

# Esther

## Objectives of this lesson

1. Explain why the return to the land turned out to be less exciting than the original returnees may have hoped for.
2. Describe the different styles, but the singular goal, of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.
3. Explain how the character of the main characters of the book of Esther reflects upon the character of God and influences the message of the book.

## Some key terms

*Lots, purim, gallows, Susa, post-exile, providence, canon, LXX, Additions to Esther, apocrypha*

## Introduction to Esther

### *Why this is the climactic study*

I've chosen the book of Esther as the climax of our study for several reasons. First it comes very near the end the Old Testament time period. Although in our Bibles the books are arranged topically, making it seem like Esther happens in the middle of the Old Testament period, it is actually one of the very *last* stories to have happened. And because it is one of the very last words from God, it assumes that its readers will understand everything that has happened up to this point in the unfolding program of God. This is one reason why it makes for a good interpretive test case for us. Can we bring everything we've learned from the Old Testament so far to help us understand why this is far more meaningful than a story of romance and courage?

- Historical—inform the reader about facts that happened in the past
  - *What's good?* The Bible is true and accurate
  - *What's the problem?* It leaves out many "important" historical details, because...
- Moral—inform the reader about how to behave
  - *What's good?* Most of us need to behave better.
  - *What's the problem?* every story does not prescriptively tell me how to behave better; e.g. Abraham, Gen. 12
  - Becoming a "nice" person isn't really what God cares about most
- Theological—revealing WHO God is to draw the reader into relationship with him
  - *What's good?*
  - *What's the problem?*

Another reason why this is an interesting test case is that it is a well-known book and most people assume they already know the point of the story. In most popular Christian literature from Veggie Tales to the 2006 movie, "One Night with the King," Esther is considered to be a courageous role model who stands up for her people. This is why it should be fun to reconsider an old familiar story from the new perspective provided by our semester together and ask in particular, "What does this story teach us about God?"



## Historical and geographical background

First of all, let's talk about the *historical* context. The action of the book spans approximately 6 years between 483 and 477 BC. Most importantly for our purposes this means that the events happen *after* the exile is over. The last tribes were exiled from Israel in 586 and Zerubbabel led a return back to Jerusalem in approximately 536 BC. Therefore, the story of Esther happens at least sixty years post-exile well after it is legal for Jewish people to return to the land.

Secondly, the *geographical* context is important as well. The events of the book transpire in the Persian capital of Susa. For years God's people had been exiled to Babylon, but Susa, in the northeastern portion of the Fertile Crescent, was even *further* away from the land of Israel. We'll talk about the significance of these facts in a moment.



## Theological background

### Why is God seemingly absent from the book?

God is clearly present in the book—but only from the perspective of a believing person. That is, what might be dismissed as mere coincidence by an unbeliever, will be clearly seen by the believer as a *providential* act of God. He does not break the laws of nature with miraculous and powerful signs; instead, he works behind the scenes. The way God turns around the fortunes of Haman and the way Mordecai just “happens” to uncover the plot to assassinate the king are all seen as the sovereign and providential work of God. The problem, however, is that the author never actually gives God the credit nor does he in anyway associate the name of God with the events in the book. The most celebrated theological fact from this book is the absence of the name of God and references to his law and worship of him. In fact, this was one of the last books to be included in the canon of the Old Testament because it lacked any reference to God.

When we think of the rule about noticing repetitions and patterns this book again stands alone. In every other book of the bible the name of God is found numerous times. For instance, when we compare the name of God in Genesis 1 with the book of Esther it is clear that this book does not fit the pattern. This is such a conspicuous absence that during the time between the testaments some Jewish people sought to “remedy” the situation by actually adding certain spiritual elements to the book that weren't there in the first place! These can be found in the apocryphal book of *The Additions of Esther*. Here's one portion from chapter 14:

*1 Queen Esther also, being in fear of death, resorted unto the LORD: 2 And laid away her glorious apparel, and put on the garments of anguish and mourning: and instead of precious ointments, she covered her head with ashes and dung, and*

*she humbled her body greatly, and all the places of her joy she filled with her torn hair. 3 And she **prayed** unto the **LORD God of Israel**, saying, O my **LORD**, thou only art our **King: help me**, desolate woman, which have no helper but thee.*

In this passage we have several things added to the text such as the name of God, repentance, and prayer! While evangelicals would do something as bold as rewrite or add to the words of Scripture we might accomplish the same thing by the way we interpret or easily “assume” things into the text. For example, in 4:16 when Esther speaks to Mordecai “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me,” you will notice that prayer is not mentioned. However, that doesn’t stop most of us. Many simply *assume* that she prays as well, even though the text does not say so. We might say, “Well, everywhere else in the Bible when people fast they also pray.” But that might also be a strong argument for the other side if we reason that everywhere else where fasting is mentioned it *is* accompanied by prayer and it *isn’t* here. This simply doesn’t fit the pattern, and maybe it is an intentional statement that we shouldn’t add to, either explicitly or implicitly! So why would God tell us this story where his name is completely left out? This is too important to skim over. I’ll just propose it and let you answer it in the end. But let’s make one thing clear—the impulse of the ancient Jewish people who thought God didn’t write the original text very well and simply added to it, were accomplishing the same thing many people do today by their *interpretation*, except that the ancients were a little more honest about it. This is a good test for all of us: Do we trust the inerrancy of the Scripture *as it is* and are we desperate to hear it on its own terms, or do we feel it needs some help from us?

