

Esther(1)

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Introduction

The books of Ruth and Esther are the only two books of the Bible named for women. In the book of Ruth we learned how a Gentile woman from an ungodly nation was wonderfully used by God in His prophetic plan for the nation of Israel. In the book of Esther, we'll see how God used a Jewish woman residing as an exile in the kingdom of Babylon.

The book of Esther covers much more than Esther herself, so we need to take a look at the entire book to understand what God would have us to know about the woman Esther and about the man who assumed the role of her father. Therefore, in the first two lessons I plan to provide a summary of what the book of Esther contains; my takeaways will follow in the third lesson. As with the book of Ruth, I recommend that you read the book of Esther before proceeding with this study, as I will not address all the details contained in it.

Background

Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah (of Israel) had been conquered and many of the people were exiled to the kingdom of Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (Esther 2:5-6; II Kings 24:10-16; 25:1-21). The kingdom of Babylon was later conquered jointly by the kingdoms of Persia and Media (Esther 1:1-3; Daniel 5:22-31; 6:6-15) and became one large kingdom consisting of 127 provinces and many languages (Esther 1:1, 22). The people of Israel were still exiled in the new kingdom during the time covered by the book of Esther (Esther 3:8).

Ahasuerus was king over the new kingdom, and his queen was Vashti. During a royal celebration of his kingdom in the walled portion (this area would have contained the palace) of the city of Susa, King Ahasuerus commanded that Queen Vashti come before the king and display her beauty to the people and the princes of his kingdom. However, she refused and the king became very angry (Esther 1:10-12).

Ahasuerus consulted with his wise men who were close to him as to what to do about Vashti. Fearing that all the wives of the princes of the kingdom would disobey their husbands because of the example set by Vashti, the wise men recommended that the king replace Vashti with a new queen. This pleased the king, and letters were sent to all of the provinces declaring that every man should be master in his own house (Esther 1:13-22).

Later, as recommended by his attendants, King Ahasuerus commanded that every beautiful young virgin within his provinces be gathered to his house of the women (harem) in Susa. The king would then choose one virgin from among them to be his new queen (Esther 2:1-4).

Esther Becomes Queen

Mordecai was a Jewish man whose relatives had been taken into exile when King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem. At the time of King Ahasuerus' decree, he was living in Susa and was raising his uncle's daughter Esther after her parents had died, and took her as his own daughter. Esther was a beautiful young woman, and was one of the virgins who was taken to the king's palace (Esther 2:5-8).

Esther's initial appearance before the king pleased him, and she was transferred to the best place in the harem, which was in the charge of the king's eunuch named Hegai. As instructed by Mordecai, Esther did not reveal her Jewish heritage. Every day Mordecai walked in front of the courtyard of the harem to learn how Esther was doing. After a prescribed 12-month period of beautification, Esther was formally presented to the king (Esther 2:9-14).

Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her, so she was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace. She found favor and kindness with him more than all the other virgins, so the king made Esther his queen. Accordingly, the king gave a great banquet—Esther's banquet—for all of his princes and servants, and also declared a holiday for all the provinces. Still, Esther had not made known her Jewish heritage, for she continued to do as Mordecai had told her, even as she had done when under his care (Esther 2:15-20).

The Plot to Kill the King

While sitting at the king's gate, where he apparently had some access to Queen Esther, Mordecai overheard a plot by two of the king's officials (who were responsible for guarding the gate) to kill the king. Mordecai informed Esther who then informed King Ahasuerus (she attributed the information to Mordecai). The plot was found to be true, and the two men were hanged (Esther 2:21-23).

Haman's Plot to Kill the Jews

Scripture doesn't say why, but after these events the king promoted a man named Haman and gave him authority over all the princes who were with him. The king commanded that all of his servants bow down and pay homage to Haman as he passed through the king's gate, but Mordecai didn't do so. When the king's servants asked him why, he told them that he was a Jew. When word got to Haman about Mordecai, and when he saw that Mordecai did not bow down to him, Haman plotted to have all of the Jews in the kingdom of Ahasuerus be killed (Esther 3:1-6).

Haman went before the king and informed him of the Jews who were scattered through his kingdom, saying that they had different laws and did not observe the king's laws. Haman recommended that they be removed from the kingdom, and convinced the king to give him the authority, and money, to get the job done. King Ahasuerus agreed and left the means to do so with Haman. Consequently, in the king's name and under his seal, Haman had letters sent to all the governors and princes commanding them to destroy, kill, and annihilate all of the Jews in their provinces on a specific date, and to seize all of their possessions as plunder. The letters were written in all of the languages in the provinces so that all the people would be ready for that day (Esther 3:7-15).

When Mordecai learned what was to happen, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and publicly mourned loudly and bitterly for his people. Without knowing of the king's edict through Haman, Esther tried to console Mordecai by sending new clothes to him but he refused them. Esther then sent her attendant to talk to Mordecai, who told him what Haman had done and also gave him a copy of the letter to show to Esther so that she might go to the king and plead for her people (Esther 4:1-8).

Esther initially sent word back to Mordecai explaining that one had to be summoned by the king to go before him, and without a summons anyone who entered the court of the king was to be put to death. In his response back to Esther, Mordecai reminded her that she would die along with the other Jews,

and that her silence would guarantee the deaths of all of the Jews. He added that perhaps she had become queen for just such a time and opportunity (Esther 4:9-14).

Esther took Mordecai's plea to heart and instructed Mordecai to gather all of the Jews of Susa and fast for three days and nights, and let him know that she and her maidens would do the same. After the three days of fasting she would go before the king, which was contrary to the king's law, and accept her fate, which was expected to be death (Esther 4:15-17).

To Be Continued...

I hope to finish the account of the book of Esther next week. Feel free to read ahead! In the meantime, think about what we can learn from this account so far.