

4 studies on Esther

"If any producer ever made a decent movie out of the Book of Esther I have the feeling that the movie would be a roaring success. It has all the elements ranging from terror to comedy, from debauchery to heroic self-sacrifice all mixed together with the most extraordinary series of "coincidences" and narrow escapes so as to keep any audience on the edge of their seats." From "Christ in the Old Testament (15) Esther" by David Jackson from Reformation in Australia May/June/July 1986 No. 52.

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Notes

1. In preparing these studies I've used the following sources: Five Festal Garments by Barry G. Webb, "Christ in the Old Testament (15) Esther" by David Jackson from Reformation in Australia May/June/July 1986 No. 52, The Message of Nehemiah by Raymond Brown and the Lion Handbook to the Bible Second Revised Edition. Throughout the studies I've added paragraphs from these books to help people better understand the Biblical text.
2. Some groups may find the studies too long for the time allocated. My suggestion is for individuals to do the whole study before you meet but if the group runs out of time then skip to the "To finish" questions for the last few minutes. Or if the group gets involved in a particularly interesting and relevant point then run with it rather than feel obliged to complete all the remaining questions.
3. In quoting the Bible I've used the New International Version in this booklet.
4. Thank you, Ross Cusworth, for proof reading and helpful suggestions.
5. I'm always trying to improve Bible studies so your comments, good or bad, and ideas about future studies may help produce better studies. Please write down any thoughts you have and send them to me at edwardeoconor@hotmail.com or ring me on 9971 4897.

