

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Esther: When 'No' is Holy and 'Yes' is Survival

I. Overview - The book of Esther is a **Reversal of Fortune**:

Reversal	References
Vashti is exiled; Esther becomes queen	Esther 1:19; 2:17
Esther goes from vulnerable orphan to queen with influence	Esther 2:7, 17; 5:1–2
Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty is remembered and honored	Esther 2:21–23; 6:1–3, 10–11
Haman rises to power but is publicly humiliated	Esther 3:1–2; 6:6–11
Haman plans Mordecai's death but must honor him instead	Esther 5:14; 6:10–11
The gallows built for Mordecai become Haman's execution site	Esther 5:14; 7:9–10
Haman's downfall leads to Mordecai's promotion	Esther 8:1–2; 10:3
The decree against the Jews is countered by a decree for their defense	Esther 3:12–15; 8:8–14
The Jews move from threatened annihilation to victory over their enemies	Esther 9:1–5
The enemies expected to dominate the Jews, but the opposite occurs	Esther 9:1
Jewish mourning, fasting, and grief become feasting and celebration	Esther 4:3, 16; 8:16–17; 9:22
The date chosen by lot (pur) for destruction becomes a celebration of deliverance (Purim)	Esther 3:7, 13; 9:26–28

The theme of **reversal** is stated most clearly in **Esth. 9:1** "...on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them."

Esther is set in the Persian Empire (c. 4th c. BCE, 2.1 million sq. miles – from India to Ethiopia) and centers Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, as vessels of deliverance from the threat of annihilation by the Persian, Haman. Esther's beauty allows her favor with the King, Ahasuerus, and lands her in the palace as queen (all happening under the watchful, strategic eye of Mordecai). Purim (a major Jewish Festival) is significant in Esther because it turns the memory of near-genocide into an annual celebration of reversal, survival, and communal responsibility, commemorating how the day marked for Jewish destruction became a day of deliverance, feasting, gift-giving, and care for the poor (**Esth. 9:20–22, 26–28**).

II. Academic Preliminaries / Problems

- Scholars do not consider Esther to be a retelling of an historical event, but a literary creation (**novel**) written as an encouragement to post-exilic Jews.
- The notion of a Persian king holding an empire-wide beauty contest to find a replacement for his queen seems unrealistic.
- Esther does not appear in any Persian records. No copies of Esther were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls possibly because Jewish scribes did not deem it a necessary book as the name of God is not mentioned. Also, Jewish scribes may have excluded the book of Esther because of her lack of piety and marriage to a foreigner (non-Jew) which does not align with Deuteronomistic history (or the separation we saw last week in Ezra/Nehemiah).

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1. The Greek version of Esther (included in the apocrypha) adds 150 verses to bring it into Jewish piety and to include God.
- D. Exaggeration of numbers – (e.g., **Esth. 9:16**, Killing of 75,000 by a small Jewish force).
- E. Esther contains a thematic contradiction of creating distinction from “others” in a post-exilic period while also depending on a Persian king for survival.

III. Fun Facts

- A. Esther is an orphan. **Esth. 2:7** “He (Mordecai) had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the young woman was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.”
- B. The name Esther is Persian “star” / Hadassah is her Hebrew name - “Myrtle.”
- C. We’re not sure who King Ahasuerus is? Possibly Xerxes I, (486-465 BCE). The problem is Xerxes’ wife is known, Amestris, but in Esther his wife is Vashti (who also is not mentioned in Persian history). It has also been argued that Ahasuerus could be Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) or Artaxerxes II (404-358 BCE).

IV. Looking For God

- A. The name God is not mentioned in Esther.
 1. The rescue of the Jews is due to Esther’s beauty and cunning under the guidance of Mordecai.
 2. Scholars refer to this as the “hiddenness of God.” However, we can see something of divine presence possibly working behind the scenes in...

Esth. 4:10-14 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai: ¹¹“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that, if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law: to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” ¹²When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silent at this time, **relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place**, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity (“the kingdom”) for just such a time as this.”

V. An Unexpected Heroine / Redeeming Vashti

- A. Vashti refuses to allow the king’s drunken court to reduce her body to spectacle. This scene is of imperial excess—180 days of displaying wealth (**Esth. 1:4**), a seven-day feast with abundant wine (**Esth. 1:5-8**), and the king “merry with wine” when he commands Vashti to appear so he can “show the peoples and the officials her beauty” (**Esth. 1:10-11**).
- B. Vashti’s “no” is brief but powerful threatening the power of the patriarchy (**Esth. 1:12, 16-20**).
- C. Redeeming Esther’s “yes.”
 1. Vashti’s resistance happens from a position of **relative privilege**. She is already queen, hosts her own banquet for women in the royal house (**Esth. 1:9**), and her “no” endangers primarily her own crown, status, and access to the king (**Esth. 1:19**).
 2. Esther enters the story as Hadassah, an orphan taken in by Mordecai (**Esth. 2:7**).
 3. Esther, a virgin, is “taken” into the palace under imperial authority (**Esth. 2:8**).

- ## VI. In Sum

The world IN FRONT of the text: How might Esther invites us to reconsider the survival “yes” forced upon oppressed people who carry communal burdens.

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