-2).
- Because Esther happened to be queen, she was able to tell the king about Haman's plot to destroy the Jews in time to avert the plot (chap. 7). The king allowed the Jews to defend themselves, which resulted in their defeating those who had set out to destroy them (chaps. 8—9).

Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people highlights another coincidence. Haman was a descendant of Agag (3:1), the Amalekite king who fought against Saul (1 Sam. 15). From the exodus through the reign of Hezekiah, these two nations had warred against each other. The Persian plot was one episode in that long history.

Without once mentioning God, the author of the book of Esther nonetheless depicts the hand of the Divine Deliverer working behind the scenes.

Sacred Messages

The book of Esther highlights two important truths for God's people. The first is that God is at work, often behind the scenes, for the good of His people. The book of Esther should bring comfort to those who feel they are fighting their battles all alone: God is always working on behalf of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

The climactic exchange between Mordecai and Esther in 4:14-16 contains the second message. Mordecai raised the memorable question to Esther, “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” Esther replied, “I will go to the king. . . . And if I perish, I perish.” The point is this: God is the One who brings salvation; yet, often that salvation is brought to the human scene through the obedient and courageous actions of a few faithful people. Moses, Mordecai, Esther, the three Hebrew children, the apostles, Paul—Scripture relates the accounts of those who stood up and said, “I will follow God, and if I perish, I perish.” The challenge for 21st-century believers, surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, is to run the same race, looking to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1-2).

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Female Dynamics in Esther

The book of Esther contains two named women who are essential to the unfolding story. Because of their presence, the book is full of power and gender-role reversals. Patriarchal cultures are strategically structured to benefit men, especially in the ways in which men wield positions of power and authority. As a result, women in the ancient Near East had very little power and were regarded as the property of men. However, sometimes women directly challenged the patriarchal structure. This is especially seen through Queen Vashti (Esther 1). On the other hand, Esther more often strategically and subversively worked around the power system via means of wit and manipulation.

The narrative begins with Queen Vashti's deliberate and defiant refusal to obey her husband, King Xerxes. His request for her to appear before the noblemen was a means of objectification and control. After all, he had just finished showing off all his other possessions, and in accordance with his patriarchal culture, Vashti was also his property to flaunt (Esther 1:1-6). According to Persian custom, women could be present at banquets before the drinking began (see Nehemiah 2:6). At Belshazzar's banquet, only women from the king's harem were present (Daniel 5:2). Thus, summoning Vashti not only diminished her role as the king's "property," but further denigrated her status by presenting her as a mere concubine. Vashti's refusal challenged Xerxes in two ways. First, it usurped the power Xerxes wielded as king. But secondly, it also challenged her culture's familial power a husband had over his wife. For this reason, Vashti's defiance was viewed as a threat to all men in the entire kingdom. In the eyes of the insecure rulers, her "no" signaled a social rebellion they were eager to quickly quell (1:13-20). As a result, Vashti was sent away and disappeared into the background. It is unclear whether she was executed or exiled (1:19). Challenging the king's power had painful consequences for Vashti, yet her bravery put a story in motion to save God's people.

Unfortunately, Vashti was not the only woman who suffered at the hands of an oppressive patriarchal culture: the story mentions many unnamed women who endured similar fates. As a means of regaining his power over his kingdom and, practically, to choose a new wife, King Xerxes brought all the virgins in the kingdom to the palace. Women were considered marriageable when they began their menstrual cycles, so it is likely that they were young teenagers. As indicated by 1:13-14, each woman spent one night with the king and then was sent back to the harem, where she would remain for the rest of her life. These young, nameless women had no social, political, or gender power over this situation and were unable to resist the king's wanton desires, on which each of their fates hinged.

Esther was one of these young women taken into the king's ha-

rem, and while we do not know what she thought or felt about her circumstances, she had no power to defy the king. What she wanted was of no interest and she was not consulted before being brought to the king's bed (2:14). The king's elevation of Esther to her position as queen did not undo the sexual abuse wrought against her. And while God did not compel the king to abuse his station, God nevertheless redeemed this traumatic experience for Esther.

At first, Esther appears to be the "perfect wife," at least according to ancient Near Eastern patriarchal standards. Like Vashti, she was beautiful, but unlike the former queen, Esther was obedient and passive, obeying both her uncle, Mordecai, and the king. She did not ask the eunuch for anything additional (2:15) and was hesitant to approach the king against his wishes (4:11). In fact, throughout the narrative Esther is presented as passively "taken" by others (2:8, 16). Yet, upon further investigation, Esther demonstrates subversive resilience. She uses the limited power she has as a woman and queen to challenge the plot to murder God's people.

The turning point in Esther's character development occurs in Esther 4:15-16. Here, for the first time, Esther issued a command. Using direct, imperative language, Esther took control and emerged as both a political and religious leader over her people. Esther devised a plan of her own, one that was much more cunning than the one Mordecai proposed (see 4:8). Whereas Vashti refused to come to the king, Esther intruded on the king. And although the king ordered Esther to explain her reasons for approaching him, Esther carefully dodged the question by not complying until the following day. Vashti openly defied the king and publicly embarrassed him, but Esther hatched a more indirect plan by holding a private banquet and stroking the king's ego with flattery (see Esther 7:3-4). This deliberate strategy enabled Esther to triumph over the limitations placed upon her by her political and cultural situation. The passive young woman from chapter 2 has emerged as a bold and clever queen!

Conclusion

Although Vashti and Esther had limited power because of their patriarchal culture, the Old Testament remembers the ways in which they boldly challenged and subversively worked around it. These women demonstrate the ways in which God's people can faithfully remain resilient amidst cultural tensions. Their social context of subjugation and sexual abuse did not have the last say in God's story. Together, their actions remind God's people about the kingdom work God still is inviting us to do in our contexts, as we strive to live according to God's vision for mutual partnerships between men and women today.

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