

**ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN (Esther 1:1-2:18)**

Joyce Baldwin: 'Everyone loves a story'. Like the story of Joseph, and Ruth too, that of Esther is an engrossing account of God's working through human history using human agencies.

Yet God does not appear on centre-stage. In fact, His name is not mentioned at all. He works His purposes out behind the four main characters:

- (a) King Ahasuerus (whom the NIV identifies as Xerxes I), who is portrayed by Herodotus as a typical Persian despot, albeit taller than most;
- (b) Esther, an orphaned Jewess, who became Ahasuerus' wife, and so a queen of Persia;
- (c) Mordecai, a Jew, who was a relative of Esther and her guardian;
- (d) Haman, the Persian who plotted to carry out genocide against the Jews.

The situation was, potentially at least, not unlike the time of the Holocaust in the 1940s when the Nazis sought to wipe out the Jews, and six million perished. Haman had the same idea, but God thwarted him, through Mordecai and Esther.

1. Where was King Ahasuerus? Over what did he reign? (1:1-2) \_\_\_\_\_

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Ahasuerus has an inscription where he introduces himself as 'I, the mighty king, king of kings, king of populous countries, king of the great and mighty earth, far and near.'

2. What did Ahasuerus do in his third year? (1:3) What was the point of it, and for how long was it to last? (1:4) \_\_\_\_\_

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The year was 483 B.C.

3. What did he do at the end of the 180 days? (1:5) Describe the scene (1:6-8). \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What was on for the ladies? (1:9) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What happened on the seventh day? (1:10-12) What did Ahasuerus command? How is Queen Vashti described? How does she respond to the king's command? Is she justified in disobeying her husband? (cf. Acts 5:1-11) How did Ahasuerus react? \_\_\_\_\_

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We are not told why Vashti refused to appear. It may well be that there was some indecency involved. Perhaps she was expected to perform a belly dance. Saying 'No' to the king of Persia took some courage, so whatever her motives, she had some spark in her.

6. Whom does Ahasuerus consult? (1:13-15) What do these astrologers fear will result from Vashti's action? (1:16-18) \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What decree results from this episode? (1:19-22) What is to happen to Vashti? What are all women in the kingdom expected to do? What else is said about the laws of the Persians and the Medes? (1:19) \_\_\_\_\_

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Governments adopt this 'the sky is falling' approach to legislation when they have no clear moral principles.

8. What happened to Vashti? (2:1) What do the king's young men suggest in order that she might be replaced? (2:2-4) Where is the emphasis? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Where was Mordecai, and what is his story? (2:5-6) What is his relationship with Esther? (2:7) How is Esther described? \_\_\_\_\_

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10. What happened to Esther? (2:8-9) \_\_\_\_\_

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11. What had Esther kept back from the Persians, and why? (2:10) What did Mordecai do each day and why? (2:11) \_\_\_\_\_

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12. How were the candidates prepared for the king, and what was the result of this beauty pageant? (2:12-14) \_\_\_\_\_

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For twelve months these women received the best of beauty treatment, and then were handed over to the tender mercies of Xerxes. This is the degradation of paganism - life is hedonistic; it is about luxury, feasting, drunkenness, unrealistic legislation, lust, a meat parade, and polygamy.

13. What do you make of Esther's discretion in 2:10, 20? Was it discretion or weakness? Or a bit of both? Should we compare Esther 2:9 with Daniel 1:5-10? \_\_\_\_\_

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There is a time to lie low, but too often we do not speak up when we ought to. When France surrendered to Germany on 17 July 1940, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge were in Memel. A crowd stood up and cheered. Bonhoeffer joined in with the Hitler salute. Bethge commented: 'I stood there amazed. "Raise your arm! Are you crazy?" he whispered to me, and later, "We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for this salute!"'

Regarding Esther, Peter Bloomfield thinks she was wise, but Barry Davis thinks that neither she nor Mordecai is particularly righteous or spiritual.

One would certainly have to raise a few questions about Esther's joining in this meat parade, beauty treatment for twelve months, and being married to this pagan king. If Vashti had the courage to say 'No' to him, surely Esther should have.

