

ESTHER - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
-

1. Would you think that God had anything to do with the events of Esther if all you knew was what you can read in the book itself? What is the purpose of having a book in the Bible that never mentions God or religious activity except possibly fasting? Where, when, and by whom, do you think, was this book written? Should we accept the apocryphal additions to Esther where God and prayer are mentioned? Why do you think the Jews preserved this book? Do you find Esther inspiring in any way? Does it help in any way with your picture of God? What is the value of Esther? Would you feel a loss if it were not in the Bible?

The book of Esther, named after its main character, Hadasseh (“myrtle”) a young Hebrew orphan apparently given the Persian name Esther (“star”; Ishtar; Easter) when she entered the beauty contest or the court, was probably written by Mordecai or possibly Ezra. In Hebrew Bibles Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and finally Esther, are grouped together and bear the collective name of *Megilloth*. Numerous historical details in the book (See Esther 1:5,10,14; 2:9,21,23; 3:7,12,13; 4:6,11; 5:4; 8:8,10,15; 9:30; 10:1,2) have been confirmed by archaeological evidence from Susa (Shushan). Esther became queen in January, 478 BC, (See chart below) after Vashti was removed from that position for refusing her husband, the king’s, request to appear before him and his guests at a drunken celebration as they were preparing to set out on their way to war against Greece. (Spring, 482 BC)

Esther was apparently a remarkably beautiful young woman whose tact and winsomeness won her favor with the king. A crisis arose when Haman, who was apparently a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag (See Exodus 17:8-16; Numbers 24:7; 1 Samuel 15:9,20,32,33; 1 Chronicles 4:42,43) became enraged by Mordecai’s refusal to bow down whenever he went by and arranged for a decree to kill all the Jews on a date chosen by the casting of “lots” or “Purim”.

The events of the book are closely tied in with a disastrous campaign by Xerxes (Ahasueras) to try to conquer the city-states of Greece. The very precise dating of the events of this book at times when Xerxes was in Susa and not on the campaign against Greece also validates its authenticity. The book is a literary masterpiece rivaling anything that fiction has to offer. The beautiful, young, intelligent, and tactful queen is matched against the hateful, unscrupulous, and egotistical villain, Haman.

Nowhere is the name of God or the act of prayer mentioned in the book, but God’s clear overruling providence is the main theme. Why would God be concerned about these Jews left in Susa who didn’t even have enough conviction and dedication to go back home despite a clear invitation? Were Ezra or Nehemiah in Susa during the times of Esther? Did any of these Jews in Susa ever return to Jerusalem? We don’t know for sure.

Author: “Although no one knows who wrote the Book of Esther, it was apparently written by a Jew who was familiar with Susa, the royal palace, and Persian customs. The Jewish Talmud attributes Esther to the “men of the Great Synagogue” [Zechariah and Ezra were two of these men], anonymous teachers who lived in the period between the last prophets and the earliest rabbinic scholars. Early Christian Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, as well as Jewish authorities like Josephus, ascribed the book to Mordecai.” (*Woman’s Study Bible*)

“Although the author is unknown, the book bears the marks of an author very close to the events recorded, with access to written records (2:23; 6:1; 9:20; 10:2). He was also very familiar with the palace at Susa (Shushan) and with the character of the Persian king. The accuracy of the author’s knowledge of Persian customs (cf. 1:19–22; 3:13–15; 8:5–14; 9:20, 29) is confirmed not only by Herodotus (a fifth century B.C. Greek historian), but also by materials discovered in Persian archives. The book is sprinkled with Persian names and loanwords. The fact that the author of the Book of Esther is not actually named does not make this book any less authoritative or canonical than those books which identify the author.” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

“Historical Setting. The events of the book cover a 10-year portion (483–473 B.C.) of the reign of Xerxes I (486–465 B.C.)... **The events occurred between those recorded in the sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra...**

“Xerxes I (ruled 485–465 B.C.) was a king of Persia and the husband of Esther, the Jewess. Ahasuerus succeeded his father, Darius Hystaspis, in 485 B.C. The Book of Esther portrays the king as (1) ruling a vast empire; (2) being very wealthy; (3) being sensual, continually giving feasts; and (4) being cruel and acutely lacking in foresight (vv. 13–22)... In 465 B.C. a courtier murdered Ahasuerus; his son, Artaxerxes I, Longimanus, succeeded him.” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

The chronological data supplied by the book of Esther are as follows:

Event	Esther	Year–	Month–	Day		B.C. Date*
The great feast	1:3	3			Between	Apr. 14, 483–Apr. 2, 482
Esther summoned	2:12	[6	10	?]	“	Jan. 2, 479–Jan. 30, 479
Esther made queen	2:16	7	10		“	Dec. 22, 479–Jan. 20, 478
Haman casts lots	3:7	12	1		“	Apr. 5, 474–May 3, 474
Haman’s decree	3:12	12	1	13		Apr. 17, 474
Mordecai’s decree	8:9	12	3	23		June 25, 474
Purim	3:13; 8:12; 9:1, 17- 19	12	12	13		March 8, 473

There are several main characters in the book of Esther. Biblical scholars are always interested in

whether or not they can document the existence and work of Biblical characters from extra-Biblical sources. In this story we have the following main characters:

XERXES (zûrk'sēz) [Old Persian *xšayaršan*; Elamite *ik-še-ir-iš-ša*; Akkadian *ḫbi-ši-'ar-ša*; Hebrew ^a*ḥašwerôš*; Greek *Xerxes*]. Xerxes I, was the son of Darius the Great and Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great and sister of Cambyses. Xerxes was designated heir-apparent by his father and served as satrap of Babylon from 498 B.C. to his accession in 486. He is portrayed with his father on the reliefs at Persepolis, where Darius sits on his throne in his robe of state and behind him stands the crown prince. The winged Ahura-Mazda [chief god of Zoroaster] floats above the scene. This sculpture confirms Xerxes's statement that his father "made me the greatest after himself." (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* - vol. 4, p. 1161)

Xerxes or Ahasuerus (ca. 520-465 BC), as the Persian king of the Achaemenid line who reigned from 486 BC following the death of his father Darius I (Hystaspes) the Great, until 465 BC when he was murdered is well documented from many sources. His grave site has been found cut in the rock high on a hillside. He conducted a disastrous campaign against the Greek city states between the time when Vashti was deposed and the accession of Esther as the next queen. His son Artaxerxes Longimanus succeeded him.

