

**LECTURE 27: ESTHER**  
**“The God who preserves his people”**  
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**I. Orienting Data**

- A.** Synthesis: Daniel ended with high hope in the coming Messiah’s kingdom. But the Israelites were still slaves separated from the Promised Land, and as the exile grew longer, it increasingly felt like God was distant. Did he really still care for his people? Esther recalls a key story of the exile in order to highlight how God was indeed present and intent on preserving his people, ultimately through his Messiah. Mordechai’s victory over Haman foreshadows the greater victory the Messiah would secure for his people.
- B. Focus:** God’s preservation of his people in accordance with his promises; God’s faithfulness to judge hostility against his people.
- C. Content:** The story of God’s providential preservation of Jews throughout the Persian Empire through Mordecai and his cousin, Esther.

- D. Historical Coverage:** Most of the story takes place in a single year during the reign of Ahasuerus (486–464 B.C.), a generation before the events recorded in Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.
- E. Emphases:** God’s providential care of the Jews in a context of a program against them; Jewish remembrance of their survival through the feast of Purim.
- F. Contemporary Purim Celebration:** Traditionally, Jews read the story of Esther publicly in the Jewish synagogue on Purim eve and the following morning, accompanied by a noisy blotting out of Haman’s name by children and adults, many of them dressed in funny costumes. Purim is a festive holiday, replete with mock reenactments of the Esther story, partying and excessive drinking, carnivals and masquerades, and a general sense of frivolity uncharacteristic of other Jewish festivals.

## II. Literary Features and Plot

### A. Four Main Characters and Their Actions:

1. *Persian king Xerxes I/Ahasuerus* (named 29x), an arrogant Eastern despot who serves in the story as a foil to God.
2. *Villain Haman* (named 49x), a foreigner who has been elevated to the 2nd highest place in the empire and who is more arrogant than Ahasuerus; likely a non-Persian Amalekite who retains his ancestors’ hatred toward the Jews.
3. *Jewish hero Mordecai* (named 54x), a lesser court official who uncovers a plot that saves the king’s life, but whose refusal to bow to Haman sets in motion the basic intrigue of the plot—a plan to kill all Jews in the empire, which ultimately backfires on Haman.
4. *Heroine, Mordecai’s younger cousin, Hadassah, given the Persian name Esther* (named 48x), who by winning a beauty contest becomes Ahasuerus’s queen and the one responsible for unraveling Haman’s plot, thus saving the Jews from annihilation.

### B. Basic Structure of the Plot:

1. *Part 1: The Setting for the Providential Preservation of God’s People: Esther Replaces Vashti* (1:1–2:18)
2. *Part 2: The Experience of God Providential Preservation of His People: Mordechai Replaces Haman* (2:19–7:10)
  - a. Plots against the king and the Jews (2:19–3:15)
  - b. Esther bravely intercedes while Haman plots (4:1–5:14)
  - c. The king rewards Mordecai and executes Haman (6:1–7:10)
  - d. The Jews defeat their enemies and institute Purim (8:1–9:32)
3. *Epilogue: Mordecai Is Honored* (10:1–3)

### C. Colors of Comedy and Irony

1. The king’s response to his wife’s defiance is an empire-wide decree regarding the need for husbands to rule their homes (1:20, 22).
2. An insignificant Jewish girl becomes elevated to the First Lady in the vast Persian empire (2:15–18), just as Mordecai is promoted from a gate keeper to Ahasuerus right hand (8:2).
3. In contrast, the self-indulgent (3:5–6) and self-absorbed (6:6) Haman is suddenly lowered, loses his position and wealth, and is killed (7:9–8:1).

4. Haman depends on chance to determine when best to destroy the Jews (3:7; cf. Prov 16:33), but a greater force ends up destroying him and his family (7:10; 9:1–17).
5. The gallows Haman erected for Mordecai are those on which Haman is hanged.
6. Haman's edict was intended to plunder the wealth of the Jews; instead his own estate falls into Jewish hands.
7. Haman, in writing the script for his own honor and recognition, in fact writes the script for Mordecai; and instead of receiving honor, Haman must lead Mordecai through the streets of Susa on horseback.

