

# **BIB104 OT2 Life & Literature of Israel**

## **Unit 6a Esther: Preservation Through Providence**

Presented by the



**LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE**  
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

For Use by the

**Blue Letter Bible Institute**

**[Web: Study.Bible](http://Study.Bible)**

A Ministry of the

**Blue Letter Bible**

**[Web: BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org)**

Wow. When you hear that word, what are some things that come to your mind? Delight, surprise, and astonishment are a few that come to mind. As we dig into Esther, that's the word that came to my mind repeatedly. And I think you'll be saying the same thing as we go along the way and unpack this little book. "Wow, what a king" is the first thing that hit me. Ahasuerus, or Xerxes as I like to call him, was the king of the greatest empire on earth at that time. The kingdom of Persia was nearly a million square miles. It extended from India to Ethiopia, we're told in Esther 1:1. In fact, to give you a little bit better perspective, for us, it was roughly the size of the United States of America. Now, to give us even a better perspective, did you know that if you drive from coast to coast in the U.S., that it would take you 37 hours straight through. Or did you know that if you walk it from one end to the other at a normal walking pace, it would take you six months? Pretty astounding, isn't it? Well, if you think about that, that's the size of the whole Persian Empire that King Xerxes was in charge of. And this is the backdrop on the Book of Esther.

Now, this empire was built by King Darius, who was Ahasuerus' or Xerxes' dad. He ruled over a vast empire that had 127 different provinces and covered 20 different regions. The palace that we hear about and read about in the Book of Esther was Susa. Now, it was the winter palace, one of three palaces that the king had. Xerxes was probably in his mid-30s and he reigned from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C. It should be noted that like the Egyptian pharaohs, the Persian kings were noted to be viewed as god—men. Now, what that really meant was that their word was law and it was never to be challenged. Their word could have you honored or elevated, and it could just as easily have you killed. He was the law, and not just the final word, but the only word. When he spoke, you either listened and obeyed, or you faced the consequences. When he spoke, it was one of those situations that you knew, in that culture, it was like hearing from God. Now, in Xerxes' life, he was the ultimate and most powerful man on earth. He was rich, probably good-looking, and very powerful. He was quite literally *the* man.

Another wow. Wow, what a party. The king wanted to show off his wealth and his power. So how do you do that? You not only invite people from your kingdom, but you invite your enemies and even your possible allies. You throw the mother of all parties, in fact. In fact, if you look at this party, you're going to find the planning that went into it, how to carry it out, the details, if you're one of those kind of people, you'll go crazy thinking about all that was done. In fact, I encourage you to read the first part of Esther and look at the list of people who were there. How big was it? We're talking about over a thousand people. How secure would you have to feel as a king to invite your army's leaders, your generals to a drunken six-month party? That's right. Six months. Then in the end of the six months, the king opens the party up to the whole city of Susa to come and enjoy the party. He offers them gold cups to drink from and the king's own best wine for another week. That was the party of all parties. Wow.

But in the midst of all this, we've got to say, "Wow, what a God." Esther is an interesting book. The name of God is not mentioned one time, but God's fingerprints are all over it. I want to point out a few things about God I think that you'll clearly see as you look at the Scriptures in this little book of Esther and even in our lives today.

Wow, what a woman. Let's look at the woman that God brought to be the key part of this story. Did you know that the book bearing her name in the Old Testament that doesn't even mention God once has her as one of the most significant women that we're aware of in the Old Testament? She was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, which had been part of the kingdom of Judah. Her ancestors were among the Jews who had been carried captive to Babylon nearly 100 years earlier. There were many Jews who didn't return to Jerusalem when it became possible, preferring instead to continue to live where they had settled around the Persian Empire. Now, after the death of Esther's parents, she was raised by Mordecai, an older cousin. We see that in Esther 2:7. Now, he served the Persian ruler's palace.

The popularity of the story of Esther is great. In fact, listen to this description in the Five Megillat. That's a Jewish commentary published quite a few years ago. And this is what it says in Page 193. "Esther is among the generality of Jews, the best-known of all the books of the Bible." In the Jewish culture, the best-known of all the books of the Bible. There's many reasons for this popularity. The Book of Esther tells us a compelling story, dramatic and exciting, with clearly defined heroes and villains, yet also reveals deep and abiding spiritual truths about God's power to deliver us from the danger and oppression even when despotic rulers plan to do evil to God's people. It's a book that's got it all. It attracts everyone because it's a love story, but it's also the good and bad guys. And in the midst of it all, we see the plan of God revealed.