MORDECAI (PERSON) [Hebrew *mordēkay* (ykdjrh); *mordōkay* (ykdōh)]

1. "The name Mordecai is almost certainly derived from Marduk, the name of the chief god of Babylon (though R. Lemosín has recently suggested it was Hurrian or Elamite, meaning 'the man *par excellence*'. It was evidently an acceptable Jewish name (cf. the Mordecai mentioned in Ezra 2:2); it is perhaps a 'gentile' name roughly equivalent to some Jewish name (Esther herself has both a Jewish name, Hadassah, and a 'gentile' one, Esther)." (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*)
2. Mordecai was a central figure in the story of Esther. He had something to do with getting the decree against all Jews proclaimed and then by cooperation with Esther, got it countermanded.
3. He was a descendant of Benjamin, Shimei, Kish, and Jair. (Esther 2:5) He may or may not have had something to do with Esther being chosen as a candidate for the position of Queen. He was her adoptive father (and her cousin, the nephew of her father Abihail [2:7,15]), probably her closest relative after her parents died.
4. He lived in the city of Susa, the capital of Persia. For reasons which are not apparent, neither he nor his ancestors had returned to Jerusalem with the exiles who returned some 50 years earlier.
5. He may have been some sort of official in the Persian government (2:19,21; 3:2; 5:9; 6:10,12; cf. 2:11) Somehow he discovered a plot against the King and through Esther the King was notified of the plot and it was duly recorded in the King's records after the plotters had been hanged. (2:19-23)
6. For reasons that are not completely clear, Mordecai refused to "bow" to Haman the newly elected *vizier* (prime minister) of the King. Some of his associates notified Haman of this and

when he realized who Mordecai was he cast lots (*purim*) to determine the best day to destroy not only Mordecai but the entire Jewish nation. (Esther 3:2-6)

7. The animosity between Haman and Mordecai may have been based on the fact that Haman was a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag whose entire nation was supposed to have been destroyed by the Israelite army under King Saul. (See 1 Samuel 15) The Amalekites had been fighting with the Israelites since the days of Moses. (Exodus 17:8-16; 1 Samuel 15:1-8; 30:1-20)
8. After Esther managed to turn the tables on Haman and have him hanged at the king's command, Mordecai was chosen to take his place.
9. Esther and Mordecai were successful in getting all the Jews to rise up against their enemies and 75,000 enemies of the Jews were destroyed in one day, including some 500 of the people of Susa itself, besides the sons of Haman. At Esther's request they were allowed to kill 300 more in Susa the following day.
10. Apart from Xerxes himself, Mordecai is the only individual mentioned in the book of Esther who *may* be documented in extra-biblical sources. An individual by the name of Mordecai was mentioned as being present in Borsippa possibly on a mission from Susa. But he is called the "scribe" or "accountant" of Ushtannu who is known to be the satrap (governor) of the province of Babylon and Beyond the River. This would suggest that the Mordecai mentioned in this document lived in Babylon and not Susa although this is only speculation. "During World War II Prof. A. Ungnad found a cuneiform tablet in the Berlin Museum, in which a certain man by the name of *Mardukâ*, the equivalent of Mordecai, is mentioned as one of the state officials in Susa during the reign of Xerxes. His title, *sipîr*, indicates that he was an influential counselor. The discovery of this text has been accepted as welcome proof that Mordecai was a historical figure, which had been doubted by many scholars.
11. That Mordecai became popular and honored by his people (Est 10:3) is furthermore indicated by the fact that a number of Jews of the next generation bore his name, as the archives of the ancient business house of "Murashu Sons" at Nippur have revealed. This would normally not be expected since it is a name based on the Babylonian God Marduk, unless, of course, Mordecai had made a name for himself in government and the Jewish people were proud of that fact.

For more comments on the historicity and story of Mordecai see the handout: ***Mordecai***.

VASHTI: [Hebrew *vašîti* (וַשְׁתִּי) < Persian, either Avestan *vahišta*—'the best' or perhaps a *fem pass part* of *uas*—'the beloved/desired one'].

1. According to the book of Esther, Vashti was the wife and Queen of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) from 486-482 BC. After six months of preparation for his campaign against the Greek city-states (482-479 BC), Xerxes celebrated with a great seven-day banquet primarily for the citizens of Susa. As was the common custom in those days the men and women had separate banquets. After drinking fairly heavily for several days, King Xerxes decided to order his wife Vashti to appear in her royal finery before the men at his banquet. At the time Vashti

was serving as hostess of the women's banquet. Some commentators believe she was afraid of the gawking of a crowd of drunken officials and commoners. Ancient Jewish commentators suggested her motive for refusing to appear was her desire to avoid some kind of immodest display. Josephus says that her refusal was because of a Persian custom prohibiting married women from associating with strangers. Some suggest she may have been pregnant at the time. Other ancient Jewish writers suggest imaginary or preposterous explanations which probably do not warrant serious consideration. She apparently felt, for her own good, for the good of her husband, and for the good of the country that she should not go. She believed that when he recovered from his wine he would commend her for her actions. But Xerxes' advisers perceived this as a threat to all the men of the kingdom. They believed it would lead to every wife despising her husband! We do not know whether Vashti was "divorced", demoted to the status of a concubine (Heb *pilegeš*), or executed. She does not appear again in the story. Some have suggested that the King's counselors advised that Vashti be completely deposed to make sure that she did not return to power and punish them. The book of Esther is certainly not the only place in the Bible where male-female issues are discussed. (see Ephesians 5:21-29; James 4:7) This book does however seem to encourage women to speak out and assert their wills when issues of combating evil and promoting good are involved.

