

### ESTHER

#### Week 1, Introduction

Today we begin our study of the Book of Esther, in earnest. And as is our custom, we begin with an introductory overview. Last week we viewed an instructional film about Esther that gives us a good mental picture of the context and general happenings in this biblical book. For those who missed it, and would like to obtain it, it is “The Bible, Esther”, by Trimark Videos. You can find it online easily enough.

The reason that we’re moving from Daniel directly into Esther is that it chronologically fits in sequence. The story of Esther is quite unique in the Bible, and as such it creates all sorts of interesting difficulties as you’ll soon see. It occurs in Persia, and the Persian Empire period we’re dealing with in Esther is often called the New Persian Empire, which began with King Cyrus about 550 B.C. and then extended to about 330 B.C. The end of Daniel takes place at the beginning of this New Persian Empire that is also called the Media-Persian Empire. So Biblically and prophetically speaking, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the succession of 4 gentile world empires as prophesied by Daniel (Media-Persia) has now come into being. The 1<sup>st</sup>, that of Nebuchadnezzar’s, was the Babylonian Empire. Symbolically speaking the head of gold of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream statue was now replaced by the silver arms and chest. Or, in Daniel’s parallel vision that used strange beasts for symbolism, the lion beast was replaced by the bear beast. And in a yet later vision of Daniel, the ram with 2 horns equates to the bear beast. So the silver arms and chest, the bear beast, and the ram with 2 horns all symbolize the same thing: the Media-Persian Empire.

We’re going to get a bit technical, and cover a lot of ground rapidly. This is after all an overview so we won’t get too deep. And I’m not going to give you a Reader’s Digest version of Esther as that was the purpose of showing you the film last week. So, here we go. We know that the setting for the book of Esther is sometime between about 485 B.C. and 460 B.C. It can’t be later than about 460 B.C. because Ezra, the Levite Priest who would lead a delegation of Jews back to Judah at that time in order to complete rebuilding the Temple and restoring Jerusalem’s walls, is involved in the story of Esther and so had not left yet to return to Judah. And Esther occurs after the time of the Persian King Cyrus (who reigned at the end of the Book of Daniel); so we get around a 25 year window where the Esther incident seems to have occurred.

Esther is as controversial as the Book of Daniel. It seems that even some early Rabbis weren’t entirely convinced that Esther was much more than a Jewish legendary tale. Other Rabbis believed that the Esther incident happened, but they were not so sure that the Esther scroll belonged as part of the Hebrew Bible. Many early Christian scholars felt the same way, and

there were a number of reasons for this skepticism. Chief among those reasons is that God is not mentioned once in the Hebrew version of Esther.

Which brings us to another area of controversy with this book; there are a number of versions of it and it depends on your particular Christian denomination or your Jewish sect as to which one, if any, that you accept as authoritative or as even belonging in the Bible at all. We'll delve into this a little further, shortly.

So the controversies surrounding Esther are many; is this merely Jewish folklore? Is it possibly based on some obscure historical act, but it has been so embellished over the centuries that at best we could call it a historical novel? Is it an actual, reliable, historical event but perhaps not of the level of divine inspiration of say Genesis, or the Psalms, or the New Testament? Might it have been written merely as an encouragement to give the Jews of the Diaspora a sense that no matter where they were, the Lord would deliver them from their oppressors? Or was it written only as a means to explain why the Feast of Purim existed?

What can be agreed upon is that Esther is told as a story. Everyone, in every age, loves a good story. I've spoken to you before that the Bible is made up of many different kinds of literature; poetry, narrative, history, parable, songs, and more. Here we encounter a kind of literature that is intentionally constructed as a memorable story as told by a gifted story teller. In fact, there are a few scholars who would tell you that this story is really a Greek comedy, perhaps even burlesque. While I think that is taking things a bit too far, there is no doubt there are all sorts of unexpected twists and turns of the plot in this story of Esther that causes one to chuckle, and there are some pretty sultry parts of it that can bring to some a flush to our cheeks. And because it's a story, and does not consist of dire prophetic warnings from God, or the presentation of a system of divine laws to be obeyed, or a treatise on how to properly worship the Elohim of Israel, Christian and Jews hardly know what to make of it. There are no directives from the Lord, no examination of Biblical principles or unveiling of new ones, no vision of the future; rather we have a story that captivates us and holds our attention.