It's also an inspiring story because Esther was such a remarkable woman. She was willing to risk her life to save her people. She was a woman of principle, who was willing to put the lives of others ahead of her own life. She was an outstanding example of serving others even underneath the most stressful circumstances. In fact, Jesus Christ shares with us in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Esther was willing to do that. Most of the time, our lives may be pretty routine. But all of us have a few defining moments when we may be called to put on godly principles above personal benefit. What will you do when you encounter those defining moments in your life? What will you do when you face such a time as this, as Esther says? Will you choose to do the right thing as opposed to what might give you some personal benefit? Esther shows all of us all along the way, and we can be very much so inspired by her example.

So, what is the story of Esther? I've given you snippets and tidbits in my little intro, but let's kind of go through the story together. The Book of Esther begins with Queen of King Ahasuerus named Vashti. Now, she snubbed the king's request to meet with her. In fact, naturally, as a result of that, being a rather egotistical man, Ahasuerus, or Xerxes as we call him, fires/divorces her. Now he needs to pick a new queen. And eventually, he manages to select Esther, a beautiful, young, secretly Jewish woman. Can you imagine that? Here's Esther, an orphan Jewish girl in a nation that wasn't her own, with an uncle that raised her. Can you imagine what was necessary in order for her to be picked? Now, we can say she was the most beautiful and she probably was very pretty. We can say she was talented. We really don't know much about that. But we can say, above all, that God chose her.

I love that aspect about Esther probably above everything else: to know that God has such an intricate plan for each and every one of us. He has a plan for your life. He has a plan for my life. He wants you and I both to have a personal relationship with him, and then he wants us to desire to become his disciples day by day, moment by moment. He has a plan for you to impact the circle of influence you're at, or maybe even on a grander stage, a worldwide one, or somewhere in between. But we were designed for a purpose and we have the opportunity through the power of God to make a difference wherever he puts us.

Now, as for the backstory, Esther, as I mentioned, was an orphan raised by her righteous cousin. Mordecai was a very righteous man. When the king came looking for young virgins to possibly fill the role of his new queen, Esther is the one the king chooses, as I said. Can you imagine how gorgeous she must have been? And yet we know that even among that, that God was the one that picked her, not really the king. Now, she wins favor with the king in some miraculous ways. Moreover, Mordecai helps uncover a plot to kill the king, allowing Esther to warn him in time. This earns him some big bounty points, Mordecai, that is, as well.

But all is not well in the king's court. Treachery is afoot. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to the evil king's counselor Haman in the street, the evil Haman decides to engineer a plot to murder all the Jews in the Persian Empire. The plot basically involves Haman going to the king and saying, "I think we should kill all the Jews in the kingdom, King." And the king says, "All right." It's amazing how flippantly, which shows you the depravity of the king and Haman in being willing to do this. Haman walks away, glad that the king is the man that he serves at the time, but not being aware of the fact of what was going to happen to him later on. His genocidal plans are finally hatched over being displeased by one man who treated him in a way that he didn't like. He wants to take it out on a whole nation. It shows you what anger and bitterness and hatred can do when you think of the actions that follow some of those steps.

The king doesn't even know, by the way, that his own queen is Jewish and would be underneath that edict that he just declared, because Esther, remember, has been keeping this secret. But the threat of the Jews' imminent demise prompts Esther and Mordecai into action. Mordecai and Esther along with her staff put on sackcloth and they fast for three days before she visits the king. Esther is worried. If she walks into the king's court and he does not drop his scepter, which was, in the empire of Persia, the way of saying, "You're allowed to come and see me," she could have her life taken from her because she was unannounced in her visit. She wasn't summoned. And again, the god-king only summoned people. They didn't just come popping in on him. You can imagine why she was so concerned and worried. But as she walked in unannounced, rather than being killed or punished in some way, quite the contrary happened. The king is pleased. He offers to give her whatever she wants, and she asks to have him come to a banquet that she's laid out for him and for Haman the very next day. Then after the

banquet, she asks for another one on the following day. Meanwhile, Haman is excited about the massacre that's about to happen and he builds a huge gallows to hang Mordecai.

Now, so we understand this, when we think of gallows, and if we live in a culture that we watch the old western movies, you might think of them as a place that people are hung by. These gallows were built quite differently. They were actually monuments, they seem to be, these big, massive instruments of death where they would actually drop people on a spiky, usually wood, sometimes metal, top. And that's how they killed the person. Very graphic and very disturbing when you think of who invented that. But that's what Haman wanted to do to Mordecai. So he builds the gallows, but unfortunately, his hopes are dashed the following morning when the king, not able to sleep, has the old court documents unhatched and read, and he's reminded of how Mordecai saved his life. He then orders Haman to honor Mordecai and lead him into parade through town, which, by the way, Haman suggests is the way that a man should be honored, that the king wants to honor, thinking that he was going to be the man that the king wanted to honor. And instead, he's honoring his archenemy who he wants to put on the gallows. At the second banquet, Esther asked the king to punish Haman for trying to kill her and her people, and the king does. Haman is hanged, I should say, is pierced to death on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai. The Jews of Persia massacre all of Haman's agents, supporters, and friends, about 75,000 people in all. Mordecai is made into the king's new counselor. And Purim, which is a feast that the Jews set up that established a celebration of God's provision and watching over them during their time of intense persecution. It's an amazing story.

