

Exegetical, Theological, and Devotional Notes
On Esther: A Celebration To Remember

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Table of Contents

Author's Preface	2
Brief Introduction, Bibliography and List of Abbreviations	3-5
Esther 1-2 – Parties that Bring Change	6-7
Esther 3-4 – A Time for Action	8-10
Esther 5-6 – The Tale Turns	11-12
Esther 7-8 – The Plot of Haman Reversed	13-14
Esther 9-10 – The Day of Reckoning and Rejoicing	15-16

The following work is a brief exegetical, theological, and devotional examination of the Old Testament book of Esther that was produced as supplemental notes for my church Bible study group where we worked through the text of Esther over the month of May 2011. These notes include questions for reflection and follow the text carefully passage-by-passage suggesting points of particular note (historical, theological, exegetical, philosophical, devotional and pragmatic), related passages both in the OT and NT (as well as Deutero-Canonical) and points to ponder in relation to the text. There is an all too brief bibliography of works cited where one can find several helpful commentaries that were used as the basis for the majority of this particular study and other resources pertinent to the study of Esther.

The English text that was used for the quotations in order to have some sense of continuity and a unified text in congregational reading was the *New International Version* (1984). However, I have tried everywhere to work closely with the Hebrew text using the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* as the base text for translation with due consideration of the LXX versions and Targumim. While the notes do not contain much information with regard to these linguistic features, nor to the history of the text (with several exceptions), this is simply due to the nature of the notes as such and to their intended audience. This is not to suggest that this was not a significant part of the work that lay behind this project, but only that it was not pertinent to providing such information for a congregational setting that needed some form of devotional supplemental materials. However, where it was felt that this information would provide further insight it has been added.

These notes were developed to enhance the Wednesday night studies and are not in any way constitutive of the full content actually covered in those sessions. These notes offer material that it was felt might provide opportunity for further reflection outside of the church setting and it has already been demonstrated in our congregation's life that this has proven to be effective as a supplement to the regular teaching and life of the Church.

It is hoped that this brief booklet will be a resource for others in furthering their own personal study of this marvelous little book which has too often been neglected in the Church (though highly prized among the Jews)! May we learn what it is to act our part as we discern the invisible hand of God in our lives.

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Brief Introduction to the Book of Esther

This is a story of feasts or banquets (Esther 1:3, 5, 9; 2:18; 5:2-5; 5:8; 8:17; 9:17-19) and thus “the major purpose of the book of Esther is to provide the historical grounds for the celebration of the feast of Purim” (599). This festival was to be “binding” (the *Piel* of the Heb. *qûm* Esther 9:21, 27, 29, 31-32) for every following generation. In relation to this festival re-enactment, the book is filled with “intrigue, brutality, nationalism, and secularity” (Childs 604). Purim may perhaps be regarded as “a carnival performance of misrepresentation” which finds its characterizations in the account of Esther (Brueggemann 347). “All Israel shares in the joy of rest and relief...It is a time to remember by hearing again the story of Purim. The effect of the reshaping of the festival is not to make a secular festival into a religious one, but to interpret the meaning of Purim in all its secularity in the context of Israel’s existence, which is religious” (Childs 605). We should say that Esther gives emphasis to the particularity of Jewishness and through the annual celebration of Purim this Jewishness is again renewed and the Jewish question must always again be raised, just as Paul has done so in Rom.9-11 (cf. Brueggemann 344, 347-8).

As a part of this festival intention for the book, the implicit intent seems to be to show the preservation God’s people through the actions (and at times despite the actions) of His people. God is at work even when God is not explicitly ever mentioned as being at work. At least this is the manner in which the text is presented in the Hebrew version. The Greek LXX versions record a spiritualized text that includes many elements not found in the Hebrew account. The LXX versions include 105 additional verses beyond the Hebrew version. When Jerome was translating Esther into the Latin in the fourth century AD, he removed the additional verses to the end of the book because he felt they did not belong to the original text and so in the Latin Vulgate they are numbered 10:4-16:24 even though these various additions make little sense removed from their particular contexts. The additions are as follows: Addition A—Mordecai’s dream (inserted before Esther 1:1); Addition B & C—The edict of Artaxerxes (the name of according to the LXX) against the Jews & Prayers of Mordecai and Esther (inserted after Esther 3:13); Addition D—Esther appears before the king (inserted after Esther 4:17); Addition E—The decree of Artaxerxes on behalf of the Jews (inserted after Esther 8:12); Addition F—Interpretation of Mordecai’s dream (inserted after Esther 10:3). The LXX text represents a very “free and paraphrastic” translation of its Hebrew original. Josephus also includes some additional material as well and there are more Targums (Aramaic texts expounding on a Biblical book) on Esther than any other besides the Torah. This demonstrates “that surrounding the Esther story there was, from early times, a body of interpretive lore that found its way into the Greek versions and Josephus, and...into rabbinic exegesis” (Berlin lii).

