

Esther

What's in a Name?	Esther's name is a great one and has particular relevance to the nature of the book in the OT that bears her name. In Hebrew, Esther means "to hide and/or to conceal." In the book, Esther's identity is concealed until it's fundamentally necessary to have it revealed.
Perhaps the Latest	The Book of Esther is, in my view, belongs with Malachi in terms of when it was written. Both of these books are the latest canonical OT books that date to the late Persian/Diaspora Period for the people of God (400 B.C.). In this period, the Persians were in charge and gave permission for Jews to return to their homeland by decree of Cyrus (539 BC). Not all Jews returned, however because they flourished in their diasporic existence within Persia. Esther is such an example.
Two Very Unique Features of the Book	Esther, with Ruth, are the only books of the Bible to be named after women. Esther however, unlike Ruth, contains not one single, solitary reference to God. That doesn't mean God is absent. His presence guides much of the story, much like a coordinator of circumstances to bring the crisis a sovereign solution and to make his name known as the God who saves. In Esther's case, literally.
A Masterpiece of Literature	The Book of Esther is also a literary masterpiece. The writer uses 10 feasts to build and resolve suspense. In the ancient world, "listening to the Word" was more common than "reading the Word." Early listeners to the story of Esther would have recognized the events and followed the rising tension in the book. Consequently, it's no coincidence that the Book of Esther is read during the Festival of Purim.
With the Worst Antagonist in the OT	Do a search of the Bible and you'll see plenty of antagonists who were truly evil and despicable people. The worst of the worst in the NT is Judas Iscariot, deemed as the "son of perdition." In the OT, the worst is Haman. He's King Xerxes 2 nd in command and, seeing the Jews as a threat, plans to exterminate them. He follows through on his plan by casting a lot called a "pur" (thus, Purim) in order to determine the day the Jews would be exterminated. What people don't usually pick up on Haman comes from outside the Book of Esther. Haman was a descendant of Agag, the King of the Amalekites, who were ancient enemies of God's people. Old vendettas never die. Haman was a walking example of that.
Big Idea	Things seemed out of control for Esther and Mordecai. Haman orchestrated ruin for God's people. Xerxes rubber stamped it. Evil was poised to triumph. But God was at work. Consequently, God and His people triumph over the worst kind of evil imaginable. God is sovereign not only when things look bleak. But also, when life doesn't make sense.
Key Verse	<i>For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? (3:14)</i>
Movement	The best way to see the tension and resolution laid out in the Book of Esther is to view it within the context of the festivals in which it is framed. When we do this, the end goal of the book really shines and stands out.

Festivals One and Two (Concern Xerxes)

1. The King's Banquet to Begin the 180 Day Display of His Wealth and Power (1:3-4)

³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. ⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

**180 days is longer than the interval between the Passover and Feast of Tabernacles. The contrast is staggering. Xerxes worships himself. Our Passover Lamb, however, is gentle and humble in heart.

2. The King's Seven Day Banquet at the End of the 180 Day Display of Wealth and Power (1:5-7)

⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶ The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. ⁷ Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.

**Again, the emphasis is on the glory and honor that is demanded by Xerxes. Notice, the least to the greatest who were gathered. Jesus' Kingdom works in the exact opposite way: the least shall be the greatest.

Festivals Three and Four (Concern Two Queens)

3. Queen Vashti's Banquet for the Women – Tension is Now Introduced (1:9-12; 19)

⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. . . ¹⁰ On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him. . . ¹¹ to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. ¹² But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. ¹⁹ "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.

**Xerxes strips away Vashti's royalty because he's temperamental. Jesus bestows it because He is humble and righteous.

4. The Banquet Given in Honor of Esther Being Made Queen (2:10-11; 17-18)

¹⁰ Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. ¹¹ Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. . . ¹⁷ Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

**Now Providence is inserted, unknown to the audience, to Esther, and to Mordecai. But certainly, known to God.

Festival Five – The Main Tension is Now Introduced

5. The Private Banquet Between Haman and the King at the Signing of the Decree to Kill All of the Jews (3:1, 15)

Reason One for the Extermination Plans: Mordecai uncovers a conspiracy to assassinate Xerxes that two of the king's officers (who answered to Haman) put into place. They perished but Haman would have been furious

Reason Two for the Extermination Plans: Mordecai refuses to bow and pay homage to the great Haman.

Within the Context of a Festival: *After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. . . ¹⁵ The couriers went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.*

**The King and Haman order mass extermination and sit down to celebrate. Jesus willingly was exterminated so that we can celebrate.

Festivals 6 and 7 – Now the Solution Through This Hidden Person Named "Esther"

6. The First Banquet Esther Gave for the King and Haman (6:4-8)

The Reason For Throwing the Banquet: Mordecai Pleads for Help: ¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (4:12-14)

God's People Fast: ¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (4:15-16)

While Xerxes and Haman Feast Once Again, But This Time With a Catch: ⁴ "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." ⁵ "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. ⁶ As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." ⁷ Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: ⁸ If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." (6:4-8)

**This seems to be a pattern in the Bible when God judges (The writing on the wall in Daniel, etc.

7. The Second Banquet Esther Throws for Xerxes and Haman, Where Haman Is Exposed (7:1-4)

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, ² and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." ³ Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. ⁴ For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.^[a]"

Festivals 8, 9, and 10 – The Hand of Providence

8. A Festival is Appointed for Mordecai, Who Becomes the 2nd Person in Command in the Kingdom of Persia (8:15-17)

¹⁵ When Mordecai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. ¹⁶ For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. ¹⁷ In every

province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

****Mordecai, a type of Christ, becomes the 2nd in command. Jesus is the 2nd person of the Trinity.**

9. The Banquet Celebrating Jewish Victory in the Provinces (9:18)

¹⁸ The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

****Similarly, the church worships in light of the finished work of deliverance.**

10. The Festival of Purim Established (9:29-32)

²⁹ So Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter concerning Purim. ³⁰ And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of Xerxes' kingdom—words of goodwill and assurance—³¹ to establish these days of Purim at their designated times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed for them, and as they had established for themselves and their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation. ³² Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records.

****Esther begins with a festival about the glory of Xerxes. It ends with returning the “festival” to where it rightly belongs: to commemorate deliverance by the hand of providence and through the courage of Esther. So much for the idea of God not being present in Esther, huh?**