I've often said that the Bible was made for ordinary people to read and understand. You don't have to be a priest, a Pastor, a professor or a theologian to understand what God has given to us in our Bibles. In times long past when literacy was the province only of royalty, aristocrats or priests, the common folk only received whatever biblical knowledge that the government and the priesthood allowed them to know. In the Middle Ages when there was such a growing hunger by the masses to know God personally, and a thirst to read and hear His Word, thousands upon thousands of Christians and Jews were murdered by their religious authorities for possessing even a scrap of Holy Scripture because those religious authorities insisted on having total control over Scriptural knowledge. In our era when almost everyone is literate, and when Bibles are plentiful and cheap and there are no barriers to access; when Bibles are available in almost every known language in existence, and offered at almost every reading level, now it is often considered as too boring, too hard to understand, too hard for us to relate to, or just too much information. Yet here in Esther is a Bible book that is fast moving, dramatic, funny, ironic, suspenseful and just plain enjoyable to read for people in all eras. It has good guys, bad guys, pretty girls, an arrogant gentile king and a beautiful, courageous Jewish girl who was thrust into a perilous situation not of her own making.

But what is it a story of? That's not so easy to say; it depends on one's point of view. To many Jews, it is the story of their collective life as a peculiar people scattered among the many gentile cultures where they now lived. It speaks of the perils that for some inexplicable reason they inevitably face where ever they might live. It is representative of Jewish life in all eras since the time before they arrived in their Promised Land, and since after their first exile into a predominately gentile world; a life that has them wandering into a region, settling, trying to get along with their gentile neighbors while also obeying the Torah and hanging on to their ancient traditions and to their God. They always seem to do fine for a while, but then because the differences between them and the natural citizens of the land where they now live are just too great, assimilation becomes impossible; distrust, envy and finally hate erupts into violence against the Jews. And just when it seems like their extinction is at hand, God shows up to deliver them in a nick of time.

For many Christians Esther is a tender love story of a female hero who uses her womanly wiles, gentle wisdom and extraordinary beauty to win the affections of (and even change the attitude of) her rather buffoonish husband, the King of Persia, and then uses it to rescue her own people. It is kind of an ancient Beauty and the Beast tale, with some Jews thrown in to add a Biblical flavor, and then blended together with some danger and a healthy helping of intrigue to provide suspense. It is a romance, not entirely distinct from the Song of Solomon.

However the Rabbis tend towards saying that Esther is simply the Story of Purim. And this story of Esther is needed because Purim was not ordained in the Law of Moses, nor is it mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Thus there needed to be a reason, a defining historical event, and an authorizing document about why all Jews were obligated to celebrate Purim. And even the anonymous writer of the story of Esther is quite careful not to imply that God has commanded the observance of Purim. So Purim is but a joyous manmade commemoration of a momentous or even symbolic event; a commemoration that it almost seems wrong NOT to have it. This is a celebration of Jewishness and all that comes with it; the good and the bad. Therefore Christians have never found a reason to pay much attention to the book, and especially not to join in common celebration with the Jewish people. Most Christians have never heard of Purim. Maybe by the time we've concluded our study of Esther, we'll have found some reasons why Christians need to reconsider our stance on this holiday.

No other book of the Bible has come down to us in so many various forms. There is no scholarly consensus on "the original version" or the one best version. There are many copies of Esther written in Hebrew, but none go back earlier than about the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D., probably around the time of the first Crusade. The good news is that because there has always been such painstaking attention paid to copying the Bible by the Hebrew Scribes, there are almost no differences at all between the various Hebrew manuscripts of Esther or any other Old Testament book for that matter. The bad news is that because the oldest Hebrew manuscript of Esther that we have is only 1000 years old, there is a huge 1500 year void between the estimated time of its writing (perhaps around 450 B.C.), and the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. copy of it that we have, and that leaves a lot questions open as to which of the several surviving versions of Esther might be truest to the original.....if that even matters.