14. How are we meant to see God's over-ruling providence in 2:8-9? Does this remind you in a way of Genesis 39:4, 21? \_\_\_\_\_

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One Catholic review said that Columbus discovered America in 1492 so that a nation would be formed which was strong enough to defeat Hitler in World War II. Of course, the answer to that is that it would have been a lot less trouble to have Hitler choke on one of his paintbrushes in 1920. He was a corporal in World War I - he could have been shot then. But just because the doctrine can be put badly does not mean the doctrine is not true.

'Even now in sordid particulars/ The eternal design may appear,' wrote T. S. Eliot.

Blaise Pascal said that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, human history

would have been different (they liked long noses back then). The same is true of Esther. A mole in the wrong place, and Xerxes would not have looked twice at her.

During the 16th century Reformation, Martin Luther was saved many times by the threats of the Muslim Turks, by the wars between France and the emperor, and by the pope's fall-out with the emperor. In 1527 the imperial troops sacked Rome, and Luther had reason to comment: 'Christ reigns in such a way that the emperor who persecutes Luther for the pope is forced to destroy the pope for Luther.'

**IF I PERISH, I PERISH (Esther 2:19-4:17)**

1. What takes place in 2:19-23? This seems a relative side-issue at this stage, but how does it become vitally important in 6:1-3? What does this teach us about God's rule over human events? \_\_\_\_\_

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Everything has consequences. Life is not a series of unconnected events, but a single fabric woven together. Do the right thing in one place, and it will reap benefits somewhere else, further down the track, and often unexpectedly.

2. How does Mordecai get into trouble with Haman, and what is Haman's response? (3:1-6) Does the Bible forbid bowing under any circumstances? (2 Sam.14:4; 1 Kings 1:16) What about when it might be perceived as paying tribute to a divine being? (Acts 10:25-26; 14:12-18) \_\_\_\_\_

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Herodotus says that the Spartans refused to bow to the Persians because it was regarded as worship. As mere protocol, we can bow; as worship, we cannot.

3. What takes place in 3:7? What does this indicate about Persian public policy? \_\_\_\_\_

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The astrologers cast their lots, not knowing the truth that the God of Israel rules all things (Prov.16:33, 4). There was to be an eleven month delay before

the Jews would be put to death. That gives the Jews time.

4. What is Haman's plan? (3:8-12) \_\_\_\_\_

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Humanly speaking, there is a shrewd man who manipulates and bribes, and a careless king who allows himself to drift along in governing the empire. All seems in order for Haman to achieve his evil purposes.

5. What did the decree say? (3:13-15) What did the king do then, and how did the city of Susa respond? (3:15) What does this tell us about the grasp of political realities on the part of King Ahasuerus? \_\_\_\_\_

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The fuse has been lit but Haman will only succeed in blowing himself up. Down through the ages, the enemies of God have sought to crush God's people - Pharaoh tried, Haman, Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod the Great, the Roman emperors, the Inquisition, Hitler, Muslim societies, communist societies, and Anti-Discrimination Boards. Sin over-reaches itself and defeats itself. At this point, it looks like Haman is succeeding, but he has left God out of His calculations.

6. How do the Jews respond to the decree? (4:1-4) How does Esther find out about it? (4:5-9) \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What is the practice in the Persian harem? What has happened to Esther? (4:10-11) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Esther would be breaking the law if she approached the king, and subject to death. What arguments does Mordecai use to convince her to go ahead:

(a) 4:13 \_\_\_\_\_

(b) 4:14 \_\_\_\_\_

(c) 4:14b \_\_\_\_\_

Esther cannot know the future, she cannot be sure of the consequences. Some charismatics and Pentecostals profess to give prophecies or 'words of knowledge' for the future. They are fraudulent (see Gen.43:14; Dan.3:16-18; James 4:13-16).

9, What is Esther's response to the situation? (4:15-17) Do you think this is an indication of her growing in faith and resolve? \_\_\_\_\_

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Barry Davis sees more resignation than courage in Esther's decision. He thinks she had no choice. But we ought to be kinder than that. 'If I perish, I perish' means that she chose what was right, and left the future in God's hands.