The author is unknown, though the first century Jewish historian Josephus thought that Mordecai was the author (*Ant.*11.6.1). Ibn Ezra, later Jewish rabbi, also believed Mordecai wrote Esther and he further explained that the reason the names for God are omitted from the text were because there would have been a copy made for the Persian court and thus Mordecai feared that the Persians would have replaced the name of the LORD with the name of one of their own Gods (Young 345). This, however, is all conjecture, but it certainly demonstrates an

early tradition. Whoever the author was, they wrote as if they were familiar with the Persian names and customs and thus it seems most likely they were writing in the Persian period and not later (Archer 403-4; Bush 295-7).

Most probably it was not written before 465BC, which is the generally accepted date for the death of Xerxes though it seems even more likely to have been written some time later, perhaps even into the fourth century (Harrison 1088). The feast is mentioned (though there called Mordecai's) in 2 Macc.15:36 which records events occurring about the year 161BC. The events that are recorded in Esther cover approximately the years 483BC (Esther 1:3) to early 478BC (Esther 2:16) and over this time period Xerxes was known to have waged an unsuccessful campaign against the Greeks. Upon returning from this campaign he apparently chose Esther, even though normally the Persian king would have been expected to choose a queen from among the seven noble families (Herodotus 3.8). However, it was not unheard of for a Persian king to just take any woman he wanted for a queen (Plutarch's *Lives: Artaxerxes* 23.3). It is actually recorded that the king took for himself 400 women when he took Esther (*Jos.Ant.*11.200) and that he also had 500 young men annually castrated and made into eunuchs to serve him (Herodotus 3.92). The Greek historian Herodotus records that at the end of his life Xerxes was actually assassinated in his own bedroom because of his sexual overindulgences that led to liaisons with several of his officers wives (9.109-113). In other words, Xerxes had lived a lascivious self-serving life that used people for self-pleasure and in the end this cost him his life. This would not be unlike the self-seeking of Haman whose end would be brought about by his own plans for self-gratification.

The genre of Esther has been variously described. Several commentators view it as a sort of satirical "comedy" not in the modern sense of the word, but in the classical sense. It is considered "comedic" in the way in which the story develops and is resolved (Berlin xvi-xxii; Birch, et.al. 444). Mervin Breneman argues that the genre of Esther should be regarded as "historical narrative" because (in his words) it is composed of the three elements of ideology, historiography, and aesthetic appeal (287). Certainly the author's introduction to the book (Esther 1:1 "This is what happened"; cf. the similar formula in Joshua, Judges and Samuel) "suggests he intends for his readers to understand the ensuing story as events that actually happened," despite how one might judge the historicity of such events (Jobes 57; cf. Waltke 765). Concerning the numerous objections to the historicity of Esther note the fairly convincing (though dated) arguments presented by Archer (404-6), Harrison (1090-8) and Young (346-8). Perhaps we might best consider Esther to be a satirical historical narrative and thus should allow the story to speak for itself (on such *satirical* issues see the commentary proper).

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List of Abbreviations

- 1 Macc = First Maccabees
 2 Macc = Second Maccabees
 AD = *Anno Domini* (the Year of our Lord)
 BC = Before Christ
 cf. = cross reference
 Heb. = Hebrew
 Josephus
Ant. = Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*
 KJV = King James Version of the Bible
 LXX = Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible
 NASB = New American Standard Bible (1995)
 NET = New English Translation
 NIDOTTE = New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis
 NIV = New International Version (1984)
 NRS = New Revised Standard Version (1989)
 NT = New Testament
 OT = Old Testament
 RSV = Revised Standard Version

The books of the Bible are as follows: Gen. Exo. Lev. Num. Deut. Josh. Jud. 1-2 Sam. 1-2 Kings 1-2 Chron. Ezra Neh. Esther Job Ps. Prov. Ecc. Song Isa. Jer. Lam. Eze. Dan. Hos. Joel

Amos Oba. Jonah Mic. Nah. Hab. Zeph. Hag. Zech. Mal. Mt. Mk. Lk. Jn. Acts Rom. 1-2 Cor. Gal. Eph. Phil. Col. 1-2 Thess. 1-2 Tim. Tit. Phile. Heb. James 1-2 Pet. 1-3 Jn. Jude Rev.

Esther 1-2 – Parties That Bring Change

1:1-3 – The stage is set. According to Adele Berlin, chapter one “portrays the Persian court in all its decadent lavishness” and “sets the tone of the book” which is a “tone of excess, buffoonery, and bawdiness” (3). This would characterize Xerxes and Haman, but does not seem to accurately describe either Mordecai or Esther. The author of Esther lays out the pomp and “glory” of Xerxes (derived from the Persian *khsyay'rsha*) in all of his supposed power by establishing the extent of his domain. He apparently reigned in Susa (cf. Dan.8:2; Neh.1:1) during this account which normally served as a winter palace among the four capitals of the Persian rulers (Susa, Ecbatana, Babylon and Persepolis). The 127 “provinces” (compare the 120 “satrapies” of Dan.6:1; cf. Ezra 2:1) give particular emphasis to the supposed greatness of the king who threw a banquet in his third year (483BC) for all his officials. This may have been to determine the best course of action against the Greeks that Xerxes would carry out in the upcoming years before returning in defeat in approximately 480-479BC.