Of course we heard similar arguments for centuries concerning the entire Hebrew Bible, especially among the Enlightenment scholars, until they were at least partially silenced by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, because the Old Testament copies in Hebrew that we had up to that point were, like Esther, not much more than 1000 years old. But suddenly we had large portions of the Hebrew Bible and in a few cases complete scrolls of Old Testament books, that were at least 1000 years older than anything we'd ever had. It took us back to a time around 100 years before Christ.....save for one. Esther. Esther was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Not even a mention of it in the trove of Community documents found along with the Holy Scriptures, as copied and maintained by the Essenes of Qumran. There are many speculations as to why that is, but almost certainly it is because the Essenes didn't see it as belonging among all the other books of the Tanach (the Hebrew Bible).

However, because Aramaic had become perhaps the most important language of the region of the Holy Lands, and because Aramaic and Hebrew are so closely related, there were a number of translations of Esther made in Aramaic as early as the 300's B.C. So even the most ardent of Scripture doubters admit that, at the least, Esther is a very old book and was written no later than about the time the Greeks were conquering the Media-Persian Empire.

When the Media-Persian Empire was eventually conquered by Alexander the Great around 330 B.C., Greek cultural influence and therefore the Greek language spread like wildfire and of course this affected the Jewish communities of the few million Diaspora Jews. Only a handful of the Diaspora Jews spoke Hebrew any more. Therefore within a generation or two after Alexander's conquest the need for a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible became apparent. The result was that Ptolemy, King of Egypt, commissioned a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek around 250 B.C., and a formidable group of scholars was assembled in Alexandria, Egypt to accomplish the task. The result is what is called today the Septuagint, or the LXX, and many modern Christian Bibles are based off of this Greek translation. Interestingly, the Book of Esther was included in the Septuagint, proving beyond doubt that it must have existed in Hebrew before 250 B.C. so that it was available for translation to Greek.

But, other independent Greek versions also arose and with that came several additions to the Book of Esther. Upon those additions, and later still with the already biased viewpoint among Christians about the Book of Esther, it was removed from the Christian Bible and placed with the Apocryphal literature. Not long later some of the Church Fathers disagreed with such a drastic action and put the early Septuagint version of Esther back into their Bibles, but removed the many additions from the text and placed them together at the end of the book. Of course taken from their context, this "pile" of Greek additions now made little sense. We get a better grasp of the problem when we understand that the Greek version of Esther with all of its dubious additions is 274 verses long. But the Hebrew version is only 167 verses long. So the Greek version adds 107 verses that weren't there at one time.

But that is not all. Even Josephus got into the act in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. and wrote his own version of Esther. Then there is the Rabbinical version of Esther that is in the Talmud, called Megillot Esther, and it has variations to it as well. So when talking about the Book of Esther, we need to realize that there are numerous versions of it, even if the kernel of the story and its outcome remains identical.

The Jerusalem Bible probably took the best approach to the problem. They left the Greek additions in the Bible, more or less where they were first placed, but they italicized them so that it was understood what they are. There are essentially 6 major additions to what is believed to be the closest thing we have to an original Esther. And I'll point these additions out as we proceed in our study.

So what was the purpose of making these many additions to the Book of Esther? More than likely it had to do with making the book work better with Jewish sensibilities. After all, since there is no mention of God and the story takes place in an alien cultural setting (Persia), where is the religious significance to it? As I've already mentioned there was a running debate as to whether Esther belonged in the Hebrew Bible at all. Yet it had already been there a long time as demonstrated by the fact that in 250 B.C. it was part of what was translated from Hebrew to Greek to form the Septuagint. So it seems that some Jewish editors added religious elements to the story to try to quell some of the demands to remove it from the Bible. Thus indeed within the several additions to Esther the word "God" is added, we find prayers offered up to God, and also a sort of divine dream-vision is given to Mordecai warning him of impending disaster (so we get the element of prophesy infused into the story).

So we can see why there have been serious challenges to the credibility of this book. In the end, however, perhaps the only intellectually honest debate about Esther ought to revolve around which of the several versions we have today is the most authentic and the least modified from the original. Because even the additions don't really change the story of Esther in any significant way except to make it more religious and less secular in its tone. All other challenges seek to simply overturn the truth of the Book of Esther and make it into Jewish fairytale. And as we look closely at the facts, that is an unwarranted conclusion.