2. After consulting his advisers, Xerxes decided to depose Queen Vashti. This opened the way for the "beauty contest" that led to the appointment of the Jewish maid Hadasseh ("myrtle") as Queen Esther.
3. According to Ctesius and Herodotus (vii.61) Xerxes' Queen was a woman named Amestris, from one of the aristocratic families of Persia, whom he married before he ascended the throne. "The name *Vashti* is puzzling because according to Herodotus, the queen's name was Amestris, daughter of Otanes, who had supported Darius in his bid for the throne in 522 B.C. Possibly Xerxes had other queens, whose names have not come to light, or she had alternative names.
4. There is no mention of either Vashti or Esther in any non-Jewish extra-biblical sources. (See section below on historical accuracy).
5. Vashti serves as an interesting contrast to Esther. One was a Jew, the other a Gentile. Esther courageously yet humbly disobeyed the King by appearing unsummoned, while Vashti defiantly disregard his command to appear with no record of apology or explanation. Esther acted at the request of Mordecai in the best interests of her people whose lives were in her hands. Vashti apparently acted in her own interest without counsel or advice from anyone. Yet each of these women was apparently used by God to accomplish His purposes.

HAMAN (PERSON) [Heb *haman* (חַמָּן)]. (the name appears 54 times in the book of Esther)

1. Haman is described as a man of Royal birth, descended from the family of Agag the king of the Amalekites. In the book of Esther he is made vizier or Prime Minister of the country of Persia under king Xerxes.

2. After a royal edict was given that all should bow to him, he became very angry when he discovered that Mordecai, a Jew, refused to bow. (Esther 3:2–5)
3. Haman convinced Xerxes to allow him to send out a decree to have all Jews in the Persian empire eliminated and their property confiscated. (3:12-14)
4. He cast lots (Purim) to determine which would be the most auspicious day on which to carry out his decree. The day chosen was Adar 13 nearly one year in the future. (Esther 3:7)
5. Didn't Haman have any idea that Esther was related to Mordecai? If he was the "prime minister" during this time how could he not have known?
6. Hoping to eliminate Mordecai before that date he built a gallows on which to hang him. (5:9-14)
7. As he approached the king hoping to get permission to hang Mordecai, he was instead given the task of leading a royal horse carrying Mordecai through the streets of Susa while proclaiming him as the one that the king "delights to honor".
8. His murderous plans were completely disrupted when Queen Esther turned the king against him at the second of two banquets she prepared for the two men.
9. Realizing the very serious nature of the situation Haman fell down before Esther's couch to plead for his life. When Xerxes found him almost touching Esther he thought he was actually trying to assault the Queen.
10. Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. (7:5–10). Almost a year later on Adar 14 his ten sons were hanged as well.
11. This story portrays Haman as the adversary *par excellence* of the Jews.
12. The Hebrew Old Testament tradition links him with AGAG, the ancient king of the Amalekites, who were enemies of the Hebrews. King Saul had been told to eliminate all of the Amalekites. When he returned from the battle leading king Agag, the prophet Samuel cut Agag up into pieces. (Esth 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:10, 24; cf. 1 Samuel 15; Num 24:7; Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19).
13. To make matters worse, Mordecai was apparently a relative of the same king Saul who destroyed most of the nation of Amalek.
14. This seems to suggest that the animosity between Haman and Mordecai is part of an ancient blood feud.
15. This interpretation of the person of Haman is continued by Josephus, the Targums (commentaries) of Esther, as well as the Talmud. According to Jewish tradition, Haman was a direct descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites (see 1 Sam. 15:8), in the 16th generation (*Targum Sheni*; Josephus *Antiquities* xi. 6. 5).
16. The LXX treats the figure of Haman in a similar way. He is never described as an Agagite but rather as either a "Bugaean" (Gk *Bougaios*; cf. LXX 3:1; 9:10; A:17), perhaps a reference to a famous friend of Alexander the Great, or as a "Macedonian" (Gk *ho Makedon*; cf. LXX 9:24). Either way Haman would be seen as a hated Greek by later Jewish audiences who still remembered the atrocities of Greek rule.
17. Some have suggested that Haman was described as an Agagite because he came from a Mesopotamian tribe mentioned in Sargon's annals known as the *Agazi*. It is very difficult,

however, to explain how *Agag* could be derived from *Agazi*.

18. Others have suggested his name might be derived from the Elamite god, Hum(b)an, but this is also a real stretch.
 19. Modern Jews leave little doubt with regard to how they feel about this arch-enemy of Jews. Whenever his name is mentioned on the day of Purim they all hiss!
 20. Haman is not mentioned anywhere in non-Jewish extra-biblical sources.
2. The book of Esther has been called “the secular book of the Bible”. Why would that be? What does that imply? Does the book have a theme?

“In the Hebrew version of Esther, the Persian king is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses; but the God of Israel not once. Nor are there mentioned in the Masoretic Text such distinctive practices and concepts as prayer, *kašrūt* [‘correctness’ as applied mainly to Jewish dietary rules], election, law, Jerusalem, temple, or divine intervention (in fact, fasting is the only religious practice mentioned [Esth 4:16 and 9:31]). These glaring omissions undoubtedly contributed to the difficulties the book had in gaining canonicity among both Jews and Christians. For as late as the 4th century A.D. some Jews were still denying the book canonical status, as were a number of Eastern Church Fathers as late as the 9th century.” (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*)

“The Book of Esther is a remarkably different biblical book because (1) neither the word for God nor the name *Yahweh* (LORD) occurs in the Hebrew text; (2) the scene is Shushan (Susa), the winter capital of Persia, not Israel; (3) the book concerns the marriage of its Jewish heroine with a Gentile king; and (4) it solves the problem of an incipient anti-Semitism by a bloody self-defense, which is even repeated on the following day by Esther’s request!

“Even though the name of God is nowhere mentioned in the book, His sovereignty and providence are evident throughout. Vashti’s dismissal, Esther’s regal position, Xerxes’ indebtedness to Mordecai discovered during a sleepless night, and the miraculous deliverance of the Jews all demonstrate God’s control and care for His people (Ps. 121:4). The book also explains the origin of the Feast of Purim (2 Maccabees 15:36) on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar (Feb.–Mar.), when Jews celebrate the deliverance from Haman.