1:4-9 – A Party in Persia. Perhaps the 180 days mentioned in verse 4 refers only to these meetings with the officials as well as the demonstration of Xerxes opulence. At the end of that time, he threw a party for seven days by inviting everyone. The descriptions of the location for the feast are unparalleled in Scripture except by the descriptions of the construction of both the Temple (1 Kings 6-7) and the Tabernacle (Exo.26, 36). This creates an aura of greatness concerning the scene and also suggests that at the time of the writing of Esther the glory of that scene had passed, but the Temple had been rebuilt (though all of this remains completely unspoken). The wine flowed freely (or “as befits a king” – Bush 348) at this party and it was, according to Herodotus, customary for the Persians preferred to make important decisions when drunk (1.133). It is important to the narrative that Queen Vashti gave her own banquet as a separate affair from King Xerxes.

1:10-22 – The King and Queen at Play. On the final day of the party, King Xerxes called for his Queen to be brought before him and his whole party to show her off, but Vashti refused and so Xerxes was furious. So Xerxes sought the advice of his counselors who proposed that in order to save face Xerxes should send out an unrepeatable decree (cf. Dan.6:9,13, 16) against Vashti appearing ever again before the king, so that other women will not treat their husbands like Vashti has treated Xerxes. This is exactly what Xerxes does, but instead of this saving face it ironically reveals the very thing he wished to hide...that Vashti had scorned him. This is part of the satirical nature of this account (Bush 355). Further, the lists of the Persian names of the seven eunuchs sent to fetch Vashti (1:10) and the seven nobles asked for advice (1:14) all may be intended to sound “ludicrous to Hebrew ears” (Bush 350). Whether this edict was ever even enforceable does not even seem to enter into the equation for the advisors and Xerxes, however the Hebrew may suggest that the goal of the edict was assure of husbands of their wives’ respect (1:20) and of ruling their houses (1:22) than that this should be the actual edict (Berlin 20). Why might Vashti (who after verse 19 is never again referred to with the title “Queen”) have not appeared before Xerxes? Should we moralize this account to either vilify her for not honoring

her husband or should we honor her for not appearing? Or should we simply recognize that whatever her reason it ultimately did not matter to the author other than to set the stage for someone else to become Queen in her place without any comment as to the wrongness or rightness of any of these actions?

2:1-14 – The Search for a Queen. Xerxes later seemed to wish he still had his Queen, but since he had decreed that she could never return to him, he sought the advice of his counselors again. And they advised that he should issue a decree to find among the most beautiful young women of the empire one who “pleases” him to be made queen in place of Vashti. These women would be put into the harem of the king and would have one night to impress the king after undergoing extensive (one year according to the text of which six months were aromatic in nature) “beauty treatments.” Suddenly a man by the name of Mordecai is introduced and his lineage is signified as being from the tribe of Benjamin with Kish (the father of Saul[?] in his family tree; cf. 1 Sam.1:9). He is further connected as either one of the exiles from the time of Jehoiachin (cf. 2 Kings 24:6-17) in 597BC (but this would make him about 120 years old) or as a descendant of one of the exiles. It is very significant that Mordecai is called “a Jew” (Heb. *yehudi*) which refers to the ethno-religious origin rather than to the tribal origin (Judah) since he was from Benjamin. “Mordecai’s most outstanding characteristic” is not his morality, but “his Jewishness” (Berlin 24). He had adopted his orphaned cousin Hadassah (meaning “myrtle”), daughter of Abihail (2:15; 9:29), whose notable characteristics here are her beauty and body (2:7) and whose name is everywhere else called Esther (from either Babylonian “Ishtar” the goddess of love and war or from Persian *stâra* for “star”). The women chosen for the harem were all appointed to Hegai the King’s eunuch who provided for their preparations and who favored Esther. Mordecai would regularly check on her during all of this time and in the days to come as he had also tried to protect her (knowing what might lay ahead for them?) by telling her to keep her ethnicity a secret. Can we appropriately accept the actions of either Mordecai or Esther in her allowing herself what will become of her in the life with a gentile King? (cf. Deut.7:3; Ezra 9:12; 10) In what sense must each of us seek to obey the Lord in a world where it is not always easy to do so? “Regardless of their character, their motives, or their fidelity to God’s law, the decisions Esther and Mordecai make move events in some inscrutable way to fulfill the covenant promises God made to his people long ago” (Jobes 103).