When we look at the objections that many scholars, Jewish and Christian, have offered against the historic authenticity of Esther, in the end they amount to mostly their personal views of subjective probability. That is, what they give is their opinions without evidence based on what they think could or could not have happened at that time. For instance they say that some number that is used is too large to be realistic; or some circumstance is too absurd in their view as to be real; or (most often) that no archeological evidence has ever been found to substantiate the biblical claim. It is not that there is some hard physical evidence that has been discovered that makes anything in Esther as false; rather it is that there has not been sufficient hard evidence (in their minds) to PROVE that what happens in Esther is true. And this is because for many of these scholars, the Bible is a suspect book from beginning to end. They are much happier, more enthused, and quicker to believe some record or declaration or oblique narrative in an ancient Assyrian or Babylonian document than they are with the Hebrew documents that form the Bible. And usually their bottom line stated reason for this is that there is too much religion mixed with Hebrew history to count the Bible as reliable. The addition of spirituality makes the Bible useless because they don't believe in spirit in the first place. But even if that was a rational reasonable position to take it overlooks that these ancient Assyrian and Babylonian records that they assume to be true and accurate also invariably called upon their gods, blamed the gods for military defeats or droughts, gave them credit for battle victories or good crops, and even the kings were named for their gods. So as it turns out, what these scholars have trouble with is anything with a **Judeo-Christian** historical

background, not a religious historical background provided it is a pagan religious historical background.

Further the academic notion that all reliable history has to be backed-up with archeological finds or it is invalid is ridiculous on its face. If that was the standard, we'd have practically no reliable history of any culture, at any time in the history of the world, to look back upon with any real assurance. Our history books would look more like thin pamphlets. And as Dr. Walter Kaiser, Jr. points out in his Archeology Bible as concerns the book of Esther, "We know practically nothing of the early Persians, except that they, along with the Medes, were Indo-Europeans....." And as Dr. C.F. Kiel points out in his commentary on Esther, we have only sparse knowledge of what life was like in the Persian Empire at the time of Esther, and even less about what palace life was like among the royalty. So for a Bible scholar to declare that such and such could not possibly have happened in the Persian culture or inside the Persian monarchy is not done so in light of facts, but only personal opinion.

Dr. Kaiser made a list of 9 of the most common reasons that so many scholars (the majority of modern scholars according to him) say the Book of Esther is not historical. And yet there is nothing within the story itself that implies it is anything but real. There's no parting of the Red Sea, or Manna from heaven type of miracles in it for them to be skeptical of; and nothing claimed that is supernatural or inherently naturally impossible.

1. In chapter 1 a feast of 180 days was given for all the big-wigs of the Persian Empire. Scholars say that to them this amount of time is excessive and therefore can't be true. But we know that Xerxes (the king in the story of Esther) was constantly trying to conquer Greece and so it is probable that this feast was mostly about a long time of diplomatic lobbying and strategic military planning. This wasn't about having a continuous 180 day banquet. Nor should we take it that all the leaders were there at the same time nor for the entire 180 day period.
2. In chapter 2 we are told that the virgin girls gathered up for the King of Persia to choose from for a new wife are anointed with perfumes and oils for 6 months, and then their bodies treated with spices and ointments for an additional 6 months before they are brought before the king. Once again, this combined 1 year of preparation is dismissed as excessive and thus not believable. Yet to take common girls from non-aristocratic families and train them in royal court decorum and protocols, and to heal their calluses and blisters and blemishes and to make them as beautiful and flawless as possible for the king, to take 12 months to do it is probably the least amount of time imaginable to accomplish such a thing.
3. Chapter 1 states that the Media-Persian Empire consisted of 127 provinces; however the historian Herodotus wrote that there were only 20. But this supposed conflict is only founded on the notion that because Herodotus says there were 20 satrapies, that this somehow carries the same meaning as the Hebrew word used in Esther, **medinah**, that means districts. In other words the Persian Empire was probably divided into 20 satrapies, each with its own governor, but at the same time those 20 satrapies entailed some 127 districts consisting of many smaller kingdoms and independent city-states that the Persians had conquered. Sort of the like the State and county system used in the USA. The number of counties doesn't equal the number of States. No discrepancy

need be seen here.

