



## Esther: A Christian story.

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The Bible is a story. It's not only a story, but it is nonetheless composed of narrative and characters and events. Together they form the greatest story ever told; a beautiful symphony that resounds to fill our ears with the glory of the gospel of God.

With the great river of scripture are many smaller streams and eddies which contribute to the whole – adding unique contributions that shape the overall course.

The Book of Esther is one of those smaller stories. It's a compelling story with careful attention to detail – a story that tells a personal story that shakes the whole world – much like the greater story of which it is a part.

The narrative is exquisitely laid out. Events that occur early on repeat or reflect later events. Apparent asides and tangents from the main story contribute vital information that is required later. The details and the panorama's of the story draw us out of ourselves into another world.

This is an Oscar-worthy drama. To approach the book by following its story allows us to not only discover the content of the story but also to enjoy its form and style, which are vital to the ultimate message of this book. We'll watch the story unfold with the DVD commentary on.

This is a story that makes deep sense when read within the landscape of scripture though ripped from this context the events that follow may seem deeply disturbing.

## **Act 1, chapters 1-3.**

Key Players – the first act offers us a number of stories. What is going on here rather depends on who the central figures are.

**Xerxes – wrathful muppet.** Xerxes is introduced in the opening of the book as being the Xerxes who rules from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. He is the king of the known world. His rule is inescapable. As king of the world he has no shortage of resources or ego and so hosts a lavish six month party to display his own glory. The detail about the palace and the service delivered paints a stunning portrait of this celebration. The atmosphere is rather spoiled however when the king decides to parade his wife before his guests and she refuses.

This is the first of three acts of defiance against the king during the first act. Later he is defied by his advisors (eunuchs) who plot to kill him, and then finally by one of his subjects who defies a command to honour the Prime Minister. The most powerful man in the world is not good at keeping people in order. His response in each case is swift and disproportionately strong and swayed by the advice of others and their interests. Laws are passed in judgement and are classified as unrepealable. There is no hope of change only punishment.

If we're to understand this book as being about Xerxes then the original audience would be learning to obey the king. Not because of any respect for the king but because defiance will be met with punishment. This would be the tract of a totalitarian dictator. He has too much power, and not enough conscience or compassion or grey matter to wield it.

However, as we read this book we find it nestled in the pages of the Bible, this makes it unlikely that foreign king would be the hero. We know that God must finally be the hero, though he is conspicuously absent. As the story unfolds we need to engage with whether this book really belongs in the pages of scripture but at this stage its context makes Xerxes an unlikely hero. Moreover, we hear that the Chronicles of Xerxes do exist in which the story of the man who saved him is recorded.

**Esther – beautifully dubious hero.** The second key player to consider is Esther. Her name is painted over the book and as a Jew in a Bible book she stands out. This young orphan is described as beautiful. As the King launches his Xerxes-factor competition to find a new wife she is selected and enters the boot camp to be beautified further. Eventually she gets her night with the king and wins him over. This rags to riches story is often used as a model for Christian girls, in addition to her later heroics.

However, this is a dubious situation for a Jewish girl to find herself in. What we see is the story of a Jewess seducing a non-Jew (it's her performance in bed not an interview that gets her the wedding ring) and marrying him. This is not good practice for one of God's people. Taking Esther as an example for our day is a dubious way to handle the text with a deeply disturbing message. Let young Christian women make themselves as beautify as they can, then let them find and seduce the most powerful non-Christian they can without revealing that they're Christians. Hardly the content of most relationships seminars! In Esther's defence her secrecy is under the advice of her guardian, and the whole process is presumably approved by him.

**Mordecai – contradictory hero.** Mordecai is a Jew also, living during the exile of God's people that was executed by Nebuchadnezzar. This links the story to books like 2 Chronicles and Daniel where that exile is recorded. The

context of the book tells us that the exile was God's judgement on Israel but he remains unnamed here.