2:15-18 – A Queen is Found. Esther chose to make herself appealing by doing what she was told. This brought favor from those she was surrounded by (cf. Gen.39:4; Dan.1:9). She was taken to Xerxes after three more years some time in either December of 479BC or January of 478BC. The king was particularly please with Esther though we are not told exactly why. Certainly something about her pleased him more than all the other women he had taken to “try out” as a potential queen. So another banquet was held and this one was in honor of Esther as the new queen.

2:19-23 – A Plot is Foiled. Mordecai served somehow in the administration (which is what it means to sit at “the king’s gate”) and overheard an assassination attempt was going to be made on Xerxes life. Rather than use this as an opportunity for a new king he told Esther who told the king and this will prepare for the events in chapter 6 when Mordecai will eventually be rewarded for this deed according to the reading of the annals of that day. The two potential assassins were “hanged” but this more than likely does not refer to either impalement or to crucifixion, but to

exposure of their bodies post-mortem (Berlin 32; Bush 373; cf. Gen.40:19; Deut.21:22; Josh.8:29; 10:26).

Esther 3-4 – A Time for Action

3:1-6 – Haman...the Agagite. Whereas the last we read would have suggested that Mordecai should have been rewarded by the king, we find only the mention of another man who instead receives honors and acclaim from the king...and this man will seek for the destruction not only of Mordecai, but of all the Jews. Haman is introduced by stating that he was an “Agagite” which would suggest an immediate tension for the reader who has just recently discovered that Mordecai is not only a Jew, but even a descendant of Kish the father of King Saul. This seems intended to bring to mind the age-old conflict between the Amalekites (which used “Agag” for their royal family name) and Israel (Exo.17:8-16; Num.24:7; Deut.25:17-19) and was exemplified in Saul’s nearly destroying all of the Amalekites with the exception of king Agag in 1 Sam.15. According to Josephus and several of the targums “Amalek” is actually given in place of “Agagite” here (though the Greek versions completely alter the name destroying any connection to this historical conflict). The term “Agagite” in Esther functions in a nearly synonymous way with “enemy of the Jews” (Esther 3:10; 8:1, 3, 5, 10, 24; Bush 384). This may, in fact, answer why Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman despite the command of the king. The text does not explain a reason and there was sufficient precedence for bowing to kings, rulers and others (Gen.27:29; 1 Sam.24:8; 1 Kings 1:16). Certainly Mordecai had bowed to the king, so why not to Haman? The only reason suggested by the text is that Mordecai was “a Jew” and this must be read then in light of Haman being “Agagite”. The targums and the LXX versions add several different explanations about the worship of God alone for the reason that Mordecai would not bow down, but this goes well beyond what the text actually says and tries to spiritualize his reasoning. It seems more likely it was the ethnic identity that was the factor involved. The questioning of Mordecai about why he would not bow and pay homage may be more to force him to do this rather than to actually discover why. Mordecai’s actions so enraged Haman that he actually determined to destroy not only Mordecai, but all of Mordecai’s people—the Jews. “There is a parallel between the decree against all women because of the disrespect shown by one (Vashti) and the decree against all Jews because of the disrespect shown by Mordecai” (Berlin 37-38).

3:7-15 – The Lot Cast. The time indicated in 3:7 places these events five years after Esther’s choice as queen, sixteen years after the return to Jerusalem of Ezra and the rebuilding of the Temple, and sixty-four years after Zerubbabel and the first return from exile (Breneman 328). In the first month of that year Haman cast the *pur* (an Akkadian loanword from which the celebration takes the plural form for its name - *Purim*) that was explained as the “lot” (Heb. *goral*). He did this to determine the best time to destroy the Jews. This was a normal manner for determining certain matters of great importance and allowing for either the fates or divine direction to lead one (cf. Josh.18:6; Ps.16:5-6; Prov.16:33). The date selected by the lot was to be exactly eleven months later. So Haman then went to Xerxes to convince him to make the edict and used truth (“scattered”), half-truth (“different than all others”) and outright lies (“do not obey”) to convince the king to give his approval. He never once mentioned the people he was referring to, but only referred to them obliquely as “a certain people”. His appeal was made

primarily to the empires and king's self-interest and greed. The amount offered of 10000 talents of silver (or about 333-375 tons) equaled nearly the entirety of tribute collected by the Persians in a single year (Herodotus 3.89)! Perhaps Haman thought to collect this by pillaging the Jews, but the king seems not even to care about such matters. He simply issues the decree. "Haman is unmitigated evil, but the king is dangerous indifference personified" (Bush 387).

The exact date that Haman of the edict being issued was the thirteenth of Nissan which was the eve of Passover when the Jews would be celebrating Israel's deliverance by the hand of God (Exo.12:18; Lev.23:5; Num.28:16). Would God again deliver His people? Would the LORD be faithful to His covenant? None of this is appealed to, but all of it remains implicit. The edict was made available in every language throughout the empire in order to encourage people everywhere to prepare to take action against the Jews on the 13th of the twelfth month. According to Herodotus it took approximately three months for a message to be carried across the entire empire (5.52-53). The chapter closes with the king and Haman drinking together while the rest of the city of Susa was "bewildered" as the edict went out.

