

**Purim 2005**  
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**Overview**

See handout for chronological setting. The book describes the Jews in Persia between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, the first return under Zerubbabel and the second under Ezra.

Esther is the only book in the OT that never mentions God. Yet it is structured in such a way as to emphasize that the affairs of men are governed, not by their own cleverness or prowess, but by divine providence. The handout shows the chiasitic structure of the book. The central element, where the efforts of the Jews' enemies begin to unravel, is dominated by "coincidences" beyond the power of the Jews to control.

The book is dominated by the theme of feasting, which is appropriate for a work that gives the reason for a feast of Israel.

Consider the nine sections in sequence. The Jewish custom is to read the entire book publicly every year. It's only 167 verses, and we could read it through here in 45 minutes or so, but that would leave no time for comment. I will read most of it, interspersing comments.

**1:1-2:18, Esther Elevated in a Festive Kingdom**

The story opens with a great feast held by the king. In fact, it is a double feast, first for the princes, then for all the people: **1:1, 3, 5, 9.**

1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this *is* Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, *over* an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:)

3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, *being* before him:

The mention of Vashti's feast leads to the account of how she dishonored the king and was removed: **1:12-13, 15, 19, 21-22**

12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by *his* chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him. 13 Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so *was* the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment:

15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;

9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women *in* the royal house which *belonged* to king Ahasuerus.

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan: 22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province accord-

ing to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that *it* should

be published according to the language of every people.

Notice the reference to the “letters.” Persia was known for its advanced postal system, with horse relays to enable the rapid movement of information from one place to another. See Herodotus 8:98, written about 480-420 BC, for a description of it.

After the king removed Vashti, he sought a replacement, and found Esther, celebrating her promotion with a feast: **2:2, 4-8, 16-18**.

2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:

4 And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so. 5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name *was* Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; 6 Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that *is*, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid *was* fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter. 8 So it came to pass, when the king's

commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.

16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which *is* the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, *even* Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

Note Mordecai's Benjamite ancestry, 2:5. We don't know whether the Kish and Shimei here are the same individuals from Samuel (1 Sam 9:1; 2 Sam 16:5), but they certainly remind us of Mordecai's links to Saul, and that will be important.

## 2:19-23, Traitors Unveiled and Hanged

Mordecai discovers two traitors. Esther reveals them to the king, and they are hanged: **2:21-23**.

21 In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 22 And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told *it* unto Esther

the queen; and Esther certified the king *thereof* in Mordecai's name. 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

## 3:1-15, Haman's Decree of Death

We learn first of the elevation of Haman the Agagite: **3:1-2**.

1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that *were* with him. 2 And all the king's servants, that *were* in the

king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did *him* reverence.

“Agagite” is obscure, but since Mordecai’s relation to Saul was emphasized, it is likely that we are meant to associate Haman with Agag the king of the Amelekites from 1 Sam 15:8. Saul lost in the combat with Agag. How will Mordecai fare in the context with Haman?

Haman persuades the king to issue a decree to destroy the Jews: **3:5-11, 13.**

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that *were* throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, *even* the people of Mordecai. 7 In the first month, that *is*, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that *is*, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, *to* the twelfth *month*, that *is*, the month Adar. 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws *are* diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it *is* not for

the king's profit to suffer them. 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring *it* into the king's treasuries. 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver *is* given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

13 And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, *even* upon the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and *to take* the spoil of them for a prey.

This action ends in yet another feast, and perplexity for the city of Shushan, **3:15.**

15 The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and

Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.

So now the battle is joined—a relative of King Saul against a relative of King Agag. Haman has made the first move, with his decree. Who will win?

### 4-5, Prophecy, Banquet, and Gallows

When Mordecai learns of the decree, he urges Esther to intervene with the king. She protests: **4:11-16.**

11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the

king into the inner court, who is not called, *there is* one law of his to put *him* to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the

golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. 12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, *then* shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's

house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this? 15 Then Esther bade *them* return Mordecai *this answer*, 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which *is* not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

This is Mordecai's countermove to Haman's move. Will it succeed?

Esther faces two challenges:

1. fear of the king's wrath for entering unbidden (after all, Vashti was deposed for a similar offense, *not* coming when she was summoned)
2. risk of becoming known as a Jew and included in the slaughter.

