

Biblical Missionaries

Esther and Mordecai

Lesson #6 for August 8, 2015

Scriptures: Esther 1-10; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; John 4:1-26; Acts 17:26; Matthew 22:21; Romans 1:18-20.

1. The story of Esther and Mordecai is a very challenging one for Bible-believing Jews and Christians. We do not know why Mordecai and Esther were in Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire, after the Jews had been given permission at least twice to return to Jerusalem. Instead of moving west to reestablish themselves in Jewish territory, for some reason they had moved east to the Persian capital. As an orphan, Esther was taken in by her cousin Mordecai and apparently raised as a faithful Jewess. The rest of the story raises a lot of questions! If you have not done so recently, please read the full book of Esther. It will not take very long.
2. The events of the book of Esther occurred early in the 5th century B.C. There are many written records documenting events in the Medo-Persian government at that time. Below is a chart of how the story of Esther fits into the known history of the Medo-Persian government of that time.
3. 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 [Xerxes I] 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 (Esther 1:13-22).... In 465 B.C. a courtier murdered Ahasuerus; his son, Artaxerxes I, Longimanus, succeeded him.** (*King James Version Study Bible*) [Content in brackets and bold type are added.]

The chronological data supplied by the book of Esther (except B.C. dates) 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	2:12,16	[6	10	?]	Between	Jan. 2, 479-Jan. 30, 479
Esther made queen	2:17-18	7	10	--	Between	Dec. 22, 479-Jan. 20, 478
Haman casts lots	3:7	12	1	--	Between	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

[Brackets and content in brackets are in the original source.] Modified from SDA Bible Commentary, Esther

4. There is a great deal of fascinating historical information about this story available at the following address: www.theox.org. Look for "Esther - A Teacher's Guide." We do not know exactly why Esther participated in the beauty contest. She probably did not have any choice in

the matter. Esther willingly or unwillingly broke just about every rule of traditional Jewish conduct. What does it say to us about God that He continued to lead and guide her under those circumstances? Did God help her prepare to be Xerxes wife or concubine?

5. When Esther was chosen to be in the beauty contest as well as after the contest, Mordecai advised her at least twice to hide her identity. (See Esther 2:10,20.) Why do you suppose he did that? What can we learn from their experience that might be appropriate today? If revealing that you are a Christian places you in additional danger without helping in any way in the spread of the gospel, it is not necessary to reveal your identity. Consider the cases of many of the early Christians. It might be appropriate in our world today not to reveal one's Christianity if one is trying to work as a pioneer in a Muslim country. What about working in China? Or, Russia? Or, some other communist or communist-leaning nation?
6. Read John 4:1-26. In this story Jesus openly revealed to a Samaritan woman that He was the Messiah while He did not do that, as far as we can tell, to His own people. Why would He do that? Is it because Jesus recognized that if He told the Jewish people that He was to be their Messiah, they would have had a completely wrong idea of what He was going to do?

Christ was far more reserved when He spoke to them [the Jews]. That which had been withheld from the Jews, and **which the disciples were afterward enjoined to keep secret**, was revealed to her [the Samaritan woman]. Jesus saw that she would make use of her knowledge in bringing others to share His grace.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 190.3. [Content in brackets and bold type are added.]

7. Read Esther 3:1-5. When Haman was appointed to be vizier or prime minister to the king, Mordecai refused to bow to him when he passed. When Haman discovered who Mordecai was and why he did not bow, he was furious. Haman's ancestors and Mordecai's ancestors had been enemies for many generations. Early in the history of Israel, King Saul was supposed to have eliminated Haman's ancestors completely! (1 Samuel 15) Haman was a direct descendant of Agag, one of the kings of the Amalekites. No doubt, Haman thought this was a good opportunity to eliminate his old rivals.
8. Read Esther 3:8-13 and Acts 17:26. Haman attempted to picture the Jews as disloyal and a problem in the kingdom. He argued that because they were different, they should be eliminated, and he would pay a large sum of money to the treasury—stolen from the Jews?
9. Where were most of the Jews in the days of Esther? Why do you think so many of the Jews stayed in Persia or Babylon rather than going back to Jerusalem or Canaan? Is that where God wanted them to be? Why did they get into that predicament? Was it ever God's plan for them to remain in Babylon or Persia? 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 the story of Esther give us any help in understanding how God feels about His children even when they do not care enough to go/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?
10. By far the majority of the Jews remained in Mesopotamia, either in Babylonia or 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 or on assignment. One hundred and eighteen years before this story begins, Mordecai's and Esther's relatives had been carried captive along with Jehoiachin and Ezekiel in 598/597 B.C. 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 had 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!