Now, this unknown author of the Book of Esther was most likely a Jew who was very familiar with the royal Persian court. Some believe Mordecai, Esther's cousin and guardian, wrote it. The detailed descriptions of court life and traditions as well as the events that occurred in the book point to an eyewitness account, or an eyewitness author, I should say. Because his perspective was pro-Jewish, scholars believe he was a Jew writing to the remnant that had returned to Judah under Zerubbabel. Some had even suggested Mordecai was not only the author, but that he had somebody else that possibly helped him along the way. It indicates that he may have been a younger contemporary, but we're not sure. Those are just the speculations. We know that it was probably, though, written around 470 B.C.

Interesting that the book is actually named for the star of the story. A young Jewish girl named Hadassah was her Hebrew name. She was taken from her guardian Mordecai and forced to compete, the unlikely contestant of a beauty contest that becomes the queen of a nation. Her name means star literally. The genre of the Book of Esther is a narrative history. Its author, as I mentioned, was anonymous, but again, somebody who was from Persia. And Esther, by the way, became queen probably about 479 B.C. The personalities that are the main ones of the book are Esther, Mordecai, Xerxes, and of course, Haman. The events of the book, as I mentioned, happened 483 to 473, so only over a short period of time, about a decade, which was during actually the first half of King Xerxes' reign. That's when he chose Esther to be queen and had gotten rid of Vashti because of her unwillingness and so on and so forth. But during this time period, the first remnant of Jews who had returned to Judah were actually struggling to re-establish temple worship according to the Law of Moses in the land of Israel. But Esther and Mordecai along with

many other Jews had chosen not to make that trip back to Judah. They seemed to be content to stay right there in Susa, which was, by the way, the capital city of Persia.

The Book of Esther may not have named God's name directly, as we said, but his involvement is felt in many ways throughout the story, especially when Esther implored the people to seek help through fasting (Est 4:15-16). Students of the Bible know that fasting was done to draw closer to God. It was accompanied by heartfelt prayers. Some examples of that would be in Daniel 9:3 and Acts 14:23. Esther is clearly a story of God's intervention and God's deliverance. Its purpose really is to demonstrate God's love and sovereignty in all circumstances. It's a post-exile story about the Jews who stayed behind when many had returned to Jerusalem or some had returned to Jerusalem after the captivity. Babylon had been captured by Persia, and Esther, who miraculously becomes the queen, is the queen of, again, the mightiest nation at that time. And God uses her role and her position to save her people.

In chapters 1 and 2, we see Esther becomes queen to Xerxes of Persia. She was chosen by him. In Est 2:17, the Bible says in Esther, "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him." And that's very interesting to note because, once again, this is a man who had many women in his harem who he could have any kind of relationship with he wanted, and yet we see again, that verse says she found favor and kindness with him. Xerxes was not known as a kind man. He was a ruthless ruler. Again, you see that when Haman brought the concept of destroying the Jews who were slaves to them and captive, he didn't even seem to blink an eye about that. Xerxes was a man who was trying to show to everybody else that he could be as great as his dad King Darius was, who had conquered much of the land of Persia that he was now being able to bear the fruits from. Almost as if he was trying to prove to everybody else that he was somebody, and God used him to become softened to a young Jewish orphan.

In chapters 3 and 4, we see that Mordecai, which was Esther's guardian again, her uncle, refused to bow down and pay homage to Haman, a high official of the king. Now, in those days, it was very common that you would bow down to the leaders that were there. When you're the god-king, you can imagine what he thinks of his inner court, which Haman was a part of. But Mordecai felt that the only one that was due reverence and adoration and bowing was Jehovah God, and that's why he refrained from bowing down to Haman. Again, we know Haman becomes infuriated. He plots to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. And then the verse that talks about where Mordecai hears about the plot against the king prior to this is in Est 4:14. And it says, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have attained royalty for such a time as this?" That's that verse that specifically points out that Mordecai confronts Esther on the fact that "Hey, you know what's going on here. You know what's going to happen. I shared with you what I'm aware of and what I know about based upon what Haman is plotting against. You have a responsibility as one of God's people to go and to tell the king this even if you're scared of it."

