**Esther Commentary**

**Esther Chapter 1**

Est 1:2

**“sat on the throne of his kingdom.”** In this context, when the king is already said to be reigning, the fact that he is sitting on his throne refers to the country being secure and peaceful, i.e., he is not at war and in the field somewhere leading his troops.

**“palace-fortress.”** The word we translate as palace-fortress is *biyrah* (#01002 בִּירָה), which is not originally a Hebrew word but is a loanword from the Persians that means palace, castle, citadel, fortress. Scholars and archaeologists agree that in Esther it means the fortified part of the city that contained the residence of the king, and thus was a citadel, acropolis, or kind of palace-fortress. Just before the time of Christ, Herod the Great built a huge and very well-fortified palace complex in West Jerusalem. The towers were so huge and grand that when the Romans conquered Jerusalem in AD 70, they left them intact so visitors could see the tremendous feat the Romans accomplished in conquering the city. The word occurs ten times in Esther (Esther 1:2, 5; 2:3, 5, 8; 3:15; 8:14; 9:6, 11, 12).

Est 1:3

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. This would have been a huge meal with lots of wine.

Est 1:4

**“180 days.”** Some historians doubt whether it would be possible to have a single feast that lasted half a year. For example, could the officials of the kingdom really be away from their posts for that long? They suggest that the feast lasted half a year but the dignitaries came at different times during that period. While that may be likely, it is also possible that the feast really did last half a year. We just do not know for sure.

Est 1:5

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 1:6

**“There were hangings.”** One only has to read this verse in several different versions to discover that what it is saying or how to translate it is not clear. It uses many technical words and words that only occur once and whose meaning is uncertain. Some scholars have proposed that this was done on purpose to elevate the exotic nature of the scene.

**“porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and *other* precious stones.”** The text has words for the stones that are debated, and so the English translations vary somewhat. In any case, the scene was elegant in the extreme.

Est 1:8

**“this command.”** According to some ancient historians, the normal rule in Persia was that when the king drank, everyone else had to drink. The king made an exception for this feast.

Est 1:9

**“made a banquet.”** According to the ancient sources, it does not seem customary in Persia that women were excluded from eating with men. Queen Esther will later have a banquet for the king and Haman that she herself attended. It is possible that the guest list was so long that a separate feast for the women was thought appropriate, or there may have been other, unstated reasons.

Est 1:10

**“merry.”** The Hebrew word is *tov* (#02896 טוֹב), and it basically means “good,” but it has a very large semantic range of things that are “good.” In this context of a drinking feast, for example, *tov* could include everything from happy to really drunk. The context shows us that Ahasuerus the king was at least somewhat drunk.

Est 1:11

**“with the royal crown.”** It has long been debated if Ahasuerus demanded Vashti to come show off her beauty naked except for her crown. That seems to have been suggested in part because it would seem to more logically justify her refusal to come. But given the way wives were protected from the eyes of people outside the royal household, she may have refused to come simply on the basis of modesty. Note the fact that even here in Esther the women did not feast with the men, but had their own feast apart from the men. It does seem to be unlikely that the king would want to parade his wife naked in front of others. We will likely never know for sure. It is also possible that a factor in her decision was that she knew the king was drunk, and thought he might regret what he had done. So along with her own modesty she might have been thinking about protecting the king from adverse public opinion.

Est 1:12

**“But Queen Vashti refused.”** The reason that Vashti refused is not given, but the king became very angry for a number of reasons. He was drunk, and that amplified things. Also, he was embarrassed in front of his guests because Vashti openly disobeyed him. Also, even the Queen was considered a subject of the king, and as such she could not disobey him; anyone else who did so would likely have been quickly executed. Vashti’s disobeying his public command made him look like a weak king, which, given all the people who would have loved to kill the king and take his throne, could be very dangerous.