4:1-5 – Sackcloth and Ashes. Mordecai immediately tore his clothes in mourning and put on sackcloth and ashes, publicly wailing (cf. Num.14:6; 2 Sam.1:11; 3:31; 13:31; Ezra 9:3; Isa.36:22). These were the normal ancient cultural ways of demonstrating ones sorrow. He would not even change his clothes to approach Esther with the news, but instead stayed outside the city gate wailing. The effect upon the Jews everywhere else was similar as they heard the news of their impending destruction. When Esther heard the news she tried to get Mordecai to put on fresh clothes so she could speak to him, but was forced to speak to Mordecai through her eunuch-servant Hathach.

4:6-17 – A Call for Action. Mordecai relayed everything to Hathach who in turn relayed it all to Esther including bringing a copy of the royal edict concerning the destruction of the Jews. Further, Mordecai pleaded with Esther to go to the king on behalf of her people. Esther relayed that she, though the queen, could not simply go to the king for fear of losing her life unless he should choose to receive her or call for her. She had not, for whatever reason, been invited to the king's presence for a month and did not know when this would next happen. Herodotus records that a message could be sent to the king requesting an audience (3.118, 140), but apparently Esther must have had her reasons for not wishing to send a message to request an audience.

Mordecai's reply to Esther suggests that she will die if she does nothing. She must take action if there is to be hope for her and her family (which presumably would include Mordecai). Bush reads the first part of 4:14 as a rhetorical question with an emphatic "No!" as the answer. This reading would then suggest that there would be no deliverance for the Jews if Esther did not do something now (395-7; but see the contrary in Breneman 336fn4). Mordecai also questions Esther that she may have come to her position for such an opportune moment despite whatever the previous circumstances may have suggested. These are the usual verses that are used to point to God's providential care, but why at this moment (above all others) didn't the author of Esther choose to refer to God explicitly in any way whatsoever? The LXX makes God's action very explicit both here and at other specific points, but the Hebrew text used in our canon does not. How should we understand this? "One logical conclusion from God's absence is that human action is important. Time and again, Esther and Mordecai's initiatives are what make the

difference for the Jews; we do not see them passively waiting for signs from God or for God to perform a dramatic miracle of some type....[T]he author is intentionally vague about God's presence in events. He affirms on the one hand, that God is indeed involved with his people, but, on the other hand, he admits that it is sometimes difficult to perceive God's involvement" (NIDOTTE 4:583-4). "These unfolding events begin to show the inscrutable interplay between circumstances thrust upon us, sometimes unjustly, and those the result of our own behavior, often flawed. God's providence marvelously moves through both in his own good time" (Jobes 124).

Esther called for a severe fast of three days whereas normally fasting seems to have only gone from sunrise to sunset (NIDOTTE 3:781; cf. Judges 20:26; 1 Sam.14:24) and that there would be nothing to drink for the time Esther spoke of. Esther and her maids would also do this and then she would go to the king whatever the consequences to herself. Here we note that Mordecai does as Esther has commanded. Why is there no object for their fasting and no spiritual explanation? Again, this is implied in the text, but is not in any way stated. Fasting could be carried out for very secular reasons (as it is in our own day), but this would seem to be for an entreaty to the LORD despite His not being named. The time for action would be prepared for by a call for solemnity and fasting. When one realizes that the Jews only had one day a year for mandatory fasting (i.e., the Day of Atonement, though there were numerous other days later added – cf. Zech.7:5) this adds to the solemnity of the occasion. Further, when one realizes that this fasting would be occurring during the Feast of Passover (much as Daniel's did in Daniel 10:2-4) which was a commanded feast (Num.9:13).

There are often propitious moments where we must take action despite what may appear to be the consequences to ourselves. The following is a relevant poem by Martin Niemöller who was a leading German pastor that realized all too late that action should have been taken by the true Church of Germany to oppose Nazism and its desire to exterminate certain people including particularly the Jews:

"First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me."