Mordecai permits his niece to enter the Kings harem and eventually marry the King which seems dubious behaviour, though he advises her and keeps close watch on her from the palace gates. We're then told that he saves the kings life though this is followed by defying the King's command to honour the Prime Minister. This incident brings the whole story to crisis point. Where he advised his niece to keep her nationality secret he is open about his own background. This is a problem because it turns a situation where he would be punished into one where every Jew is threatened with death. His actions contradict his advice to Esther and leave things in crisis.

**Haman – the villainous lucky man.** Haman is deeply offended when one subject of the kingdom will not bow down to him. This is a man with an ego. Furthermore this is a man with a problem with the Jews. The disclosure of Mordecai's nationality escalates the situation to the extreme.

He plots against this defiant subject and casts lots to determine when he should strike against him and his people. The Prime Minister is a man who believes in chance and circumstance. Backed by strong finances he makes a pitch to the King to kill the defiant man and all his people who it's reported are blight on the kingdom. The King is typically

swayed by his advisers and agrees to the implementation of an unrepeatable law to destroy, kill, annihilate and plunder them. The future looks very bleak for Esther, Mordecai and their people.

**Crisis: Why not bow?** The story reaches a crisis point at the end of chapter 3, and the city is in turmoil because of it. We're left to ask, how did this happen?

Strange place to draw a line? What is Mordecai doing? First he allows his niece to marry the king and then saves the king but then defies the royal command. We might hypothesise that he's drawing a line, like Daniel with the royal food. What a strange place to draw the line? The things he does towards the king positively seem to be of greater magnitude than simply honouring the Prime Minister.

The situation created by this strange behaviour is appalling. Short-term it's terrible because it means the end of the Jews at the end of the year. A people who have survived going into exile and survived almost to the end of it are now about to die. Furthermore reading this as Christians, salvation is on the line. If there is an end to the Jews during the exile, then the great promise to Abraham of a Seed is finished. No more Jews, no Messiah. No Messiah no salvation for us. Houston, we have a problem. So why not bow?

**Finding the meaning in the genealogies.** As we're introduced to the characters we're given genealogy for three

of them. We'd expect to find some genealogy on the King but none is given, he's almost incidental to the plot. Esther's genealogy merely links her to Mordecai. Of Mordecai and Haman we're given more detail. We find that Mordecai is a Jew, a son of Kish, of Benjamin. Haman is an Agagite. Remembering that this book is part of the Bible we're being given vital information to aid our understanding.

In 1 Samuel 15 Saul was sent to war against Agag the Amalekite King. The Jews were sworn enemies of the Amalekites since they had held them up on their way out of Egypt, in Exodus 17. The LORD had committed that he would blot out the Amalekites, and Saul was charged with playing a part in that. However, Saul spared Agag and instead plundered him. Consequently Saul is deposed as King.

Generations later in exile one of Agag's family is Prime Minister, Haman. And Mordecai is asked to bow to him. What's the problem with that? Saul was a Son of Kish of Benjamin, like Mordecai. In the courts of Susa we have a restaging of the battle between Saul and Agag only with their relatives Mordecai and Haman. Everything about who they are means that Mordecai can't bow. Everything about who they are means Haman has to take his opportunity to defeat the Jews.

As we ponder the inclusion of a strange story in which God is not mentioned within the canon of scripture it becomes

evident that this story is hardwired into the canon. The events recorded gain their significance when read as part of the overall story of God's people.

**In the face of crisis believe God's promises.** The crisis was unavoidable but what will happen? At the end of the first act we're left to ponder whether this will be a comedy or a tragedy. Will the story unfold for the good of God's people or in their end? Clearly for a Christian reading the story and indeed any Jew later reading the book of Esther, the outcome is known. We're here. Christ has come. But we're invited into the story. Everyone knows the outcome of Titanic but that doesn't stop us watching the film and being caught up in the struggle.

Circumstantially this story will be a tragedy. The problems are vast. The story of Vashti tells us that the King has passed an unrepealable law to kill the Jews. That's a situation that simply can't be turned around. He is king of the whole world and so there is no hope of escape. What's more their enemy is Prime Minister, they have no power.