Est 1:13

**“the times.”** It was considered very important in ancient cultures to know when to do things. Later in Esther, Haman wants to destroy the Jews, but tries to determine the proper time to do so (Esth. 3:7). The ancient cultures had many different ways of determining what to do and what was a good time to do it. For example, Ezekiel mentions the king of Babylon using divination to find out what to do. He looks at the liver, shakes arrows, and consults with teraphim, which were personal gods of the household (Ezek. 21:21). The wise men who knew or could discern the times, and then who could give advice about what to do, were valuable and usually powerful men.

Est 1:14

**“Who See The King’s Face**.” This is a title for the close advisors to the king (see commentary on 2 Kings 25:19).

**“sat first.”** It was customary for rulers to sit while others stood, so the phrase “sat first” would be equivalent to top rulers. For sitting being equivalent to ruling, see commentary on Isaiah 14:13.

Est 1:16

**“Memucan said.”** Memucan was quite the politician. For one thing, he takes the king’s anger from being a personal offense because Vashti has disobeyed him, to a kind of righteous indignation because Vashti’s action will cause discord throughout the entire kingdom, so the king is acting very kingly and in the best interest of his people in dealing very harshly with her. If Herodotus is correct, Memucan is also working in his best interest because the king was supposed to take a wife from the seven families that helped him come to the throne (cf. Esther 1:14), so Memucan likely thought that if Vashti was deposed the kings next wife might come from his own family, increasing his influence in the kingdom.

Est 1:18

**“contempt and wrath.”** Given the culture, in which women were subject to the violence of the men, it is likely that Memucan was referring to the contempt that would be shown by the women and the wrath of the men that would follow.

Est 1:19

**“Vashti.”** She is referred to as “queen” when she is mentioned before this (Esther 1:9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17). This is the first time Vashti is not referred to as “Queen,” (something Memucan would have done on purpose), and she is never referred to as “queen” after this.

**“the laws of the Persians and the Medes.”** Media had been a powerful nation but had been conquered by the Persians. Nevertheless, they had much in common, including some ancient laws. For more on the country of Media, see the REV commentary on Jeremiah 51:11.

Est 1:22

**“speak the language of his own people.”** This reflects upon the custom of the rich and powerful marrying many wives including wives from foreign countries who did not speak the language of the husband. Thus the king’s edict emphasized the fact that a man who married a foreign wife had no obligation to learn her language; she was to learn his.

**Esther Chapter 2**

Est 2:3

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

**“house of the women.”** This was in keeping with the custom of keeping women’s quarters separate from where men lived and worked. The “house of the women” is the harem (the word “harem” was used both for the place where the wives lived and also for the wives themselves).

Est 2:5

**“Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish.”** The scholars are divided about this genealogy, some saying that it only uses important names in the genealogy of Mordecai, while others say that the four generations follow one after the other, which is most likely correct. That Mordecai would have an ancestor named “Kish” would be common, because the names of famous people were often repeated in genealogies. That Mordecai’s genealogy was given back to his great-grandfather Kish was likely to make the connection between Kish, the father of King Saul, the great enemy of the Amalekites, and Haman, a descendant of the Amalekites who hated the Jews. Actually, the fact that the genealogy mentions Kish and not King Saul is evidence that it is genuine. If it were an invented genealogy and the book of Esther was an invented story, like some liberal theologians teach, then we would expect that the name in the genealogy would have been “Saul” so the parallel between Saul and the Amalekites and Haman and the Jews would have been more obvious and dramatic.

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 2:6

**“Jeconiah.”** Jeconiah has several names in the Bible. He is called Jehoiachin (cf. 2 Kings 24:8-12), and also “Coniah” (cf. Jer. 22:24, 28).

Est 2:8

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 2:19

**“Mordecai was sitting in the king’s gate.”** In the biblical culture of the Old Testament, it was the custom that the elders of a city would sit at the city gate (Gen. 19:1, 9; Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 4:18; Esther 2:19, 21; 3:2; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 2:49). In order for Mordecai to sit in the king’s gate, he would have had to have already been recognized in the city as an important person. He would have been some kind of elder or official with position and power. He did not “just happen to be there,” that would not have been allowed. Even the use of the word “sit” in this context meant he had some kind of powerful or ruling position.