Esther 5-6 – The Tale Turns

5:1-8 – Esther’s Request. After three days of fasting (by both the Jews of Susa and Esther and her entourage), Esther determined it was time to see the king. The motif of three days of waiting for restoration/deliverance is found several times throughout the OT: Gen.22:4; 31:22; Jonah 1:17; Hosea 6:2. It is important that she prepared herself in her regal garments and entered into the king’s presence where she did not know the outcome, but knew Xerxes must receive her if her life was to be spared immediately. Though thirty days had passed since Esther had last been seen by the king she was welcomed and actually “pleased” with her. Whatever the king’s motivation for being pleased, one can be certain that this was no coincidence. According to the LXX and targums, the king was initially angry with Esther’s entrance, but when she fainted he was moved to receive her by the LORD. All of such additions suggest far more than the text itself and attempts to explain the reception of the king. The king apparently recognized that she would not have come unbidden and dressed as she was if not for some important matter. He was so moved by her presence that he actually tells her (though this would be a euphemism for kingly generosity), “up to half the kingdom” could be asked for and he would give it to her. Rather than explaining her reason for coming she invited the king and Haman to a banquet (which was ironically prepared for Haman). Haman was brought immediately to join Xerxes at the private banquet and some time after the dinner, while drinking wine (which would then be the appropriate time for discussing business matters), the king again asked what Esther wanted and repeated the same generous offer. Her reply was that she wished for the king and Haman to return the next day for another banquet. Why would she not simply bring up the subject at hand? What was to be gained in the invitation to another banquet? It would appear that this gave a sense of ominous anticipation to the whole scene. “Esther is shrewdly and subtly pursuing a well-designed plan, by which she has maneuvered the king into committing himself in advance” to give her what she would ask for (Bush 407). As it would turn out, the events leading to the next banquet would change everything.

5:9-14 – Haman’s Plot against Mordecai. The banquet seems to have pleased Haman in his own sight by suggesting to him that he was truly blessed to be privy to such a private and exclusive party. His high spirits were quickly altered upon encountering the obstinate Mordecai at the king’s gate. In fact, he became angry that not only would Mordecai not bow, but now he would not even rise in Haman’s presence or show fear. Despite his anger, Haman kept outward control, but the author of Esther informs us that Haman was so upset that he discussed his angst with his wife and friends stating that all the honor, power and wealth he possessed meant nothing to him as long as Mordecai was around. Haman could not wait for the assigned day for the killing of all the Jews, but wished to see Mordecai dead sooner. He was counseled to build a “gallows” that was approximately 75 feet high for requesting the king in the morning to have Mordecai hung on. Why should a gallows be erected that would be that tall since most of the important buildings of the era were rarely more than 30-40 feet high already? This would seem to be in order to facilitate Mordecai’s exposure before everyone for what he had done to Haman. So he built the gallows.

6:1-14 – The Day Everything Changed. A string of “coincidences” are noted throughout this chapter that alters the direction of the story up to this point (Karen Jobes calls this literary technique “peripety” which is “an unexpected reversal of circumstances” and provides several helpful diagrams for visualizing the reversals – 155-158; cf. Waltke 765). The king could not sleep and *happened* to have the chronicle read to him which contained the account of Mordecai’s foiling Xerxes assassination years before. Why should he at this time have suddenly had this particular chronicle read to him? Further, that he should think to ask if he had rewarded Mordecai for this. The string of *coincidences* continued as Haman entered the court of the king earlier than he had been advised and just as the king asked who was in the court might give him advice about the reward. Apparently Haman himself could not sleep with the thought of having Mordecai hung which would account for his early arrival to ask the king about this.

A conversation where the king and Haman fortuitously spoke past one another ensued. The king wanted to receive advice on how to reward “the man the king delights to honor” which Haman automatically assumed was himself according to the author. Haman’s advice was to essentially treat that man like the king by giving him the very clothes the king had worn, riding on the king’s horse and being publicly paraded about as the delight of the king. Haman was attempting to present himself as a “surrogate king” by actually masquerading as the king (Berlin 59-61). Haman’s pride could not allow him to think beyond himself as the “delight” of the king, but then the king commanded Haman to do all of these things for Mordecai “the Jew” (giving special emphasis to his ethnic identity). Haman was overwhelmed with grief and shame at what he had to endure publicly honoring as a king the very man who would not honor him. When Haman told his friends and wife what had transpired, their words in reply echoed the Jewishness of Mordecai as the very reason for this reversal and declared the destruction of Haman. How should we understand such a statement in the mouths of Haman’s wife and friends? Before Haman could even respond he was fetched for the next day’s banquet with Esther and the king. Haman was hurdling towards destruction unaware of what awaited him and unable to change the course that was about to befall him. Elsewhere the Scriptures declare, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov.16:18). This would all pertain to the blinding pride of Haman and all who would fail to see things in the light of God’s covenant of grace.