**D. Target: Jews in Exile:**

1. Does not refer to the land of Israel or Temple.
2. Addresses the problems of the minority people: Their vulnerability to political forces and governmental edicts, their lack of autonomy, their dependence on royal favor and on the wisdom of their own leaders.
3. Haman's false claims against the Jews are a proto-type of anti-Semitism.

**E. Theological Distinctive: No Explicit Mention of God.** The only biblical book without mention of God, yet the author appears to expect the reader to see God at work at every turn.

1. Ahasuerus is portrayed as the foil of God (1:4), who is the true power of the universe.
2. In this light, God is ultimately in charge of Vashti's removal (1:10–22), the choice of Esther as queen (2:15–18), Mordecai's discovery of the plot to kill the king (2:21–22), Esther's receiving the gold scepter when she approaches the king unbidden after her three-day fast (4:11; 5:1–2), the king's sleepless night in which he discovers that he had failed to honor Mordecai (6:1–3), etc.

### III. A Detailed Walk through the Plot

**A. Part 1: The Setting for God's Providential Preservation of His People: Esther Replaces Vashti (1:1–2:18).** Begins with a lavish feast given by Ahasuerus and the disposal of queen Vashti, who had refused to come and be put on display; this leads in turn to Esther's becoming queen.

1. A king with only apparent authority (1:1–22)
  - a. The "great" Ahasuerus holds a feast for his princes (1:1–9) and Vashti gave a separate banquet.



- b. Vashti refuses to allow Ahasuerus to show off her beauty and this greatly disrespects Ahasuerus (1:10–12). This identifies Ahasuerus’s weakness.
- c. After counsel, Ahasuerus sends out an edict that wives must honor their husbands (1:13–22).
- 2. A new queen in Persia (2:1–18)
  - a. Ahasuerus then seeks a new wife to replace Vashti, and it is here that we learn of the story’s main characters. Mordecai is a Benjamite who is raising his orphaned cousin Hadassah, also known as Esther (2:1–7).
    - i. Get a queen! (2:1–4)
    - ii. Enter the main characters (2:5–7)
      - (1) The hero Mordecai’s intriguing heritage (2:5)
      - (2) The exilic context of judgment (2:6)
      - (3) The heroine Esther (2:7)
  - b. Esther is taken to the palace, the king chooses her to be queen, and the kingdom celebrates, all while her Jewish identity is kept secret (2:8–18).

**B. Part 2: The Experience of God’s Providential Preservation of His People:**

- Mordecai Replaces Haman (2:19–7:10).** God uses Mordecai and Esther to preserve King Ahasuerus and the Jewish people. Specifically, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king, and Haman gains hatred toward the Jews in light of Mordecai’s unwillingness to honor him. Motivated by Mordecai’s plea, Esther invites the king and Haman to a feast, after which Haman seeks to hang Mordecai. The king honors Mordecai and then executes Haman after his plot to kill the Jews is revealed at Esther’s second feast.
- 1. Plots against Ahasuerus and the Jews (2:19–3:15)
    - a. Mordechai, Esther’s guardian, saves Ahasuerus’s life by telling Esther of a plot that he somehow discovered (2:19–23).