“A third theme is evident, that of anti-Semitism. When fully developed, animosity toward Jews results in genocide: the attempt to exterminate a race. This satanic scheme is probably much older than the time of Haman. In Moses’ day, Pharaoh attempted to exterminate the Hebrew slaves.” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

“Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not mention or even allude to God. In that sense, it is the “secular” book of Scripture. For that reason, the meaning of Esther has been debated for centuries. Some have denied that it should be regarded as God’s Word. Others have defended its inspiration, but then ignored it. Some early Christians allegorized it, and some modern Christians have spiritualized it. Interestingly, many Christians in Iran, the modern-day successor to ancient Persia, where the story took place, take a very literal view.

“Questions about the interpretation of Esther will probably continue, but two lines of thought are worth considering. First, even though God’s name does not appear in the book, God’s purposes do.

A theological high point occurs in the narrative when Mordecai informs his young cousin Esther about a genocidal plot against the Jews. He warns her that she is mistaken if she thinks that she can escape death simply because she has been named queen.

“Then Mordecai challenges Esther to act. He seems unaffected if she chooses not to: ‘If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place,’ he confidently says (Esth. 4:14), in what is taken as a quiet display of faith in God’s protection. Then he adds, ‘Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’

“Mordecai’s searching question suggests that he was aware that God was working out His purposes. He was raising the hopeful possibility that nothing had happened in Esther’s life merely by accident, chance, or human choice. Something—or Someone—had placed her in the strategic position where she now found herself.

“Apparently Esther concurred, because she asked Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for her for three days—clearly an act of religious devotion.

“However, as significant as these statements are, the book also has a troubling side, which raises a different possibility for thinking about Esther. After Haman’s plot is exposed and he is executed, the tables are turned and the Jews are allowed to destroy their enemies. At first they kill more than 500 men in Susa (Esth. 9:1–10). Then Esther asks for a second day of vengeance, and they kill 300 more (9:15–17). This was in addition to the 75,000 killed in the provinces.

“Curiously, the Bible mentions but does not comment on this massacre. Is it possible that God disapproved of what happened, particularly on the second day? These Jews had not returned to Judah. They were remaining in the land of exile. Was that what the Lord wanted? Was Mordecai’s feast of Purim, established to celebrate this slaughter, a divinely sanctioned feast, like Passover? Scripture does not tell us either way.” (*Word-in-Life Study Bible*)

3. Few Biblical books have so much historical detail that can be checked and perhaps verified as the book of Esther. As we have already noted, only Xerxes and Mordecai seem to be documented from extra-biblical sources. This, of course, leads critical scholars to question the historical accuracy of the book. Do we just assume it is historically accurate because someone in the past said it is “inspired”? How would we decide this question for ourselves?

“Historical Accuracy • Some critical scholars question the historical accuracy of Esther on various counts. One difficulty is the passage that describes the royal feast (1:3–5). The passage appears to indicate that the feast lasted a particularly long time: “one hundred and eighty days in all” (1:4). However, a better interpretation is that this long period of time was the period of preparation for the military campaign in Greece, during which Xerxes displayed his power and wealth to his officials. The feast itself lasted seven days—a lengthy time for a feast, but not an incredible period (1:5).

“Another difficulty is that neither Vashti nor Esther is mentioned outside the Bible. However, historians do note that following his unsuccessful campaign against Greece (482–479 B.C.), Xerxes sought refuge in his harem. This coincides with the elevation of Esther (2:17). Furthermore, the word translated *queen* (1:9; 2:22) may refer merely to a principal wife rather than to a woman who ruled beside the king. Thus the obscurity of Esther and Vashti would be understandable. Even so, some

still balk at the idea that a Persian ruler would marry a Jewish woman rather than choosing someone from the aristocratic Persian families. However, the Book of Esther makes it clear that Esther initially hid her Jewish identity. She used her Persian name Ishtar or Esther instead of her Hebrew name Hadassah. The climax of the story involves her surprising revelation that she was a Jew.

“Importance in the Canon • The Book of Esther has held an important place in the canon due to its strong testimony to God’s providence and protection of His people. However, the book has been challenged by some. One of the main points in the dispute is the remarkable fact that neither the word God nor God’s name Yahweh is found in the book. There are two explanations that may account for this. First, it may be a result of the author’s chosen point of view. The author might have viewed the Jewish people who remained in Persia and did not return to the land of Israel (Ezra 1:1) as a people cut off from the principal blessings of God. Thus, the absence of God’s name in the book might be a way of expressing God’s distance from the exiles. At the same time, the book clearly reveals God’s surprising protection of them.

“Second, the author may have written the book in the form of a Persian state chronicle in order to explain to the Persians the Jewish celebration of Purim. In accordance with this style, the author emphasizes the king’s name, titles, and lists, but writes about the Jewish people in a detached tone. This could help explain why the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not directly mention God.” (*Nelson Study Bible*)

Interpretive Difficulties: “The question of whether the Book of Esther belongs in the canon of Scripture has been raised from an early period by both Jews and Christians, though the book’s commendation of the popular festival of Purim argued strongly in favor of its inclusion in the Jewish canon. Objections voiced by some Christians to Esther’s canonicity included its absence from some of the earliest lists of canonical books, its lack of citation in the New Testament, its lack of overt references to God and to religious practices, its excessive Jewish nationalism, and its spirit of vengeance. Some of these objections were alleviated when the early church adopted an expanded version of the Book of Esther found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). This Septuagint text contains over one hundred verses, not found in the Hebrew text, that made the book more religiously acceptable to some. These additions include a dream of Mordecai about the coming destruction of the Jews and prayers of Mordecai and Esther for deliverance. However, when the Protestant churches judged the shorter Hebrew version of Esther to be the authoritative version, objections to the book’s canonicity resurfaced.