11. 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 such places before angels 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. Still today, there is 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.
12. God never leaves His children alone, especially when they are in 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 them. 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.
13. Shouldn't God have solved the problems in the book of Esther by means of a prophet or prophetess instead of using 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? It should not be too hard to understand why down through the ages some have questioned the inspiration of and have had problems with this book being in the Bible.
14. 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*)
15. What was the reason Mordecai refused to bow to Haman? Was there a moral or biblical reason involved? Or, was it 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.)
16. 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. *Agag*, like *Pharaoh*, means king or ruler. 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 his action? It was clearly a matter of considerable attention because Mordecai's associates spoke to him about it on a regular basis. (Esther 3:4)

17. 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?
18. It is not clear why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. He may have thought that there was some special, legitimate 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.
19. How many other times in the Bible were death decrees issued? (Exodus 1:15-22; Matthew 2:16-18) What was the purpose of those decrees? Who do you think was behind them? 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 received by Ezra and Nehemiah? Are there any descendants of Mordecai and Esther in the world today?
20. 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.
21. Since Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) reigned until 465 B.C. and Ezra led the second group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 457 B.C., 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 the king, 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.
22. Artaxerxes I Longimanus (465-423 B.C.) was the third son of Xerxes I and his successor to the Persian throne. It is very unlikely that he was the son of Esther, but at least he would have known all about her. He was the king who granted the generous gifts and positions to Ezra and Nehemiah to help rebuild Jerusalem.
23. Why do you think Esther, her friends, and the Jews in Susa fasted? Note that prayer was not mentioned in original versions. (Esther 4:15-16) Was it to get God's attention? Or, what?
24. It is quite likely that their 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 it was a part of a period of prayer and fasting to appeal to God for the welfare of His people.
25. Read Esther 5-8. In these chapters we have the critical parts of the story. By inviting the king and Haman to two different banquets and then finally revealing her identity, Esther sealed the plot against Haman.
26. Why couldn't the king sleep after the first night of banqueting with Esther? Did he eat too much food? Or, drink too much wine? Read Esther 6:1-3. At an earlier time, Mordecai had done a very

important deed which resulted in the saving of the king's life. We do not know how he found out about the plot or exactly how he reported it. But, he clearly was working in the king's best interest.

27. Try to imagine yourself in the position of Haman or the position of Mordecai as Haman led Mordecai through the streets of Susa, declaring Mordecai to be the man the king delighted to honor!
28. What do you think of the solution that Esther and Mordecai worked out to this major problem? Was that God's ideal way for dealing with enemies of the Jewish people? Read Esther 8:17. Is fear of being killed a reason to declare yourself in favor of the Jews? Or, even of God? Do you think those people were truly converted? Or, were they just scared?
29. Read Romans 1:18-20. Most Christians misread this passage of Scripture. As it is commonly understood, it is believed that this passage basically says that when people oppose God or His people long enough, then God will step in with anger and destroy them.
30. Read Romans 1:24,26,28. What this passage in Romans 1 actually says is that when people reject God long enough, God will ultimately turn away from them because they do not want Him anyway, thus, leaving them to the inevitable and awful consequences of their own destructive behavior. (See, for example, Hosea 4:17; Psalms 81:11-12; and Ezekiel 20:25-26.)
31. One interesting side note in all of this is found in Esther 3:13 compared with Esther 8:11. The people who were initially given permission to kill all the Jews were allowed to plunder their possessions. When Esther and Mordecai rewrote the decree, they apparently included the same phrase, that the Jews could plunder the possessions of their enemies. However, read Esther 9:10,15-17, *GNB* which says that "there was no looting." Did Mordecai and Esther want people to understand that the Jews were acting out of self defense and not greed?