Philip Henry (Matthew Henry's father): 'Duty is ours, and events are God's.'

William Cowper:

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*

### **THE PLOT THICKENS (Esther 5:1-6:13)**

Mordecai had prevailed upon Esther to act so she has come to the decision that she would approach the king, thinking 'If I perish, I perish'. Haman had beguiled the king into signing the death warrant of all the Jews. Some time earlier, Mordecai had saved the king's life from a plot by two of his doorkeepers.

1. What is behind all this? (Deut.32:9-12; Zech.2:7-9) \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What did Esther do, and how did Ahasuerus respond? (5:1-2; recall 4:11) \_

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The Septuagint even inserts here that Esther fainted twice. That sounds like a preacher's embellishment of the story! But Esther must have been anxious. If we are too afraid of non-Christians, something is wrong.

3. How does Esther show wisdom and patience in 5:3-8? Why is the head-on approach sometimes not wise? (note how Nathan confronts David with some discretion and wisdom in 2 Samuel 12:1-7) What does Esther ask for, and what does she ask for after the first feast? \_\_\_\_\_

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There is nothing like a good feast in the Middle East. In Persian law, edicts could not simply be reversed, so she realised that it was going to be a difficult task.

4. What is Haman's frame of mind in all this? (5:9) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What is his attitude at home? (5:10-11) What means so much to him? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. How bitter and unhinged is he? (5:12-13) What did his wife and friends suggest to him? (5:14) \_\_\_\_\_

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Fifty cubits is about 75 feet high, or about 22.5 metres.

7. What happened that night? (6:1) What was his remedy for insomnia? What does Ahasuerus find out? (6:2-3) What does this show? (Prov.21:1) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Who arrives then? (6:4-5) What does he come to speak about? What does the king say to him? \_\_\_\_\_

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Strictly speaking, there is no obvious miracle here, but the timing is miraculous. In walks Haman to discuss the hanging of Mordecai just when the king has come to realise what Mordecai has done for him.

Thomas Erskine: 'Many things appear irretrievable to us, but there is nothing irretrievable with God.'

God is not mentioned in all this, but those with eyes to eyes can see Him everywhere.

9. What do verses 6-9 reveal about Haman? How is this almost funny? How appropriate is Proverbs 16:18? \_\_\_\_\_

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There are wires well and truly crossed here. Haman is so proud that he thinks that the king is referring to him, to Haman.

10. What does the king command Haman to do? (6:10-11) What is Haman's response? (6:12) What might be God's response? (Ps.2:1-4) \_\_\_\_\_

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11. What do his wife and his wise friends then tell him? (6:13) \_\_\_\_\_

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Touch the people of God, and you arouse God Himself. Curse them, and He

will curse you. That is the promise to Abram (Gen.12:3)

How did the Jews come to be preserved at this time? There are three answers: (a) Esther's courage and patient wisdom; (b) Haman in his evil overreached himself; (c) God was in sovereign control of all things. All three answers are true. That is the Christian view of life. That ought to greatly encourage us in evil days.

**THE TABLES ARE TURNED (Esther 6:14-8:17)**

The second banquet was about to be held by Esther, and here she would intervene openly on behalf of her people, the Jews.

1. How is the scene set in 6:14; 7:1? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How is Esther's response in 7:2-4 such a shrewd speech? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. How is Ahasuerus drawn right in? (7:5) \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What does Esther do next? (7:6) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. How is Haman 'hoist by his own petard', to use the expression from *Hamlet*? (7:7-8; Ps. 9:16) How does it all go horribly wrong for him? \_\_\_\_\_

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In near eastern feasts one reclines at the table, not sits, so Haman only has to be a little bit clumsy, and it all looks very bad.

In Greece and Rome, condemned prisoners had their faces covered, and I assume that is the practice here in Persia too - hence v.8c. Herodotus says that Persian law did not allow for capital punishment for only one offence, so this would explain why Xerxes reacts so quickly here - Haman had plotted the death of the Jews and had, in Xerxes' mind, molested Queen Esther.