“The violence in the Book of Esther is a kind of civil war, which Cicero called the worst of all calamities. The author of Esther shows the relief of the people when justice triumphs, and does not criticize the means employed, such as the hanging of Haman’s sons. But it would be a mistake to consider these events as models for behavior. The extreme situation and threat under which they happened limits what can be concluded from them. The author does not engage in moral reflection about the massive killing and the motives of avengers. The reader struggling with some of the questions that arise needs to go to other places, such as the prophets, Job, or Revelation, where the discussion includes them and answers may be found. Positively, the Book of Esther testifies clearly

to the invisible hand of Providence, which will not allow the covenant people to be utterly destroyed.”
(*New Geneva Study Bible*)

In antiquity, a number of Jews and Christians contested its canonicity. From the period of the Middle Ages, the pronouncement of Luther (*WA* 3: 302) stands out:

“I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and Esther that I could wish that they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety.”

“Twentieth-century scholars have also been quite critical of the book’s moral tone. Paton, who has written the most detailed and comprehensive Esther commentary in English, concluded that ‘There is not one noble character in the book. . . . Morally, Esther falls far below the general level of the OT, and even of the Apocrypha’ (*Esther* ICC, 96). Other scholars have been almost as severe, claiming that Vashti, the deposed queen, was the only honorable person in the entire story. Scholar and rabbi Sandmel confessed that he ‘should not be grieved if the Book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture’ (1972: 44) while the Israeli Ben-Chorin actually advocated that Jews abandon both the book and its holiday, arguing that ‘Both festival and the book are unworthy of a people which is disposed to bring about its national and moral regeneration under prodigious sacrifice’ (1938: 5). All this and much more has been said about a biblical book which the great Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) ranked as second only to the Pentateuch itself.” (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*)

4. Where were most of the Jews in the days of Esther? Why do you think so many of the Jews stayed in Susa or Babylon rather than going back to Jerusalem or Canaan? **Is this where God wanted them to be? Why did they get into this predicament? Was it ever God’s plan for them to be in Babylon or Susa? How many opportunities had they had to go back to Canaan?** Do you have a harder time understanding and explaining how God treats the righteous or how He treats the wicked? Does Esther give us any help in understanding how God feels about His children even when they don’t care enough to come “home?” What do you think of a God who goes to such great lengths to preserve such a group? Where are Esther’s and Mordecai’s descendants today?

By far the majority of the Jews remained in Mesopotamia, either in Babylonia or over in Persia. We have no evidence that any Jews were ever required to go to Susa in Persia, so it is quite likely that those who went there did so for commercial reasons. One hundred and eighteen years before this story begins Mordecai’s and Esther’s relatives had been carried captive with Jehoiachin and Ezekiel in 598/597 BC. Sixty years before this story Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest had led the 50,000 Jews who were willing to go on the journey “home” to rebuild Jerusalem. Another large group of Jews were in Egypt where they fled taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them. (See Jeremiah 43:6) Only a very small percentage of the Jews were actually in Jerusalem where God apparently wanted them to be!

Sometimes we have suggested to our children that God will not protect them if they go to places where God does not want them to be! Do their guardian angels wait until they leave that place before they take up their protecting role again? What about the parable of the lost sheep? (Luke 15:1-7; Matthew 18:10-14) or the prodigal son? (Luke 15:11-32) The book of Esther should be a clear answer to such ideas. There are still today a large community of Jews living in

Persia (Iran) although many have left in recent years. No doubt the descendants of the main characters of this book actually became a part of the Persian culture and blended in with that nation.

God never leaves His children alone, especially when they are in particular danger! His children may be ignoring His advice and counsel at the moment and even ignoring the persuasion of the Holy Spirit and His assistants, our guardian angels, but that does not mean that God has abandoned us. Numerous examples could be given from Scriptures to show that God goes out of His way to reach out to help and touch us if there is any possible way that we will respond.

5. Shouldn't God have solved the problems in the book of Esther by means of a prophet or prophetess instead of by a beautiful, young woman who ended up "committing adultery" as one of the many "wives" of a heathen king? (Esther 2:1-18) By our standards, shouldn't Vashti have been the heroine of the book? (Esther 1:12) What do you think of the reason given by the counselors for deposing Vashti? (Esther 1:13-22) Couldn't God have used some other person or method to solve this problem without breaking so many moral codes, even commandments, by our standards? Would you want your daughter to do what Esther did? Do you think Esther had any choice?

This is primarily a thought question. It shouldn't be too hard to understand why some have had problems with this book down through the centuries.

"Herodotus names Xerxes' queen as 'Amestris,' and describes her as infamously cruel. Suggestions have been made to identify her with either Vashti or Esther, although philological and historical arguments for either are unlikely. More likely Vashti and Esther were wives of Xerxes/Ahasuerus that Herodotus does not mention. It should be noted that although Herodotus is often called the 'father of history,' he wrote primarily from interviews and with the intention to entertain and to glorify the Greeks. His work is far from faultless historically. Therefore, it is improper to pit Herodotus against the Bible, assuming the Bible to be in error where it is inconsistent with Herodotus." (*Believer's Study Bible*)

"Memucan's appeal was to male self-interest. Note the whimsical way laws were made in a land where so much was made of law and judgment (vv. 8, 13, 15, 19). The king dispatched his edict without so much as a further thought. There was something ludicrous about this decree that a husband was to take charge in his own household, for this was the standing rule in an oriental home. The law was not even enforceable. There is an ironic contrast between King Ahasuerus at the beginning of the chapter, when he is the world's greatest monarch, rich and powerful, aloof yet generous, and that same king by the end of the chapter, where he attempts to maintain his dignity despite the defiance of his wife. This lawmaker of the Persians and Medes, whose law could not be altered, was prepared to pass an edict framed in a moment of pique, when he was not even sober. Such is the measure of the king who reigned over the world, and had the future of all in his power." (*King James Version Study Bible*)

6. What was the reason Mordecai refused to bow to Haman? Was there a moral or Biblical reason involved or was this just a personal or national rivalry or stubbornness because Haman's ancestors were old archenemies of the people of Israel? (See Genesis 14:7; Exodus 17:8-16; Numbers 14:45;

24:7; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; Judges 3:13; 6:3,33; 1 Samuel 15:1-3,9,20,32,33; 27:8; 30:1; 2 Samuel 1:1; 1 Chronicles 4:42,43)