[For more on the elders at the gate, see commentary on Ruth 4:11. For Wisdom being at the city gate, see commentary on Prov. 1:21. For more on the meaning of “sit” in this context, see commentary on Isa. 14:13, “sit.”]

Est 2:21

**“was sitting in the King’s Gate.”** It was customary for kings and officials to sit in the gate and judge the people of the city and conduct business (e.g., 2 Sam. 19:8; 1 Kings 22:10; 2 Chron. 18:9; Esther 2:21; Jer. 38:7; Dan. 2:49). The fact that Mordecai was sitting in the King’s Gate points out that he was an official or important man of some rank, otherwise he would not have been allowed to sit there.

**“assassinate.”** The literal Hebrew is an idiom: they sought to “stretch forth a hand against” King Ahasuerus. They wanted to kill him.

Est 2:23

**“the scroll of the Events of the Days.”** More literally, the “Words of the Days,” but here “words” more closely means our events. This was the daily chronicle of what happened in the Persian kingdom.

**Esther Chapter 3**

Est 3:1

**“Haman.”** Haman was “the enemy of the Jews” (Esther 3:10; 8:1; 9:10, 24), and a representative and prophetic picture of the Devil himself (see commentary on Esther 5:14).

**“the Agagite.”** It has long been believed by both Jews and conservative Christians that Haman is a descendant of Agag, who was a king of the Amalekites at the time of Saul (1 Sam. 15:8-9, 32-33). Although there is no way to prove that, God is the Author of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16), and one of the purposes of the Bible is to inform us of things we need to know to understand how evil and evil spirits can work through many generations. Given that, what Jews and Christians have believed for centuries about Haman being a descendant of Agag makes sense and fits with the overall purpose of Scripture.

We know that when Saul killed the Amalekites as recorded in 1 Samuel 15, he did not kill all of them because there were still Amalekites during the reign of David (1 Sam. 27:8; 30:1). Since Agag was the king of the Amalekites during the time of Saul, it makes sense that like most kings he would have had more than one wife and would have had quite a few sons. Those sons were princes, and most likely at least some of them would have acted as under-rulers to Agag and lived in cities scattered around the Amalekite kingdom. That explains why when Saul killed the Amalekites as recorded in 1 Samuel 15, some of the sons of Agag survived—they were not in the cities that Saul attacked. Furthermore, those sons had descendants who then survived through the reigns of David and other Judean kings, and eventually moved into other areas of the ancient Near East such that by the time of Esther, which was some 500 years after Saul, there were descendants of Agag, Agagites, in the Persian empire. Add to that the fact that it is common in the Eastern culture for people to have very long historical memories, including blood feuds that last for generations, and we can see why when Haman got angry at Mordecai he did not just want to kill Mordecai, but he wanted to use the occasion to exterminate all the Jews. Actually, Mordecai felt the same way about Haman as Haman did about Mordecai. Mordecai would not bow down before Haman because Mordecai was a Jew and he knew the Amalekites were enemies of God (Esther 3:4).

Est 3:2

**“servants who were in the king’s gate.”** This is an instance where “servants” is used of the royal officials of the king. While technically they were his “servants,” they were his royal officials, which is why they were at the gate (cf. “royal staff” HCSB; “royal officials” NIV; “king’s officials” NLT). The elders and important people of a city usually went to the gate of the city to meet people and conduct business.

[For more on the elders at the gate, see commentary on Ruth 4:11 and Prov. 1:21. For more on “servants” being used for people of high position in the kingdom, see commentary on 2 Sam. 11:1.]

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. The word translated “bowed down,” *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Est 3:6

**“thought it beneath him.”** One of the meanings of the Hebrew word *bazah* (#0959 בָּזָה) in this context (cf. *HALOT*;[[1]](#footnote-18423) NAB translation.