4. Chapter 1 states that a decree given by a Persian king is irrevocable, and this is seen by some academics as not believable. Yet we hear exactly the same thing in Daniel chapter 6: <sup>CJB</sup> **Daniel 6:9** *Now, your majesty, issue this decree over your signature, so that it cannot be revoked, as required by the law of the Medes and Persians, which is itself irrevocable.* And there is no question that 2 different authors from two different eras who had no knowledge of one another wrote these 2 books.
5. In chapter 3 we read of the Persians planning a year in advance to massacre the Jews, and even letting them know about it. This, says scholars, is too unlikely to accept. Yet the book explains that the date was set not by the king or a military general or by Haman, but by divination through the casting of lots by Persian priests. And if the lots gave the propitious month and day something was to happen, that is of course what was followed lest the gods be upset and all go badly. And since the king really wasn't much involved in the process (it was Haman that insisted upon and organized the attack), no doubt Haman was not about to buck what the King's priests said was the date the gods wanted this heinous thing to occur on.
6. Chapter 3 says that Haman was an Agagite. And scholars say that it seems much too coincidental that Haman would be a descendant of Agag the Amelikite, a dreaded enemy of Israel, who cost King Saul his crown. However there is nothing in the verse that claims that this reference to Agagite has any relation whatsoever to the Amelikites. No one quite knows what is meant by "Agagite" in this context, especially since more than 5 centuries had passed since the time of King Saul!
7. Assuming as most do that King Ahasueras was but the Greek name for King Xerxes, there is no Persian or Greek record of a wife of this king named Vashti (as the Esther story claims). Rather the Queen was named Amestris. However there is a good probability that Amestris is Esther because linguistically Esther and Amestris are nearly identical words.
8. Scholars claim that although Xerxes is certainly a historically identifiable name for a king of that period in Persia, that the name Mordecai is nowhere else known in Persian records and therefore it is just made-up. However that is a disingenuous claim. In Persian and Babylonian his name is not Mordechai, it is Marduka, and indeed in Persian and Babylonian records the name Marduka (a Babylonian name) is found. In fact, in a Persian tablet that speaks about Xerxes' ascension to the throne, there is record of a royal accountant residing at Susa (the city where the story of Esther takes place) whose name was Marduka (Mordechai in Hebrew).
9. And finally the claim is that archeological data has not confirmed the Esther story. As Dr. Kaiser says, it is rare that physical archeological data EVER confirms an historical event. The most usual way for reconstructing historical events is NOT from archeology but rather from piecing together data from various documents and oral traditions. For instance, we don't demand that the Mayflower be found in order to believe that the Pilgrims landed on that ship at Plymouth Rock. But that is the sort of standard that modern Bible scholars insist must be imposed on the Holy Scriptures, otherwise they are to be seen as only Jewish legend and myth.

So how ought we to look at and think about what we'll study in Esther? First, we can know that it was real, the characters were real, and the event happened. Was every last detail that we

have accurate? Likely not. For one thing whoever wrote it could not have been inside the palace, inside the King's chambers and Esther's chambers and inside of Haman's house, privy to all those conversations and plots. This would have been information gathered from a number of sources, some by eyewitnesses and some by hearsay. Besides, all historical happenings that are recorded are reported through the lens, culture and agenda of the person writing about it. If you don't believe that, just compare various news stories of current events today on most anything that is happening and at times you wonder if they are even speaking of the same event. Whether it is the progress of the war in Afghanistan, the peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the theft of national intelligence documents by Edward Snowden, or even what the new ObamaCare medical system accomplishes or at least is meant to accomplish, we'll read of a number of different viewpoints that often conflict with one another. The Bible operates in similar fashion, and books like Esther and the NT Synoptic Gospels are especially vulnerable to the author's personal viewpoint and vantage point.