According to Jewish tradition (*Targum Sheni*; Josephus *Antiquities* xi. 6.5) Haman was a direct descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites in the sixteenth generation. There is no mention made of Mordecai refusing to bow to the king. There are numerous records in Scripture of Jews bowing before kings (See 1 Samuel 24:8) and others who were regarded as superior to themselves (Genesis 23:7; 27:29; 33:3; etc). Haman was a Gentile, but Abraham had bowed before Gentiles. (Genesis 23:7) Mordecai, of course, refused to offer Haman the kind of reverence that is due only to God. (See 5T 450; PK 600) Did Mordecai put all the Jewish people at risk by this action? It was clearly a matter of considerable attention because Mordecai's associates spoke about it to him on a regular basis. (Esther 3:4)

Mordecai's refusal to bow down was brought to Haman's attention by Mordecai's associates and it clearly irritated Haman. It is likely that when he discovered that Mordecai was a Jew he determined to get back at all Jews for what their ancestors had done to his! God knew in advance what was going to happen. Is it possible that He arranged for Esther to become queen just to meet this emergency? From what we know of the story it appears that the whole thing could have been avoided by getting either Haman or Mordecai a different job! It is very likely that the Devil was very much involved in all of this. He knew of the prophecies of the coming Messiah, and he was probably hoping to make a preemptive strike against Jews. If he could eliminate the Jewish people, then the Messiah could not be born and God's plans would be spoiled. (compare Exodus 1:8-22)

It is impossible for us to know at this point in time whether God somehow was involved in arranging for Esther to be selected for the beauty contest, and to be chosen as the new queen. It is possible that God only used Esther because she was in the right position to accomplish what needed to be done. Was this an attempt on God's part to raise the status of women, at least among His own people? The Jews have been celebrating the events of this book in the feast of Purim ever since! Once again God demonstrated that His ways are not our ways, and that He has a thousand ways of accomplishing what needs to be done that we know nothing about!

We cannot know for sure what Vashti's reasons were for refusing to go in before the king. (See comments under "**Vashti**" above) However, it is clear that most modern Christian parents would prefer to have their daughters follow her example rather than Esther's. Esther may not have had any choice in the how she was treated.

7. How would you feel if you were Mordecai and you had just learned of the death decree against all of God's people because of your actions? (Esther 3:1-15) Why do you think Mordecai refused to bow down? Did he refuse to let others bow to him when he become prime minister?

As we have already mentioned above, it is not clear why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. He must have felt terrible when he learned of the death decree. He may have felt that there was some special reason why bowing in this case would represent a compromise of his religion. (See comments below) Or it may have been nothing more than stubbornness against a group of ancient rivals who had been enemies of God's people since the days of Abraham. We have no way of

knowing if Mordecai required bowing from his subordinates when he rose to the position of Prime Minister.

8. How many other times in the Bible were death decrees issued? (Exodus 1:15-22; Matthew 2:16-18) What was the purpose of these decrees? Who do you think was behind them and why? Would the Jews, as a people, have disappeared if Esther had not done what she did? If you had been given the King's permission to counteract the first decree of Haman, what would you have written or done? Was Esther partly responsible for the kind treatment of Ezra and Nehemiah?

As suggested above, it is very likely that Satan was hoping on this occasion to eliminate or at least reduce the possibility that the Messiah would be born as had been prophesied. He was determined to do whatever he could to disrupt God's plans.

Since Ahasuerus (Xerxes) reigned until 465 BC and Ezra led the second group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 457 BC it is most likely that Ezra at least knew of Esther. No doubt he was very familiar with her story. How much personal contact a man like Ezra may have had with the queen, who as a member of the king's harem was reserved just for him is questionable. But it is clear that those in high office may have had opportunity to come in contact with the queen directly as evidenced by the banquets that Esther held to which Haman was invited.

Artaxerxes I Longimanus (465-423 BC) was the third son of Xerxes and his successor to the Persian throne. It is very unlikely that he was the son of Esther, but at least he would know all about her. He was the king who granted the generous gifts and positions to Ezra and Nehemiah to help rebuild Jerusalem.

9. Why do you think Esther and her friends fasted? (Esther 4:15,16) Was it to get God's attention, or what?

It is quite likely that this fast lasted no more than the last part of the first day, all of the second day, and the first part of the third day (compare the time Jesus was in the tomb) and would thus be about 36 hours in length. Even so, it was an attempt to get the moral and spiritual support of the Jews of Susa and God as well. (See *Prophets and Kings* 601) It was known that the mind is particularly clear after such a fast and Esther may have suggested it so that she would be especially clear-minded as she approached the king. It is also possible that this was a part of a prayer and fasting period to appeal to God for the welfare of His people.

10. Esther seemed to have been placed by God in a key place and position at the right time. Can you think of any others? How about Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah? How does God do this without violating people's freedom?

It is not necessary for God to violate anyone's freedom to make use of a willing volunteer in a key position. It is not even a violation of anyone's freedom for God to arrange for someone to be in a key position so he can do what God needs to have done. Those who have served God and their country's best interests have done so with great dedication and wisdom. Those governments who have the privilege of finding such people are greatly benefitted. Notice that even the kings of Medo-Persian recognized the superior talent of Daniel.

11. Did God keep King Ahasuerus from sleeping that night so that he would hear about Mordecai's saving his life? (Esther 6:1; 2:19-23)

It is hard to know if it was God who kept King Ahasueras (Xerxes) awake or if it might even have been the food that Esther served at the banquet! More likely, it was the amount of food that the king chose to eat!

12. How do you think Haman felt as he was leading Mordecai through the streets on the king's horse? (Esther 6:10,11)

This story is full of the most incredible intrigue, irony and reversal of fortunes! Here is Haman just ready to ask for permission to hang Mordecai and now he must lead him seated on the king's horse in great honor and dignity through the streets of Susa proclaiming the king's wish to honor him! Haman must have been very angry inside! Do you suppose he was wondering if he was going to be defeated by the Jews as were many of his ancestors? Did he wish that he had never paid any attention to this Jew who refused to bow down to him?

13. What led Haman's wife to say that it would be ultimately fatal to oppose Mordecai? (Esther 6:12,13) Did she know something that we don't?