There are some opportunities on a circumstantial level. Firstly there is a secret Jew. Moreover she is Queen and so has access to the King. If nothing else we might expect her to survive since she's in the Palace and no-one knows she is a Jew. Technically she shouldn't die. One survivor isn't much of a fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham of an uncountable number of people, but reflecting on the story as a Christian

we know only one person is required (Jesus). Nonetheless it's not much of hope. There is also the matter of the hero whose name is written in the Kings book documenting the day he saved the king. A line in a scroll somewhere in the king's library is also not much of an opportunity but we've been told these details for a reason.

A better source of hope is found in God's promises. The book sits among the scriptures, and just as the crisis has its origins in the wider story of God's people so too their best hope of salvation rests in God having secured their future in his promises. They will be multiplied. The Messiah will come. God's promises make comedy possible. They're only thing that make it possible. As the city descends into confusion God's people are required and invited to believe the promise of God.

## **Act 2, chapters 4-7.**

Certainty and uncertainty. The second act opens with the people in turmoil; there is fasting and sorrow over the impending destruction of the Jews. We're given the opportunity to listen in on a conversation between our two Jewish heroes. We're told that while Esther is in the Palace her access to the King is not free, and if she were to go uninvited she risks death. This sets up a great moment of suspense.

As Mordecai addresses Esther he speaks with great confidence. What follows is perhaps the best known part of the story of Esther. He is convinced that deliverance will come. How can he be so sure? Only because of God's promise to Abraham. Only because of God's promise to Jeremiah that they would survive the exile. Circumstances offer scant hope, only when the story is rooted among God's promises in the rest of salvation history can there be any confidence.

For all his confidence Mordecai is also a man without confidence. He does not know how they will be delivered. But, he observes that Esther is in a position where she may be able to take some action. He cautions her that if she tries to trust that the secrecy of her nationality will save her then she will perish, and deliverance will still come. Where some might be paralysed by lack of certainty Mordecai is spurred into action. She must take a risk. Best case scenario her risk leads to their deliverance. Worst case she'll die for approaching the King uninvited. But, as Jesus later warns his disciples death is not the worst thing that can happen, that is to fall into the judging hands of God. Likewise, Paul can reflect that dying is gain not loss. And in view of God's sovereign purposes in Romans 8, everything is in fact working for the good of God's people so really the apparent risk is no risk at all. Esther's life is no perfect example to imitate but the actions here show what it looks like to live with confidence in God's promises.

Esther enters the room. We wait with bated breath, will she be carried off to execution or will the King approve her entrance. She lives! Raised from almost certain death on the third day. She unfolds a surprising plan to hold a feast for the King and Haman. Haman is delighted by news of this but unable to stay happy while Mordecai lives. His wife, Zeresh, and friends advise him to expedite his plans and make gallows on which to hang the rebellious Jew. With the plan set in motion he marches down to the Palace for royal approval.

Suddenly, and the centre point of the book everything turns around. The King is unable to sleep and requests the reading of his chronicles to help him sleep. The reader opens the scroll at the story of Mordecai saving the King. The King discovers Mordecai unhonoured for this and seeks advice on how best to honour a hero.

At exactly the wrong moment Haman walks in. Puffed up with his plan to hang Mordecai he misreads the King's meaning and assumes that the honour is designed for him. He plots a lavish reward before having to execute it in favour of Mordecai, whom he must grudgingly march through the city. Furthermore at the second feast his plots are exposed by Esther and as the King returns to pass judgement he happens to fall upon Esther with the appearance of sexual assault. And so he is carried away for punishment.

It's worth taking a brief aside on Zeresh. Along with Haman's friends she is supremely confident of Haman's victory before the reversal begins; she spurs him on to hang Mordecai. As soon as circumstances begin to turn, her confidence changes, her advice changes. This time she is confident that because Mordecai is a Jew then defeat is assured. The nationality of Mordecai is no new information, the whole crisis exploded because of it. But now, as circumstances betray the Amalekites she collapses in what must be fear of the LORD. They cannot win.