The decree that will finally go forth against the remnant people of God will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews. Today the enemies of the true church see in the little company keeping the Sabbath commandment a Mordecai at the gate. The reverence of God's people for His law is a constant rebuke to those who have cast off the fear of the Lord and are trampling on His Sabbath.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 605.2; *LDE* 258.2; *CC* 245.3; *FLB* 311.4; *Mar* 269.2.

32. Both ancient Jews and Christians disputed the right of the book of Esther to have a place in the Old Testament canon. It did not appear in the Old Testament used by the community that produced the Dead Sea scrolls, nor in the Old Testament of the churches of ancient Turkey and Syria. The name of God does not appear in the book of Esther, while there are about 190 references to the heathen king. There are no references to sacrifice, temple, or worship, although fasting and prayer (*sic*) are mentioned. Finally, the covenant emphasis on forgiveness and mercy is not mentioned. And yet, the Lord saw fit to include it in the canon. Why? What powerful spiritual lesson can we take from it about how God can work in our lives for good, even amid what appear to be very difficult circumstances? (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Friday, August 7.) [Content in parenthesis is added.]
33. One of the most puzzling questions in the story is why Mordecai and Esther were in Susa. Since Mordecai or his ancestors were first exiled to Babylon, it would have been necessary for Mordecai or his ancestors to move further east to Susa in the days of Cyrus or his descendants. Thus, there is a possibility that Mordecai was in Susa representing Jewish interests. Do you

think that is possible? Or, was it just for commercial interest?

34. Esther is sometimes called the secular book of the Bible. That is because the name of God is not mentioned and there is so much involvement in the affairs of the Medo-Persian government. Herodotus, the famous Greek storyteller, wrote that the wife of Xerxes was Amestris who was herself very cruel. So, how do we explain the story of Vashti and Esther? Mordecai is a name derived from the Babylonian god, Marduk. As far as we know, so far, no archaeological evidence has been found for the existence of Vashti, Esther, or Mordecai. However, it is interesting to notice that shortly after the occurrence of this story, a number of young Jewish males were given the name Mordecai! Clearly, that was not because they were wanting to worship a pagan deity! We have to assume it was because of this Mordecai.
35. So, what are we supposed to do with the book of Esther? In order to see God's involvement, one clearly has to read between the lines. But, Ellen White reminded us:

In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. **But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.**—*Education*, p. 173.2 (1903); *PK* 499.4; *CC* 250.3; *FLB* 168.2; *AG* 50.2; *LDE* 29.5. [Bold type is added.]

36. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. . . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (*1 Cor. 9:20, 22, NIV*). In many ways this is a confronting passage of Scripture. What exactly does Paul mean by becoming "all things to all people"? The religious sect called "The Family" used to be known as the "Children of God." In the 1970s, they began a recruiting practice that their founder, David Berg, called "flirty fishing"-- basically using sexuality to lure people. Although no longer practiced, the David Berg Web site still defends this method of religious prostitution: "Over 100,000 people were led to faith in Christ because of the sacrificial love of Family men and women who were willing to go to such lengths to share the Lord's love." *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* p. 81.
37. To what extent should Christians in our day assimilate into our culture? Should we stand out as strange and unusual? In what areas of our lives do we need to be separate and distinctive?
38. Read Esther 4:12-16. Would it not have been quite easy for Esther to have refused the directions of Mordecai and pretended like she was Persian instead of Jewish when that crisis came? We know very little about Mordecai's early training of Esther. But, clearly, she was willing to sacrifice her life to stand up for principle in some respects.
39. In the Bible we have the stories of Esther, Joseph, and Daniel who served in foreign governments, undertaking the king's work; and yet, they stood out in their honoring of God. Will the time come for some of us to do the same?

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