Esther 7-8 – The Plot of Haman Reversed

7:1-10 – Haman Hanged. After the second banquet, the king once again asked what Queen Esther wanted (“petition” and “request”) and offered her whatever she should ask for. Her answer was to ask whether he truly favored her or not and to make a “petition” for her own life and a “request” for the life of her people which would serve to connect the two as a singular desire—her lot would be that of her people (7:3). However, she leaves off just who “her people” are and only speaks of their current lot as those who have been “sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation” (7:4). She exercises wisdom in speaking to the king (who has earlier shown a penchant for over-reaction) by stating that she would not be bothering the king with something like this if it were not imperative to survival. The king’s reply shows his anger already rising by the manner in which he asks who and where this individual is. Esther’s answer is also biting as she states it the type of man who has done this and that it was Haman. Haman’s reaction was noticeably fearful because he suddenly realized that the king had determined to destroy him and that his life was solely in the hands of Queen Esther. With a dark comedic twist, Haman fell (cf. “fall” prophesied in 6:13) upon the couch of Esther with all of his pleading and the king returned just at that moment from having left the banquet hall for unknown reasons. The king appears to have used this occasion as a “pretext to punish” Haman and relieve himself from the liability of involvement in the plot to kill the Jews by admitting his own involvement (Berlin 64-65, 70). Exactly what the covering of Haman’s face refers to is unclear unless perhaps it was to remove Haman from the sight of the king (though this is a peculiar practice). At that moment one of the king’s eunuchs mentioned the gallows Haman had set up at his house for Mordecai who had rescued the king. The mention of the gallows was sufficient for the king to command Haman’s hanging from the very gallows Haman had built. This apparently satisfied the king’s anger, but did not resolve the edict issued for the destruction of the Jews. The king once again showed a penchant for short-sightedness. It is striking that with the short statement “they hanged Haman”, his life was ended and the reversal begun.

8:1-8 – A plea for the Jews. Not only did Haman suffer the ignominy of death by his own making, but all of his “estate” (lit. “house”) was taken and given to Esther who in turn gave it and Haman’s position in the kingdom (noted by the signet ring) to Mordecai (cf. Ezra 6:11; Herodotus 3.129). The words of the Psalmist are rather fitting for what occurred: “He becomes the victim of his own destructive plans and the violence he intended for others falls on his own head. I will thank the LORD for his justice; I will sing praises to the sovereign LORD!” (Psalm 7:16-17 NET). Finally, the relationship between Mordecai and Esther was revealed and literally “all that he was to her” is what was made known (8:1). Esther had received only part of what she had asked of the king, but not the repeal of the first decree to slaughter the Jews. It was truly courageous that Esther should continue to plead for the lives of the Jews rather than to be satisfied with the blessing of herself and Mordecai. However, the king would not (and according to Esther 1:19; 8:8 “could not”) repeal the initial decree against the Jews. So he instead left the protection of the Jews to Mordecai and Esther essentially once again not really caring what became of these people or admitting his own role in the affair.

8:9-17 – A decree for the Jews. In a reversal of events, the royal secretaries were called to write a decree for the Jews and all the same leaders of the empire that had been enumerated before (compare 3:12; however notice the naming of the Jews leading the list of rulers which gives particular emphasis to them). This was done seventy days later than the original decree which may have theological significance in connection with the time of the exile, but must be deduced by counting from the date of this decree back to the date of the first (Berlin 76; Bush 442). The decree was also notably written not only in the language of all the leaders, but particularly of the Jews so that they could read it themselves (cf. 1:22). The messengers sent were described as being sent on “fast horses especially bred for the king” in order to dispatch the decree that much faster than the first decree had been sent (cf. 3:15; 8:10, 14). The decree permitted the Jews to retaliate and defend themselves against any who tried to carry out the initial decree in a manner of retaliation equal to the original intended attack (cf. 3:13; though the retaliation was not carried out in an equal manner according to 9:16). The NIV incorrectly translates “women and children” as if the Jews would be defending theirs instead of attacking the women and children of their attackers which actually fits the grammar of the Hebrew, but is difficult theologically because of modern propensities against such a notion (Bush 443, 447; Jobes 180-181). Indeed, how could such a thing be acceptable?

This would be carried out on the same day (the thirteenth of the twelfth month) as the attack so it would be evident who was attacking. The decree also would make evident to all those who would have attacked that they were now given official approval by the king to defend themselves and thus should have prevented any attack. Whereas Mordecai had been clothed in sack-clothe and ashes in chapter four, here he was clothed in royal accoutrements. In 3:15 the city of Susa was “bewildered,” but here the city “held a joyous celebration.” In 4:3 the Jews mourned with “fasting, weeping and wailing,” but in 8:16-17 their lot was one of feasting with “happiness, joy, gladness and honor.” Not only were the Jews now pleased with what was happening, but many Gentiles appear to have sided with them (though it is debatable whether they converted to Judaism or simply outwardly aligned themselves with the Jews). But nothing had officially been carried out at this point. The Jews were still left to defend themselves and determine their lot in life as a people, but now they had the favor of the empire with a queen on the throne and a grand-vizier in command. What would be the outcome?

Esther 9-10 – The Day of Reckoning and Rejoicing

9:1-4 – The day arrives. After all that had been done and the joy of chapter eight, the actual day for the struggle of the Jews had yet to be decided though things were increasingly in the favor of the Jews. The Jews had been authorized to defend themselves against anyone taking aggression against them on the thirteenth of the twelfth month. Not only could they take action against such persons, but they also had the support of the government officials and so “the tables were turned” (cf. Jer.30:16). The rise of Mordecai lent tremendous support to the upsurge of Jewish support by the various government personnel including those who were earlier mentioned as caring for the monies that Haman would have contributed to the coffers of Persia (9:3-4; cf. 3:9).