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Study 1, Esther chs 1 & 2

Getting started

1. What has happened to you lately that was particularly lucky or particularly unlucky?

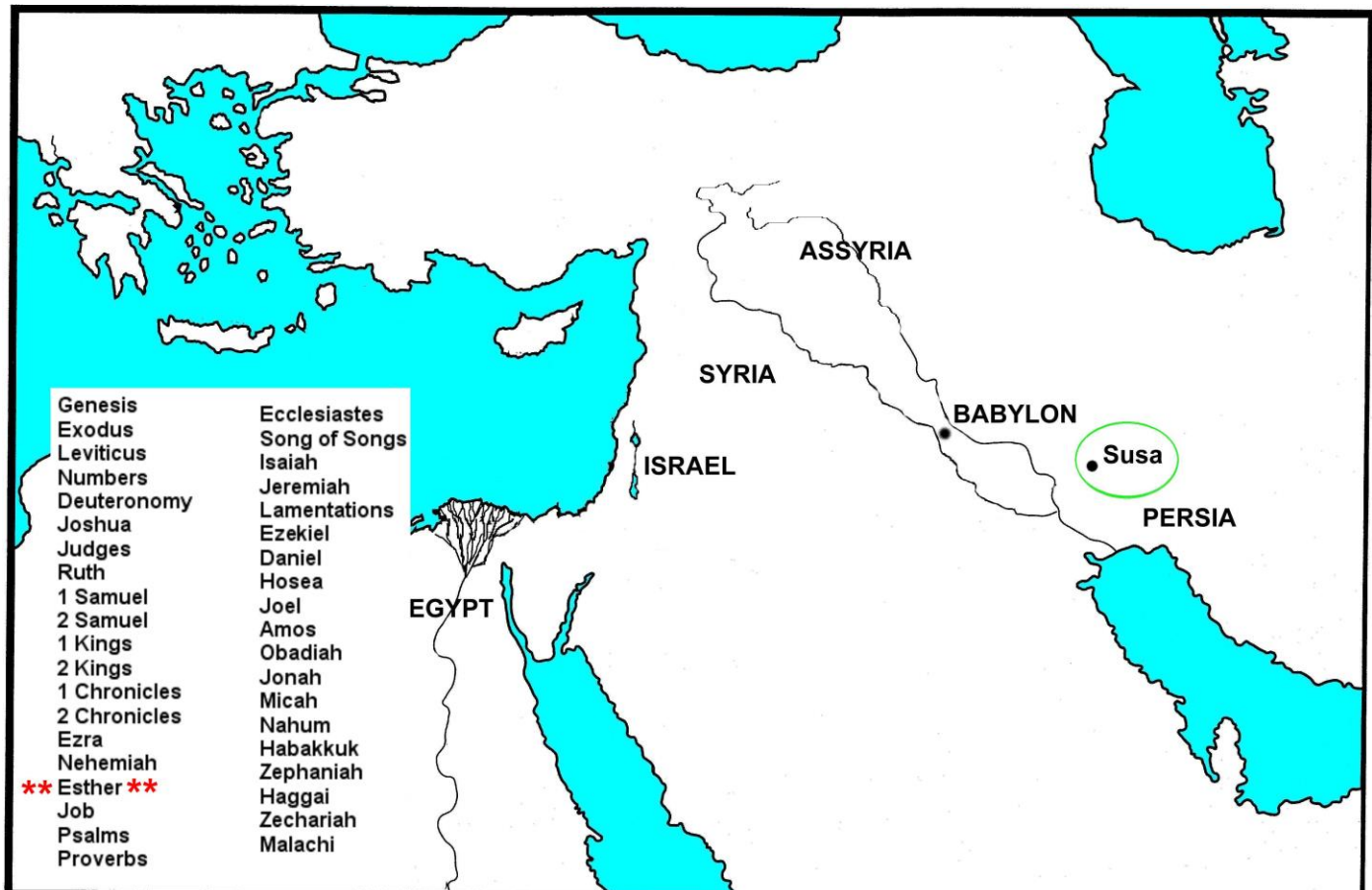
Introduction to Esther

"When Babylon's soldiers marched out of Jerusalem in 586 BC, they left a desolate city behind them. Its magnificent temple, built by Solomon four hundred years earlier, was reduced to heaps of fallen masonry and charred timber. The city's gates and all its important buildings were enveloped in flames, and its strong walls demolished to ensure that the impoverished citizens could not organize another revolt such as the one recently attempted by the hapless Zedekiah. Only the poorest of Jerusalem's people were left behind, the rest led off as captives to distant Babylon." From The Message of Nehemiah by Raymond Brown p 13.

"Yet the empire of the Chaldean [Babylonian] kings was not to last. As Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel foresaw, the hill-men of the east and north would overcome it. . . . Media was clearly a rival to Babylon when, in 550 BC, her vassal, Cyrus the Persian, seized the throne. In Babylon, Belshazzar governed while his father Nabonidus lived in northern Arabia. The king returned only to see his realm fall to Cyrus in 539 BC. The new king's policies were generally peaceable, and he liberally allowed Jews to return and restore Jerusalem's temple as he restored many other shrines." From Handbook to the Bible article by Alan Millard p 413.

"Ezra and Nehemiah describe the three-stage return: the main party, who returned with Zerubbabel in 538/7; the party that returned with Ezra 80 years later, in 458 . . . ; and Nehemiah's party in 445. Esther's story belongs to the time between the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem and Ezra's return (Ezra 7:1)." From Handbook to the Bible p 306.

"At the time of Esther (483 BC) Jews are spread thinly all over the Persian empire from India to Ethiopia to Turkey. Some have gone back to the land of Israel, but by all reports the place is a mess, the land has reverted to uncleared scrub and it is a pioneer's calling to rebuild the promised land. So not too many want to leave the comforts of the Persian empire for such a calling. Besides, the Persian king hasn't treated the Jews badly. They are free and they are prospering." (Jackson).



“The central figure of the story is a Jewish woman who is, contrary to God’s law, married to a Gentile king. It concerns a community of God’s people who, when given the opportunity to go back to Israel after the exile, choose rather to stay and grow wealthy in Persia. If that is not enough, the author explains in chapter 9 that all this was written to explain the origins of the Jewish “Feast of the Dice” (Purim).

For some people, all this is too much and they have argued that Esther should be thrown out of the Bible – among them, Martin Luther. Other more charitable souls have found the story, and especially the coincidences and narrow escapes altogether too much, and have chosen to believe that Esther is a piece of ancient Jewish fiction, like our modern day Indiana Jones or James Bond!

The author, fortunately, pins his story down so precisely to names, dates and places that there can be no doubt that this is no work of fiction.” (Jackson).

Bible

Read Esther ch 1.

2. What is the historical setting?
3. Who are the main characters in this chapter and what are they like?
4. What is the humour and/or irony in this chapter?