**“put forth his hand against Mordecai.”** This is idiomatic for coming against someone, in this case, it is almost euphemistic for killing Mordecai.

**“So Haman sought to destroy all the Jews.”** Haman was rightly called “wicked,” because of the way he acted. Although the Bible does not say so, he was very likely a child of the Devil like some Pharisees were at the time of Jesus. Jesus told the Pharisees who were trying to kill him, “You are of *your* father the Devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44). People in league with the Devil do the works of the Devil, so by studying the people in the Bible who are in league with the Devil we get a good look at the true character of the Devil. The Devil and his people are ruthless, heartless, enemies of God, and we see that in Haman. In studying Haman we learn about the Devil and his people.

[For information on Haman’s death being typological of the Devil’s death, see commentary on Esther 7:10.]

Est 3:7

**“Pur.”** *Pur* is an Akkadian loanword, and therefore likely unfamiliar to the people reading the Hebrew text, thus the explanation of what “*Pur*” meant.

**“from day to day.”** The custom and method used in casting lots was unknown, and the Hebrew text is not clear on what was done or how. It seems extremely unlikely that Haman met with his astrologers and magicians to cast lots every day until a propitious day was found. If they cast lots from day to day, they would start with a day and if the lot said “no,” they would ask about the next day, and in that matter they would move “from day to day, and from month to month.” This process would have taken a while but would have been accomplished in one day. There is little doubt that God had his hand on the date because from Nisan, the first month, to Adar, the twelfth month, there was a year’s time, and so God had time to work behind the scenes with the situation so the Jews could be saved.

Est 3:10

**“signet rings.”** A signet ring was a ring that was engraved with special letters and/or characters that identified the owner of the ring. In this case, the king’s signet ring gave Haman the authority to sign documents in the king’s name.

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Est 3:15

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

**Esther Chapter 4**

Est 4:8

**“explain it to her.”** It is very possible that Esther could not read the decree and needed it to be explained to her.

**Esther Chapter 5**

Est 5:6

**“banquet of wine.”** After the king and Haman had finished eating food at the banquet, they would begin to drink wine, and this is referred to in this verse as the “banquet of wine.” The ESV tries to clarify the verse by translating it, “And as they were drinking wine after the feast.” Although it is a very loose translation, it captures the meaning.

Est 5:14

**“stake.”** The Hebrew is literally “tree” or “wood.” It was a wooden stake. The stake itself could not have been 75 feet, for one thing, there would be no way to get Mordecai’s body up to the top of it. It was on some wall or platform as a base, then placed on top of that such that the top was 75 feet off the ground and easy to see. The Assyrians and Persians did not hang people from the “gallows” by the neck like Westerners are used to. Instead, their custom, documented as far back as the Code of Hammurabi about the time of Abraham, was to impale people on a stake. Usually, the stake went through the front of the body and under the rib cage, and this practice can be seen in the Assyrian bas-relief rock cut that was made to celebrate the Assyrian victory over the biblical city of Lachish. The victim was “hung” on the stake, but not hung by a rope. He was hung, or suspended, on the stake. Many versions say “impaled” instead of “hung” for clarity (cf. NAB, NIV, NLT, JPS Tanakh, and the translation by Robert Alter[[2]](#footnote-28843)).

Haman was “the enemy of the Jews” (Esther 3:10; 8:1; 9:10, 24), and a representative and prophetic picture of the Devil himself. Haman schemed to kill Mordecai, the figurative head of the Jews by hanging him on a stake, and thus rid the earth of God’s people. The Devil schemed to kill the Messiah on the cross and by doing so get rid of the Messiah and God’s people, who then could not be redeemed. But God worked to turn the schemes upside down. Haman was impaled on his own stake, and instead of killing the Messiah and God’s people, Jesus’ death on the cross ensured the death of the Devil and the salvation of God’s people.