9:5-17 – The defeat of the Jewish enemies and the end of Haman. Rather than this being a Jewish killing spree, it was an organized and authorized response to aggression against the Jews. In fact, the author of Esther repeats three times that the Jews did not take any plunder as they had been authorized to do by the edict from Mordecai (9:10, 15, 16; cf. 8:11). It is stated that the Jews “did what they pleased” which would be a reversal of what Xerxes had told Haman he could do to the people he plotted against (cf. 3:11). What they “pleased” was not the same level of destruction that had been plotted against them though. However, the sons of Haman were all put to death and thus their names were listed in order to signify the complete destruction of Haman’s family line. As an aside, the names of his ten sons are listed in the Hebrew text with the name to one side and the definite direct object marker to the other creating a clearly distinct list-type following the pattern of the list of defeated kings in Joshua 12:9-24 and cities gifted by David after defeating his enemies at Ziklag in 1 Samuel 20:27-31. There was a clear accounting to the king of all those killed in the citadel of Susa (9:11-12), Susa proper (9:15) and throughout the empire (9:16). After reporting to the king the initial slaughter of the Jewish enemies in the citadel of Susa he asked what more could be done for Esther giving her a sort of *carte blanche* to do as she desired. So Esther requested that the enemies in Susa proper be dealt with the next day. Were they expected to try to continue to attack the Jews? Why should she ask for another day of killing? The text does not answer this. The killing that lasted an extra day in the city of Susa became the reason that the celebration of Purim was observed on two different dates by Jews in the cities and those in the country (9:18-19). Esther also asked that Haman’s ten sons that were killed be hung on gallows for a public display of their shame (cf. 1 Sam.31:1-13 – the public display of the bodies of King Saul and his sons by hanging). The numbers reported killed (500; 300; 75,000) have been considered nothing more than items of farcical comedy by some (Berlin 81-82), but records of factual history by others (Jobes 199) despite the excessive numbers.

9:18-32 – The institution of Purim. The “day of feasting and joy” was not observed on the days of killing and battle, but on the day after when things were peaceful finally. Also, the “celebration is...different from the feasts prescribed by the Torah. Rather than being imposed on the people from above as God’s command met, Purim began as the spontaneous response of God’s people to his omnipotent faithfulness to the promises of the covenant” (Jobes 214). The

institution of this day (though celebrated on different days in different locations) became one of celebration for having gained “rest” from enemies (contrast how Haman plotted to take “rest” from Jews by their enemies – 3:8). It was not a celebration of battle or destruction. It was a celebration of joy having come from sorrow and rest from enemies and thus a day for blessing others including particularly the poor (9:19, 22). Thus, Mordecai wrote and sent letters about these events to all of the Jews throughout the empire and described what should be done concerning this celebration that it should be carried out in perpetuity (9:27-28; cf. Exo.17:14). The Jews received this gladly (9:23, 27). As part of the closing remarks the story was written in summary fashion (9:24-25) as an “official version’ of the story...simplified and sanitized” to make the king seem to be the one responsible for saving the Jews from wicked Haman and thus leading to the reversal of events (Berlin 90). This all was used for an etiological explanation for the name “Purim” as the casting of the *pur* (an Akkadian term that had the Hebrew plural affixed to it for unknown reasons in naming the festival) or lot which would otherwise apparently be lost to the readers of the book since it was some time after the initial events. Esther also wrote a letter of commendation for this celebration. Both of their letters were sent to all of the provinces of the empire as a message of “goodwill and assurance” (Heb. *shālôm w’ ’ēmet* “peace and truth”; cf. Isa.39:8; Jer.33:6; and the reverse order in Zech.8:19). Not only was there to be feasting, but this appears to have been preceded by a time of fasting (likely over the days of conflict leading to the celebration with rest and feasting). Why should Esther have written something more than what Mordecai had written and what might this have added to the credibility of that writing? Perhaps this adds to the established authority of Esther who earliest in the story was submissive and now was one who acted the part of the queen as one with authority.

10:1-3 – The continued rise of Mordecai. The conclusion of the book (technically 9:18-10:3) acts as a sort of appendix to summarize what happened after the events of the victory of the Jews against their enemies where the Lord had turned their “lot” from sorrow and destruction into one of joy and blessing. The final few verses enumerate how Mordecai continued to exercise authority throughout the empire as well as to be recorded in the annals of Persia for all he did (following the identical pattern for recordings of the kings of Israel and Judah, for example: 1 Kings 14:29; 15:7, 23, 31; 16:14; 1 Chron. 27:24; 2 Chron.25:26). Mordecai was exalted among the Jews because of all he did on their behalf (cf. the celebration of “Mordecai’s Day” in 2 Macc.15:36). Why should Mordecai be so exalted in the conclusion of a book named after Esther?