Read Esther 2:1-18

5. What do we find out about (a) Mordecai?

(b) Esther?

(c) who Mordecai is related to? (see Esther 2:5, 1 Sam 9:1-2, 2 Sam 16:5-14)
6. 2:10: Why would Mordecai want to keep the family background a secret?

7. Do any of these events seem less than proper for a good Jew?

Read Esther 2:19-23

8. Have you noticed any coincidences in the story so far? What were they?

To finish

9. As we work through the book of Esther we are going to find a lot more coincidences.
(a) Do coincidences make the book less believable?

(b) How do coincidences or luck square with God's sovereign rule?

"The absence [of any explicit reference to God] is certainly one of the most striking features of the book. What clearly *is* present, however, is a whole series of remarkable coincidences which tip the balance of events in favour of the Jews at critical moments . . . Either the Jews have extraordinarily good luck, or unseen powers are at work, giving events a particular shape and direction. The author never makes an explicit comment on this, one way or the other. However, the way the characters in the story behave, and the speeches they make at crucial points, clearly indicate *their* belief that something more than chance or purely natural causation is at work." (Webb p 121).

Study 2, Esther chs 3 - 5

Getting started

1. Describe an event in your life that involved an element of suspense? Did you enjoy the experience?

Bible

Read Esther ch 3.

2. What do we learn about (a) Haman?

(b) King Xerxes?

(c) Mordecai?

"The plot is laid. Haman, arch-enemy of the Jews, plots their extermination. He rolls the dice to set the date for the mass genocide of the Jews. And it just so happened that the time when Haman rolls the dice is the month of the Jewish feast of Passover. He rolls a twelve, giving the Jews an eleven month stay of execution." (Jackson).

3. Do the personalities of Haman and Xerxes remind you of anybody in the New Testament? Who?
4. Was Mordecai right or wrong for not honouring Haman? Why?

"Now we know that since the days of Moses, the Agagites have been the arch-enemies of the Jews. Agag was the king of the Amalekites who attacked Israel as they escaped from Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16) [see also Num 24:7 "Agag may have been a common name among the Amalekite kings" from The Message of Numbers by Raymond Brown p 221]. At that time 'the Lord said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven . . . The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation"'. "

Later when Saul was at war with the Amalekites he forgot Moses' words and spared Agag, king of the Amalekites. When Samuel saw it he rebuked Saul and announced to him that for such disobedience Saul was rejected by God as king. Samuel then took a sword and "cut Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal" (1 Sam 15)." (Jackson).

And from your answer to 5 (c) in Study 1 we see that Mordecai is a direct descendant of Saul's father, Kish, the Benjaminite, and Haman is an Agagite. "This ancient enmity stands ready to explode here in the Persian capital. All that is needed is a spark." (Jackson).

3:7 "The casting of the *pur* (the lot) by Haman and his friends at court at the beginning of the main action (3:7) implies a belief on their part that times such as particular days and months are not neutral. They have a tendency or bias towards certain outcomes, and it is not wise to make plans without consulting whatever powers give the times this special character. The lot is apparently a device for doing this. . . Hallo (1983) describes a cube-shaped die in the Yale collection from ninth-century BC Assyria, with an inscription which twice uses the term *puru*, 'lot'. It illustrates how widespread was belief in predetermined fate. The die was used to determine the best time for all important events in the coming year." (Webb p 121).

Read Esther ch 4.

5. Is Esther brave or is it a case of not having any other choice? Give a reason for your answer.

6. What indication is there that Mordecai has faith in God?

7. What indication is there that Esther has faith in God?

“The three-day fast called by Mordecai at Esther’s request in 4:15-16 . . . is ‘called’ by Esther and Mordecai, and therefore takes on the character of a ritual act. Furthermore, it is specifically ‘for’ Esther (4:15), who is about to take her life in her hands by approaching the king unbidden; it has an intercessory aspect to it. The Jews apparently do not believe that particular events have a fixed character; but neither do they think that the way they turn out is entirely due to natural causes. The fasting here implies belief in a higher power who may be induced to intervene in a favourable way. The fast in question appears to be a religious act which it is hoped will induce him to do so on this particular occasion. But the outcome is not guaranteed by the act. There is no mechanical connection between ritual and result. The power who is appealed to remains free and sovereign.” (Webb pp 121 – 122.)