She overcomes the first fear, **5:1-2**.

1 Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on *her* royal *apparel*, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house. 2 And it was so,

when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, *that* she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that *was* in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.

Her delay in making the matter known suggests that she is wrestling with the second. **5:3-8**. Things don't look good for the Jews.

3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what *is* thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom. 4 And Esther answered, If *it seem* good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him. 5 Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What *is* thy peti-

tion? and it shall be granted thee: and what *is* thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed. 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request *is*; 8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.

Haman is delighted to be honored by the queen, but Mordecai's disrespect rankles him, and his wife urges him to prepare a gallows to hang Mordecai, **5:12-14**.

12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but my-

self; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king. 13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting

at the king's gate. 14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be

hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

### 6:1-12, God Intervenes

In the end, the decisive move in the game is by neither Haman nor Mordecai, but by God. **6:1-10.**

1 On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him. 4 And the king said, Who *is* in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in. 6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth

to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself? 7 And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour, 8 Let the royal apparel be brought which the king *useth* to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: 9 And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man *withal* whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour. 10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, *and* take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.

Dorsey: "The turning point of the story does not involve the brave actions of either Mordecai or Esther (although we have every reason to expect this). ... The king just *happened* to be sleepless that night; he *happened* to ask for the royal records to be read; the section read *happened* to be about Mordecai's good deed; Haman *happened* to be in the palace the nextday; Haman *happened* to misread the king's intention; etc." Here is the hand of God working behind the scenes to preserve his people.

### 6:13-7:10, Prophecy, Banquet, and Gallows

Just as Mordecai had prophesied the Jews' deliverance before Esther's first banquet, Haman's wife prophesies Haman's fall before the second, **6:13.**

13 And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every *thing* that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai *be* of the seed of the Jews,

before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.

At the banquet, perhaps encouraged by Mordecai's recent honor, she finally finds the courage to tell the king what the matter is. Haman is unveiled, **7:2-6**.

2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What *is* thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what *is* thy request? and it shall be performed, *even* to the half of the kingdom. 3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: 4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be de-

stroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage. 5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so? 6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy *is* this wicked Haman.

Haman is hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai, **7:10**.

10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

### 8:1-17, Esther's Decree of Defense

Just as the decree of death in ch. 3 began with Haman's elevation, so this section begins with Mordecai's elevation, **8:1-2**.

1 On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen. And Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he *was* unto her.

2 And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

The decrees of Persian kings can't be revoked, so Esther does the next best thing, and persuades the king to issue a decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves, **8:3-6, 11, 14**.

3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king, 5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing *seem* right before the king, and I *be* pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which *are* in all the king's provinces: 6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or

how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?

11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which *were* in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, *both* little ones and women, and *to take* the spoil of them for a prey,

14 *So* the posts that rode upon mules *and* camels went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment. And the decree was given at Shushan the palace.

Corresponding to the perplexity of Shushan and Haman’s feast at the end of ch. 3, now Shushan is happy and the Jews feast, **8:15-17**.

15 And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16 The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and

honour. 17 And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.

### 9:1-18, Traitors Unveiled and Hanged

Most of this section describes how the Jews defended themselves, but the culmination is how Esther requests that the bodies of Haman’s sons be hanged, which the king authorizes: **9:1-5, 10-14**

1 Now in the twelfth month, that *is*, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them;) 2 The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people. 3 And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them. 4 For Mordecai *was* great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater. 5 Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them.

10 The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew they; but on the spoil laid they not their hand. 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king. 12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? now what *is* thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what *is* thy request further? and it shall be done. 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews which *are* in Shushan to do to morrow also according unto this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and the decree was given at Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons.

### 9:19-10:3, Mordecai Elevated in a Festive Kingdom

The book ends as it began, with nation-wide feasting and the elevation of a new government official.

The feast is again multiple in nature, starting with the original celebration (**19**), but perpetuated by a letter sent from Mordecai and Esther (**20-22**).

19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the four-

teenth day of the month Adar *a day of* gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of send-

ing portions one to another. 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that *were* in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, *both* nigh and far, 21 To stablish *this* among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, 22 As the days

wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

Just as Esther was elevated to be queen, so Mordecai is elevated to be next unto the king: **10:3**.

3 For Mordecai the Jew *was* next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking

the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.