6. How did Haman meet his end? (7:9-10; Prov.11:5-6; 5:22) \_\_\_\_\_

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Fifty cubits is 75 feet high, or 83 feet says Joyce Baldwin. The irony is that Haman was condemned for a crime of which he was not guilty. He was guilty of a far greater one.

7. From 8:1-6, how do we see illustrated the folly of treating human laws as divine? (note too Dan.6:8, 12, 14-15) What is Ahasuerus' solution? (8:7-8) \_\_\_\_\_



8. How is the original law counteracted? (8:9-12) \_\_\_\_\_

In 474 B.C. the Jews were given the right to defend themselves, to kill those who were going to kill them.

Why the delay of two months and six days? I do not know. The Septuagint (LXX) says it was five days, but we must follow the Hebrew text first.

9. Barry Davis regards Mordecai as spiritually flawed. Is that fair? Can a Christian serve in a pagan government? (Gen.41:41-45; Dan.2:48-49; 6:1-3; Neh.1:11) What about the way that Mordecai goes about undoing the first decree? (8:9-14) Is he being as shrewd as a serpent or as brutal as Haman? \_

10. How does God work His purposes out for good? (8:15-17; Ps.76:10a) What does it point to? \_\_\_\_\_

In 1949 the communists came to power in China. At that time there were about a million Christians in the country. Today the number could be 50 million or even 80-100 million. God has used evil to extend His kingdom, such is His sovereignty.

The book of Esther is showing us that the victory will belong to God and His people, no matter what the dreams and devices of His enemies.

**THE TRIUMPH OF GOD'S PEOPLE (Esther 9-10)**

Martin Luther did not like the book of Esther at all, but it shows how God uses human means to carry out His declared purpose of blessing His people

and cursing those who curse them. But Persian laws could never be changed, so people were left with two conflicting edicts - the earlier one which condemned the Jews to death and the later one which gave the Jews the right to defend themselves. Something had to give.

1. What happened in verse 1? How is this a case of God's retributive justice?

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The date is March 473 B.C.

2. What had God done to confuse His enemies? (9:2-3) \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What had God done for Mordecai? (9:4) \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What did the Jews do when their enemies came to plunder them? (9:5-10)  
Who was put to death? What did the Jews *not* do? (9:10) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What happened on the next day? (9:11-15) What was Esther's part in this?

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The number killed was 800 in Susa (Shusan) plus Haman's ten sons.

Joyce Baldwin in an earlier commentary of hers regarded this as excessive and vindictive, but it is better to see it as retributive justice. Note that men - not women and children - were killed (9:6, 15). Note too that the Jews did not plunder their enemies (9:10, 15-16). King Ahasuerus (Xerxes?) had given them the right to do more than they did (8:11). They held back.

There were pogroms in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and thousands upon thousands of Jews were massacred. If they had possessed the right to defend themselves, thousands of innocent lives could have been saved.

6. What happened in the rest of the provinces? (9:16) \_\_\_\_\_

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75,000 is a very high number. One version of the Septuagint has 15,000, but 75,000 is not unrealistic.

7. What takes place to celebrate this and how was it celebrated? (9:17-32) \_\_\_\_\_

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In v.19 it is 'portions' rather than 'presents', and probably refers to food. This is the Feast of Purim, from Pur, meaning 'lot' (see 3:7). It lasted for two days. God does not specifically command His people to keep it. It is same with Feast of Dedication, which dates from the Maccabean period (John 10:22). Jesus appears to have kept this feast, or gone along with it.

8. Can a Christian work with a pagan government or employer? (10:1-3; see Jer.29:7) \_\_\_\_\_

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William Cowper wrote:

*For Thou, within no walls confined,  
Inhabitest the humble mind;  
Such ever bring Thee where they come,  
And going, take Thee to their home.*

There is no place where God says: 'Well, the devil can run this, not Me.'

9. How does God show that the powers of evil over-reach themselves? (Col.2:15) \_\_\_\_\_

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