Thus, where Act 2 began with chaos and crisis it ends with Haman hung on his own gallows. In Jewish terms, cursed as a man hanging on a tree. Appropriately for a man who curses the people of God, he is cursed just as God had said to. One day another man will hang on a tree for their deliverance, not an enemy but a friend. And his tree will bring complete rescue. Here, however, the crisis is not averted. An unrepealable law still stands against the people of God.

### **Act 3, chapters 8-10.**

In Act 3 our heroes must deal with the remaining problem of the law against them. It cannot be repealed so their only hope is to pass a law permitting a response. They pass a law that mirrors the law of Haman word for word. The Jews secure the right to defend themselves against anyone who will attack them under the terms of Haman's law. In theory

that should deter people from attacking them, but at the very least it gives them so hope of survival.

The horsemen of Ahaseurus are sent out with the word of salvation for the Jews, urged on by the king's command. The good news spreads with all the authority of the king. As the Jews begin to see the tide turning a shocking turn of events happens. They were expecting the number of Jews to reduce to zero but now people begin to declare themselves Jews. The number of Jews is increasing. This echoes events such as the salvation of Rahab who reported fear of the LORD among the Canaanites and chose to become a Jew. Far from the late Amalekite reducing the number of Jews there are now more of them!

At the end of the year the laws come into effect. They're able to complete Saul's unfinished business. They kill their enemies, including the hanging of Haman's sons – blotting out his family under God's curse. But, we're told three times they don't do one of the things they were permitted to do. They don't take the plunder. They do all that Saul didn't do. The Amalekites are vanquished and the plunder isn't kept. The story is further rooted into salvation history.

There is widespread celebration among the Jews over their victory. They institute a celebration called Pur. This seems like a strange thing to commemorate. They celebrate with the symbol of Haman's confidence against them. This is

something of a satirical celebration, mocking the worldview of their enemy. A more obvious symbol would have been the gallows on which Haman hung or even the crowns with which they were honoured. This is something like Christians celebrating the cross, the symbol by which it was assumed Jesus was defeated, when it may have seemed better to celebrate with an empty tomb or a throne.

As the story concludes the Jews remain in exile but they enjoy peace and favour, a remarkable reversal has occurred for the people of God. The crisis has been averted and they're received abundant blessing on top of that. The future of God's people seems secure. The prospect of Messiah coming is no longer under threat. A great reversal and deliverance has happened, just in time for them to celebrate Passover (one month after Purim) and remember God's past deliverance of them.

For the Christians we read Esther with thanksgiving that God delivered his people. We read it and rejoice that because of these events the Messiah came for our deliverance. We read it and rejoice that God's promises are kept and this story shows us that. We read it and learn what it looks like to live in a world where circumstances often stand contrary to what we'd expect to see in light of God's promises. We read it and strengthen our confidence in God's word as a consistent complete word in which the promises of God are revealed, promises kept in Jesus.

**No explicit mention of God?** One of the most notable points of this dynamic story is that unlike all other Christian stories, letters and books it makes no mention of the LORD God. He is notably absent, though we've observed his fingerprints in every step of the story. Similarly non-Scriptural literature doesn't have to name God on every page to explore Christian themes.

“Luther was famously hostile to the book of Esther. Luther was also famously enamored of the idea of *the Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. These positions are inconsistent: No book of the Bible better narrates the power and providence of the hidden God than Esther, which refrains even from naming Him.”

*Peter Leithart.*

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/001672.php>

*They're in exile so are distant from God.* This may be a good reason for there being no explicit mention of God in their deliverance. However, God is very much seen in the book of Daniel which also happens during the exile.

*Suspense is lost when the obvious is stated.* This seems more plausible to me, if Mordecai explicitly states the reasons for his confidence about their deliverance then much of the suspense in the story is removed. Where the people are

required to believe against circumstances they'd require less faith in what's obvious.

*Mockery of the circumstantial confidence of Haman as the reversal happens.* This is all the more plausible. Haman's confidence is in circumstances and chance. This seems to be working for him until the tipping point in the king's sleepless night. By remaining quiet about God's work we're able to see the most unlikely circumstances defeat him, knowing that the entire story sits firmly rooted in the wider story of God's people, his promises of their prosperity and his promise to give them victory over the Amalekites.