But at the least we see a number of important theological themes raised within Esther. For instance, God's invisible providence is on full display even though it is not specifically brought to our attention by name. The story of Esther is told as a series of improbable if not impossible coincidences that foiled the effort of the evil Haman to gain great power and status for himself at the same time ridding the Persian Empire of an entire people (the Jews) because only ONE among them, Mordecai, pricked his pride. Yet, for the spiritually oriented person, it is obvious that these supposed coincidences were but God guiding history behind the scenes, with almost no one (Jew or Persian) aware of it.

We also see that God raised up ordinary people who were living in less than ideal circumstances in a foreign land to do service for Him. Esther and Mordecai were not aristocrats although Mordecai seemed to be considered a wise man if not an informal leader of the Jews in Susa. Thus God can use anyone, even the most unlikely, to do the most amazing things if we'll just learn to say "yes" to Him when every bone in our body wants to yell "NO!" Usually because it is something uncomfortable, unfamiliar, inconvenient, or well out of our pay grade that seems to be being asked of us.

I see in Esther the story of a repeating pattern of irrational hatred for the Jewish people that seems to suddenly come out of nowhere like a microburst from the sky that can fell trees and rip the roofs off of homes. All throughout history it seems that one tyrant or another takes some kind of homicidal bent towards the Jews that makes no sense. Often the Jews are an important cog of the societal machine of whatever nation they might be in. And to evict or to oppress or to murder them only harms this nation. But no matter, it is done anyway, usually to the detriment of the national leader who led the oppression or expulsion. We see the same thing happening today. Why does Anti-Semitism seem to be on the rise in Europe when the Jews are such a small part of European society, and are in most cases nearly invisible? Why do Europe and the USA believe that the Jews of Israel just have too much land for their own nation when they already have one of the tiniest countries on the planet of which nearly half is barren desert? Thus the consensus is that they need to give some more of it away to an invented people called the Palestinians, who have made it their stated goal to eradicate the State of Israel from the face of the earth, and to kill all Jews anywhere they might be found on this globe.



The word most often used today to describe the inability to reach peace in the Middle East is intractable. This word means something that is uncontrollable, impossibly difficult, a problem that has no solution. But why is the problem intractable? Because of an irrational hatred by most of the world's gentiles for the Jewish people. What a secular world cannot understand, however, is that this is really a spiritual battle, just as it was for Esther, Mordechai, King Xerxes and Haman.

As we'll soon read in Esther, it was only because Haman hated but one Jew (Mordechai) that he decided to hate them all. And not just personally but maniacally to the point that the Jews should no longer exist. And then he went to the Persian king as a trusted advisor, counseled him that these people were rebellious and an extreme danger to the King's Empire, and the king told him to do whatever he thought best. Again, irrational. Eradicating the Jews was harmful to his Empire simply because they were so numerous, industrious, and greatly contributed to the Empire's economy. But he agreed to it anyway because it seemed unimportant to him.

We also see a theme of civil disobedience being acceptable to the Lord when it comes to saving God's people from destruction. Mordecai defied Haman. Queen Esther defied her husband the king, as well as disobeying some of the immutable laws of the Persian government. And we see that God didn't just miraculously sweep away the danger. Rather the plan was for the Jews to defend themselves with the sword; they would have to fight for their own lives, with God on their side of course. So while Esther and all the Jews of Susa fasted and prayed to God for 3 days to find an answer to their dilemma, the answer came in the form of battle. Some Jews would lose their lives in order for their people to survive. Prayer first as a preparation; and then a spring into action! No passivity. No standing on the sidelines letting someone else deal with it. No praying and sitting on their hands waiting for their God to supernaturally handle things.

And finally we read about pride and how it can destroy. In this case it is the pride of Haman who fancies himself as being fabulously wealthy, possessing a cunning beyond the reach of others, and 2<sup>nd</sup> in power to the King of Persia. He obtained his status through lying and treachery, and was willing to destroy an entire people (the Jews) to accelerate and cement his position in the royal court. He hated Mordecai because Mordecai wouldn't bow down to Haman and this his pride couldn't stand it. But because of the arrogance that goes hand-in-hand with pride, Haman thought his cleverness would be undetectable and his strategies impossible to stop. And just as he thought all was in his hands, the floor gave way and not just he but his entire family was destroyed because of it. The old Biblical proverb of pride going before the fall was on full display.

Next week we'll begin Esther chapter 1.