- b. Ahasuerus promotes Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and Haman seeks through legal recourse to exterminate the Jews because Mordechai disrespected him (3:1–15).
  - i. Haman’s intriguing heritage and heinous plan (3:1–6)
  - ii. The destruction of the Jews decreed (3:7–15)
- 2. Esther bravely intercedes while Haman plots (4:1–5:14)
  - a. Mordechai encourages Esther to intervene, believing that she is in her position for such a time as this (4:1–17).
    - i. Mourning and Mordecai’s charge to Esther (4:1–14): “For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (4:14).
    - ii. Esther’s God-dependent charge (4:15–17)
  - b. Esther has her first banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman and requests that they attend a second banquet (5:1–8).
  - c. Haman still wants to kill Mordechai and the Jews so he listens to his wife’s advice and has a “tree/stake” built to hang Mordechai (5:9–14).
- 3. Ahasuerus rewards Mordecai and executes Haman (6:1–7:10)
  - a. “Unexpected” humiliation (6:1–14)
    - i. The king forces Haman to honor Mordechai because Mordechai saved his life (6:1–11).
    - ii. Mordechai’s wife tells Haman to no longer resist Mordechai because he will fall to him (6:12–13).
  - b. “Unexpected” honor (6:14–7:10): Esther has her second banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman, and there she reveals her Jewish ethnicity and Haman’s plot; the king promptly orders that Haman be hung on the “tree/stake” he built for Mordechai (6:14–7:10).
    - i. The second feast and the revealing of Haman’s plot (7:1–6)
    - ii. The abating of Ahasuerus’s wrath (7:7–10)
- 4. The Jews defeat their enemies and institute Purim (8:1–9:32). Following Yahweh’s war of judgment on Haman, it is continued on all who stand against the Jews. This is followed by the establishment of the feast of Purim.
  - a. The enemies of the Jews are defeated (8:1–9:19)
    - i. Ahasuerus promotes Mordechai over Haman’s house (8:1–2)
    - ii. Esther and Mordechai petition Ahasuerus to pass legislation allowing the Jews to defend themselves whenever Haman’s decree would occur (8:8–17)
      - (1) The plea (8:3–8)
      - (2) Mordecai’s authoritative declaration (8:9–14)
      - (3) The Jews’ joy (8:14–17)
    - iii. The great reversal and the seeds of kingdom hope (9:1–19)
      - (1) Mordechai leads the Jews to defeat their enemies (9:1–10)
      - (2) Esther petitions the king to allow the Jews an additional day for the Jews to defeat their enemies in Susa (9:11–19)

- b. The origin of the feast of Purim (9:20–32)
  - i. Mordecai establishes the feast of Purim (9:20–28)
    - (1) Called “Purim” in recollection of Haman’s casting of “lots” (9:24–26; cf. 3:7)
    - (2) The only OT feast not mentioned in the Pentateuch; to this is added Hanukah in the inter-testamental period.
    - (3) A day of remembrance, joy, and giving to the poor (9:22): “That they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.”
  - ii. The command to keep Purim (9:29–32)
- C. **Epilogue: Mordecai Is Honored (10:1–3).** Mordecai, who represents God’s favor toward his people, is exalted to Haman’s position, where he achieved much good for the Jewish people.

#### IV. The Lasting Message

##### A. God’s Providential Care Is Mysterious but Real.

1. By “chance” the orphan became queen.
2. By “chance” Mordecai overheard the plot to assassinate the king and saved him.
3. Haman relies on “chance” to determine when best to destroy the Jews, but the same timing ends up being their exaltation.
4. By “chance” the king gave favor to Esther, which opened the door for her invitation to the feasts.
5. “By chance” the king read in his royal chronicles of Mordecai and decided to honor him.
6. Ironically, Haman’s passion to exalt himself resulted in Mordecai’s exaltation.
7. Ironically, Haman’s plot to hang Mordecai resulted in his own hanging on the same gallows.
8. Ironically, the king placed Mordecai over Haman’s estate with all his authority.

##### B. Everything Happens with God-ordained Purpose.

1. God, whose title and name are never found in the book, is, nevertheless, ever present and will preserve his own to the end (4:14).
2. Ahasuerus stands a foil to God who holds true sway in the universe.
3. God was in charge of all: Vashti’s removal, the choice of Esther as queen, Mordecai’s discovery of the plot to kill the king and his *not* being rewarded so that Haman could later be humiliated, Esther’s receiving the gold scepter, the king’s sleepless night in which he discovers that he had failed to honor Mordecai, the elevation of Esther and Mordecai so as to deliver the Jews, etc.
4. Rom 8:28. “For those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

##### C. We Should Have Hope in God’s Power and Faithfulness.

His plan from of old to exalt himself through his people still stands, and in the end he will triumph and evil will be eradicated through his Messiah.

