

Handout Esther Lesson 1

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

BIBLICAL PERIOD	# 9 THE RETURN FROM EXILE			
FOCUS	Jewish Community in Jeopardy		Salvation of the Jewish Community	
COVENANT	THE SINAI COVENANT			
SCRIPTURE	LXX 1:a-----2:21-----5:1-----8:4-----10:3-LXX 3-1			
DIVISION	Introduction: Mordecai’s dream, disgrace of Vashti, Esther becomes queen of Persia	Haman plots to kill the Jews and the decree of the King	Vindication and salvation of Mordecai and Haman’s death	Esther warns the Jews and victory of the Jewish community
TOPIC	Feasts of the King		Feasts of Esther	
	Danger from enemies		Deliverance by God	
LOCATION	Susa, the Persian royal capital			
TIME	About 11 years [484-473 BC]			

TIMELINE: [all dates BC]

Judah vassal state of Persia-----			-----Greek Empire-----				Hellenistic period-----		
538	516/17	479	458	445	332	323	250	166	
#1 return of exiles	Jerusalem Temple rebuilt	Esther Queen of Persia	#2 return led by the Ezra	#3 return led by Nehemiah	conquest of Alexander the Great	death of Alexander	Greek translation of the Old Testament = Septuagint	revolt of the Maccabees against Greek Seleucid	

Significant dates that impact the Book of Esther:

1. The Edict of King Cyrus allowing all those taken into exile by the Babylonians to return to their homelands (539 BC).
2. The first return to Judah from the Babylonian exile (538 BC).
3. The First Persian invasion of Greece (492-490 BC).
4. The Second Persian invasion of Greece (480-479 BC).
5. Esther becomes queen of Persia in the 7th year of Xerxes’ reign (479 BC)
6. Ezra’s mission to Judah (458 BC).
7. Nehemiah’s mission to Judah (445 BC).

(all dates are approximate and may vary according to source)

The Greek Septuagint Old Testament (abbreviated as LXX) has a version of Esther with six passages (107 verses) not included in the Jewish or Protestant Bibles which refer to them as “the Additions.” Scholars of the Catholic Church support the disputed passages of Esther as canonical and make these arguments for including them:

1. There is an absence of religious themes and elements in the Hebrew text. The Persian king is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses, but there isn’t even one mention of the Lord God of Israel.
2. Basic Old Testament themes like the Law and God’s covenant with Israel are absent as well as

spiritual concepts like prayer, divine election, salvation, worship, and the Temple. Fasting is the only religious practice mentioned in the Hebrew version (Esth 4:16; 9:31).

3. The historicity of some of the events in the narrative of the Hebrew version is questionable.
4. The Hebrew text is primarily interested in providing the historical background for establishing the Feast of Purim which may have been initially a pagan feast.

The Greek text of Esther corrects several of the weaknesses in the Hebrew text, significantly changing the emphasis of the story. For example, God, or the word Lord (referring to the God of Israel) occurs over 50 times in the Greek version of the Book of Esther and includes these elements:

1. fearing to offend God and the willingness to obey His commandments
2. praying to the Lord
3. God will be His people's help and salvation
4. petitioning God's assistance
5. God's direct intervention in unfolding events
6. God is with Mordecai
7. God gave Esther courage

The Hebrew text is primarily interested in providing the historical background for establishing the Feast of Purim, but the Greek version concentrates on the religious themes of God's concern for His people and their deliverance by Him even while living in pagan lands. Esther and Mordecai are the heroes in the Hebrew version, but in the Greek, God is the hero.

The events in the story of Esther took place between Chapters 6 and 7 in the Book of Ezra.

The main characters in the Book of Esther:

1. Mordechai is a wise and just Jew living in Persia and serving in the court of the Persian king.
2. King Ahasuerus I, also known as Xerxes I, ruled from 486-465 BC. He is the typical all-powerful and self-centered pagan ruler.
3. Haman, a chief minister and favorite of King Ahasuerus, is the archetypical villain.
4. Vashti is Ahasuerus' Persian queen who falls out of favor with the king for attempting to preserve her royal dignity.
5. Hadassah (renamed Esther) is a beautiful Jewish maiden raised by her elderly cousin Mordechai. King Ahasuerus chooses her to replace Queen Vashti, and she, along with her cousin, become God's instruments to save the Jews living in the Persian Empire from a Persian holocaust.

Dates in LXX Chapter 1 and Chapter 1 in the Hebrew version:

484 BC: the second year of King Ahasuerus/Xerxes' reign (LXX 1:a)

483 BC: the third year of King Ahasuerus/Xerxes' reign (1:3)

The summary of the story of Esther in the LXX is in the account of Mordecai's symbolic dream in Catholic versions of Esther and finds its fulfillment at the end of the story. The divisions of the Book of Esther in our study:

1. Prologue: Mordecai's dream (LXX 1:1-r)
2. Esther becomes a queen (1:1-2:18)
3. The confrontation between Mordecai and Haman (2:19-3:6)

4. Decree to exterminate the Jews (3:7-13; LXX 13a-y; 3:14-15)
5. The Jews implore God's help (4:1-8, LXX 8a-b, 9-17, LXX17a-z)
6. Mordecai and Esther outwit Haman (LXX 5:1a-2b; 5:3-14; 6:1-14)
7. Haman's disgrace and execution (7:1-10)
8. God saves His people (8:1-12, LXX 12a-v, 13-17)
9. The institution of the Feast of Purim (9:1-19, LXX 19a-9:32)
10. Epilogue (10:1-3, LXX 3a-1)

The themes of the Book of Esther: God listens to the prayers of His people and intervenes in human history by coming to their aid. However, He also expects, when possible, for His people to take the initiative in cooperating with Him to work to resolve their problems. The book is also a summary of the virtues necessary for gaining God's favor that includes humility and fidelity to God's commandments epitomized by Esther.

The Greek version of the Book of Esther begins with Mordecai's dream foretelling future events that come to pass in the unfolding of the narrative. The images of the dream in the Greek text of verses d, e, and g are each introduced by the words *kai idou* ("and behold!"). The elements in the dream include:

1. Cries, noise, thunder, earthquakes, and disorder over the earth (verse d).
2. Two dragons engaged in a fight to the death (verses e).
3. The struggle of the two dragons initiates a war against the just (verses e-f).
4. The nation of the just cried out to God that resulted in a little spring turning into a great flood of many waters (verses h-i).
5. A light like the sun signifying divine revelation in the victory of the humble over the mighty (verse k).

The elements of the dream symbolize:

1. hyperbole to represent a crisis of life or death for the Jews.
2. Mordecai and Haman, the two deadly enemies.
3. The enmity of Haman initiates a planned genocide of the Jews living in the Persian Empire.
4. The Jews cry out to God for His intervention, and Esther, the "little spring," brings about a great flood of protection for her people.
5. The Jews are victorious over their enemies.

The symbolic meaning of the dream becomes clear at the end of the narrative.

1:20 the words *Let this edict [issued by the king] be proclaimed* in the Hebrew text appear to contain a reverse acrostic of the Tetragrammaton YHWH, the Divine Name: **Hi'Wekhol-Hannashim Yitenu**. It is an anomaly that appears four times in the Hebrew version of the Book of Esther (also see 5:4, 13 and 7:5) along with the acrostic formed from the phrase "that there was evil determined against him" in the Hebrew text (translated in the NJB as "was determined on his ruin") in 7:7, spelling the acrostic EHYHE, which is the same backward and forwards for "I AM sent" in Hebrew, suggesting the Divine Name YHWH and His direct action in the story (Ex 3:14-15).