**“50 cubits high.”** The Hebrew is “50 cubits,” which is about 75 feet or 23 meters.

**Esther Chapter 6**

Est 6:1

**“could not sleep.”** This is idiomatic. The literal Hebrew reads “the king’s sleep fled away.”

Est 6:13

**“of Jewish descent.”** Literally, “of the seed [or offspring] of the Jews.”

**Esther Chapter 7**

Est 7:8

**“the *guards* covered Haman’s face.”** The Hebrew text simply reads, “they covered Haman’s face,” but the people reading Esther around the time it was written were quite familiar with Persian court customs and understood that the king was attended by guards who protected him and his honor. The king of Persia had a force of 10,000 men who the Greek historian Herodotus referred to as “the immortals” because as soon as one of the men was killed, wounded, or sick, he was immediately replaced by another man. The immortals were crack troops who fought for the king, and 1,000 of them were handpicked to be the king’s bodyguards. It seems certain that some of them were in constant attendance to the king to protect him from attack and dishonor.

It was almost certainly the custom in Persia, like it was in Greece and Rome, that no condemned person had the right to look on one as exalted as the king, so the face of a condemned man was covered in the presence of the king. That certainly fits the circumstance occurring in Ahasuerus’ court. As soon as King Ahasuerus accused Haman of trying to rape Queen Esther in his very presence in his own house (even if what he said was hasty and somewhat hyperbolic), the guards took the cue and covered Haman’s face. Haman was doomed and was soon afterward impaled on the stake he had set up for Mordecai.

Est 7:9

**“75 feet.”** The Hebrew is “50 cubits,” using the standard cubit of about 18 inches the height of the top of the stake was about 75 feet (about 23 meters).

Est 7:10

**“So they impaled Haman on the stake that he had prepared for Mordecai.”** That Haman died on the stake that he intended to kill Mordecai on is irony but also contains some typology. Haman was the enemy of the Jews, God’s people, and as such was a type of the Devil. Haman ended up dying on the stake he made for Mordechai, and in a figurative way, the Devil died on the “stake” (the cross) he had made for Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross the fate of the Devil was sealed once and for all. Jesus died on the cross but God raised him from the dead in a new, glorious body, whereas when Jesus died on the cross, the Devil’s death in the Lake of Fire was sealed once and for all. The stake that Haman intended to have kill Mordecai killed him instead, and the cross that the Devil intended to kill Jesus with actually sealed the death of the Devil.

**Esther Chapter 8**

Est 8:2

**“signet rings.”** A signet ring was a ring that was engraved with special letters and/or characters that identified the owner of the ring. The king had given the ring to Haman earlier (see commentary on Esther 3:10).

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Est 8:14

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 8:15

**“purple.”** Purple dye was rare and very expensive so it was fitting for Mordecai to wear a royal purple cloak (see commentary on 2 Chron. 3:14).

Est 8:17

**“banquet.”** The Hebrew word can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine. This would have been a huge meal with lots of wine and likely beer as well.

**Esther Chapter 9**

Est 9:6

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 9:7

**“and…and.”** The list of the ten sons of Haman is couched as the figure of speech polysyndeton, “many ands.”[[3]](#footnote-13454) In polysyndeton, the word “and” before every item in the list puts an emphasis on each individual item in the list. So in this list, each son is emphasized. Haman’s sons were a threat to the Jews, and every one of them was executed.

[For more on polysyndeton, see commentary on Mark 12:30.]

Est 9:11

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 9:12

**“palace-fortress.”** See commentary on Esther 1:2.

Est 9:17

**“eating, drinking.”** The Hebrew word is generally translated as “banquet,” and can mean “drinking bout,” and it generally refers to a meal with wine.

Est 9:28

**“each and every generation, every family, every province, and every city.”** The Hebrew text is idiomatic and hard to exactly reproduce in good English: “in every generation and generation; family and family; province and province; and city and city.”

**Esther Chapter 10**

1. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18423)
2. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A translation with commentary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28843)
3. Cf. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 208, “polysyndeton.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13454)