In chapters 5 to 10, we see Esther outwit Haman and he takes her petition to the king and pleads for the protection of the Jewish people from Haman's wicked strategy. The king, out of anger, has Haman killed on his own gallows, which he had built to destroy Mordecai. Esther's faith and courage saves her people. But as we mentioned, although God wasn't mentioned, he wasn't absent. We've referenced that in the way that he protected, the way that he watched over—His presence permeates the whole story. It was as though, humanly speaking, you could say this, but we know on a biblical perspective that he was the one that coordinated all the things that seemed to be coincidences by man and all the circumstances that led up to this situation.

In fact, it's much like the Book of Ruth. Now, that book is one that was written where you can see, again, the hand of God. Even though God is mentioned more often than in Esther, it's very evident that, again, here's a woman that God has a special plan for, to show how he can save and intervene in the most hopeless of circumstances. This book stands as one of the most skillfully written biblical books. It uses eight feasts to systematically build and resolve suspense. The author constructed the story using a Hebrew literary device in which events mirror each other inversely. Early listeners to the story would have recognized significant events and follow the rising tension with understanding, which makes it so popular in the Jewish culture in particular.

Haman, the king's evil second-in-command, was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, who were ancient enemies of God's people (Numbers 24:7 and 1 Samuel 15:8). In fact, remember, if you go back to that and you can go into your biblical memory or read up these verses, Saul had been told by Samuel to go in and kill all of the nation of the Amalekites. And he saved the king and some others because he wanted to make them their slaves and wanted to keep those things. So it's interesting and it's also worth noting that's probably why Haman was so adamantly angry and bitter towards the Jewish nation. He cast the lot called Pur in order to determine the day that the Jews (this was Haman) would be exterminated in Esther 3:7-9. What was meant for evil, the Pur, the casting of the lots, became the Feast of Purim, which is still celebrated by Jews today and it commemorates the Jews' deliverance from Haman's plot (Est 9:24-32).

While the primary purpose of the Book of Esther was to relate the dramatic origins of the Feast of Purim, a greater theme shines through the story. The sovereignty and faithfulness of God permeates each scene. Nothing is truly coincidental, as we mentioned. The Book of Esther says to us, God's sovereignty is best summarized in Mordecai's exhortation to Esther in Est 4:14. "And who knows whether you've attained royalty for such a time as this?" I already mentioned that, but to think about that again "for such a time as this." And as I mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, you don't know at what time God is going to take all that he's taught and even brought you through for his honor and glory. Sometimes you go through some difficult things, and I like to call it "we see roses come out of ashes." Out of grief can come an opportunity to counsel and encourage others. Out of heartache and hardship can toughen us up to be able

to fight spiritual battles that are in front of us. We never know, and yet it's so easy for us to be angry and wave our fist to God when things don't work out the way we think they should. But God has a plan. Esther probably already thought, "My parents were taken from me." We don't know underneath what circumstances, but we know that she was an orphan. "And now I'm in a foreign country, not my own land. And now I'm chosen by this egotistical godlike king." You can't even imagine the emotions. And yet she submitted to God's plan in that. I encourage you to submit to God's plan, whatever your circumstances are. He has a purpose for you that we need to be willing to embrace. When events seemed out of control to Esther and Mordecai, when the king dictated ruin for their people and evil is poised to triumph, God was at work. He worked through the dark days. Esther was taken to the harem (Est 2:1-16). Their faithful obedience—Esther risked her life before the king (Est 5:1-3). And their victories—Esther revealed Haman's plot and the Jews' destruction of their enemies (chapters 7 to 9). The message is clear. God is sovereign even when life doesn't make sense. Did you hear that? God is sovereign even when life doesn't make sense.

God is also the great promise keeper. Mordecai said to Esther, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish." (Esther 4:14). Mordecai's words reflected a space that God would honor his eternal covenant with Abraham and David. Now we see Esther as a picture of Christ. Esther was sent to be able to save her people from the evil king. Christ was sent to save all mankind from evil, from the results of sin, which would be eternal damnation, and he provided a way of escape. Xerxes, who at the time was the greatest king, and even though there would be other greater, you must be a little awed by him. Now, magnify that by a million.

If you're a Christian, you've been saved by God, who not only made today, but the sun to rule over it. He not only created you, but had sent Christ to save you. There has never been and never will be anyone like God. In the end times, we will see one raised up who will be the closest shadow of God in the form of the Anti-Christ. But if you read the end of the story, even he will be nothing compared to Jehovah God. He is not just the ruler over the universe, but the creator of it. Life can be hard. Difficult times happen, and pain can't be avoided. When life doesn't make sense, do you turn to God or do you turn away from God? Let the Book of Esther encourage you that God is always present. Jesus called us friends in John 15:15. And the Spirit is our helper (John 14:26). Trust and obey as Esther did, and watch God silently weave all the events for his glory and for our good.