1. God will preserve his own to the end. Esth 4:4. If you keep silent, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

2. God will curse those who curse his people (Gen 12:3; Num 24:9).
  - a. Since their first attack on Israel during the exodus, Yahweh declared a war of judgment against the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–16; cf. Deut 25:17–19; 1 Sam 15:2), who epitomize those who “curse” Yahweh’s people and thus deserve judgment (Gen 12:3).
  - b. Saul, a Benjamite and son of Kish (1 Sam 9:1–2), failed to kill Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:8–9, 19–22). This resulted in sustained skirmishes with Israel, which the biblical authors seem to highlight in order to recall Yahweh’s declaration of judgment (30:17; 1 Chr 4:43).
  - c. Haman was an “Agagite” and thus a possible descendent of Saul’s nemesis (Esth 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24), whereas Mordecai was a Benjamite and son of Kish (2:5)—i.e., a new Saul, who served as the instrument of the Agagite’s downfall—both him and his family (7:10; 9:14).
  - d. The killing of Haman and his family on a “tree/stake” (ESV = “gallows”) represent the serpent and seed’s cursed death, along with the substitutionary death Christ would endure for us (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13; cf. Num 21:8–9; Josh 8:29; 10:26; John 3:14–15).
  - e. In a way similar to the narrative of Joshua who led Israel in Yahweh’s war of judgment in Canaan, the Jews in the Esther story assemble in all the cities of the empire and “no one could stand against them” (Esth 9:2). Also similar is the stress that Israel would not touch the plunder (9:10, 15, 16; contrast Saul’s action in 1 Sam. 15:7–9), even though the king had decreed that they should have it (Esth 8:11; cf. Deut 13:16).
  - f. The Lord is both powerful and faithful, and he will continue to be.

**D. The Messiah in the Line of Judah will Bring Ultimate Joy (8:16).**

1. With echoes of the biblical accounts of both Joseph and Daniel, the book of Esther sets up Mordecai to anticipate the Christ. Israel’s history writers recorded “all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai” (Esth 10:2). Further, the narrator tells us, “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people” (10:3).
2. Nevertheless, because Mordecai was a Benjamite and not a Judahite (Gen 49:8–10), and because King *Saul*, Israel’s first monarch, was his foil, the reader is left anticipating the greater promised King David to follow. We thus leave Esther deeply encouraged by God’s providential protection and care for his people while also hoping in and longing for the one whose “house and . . . kingdom shall be made sure forever” and whose “throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). “He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23:5). God will designate him as “shepherd, . . . and he shall feed [the Lord’s people]” (Ezek 34:23), and “of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (Isa 9:7). His name and fame will endure forever (Ps 72:17), as “to him [will be] given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan 7:13).

3. Esther provides readers living in exile a tangible account of God's faithfulness so as to awaken hope in his complete trustworthiness, specifically in fulfilling all of his kingdom promises.
4. Haman the Agagite is the offspring of the serpent, and Mordecai's triumph over this Agagite recalls Balaam's prediction that Yahweh's future "king shall be higher than Agan, and his kingdom shall be exalted" (Num 24:7). "Agag" or "Gog" (LXX) represents all that is hostile to God and his ways (cf. Ezek 38–39; Rev 20:8), but the coming redeemer from Judah will triumph!

**V. Book Summary:** God discreetly and sovereignly preserves his people from Haman's extermination by honoring Esther over Queen Vashti and Mordechai over Haman resulting in his people's joy in order to foreshadow the Messiah's future work.

## **VI. Guided Reading of Esther**

**A. Key Chapters:** 3–4, 7–10

**B. Questions:**

1. What would you suggest was the author's central purpose in the book of Esther?
2. What was the purpose of the Jewish feast Purim?
3. Israel's ongoing conflict with what people is recalled in the book of Esther? What character in the story represents this people?
4. What is uniquely absent from the entire narrative in Esther, and what might you suggest is the reason behind this absence?
5. How is the Messiah anticipated in Esther?
6. "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" By whom and to whom were these words spoken?