Read Esther ch 5.

8. What things make Haman so pleased?

9. What is Haman not so pleased about?

10. What elements of suspense have been built up in this chapter?

11. What other elements of suspense can you think of in the Bible?

To finish

12. How does your faith in God help you through suspenseful moments like the one you described in Q 1?

Study 3, Esther chs 6 and 7**Getting started**

1. What are the different types of humour/comedy?
2. How big a part does humour play in your life?

Bible

3. Quickly scan the first 5 chapters of Esther. What has happened so far?

Read Esther 6:1-9

4. What does Haman think is going to happen?

Read Esther 6:10-14

5. What happens?

6. What is ironical about this turn of events?

7. What are the co-incidences in this chapter?

8. How do these co-incidences support Queen Esther's plan (and God's purposes)?

6:13 “There is no reference to any agent, human or divine; simply to an apparent law of history: ‘If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you cannot stand against him – you will surely come to ruin’ (my translation). It is the most absolute statement in the whole book that history as a whole has a pro-Jewish shape to it, and it is surely ironic that it comes, not from the Jews themselves, but from their enemies. It is the equivalent of the ‘great fear’ that falls on Israel’s enemies in the conquest traditions [e.g. Josh 2:8-9], something we shall see emerging again even more strongly as the book draws to a close (8:17).” (Webb p 123).

We left Esther in ch 5 organising a banquet for King Xerxes and Haman before she makes her request of the king. Read Esther ch 7.

9. What is Esther’s request?

10. How does it all go wrong for Haman?

11. Did you expect to find “black” humour in the Bible? Why/why not?

To finish

12. When is it good to apply humour to a situation?

13. When is it bad to apply humour to a situation?

14. Is the humour in Esther ch 7 good or bad? Why/why not?

Study 4, Esther chs 8 - 10

Getting started

1. Describe a time in your life when you were in trouble but you got let off?

Bible

Read Esther ch 8.

2. How do things get even worse for Haman?

3. Why were the Jews so happy?

4. Do you feel sorry for Haman? Why/why not?

“There may be incidental, salutary lessons that we can learn by identifying with Haman [e.g. the self-destructive character of pride, lust for power, and racism], but essentially what the story invites us to do is not to identify with him, but to rejoice at his downfall. Haman is not us, but our enemy. He embodies, in a most striking way, that inveterate hatred that the world has always had, and always will have, for God’s people (John 17:14). And his downfall is not our achievement, but God’s – a gift to be marvelled at and rejoiced in. As part of its total message, the Bible’s laughter is an anticipation of the eschaton [when Jesus comes back]; a reminder of the fact that, in a world where God remains sovereign, it is not the proud and cruel who will have the last laugh, but God and his people (Rev 18:20).” (Webb p 132).

Read Esther ch 9.

5. Why did the Jews still have to fight (see Esther 8:8)?

6. Why was Purim so important?

“On the night of Purim a remarkable synagogue service takes place. The children raid their dress-up boxes and arm themselves with noise-makers for the occasion. During the service the whole text of Esther is read and everytime the name of Haman is read the congregation erupts with boos and noise-makers so as to fulfill Moses’ prophecy to ‘blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven’.” (Jackson).

Read Esther ch 10.

7. How does it all end?

8. (a) What is ironical about the place and position of the Jews in King Xerxes huge kingdom at the end of Esther compared to the early chapters?

(b) What does this tell us about how God can achieve his purposes today?

9. Looking back over the whole book what would you say is the purpose of Esther?

"[T]he hiddenness of God that we find in Esther mirrors the world many of us live in today, particularly in the West. Events seem to take their normal course, and miracles are few and far between, if they occur at all. But if we have read Esther correctly, it testifies in a striking way to the fact that the absence of the miraculous does not mean the absence of God. He remains committed to the welfare of his people, and works all things for their good, even when is most hidden. This message about the special providence of God is one that is reiterated in the New Testament and one that God's people still – and perhaps especially – need to hear today (Rom 8:28)." (Webb p 131).

10. How does the deliverance of the Jews in the book of Esther remind us about Jesus?

To finish

11. How does Jesus get us out of trouble?