Haman's wife was no doubt reflecting on the known history between these two rival groups, the Jews and the Amalekites. She probably knew how many times the Amalekites had been defeated and large groups of them destroyed by the Jews. She was beginning to fear that history would repeat itself, and she was right. We can hope that she was also learning something about the God of Israel. It is too bad that Haman was not as perceptive as his wife in this case. Once again in this book we see that the women were much wiser and acted more intelligently than the men!

14. Why was Esther so vengeful, asking for another day of bloodshed, and then requesting the hanging of the ten sons of Haman? (Esther 9:5,6,13-15) Was Esther's request for a second day to kill the enemies of the Jews just self-preservation? Is this the first time the Israelites were granted extra time to kill? (see Joshua 10:12-14)

It is very unlikely that Esther made this decision and request on her own. She no doubt acted after consulting Mordecai. He may have felt the necessity for his own preservation from vengeful remnants of those who had been killed to eliminate as many of their survivors as possible. There is some confusion today about the way numbers were written in the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic scripts so it is possible that the number of people killed in the provinces was only "one thousand and seventy-five" rather than "seventy-five thousand." It is possible that many of those who were trying to kill the Jews were also Amalekites and seeking to settle an old grudge. If so, the Jews may have reasoned that these enemies of theirs were supposed to have all been killed at the command of God long ago anyway!

15. **Did the universe love and worship God more or less after the events of the book of Esther?** What do you think they learned from this book? Does the book have any usefulness for us in our day? How do you fit Esther in with Jesus' statement in John 5:39,40 which suggests that the Old Testament

writings were to teach us about Him?

Even though the book of Esther doesn't mention the name of God, it says a great deal about His loving care for His children. This whole story is about His loving care and protection of a group of people who didn't apparently care enough to follow His instructions to go back home to Jerusalem. This will be a particularly useful thing for us to remember when we approach our day of trouble at the end of this world's history.

16. In the Apocrypha there is a book by the name of Judith that has a story and a theme, even an outcome, quite similar to that of the book of Esther. On what basis would you accept Esther as inspired and say Judith is not?

This is a very large question that we will not be able to deal with in depth in this handout. Judith is a part of the Apocrypha that Roman Catholics accept as a part of their canon but Protestants and Jews do not. In general Apocryphal books are rejected by many scholars, even Jerome—the Roman Catholic scholar who translated the Latin *Vulgate*—because their origin is in considerable doubt. Many of the Apocryphal books claim to have been written by very early writers but the only copies that we have are from a much later time and even in a different language than the original writer was supposed to have used.

The Apocrypha was an integral part of the original *King James Version* of 1611 and anyone who tried to leave it out was persecuted. It was finally left out of some Bibles in the nineteenth century by the British and Foreign Bible Society in order to reduce at least a little bit the cost of printing Bibles to distribute around the world.

The book of Esther is very precise in many of its historical details and is clearly written by someone who knew the fine details of Susa and the palace in Esther's day. On the other hand, the book of Judith starts out by saying, "In the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh..." This is clearly mistaken historically! Nebuchadnezzar reigned over the Babylonians in Babylon. There are numerous other mistakes in the document as we have it today, suggesting to many minds that the story is fictional.

It should be noted that Protestants and Jews also reject the Apocryphal additions to the book of Esther itself. Much of this additional material consists of pious prayers attributed to Esther and Mordecai. It appears to be an addition by someone in an attempt to give the book a more pious overall tone. The original book of Esther was thought to be too secular in nature and lacking in religious material.

17. How does the book of Esther relate to other books of the Bible?

We have already noted that Esther is not mentioned in the New Testament and is apparently the only book of the Hebrew Old Testament that was not preserved by the Essenes. (See appendix) It is interesting to note its relationship to the book of Daniel who preceded Esther by some 60 years. In his prophecies Daniel seems to speak about the kingdom of Medo-Persia as a combined kingdom. Repeatedly in the book of Esther we see the kingdoms of Media and Persia mentioned together as a single government. (Esther 1:3,14, 18, 19; 10:2)

18. Considering all of the issues that have been mentioned so far, can we learn anything of significance about God from this book?

Many very significant issues have been raised from the study of the book of Esther. Look at some of the major ones:

1. What evidence is there that this book is inspired? Some try to compare this book with the book of Judith in the Apocrypha and suggest that neither is really inspired. The plot may be similar but the details in the two stories are completely at odds. As we learn more and more about the background of the book of Esther, we find that the historical background fits exactly with the details as preserved in the book. By contrast, almost all of the historical details in the book of Judith are either in error or cannot be documented. (See *Judith - A Teacher's Guide*)
2. Would God really work with a group of people who are hundreds of miles from where God asked them to be? 1) Is this a book full of incredible chance serendipities? 2) Did God really act repeatedly in behalf of these people who seem to have gotten themselves into a lot of trouble? 3) Or is this just a clever, well-written novel with a "made-for-Hollywood" plot? Most modern "critical" scholars are inclined toward the last choice. On what basis would we disagree with this assessment?
3. The Bible speaks about a number of prominent Hebrews who found themselves in high-level positions in major world governments in ancient times. Joseph, Moses, Daniel (two different governments), Mordecai, Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra are major examples. Only two of these individuals have any documentation at all outside of the Biblical record and that documentation is minimal. If these individuals were really in such prominent positions, why didn't any record of them get preserved elsewhere? When this happens once or twice we can easily assume that it is just chance. But when it happens again and again, does this begin to suggest to us that the Biblical record is not completely reliable? We may have some evidence for Daniel's burial site in Jerusalem. We may have some evidence of one transaction that involved Mordecai. Shouldn't there be more? In the earlier parts of Scripture there is very little documentation of anything and this is easier to understand, but when we come to the times of Esther, Mordecai, Ezra and Nehemiah, there is considerable documentation outside of Scripture. Is God testing our "faith" or our "gullibility" here? On what basis do you choose to believe the Biblical records of these heroes rather than rejecting them as fictitious?