For those who have ears to hear the story of Esther is a thoroughly Christian story, though we might easily miss its meaning.

## Three Bible Studies on The Book of Esther

### Esther 1-3

**Theme :** *God's people under fire*

**Transform :** *Believe God's promise to preserve his people*

- Trace out the key events from Xerxes' perspective. If this was the book of Xerxes what would the story be? What would be the point?
- What details do we learn about the other characters –who they are / what they do etc?
  - *Esther (2v7-20)*
  - *Mordecai (2v5-7,10&20, 3v2-4)*
  - *Haman (3v1-10)*
- Why doesn't Mordecai bow to Haman?
- What is the history between Jews/Kish vs. Amalek/Agag?
  - *Exodus 17v8-16?*
  - *1 Samuel 15v1-3, 9, 10, 15, 17-21?*
- Check Saul's genealogy in 1 Samuel 10v21. How does this explain Mordecai's actions?
- What will happen because he doesn't bow? How could this have been avoided?
- How do we react to the impending destruction of God's people? How does this clash with God's promises?
- What do these events require us to believe in those promises?
- Is there any hope for the Jews?
  - From Esther?
  - From Mordecai?
  - From God's promises?
- What do these events require us to believe about God's providence & promises?
- In what ways might we be prone to doubt God's promises – what would be the easy ways out of these situations?

## Esther 4-7

**Theme :** *Promises are certain, circumstances are not*

**Transform :** *Belief the promises and so risk your life for the sovereign God.*

### **Confidence in Promises & Godly Risk taking (4v12-17)**

- *Read Chapter 4. Consider the conversation between Mordecai and Esther:*
- What is Mordecai certain of? What is not certain? How does the certainty about God's promises allow him to suggest they risk?
- How can Esther put herself at risk?
- How could God's promises to us in Jesus set us free us to take risks?

### **Proud opponent of God cannot stand (ch5-7)**

- *Read Chapters 5-7.*
- What are the key factors in Haman's fall from such height (3v1) to his death in 7v10?
- Where does his boasting come from? Was Haman simply unlucky?
- What part do God's promises play in his fall? What part Esther's "risks"? How was Haman defeated by God's promises?
- What is Zeresh driven by? 5v10, where does her confidence go? Why is she so emphatic in 6v13? How do God's promises drive her?
- How does the fall of Haman give us confidence in God's promises in Jesus?

## Resources

- **Five Festal Garments:** Barry Webb (IVP, 2001)
- **Giving the Sense:** Michael Grisanti and David Howard (IVP, 2004)
- **Daylight at Midnight:** Jane McNabb (Authentic, 2008)
- **Esther TOTC:** Debra Reid (IVP, 2008)

## Esther 8-10

**Theme :** *Complete rescue – by promises not luck*

**Transform :** *Believe God's promises – he brings rest for his people.*

### **8v1-19 The Great Reversal**

#### **8v1-14,**

- What requests do Esther and Mordecai make? How does this complete their victory over the Enemy of the Jews? (*see 3v13 and 8v11*)

#### **8v15-17**

- What's the mood among the Jews? (*Contrast with 4v1-3*) What is the effect of these things upon those who aren't Jews? (17) (*Compare Joshua 2v8-12*) How many Jews are there now – compared with what Haman was aiming for?

#### **9v1-19**

- What do the Jews do? How are they able to do this? What don't they do? (v10+15, 16 and compare 1 Samuel 15v19) How does this complete the task Saul left unfinished?

#### **9v20-32 Purim**

- Why do they institute a festival? (v22) Why call it Purim? (*v23-26. 3v7 – why focus on Haman's superstition?*)

#### **10v1-3 Shalom?**

- What has happened to Mordecai the Jew? What is the result for his people? How does this complete the movement from 3v13? How would this great reversal help them to believe God's promises, even in the days of exile? How does the story of Esther help us to have greater confidence in God's promises in the gospel?