© Copyright 1996-2006, Kenneth Hart
khart@llu.edu

Last Modified: September 17, 2006
C:\My Documents\WP\TG\TG-2\ESTHERtg.wpd

Ellen White Comments

S.D.A. Bible Commentary, Vol. 3, p. 1139

Contrast of Two Feasts. "We read with pleasure of the feast of queen Vashti. This was not a feast attended by a promiscuous number, but a feast given by the queen for the women of rank in the kingdom, who were entertained with modest courtesy, without wantonness or sensuality.

"It was when the king was not himself, when his reason was dethroned by wine drinking that he sent for the

queen, that those present at his feast, men besotted by wine, might gaze on her beauty. She acted in harmony with a pure conscience.

“Vashti refused to obey the king's command, thinking that when he came to himself, he would commend her course of action. But the king had unwise advisers. They argued it would be a power given to woman that would be to her injury.” (MS 29, 1911).

Vashti's Refusal Was for the King's Good. [Esther 1:10, 11 quoted.] “Had the king maintained his royal dignity by practicing habits of temperance, he would never have made this command. But his mind was affected by the wine that he had used so freely, and he was not prepared to act wisely.

“When this command came from the king, Vashti did not carry out his orders, because she knew that wine had been freely used, and that Ahasuerus was under the influence of the intoxicating liquor. For her husband's sake as well as her own, she decided not to leave her position at the head of the women of the court.” [Esther 1:12 quoted] (MS 39, 1910)

God Overruled Ahasuerus' Folly for Good. [Esther 1:16-22 quoted.] “There is little doubt that the king, when he afterward considered the matter, felt that Vashti deserved to be honored, rather than to be treated as she was. No law of divorce, drawn up by men who for many days had given themselves up to wine-drinking, men who were unable to control the appetite, could be of any value in the eyes of the King of kings. These men were unable to reason soundly and nobly. They could not discern the real situation.

“However high their office, men are amenable to God. The great power exercised by kings, often leads to extremes in exaltation of self. And the worthless vows made to enact laws which disregard the higher laws of God, lead to great injustice.

“Occasions of indulgence such as are pictured in the first chapter of Esther, do not glorify God. But the Lord accomplishes His will through men who are nevertheless misleading others. If God did not stretch forth His restraining hand, strange presentations would be seen. But God impresses human minds to accomplish His purpose, even though the one used continues to follow wrong practices. And the Lord works out His plans through men who do not acknowledge His lessons of wisdom. In His hand is the heart of every earthly ruler, to turn whithersoever He will, as He turneth the waters of the river.

“Through the experience that brought Esther to the Medo-Persian throne, God was working for the accomplishment of His purposes for His people. That which was done under the influence of much wine worked out for good to Israel” (MS 39, 1910).

S.D.A. Bible Commentary, Vol. 3, p. 1140

“Consecrated Women Can Act Important Part. Through Esther the queen the Lord accomplished a mighty deliverance for His people. At a time when it seemed that no power could save them, Esther and the women associated with her, by fasting and prayer and prompt action, met the issue, and brought salvation to their people.

“A study of women's work in connection with the cause of God in Old Testament times will teach us lessons that will enable us to meet emergencies in the work today. We may not be brought into such a critical and prominent place as were the people of God in the time of Esther; but often converted women can act an important part in more humble positions” (Letter 22, 1911).

Prophets and Kings 600

“Through Haman the Agagite, an unscrupulous man high in authority in Medo-Persia, Satan worked at this time to counterwork the purposes of God. Haman cherished bitter malice against Mordecai, a Jew. Mordecai had done Haman no harm, but had simply refused to show him worshipful reverence. Scorning to lay hands on

Mordecai alone,' Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.' Esther 3:6.”

The Signs of the Times, November 8, 1899

“The decree which is to go forth against the people of God in the near future is in some respects similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews in the time of Esther. The Persian edict sprang from the malice of Haman against Mordecai. Not that Mordecai had done Haman harm, but he had refused to flatter his vanity by showing him the reverence which is due only to God. The king's decision against the Jews was secured under false pretenses. Satan instigated this scheme in order to rid the earth of those who preserved a knowledge of the true God. But his plots were defeated by a counter-power that reigns among the children of men. Angels who excel in strength were commissioned to protect the people of God, and the plots of their adversaries returned upon their own heads.”

Appendix

“Of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Bible—or twenty-four if the Minor Prophets, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles are each counted as one—only the book of Esther is missing from the collection of manuscripts unearthed in the caves above the banks of the Dead Sea. The absence of Esther from the twenty or so scrolls found among the ruins of Masada and the hideouts used by the rebels of the Bar Kokhba revolt does not raise much of a question, but the absence of Esther from more than 200 biblical scrolls from the caves at Qumran is a bit more curious. To be sure, the books of Nehemiah and 1 Chronicles have not been found either, but they are generally assumed to have been present on the basis of the few crumbs of the scrolls of Ezra and 2 Chronicles respectively.

“That Esther has turned up missing might be attributed to nothing more than chance coupled with the relatively small size of the book. In addition, as noted above, it is true that other books composed in the period following the Babylonian exile are either missing (Nehemiah and 1 Chronicles) or nearly so (Ezra and 2 Chronicles). However, some evidence that has come to light just recently reveals that the absence of Esther was purposeful rather than accidental. The Qumran calendar texts—not generally known before 1991—chart festivals and holy days on the community's 364-day year. The feast of Purim, which has its beginnings in the story of Esther, is missing. As a result, the real question now becomes: Why was Esther rejected?

“Several answers might be suggested. **First**, the fact that the festival of Purim was a later addition, not mentioned in the Books of Moses, might have caused the Dead Sea Scrolls community to reject the book. **Second**, the mere fact that the story concerns the marriage of Esther—a Jew—to a Persian king was likely repugnant to the group's conservative sensibilities. **Third**, the book itself makes no mention of God whatsoever. **Finally**, the emphasis on retaliation evident in the final chapters of Esther (chapters 7—9) is contrary to the teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls: “To no man shall I return evil for evil; I shall pursue a man only for good; for with God resides the judgment of all the living, and he shall pay each man his recompense” (1QS 10:17—18). Any one of these factors would have provided good reason to reject the book of Esther. (*The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*)