### Is Esther a role model?

A second theological issue is whether this assumption about Esther being a role model is valid or not. She is beautiful and does save the nation, at least humanly speaking, but does she live in a biblically faithful way that we should attempt to follow? We’ll consider four factors: *foreign soil*, *food*, *Jewishness*, and the nature of the *contest* itself.

#### *Foreign soil*

Now to us geography is one of those truly amoral subjects unless you think it’s spiritual to be warm in the winter, in which case you move to Phoenix. But to the ancient world, and as we have seen in Genesis 12, the land of Israel is loaded with spiritual significance. It was the sacred space where God promised to bless the descendants of Jacob. The only reason not to be in the land was if they were exiled by God as a punishment, but as soon as the exile was over in 536 BC the faithful Jewish person should have returned to the place where the temple and its attendant worship was. Although Esther is probably not to blame for where she was living I believe that Mordecai, her guardian is. For him to have remained in Susa when he had the opportunity to return reveals a lot about the importance of the promises of Genesis 12 to him. Abraham left everything by faith to go to the land of Israel (Heb 11:8). Why didn’t Mordecai?

### Food

Again, for us, the choice of water and vegetables sounds like a low-fat dietary choice and anything but a spiritual decision. Yet, for an ancient Jewish person living in a foreign land food was a critical issue. In the first chapter of the book of Daniel we quickly learn that what a faithful Jewish person would eat and not eat was an accurate measure of his or her faithfulness to the Law of God. Daniel chose vegetables because it was safe; there was no such thing as an unclean vegetable. Meat, on the other hand, even though it might have been technically clean because it was lamb or beef, would have been slaughtered in an unclean way by a pagan chef (without the blood being properly drained) and therefore ultimately unacceptable to him. This is why Daniel refused. But twice in the text we're told that Esther chose to eat the food prepared in the pagan palace. What is the writer telling us about her relationship to Yahweh and his law?

### Jewishness

Mordecai instructed Esther to hide her Jewishness. Since the text doesn't reveal motives, we have to be careful about speculating. But since he tells her not to reveal her nationality when she is taken into the palace harem, I believe we're safe in at least assuming that Mordecai thought it might harm her chances of survival or at least success in the contest. This is why the final revelation of her Jewish identity comes so difficult for her in chapters 5 and 6. (At that point it becomes evident that she has kept something very important hidden from her husband for a long time). This factor of hiding the Jewishness is a bit harder to excuse, especially when compared with the stories of Daniel. By the way, Daniel is a good comparison with Esther simply because they were both single, Jewish people who lived outside the land of Israel. When Daniel was charged with praying to God (something with which Esther was never charged) he had the opportunity to either hide it and save himself or reveal it and honor God. He chose to go home and open up the windows and pray directly in front of them so that all could see. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine; hide it under a bushel, \_\_\_\_\_???

By the way, the argument that she might have lost her life if she had revealed her race surely would have carried little weight with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

### The contest

Although we might attempt to sanitize the story by thinking of it in terms of a modern-day beauty contest, an honest reflection on the text will demonstrate otherwise. The text has been discreet by not mentioning explicit details because the author assumes that everyone really knows what is happening. The search is made for *virgins*, who are then put in a *harem*, who then go into the *king's chambers for a night alone*, and who return to a *different* part of the harem. At the end of the time period he chooses a girl who has *pleased* him. Remember that just because this is in the Bible doesn't mean that it is condoned. Many events are recorded as they happen without comment because the discerning reader should be able to supply his own moral commentary. These people live in Persia and they're playing by Persian rules, and make no mistake, ancient, pagan monarchs played by their own rules that cared nothing for #metoo.

I was once asked to edit a series of devotionals for teen-age girls by a friend who had based her work on the story of Esther. When we got to this point in her devotional, I asked her, “How are you going to present this part of the story in a positive light for teenage girls?” Her response, “Well, it doesn’t actually say ‘they had sex.’” I responded that her words were technically accurate but the same is technically true for the book of Song of Solomon as well, though we all know what happens there. I asked her how she would account for the night alone with the king. Again, she theorized that perhaps she *entertained him with her wit!* I think you can see that there is no way around the fact that she sleeps with a man who is not her husband and marries a pagan man. He’s powerful and he is sexually attracted to her, but since when did these become reasons for disregarding God’s standards for marriage? What I hope you understand by now is that the literary design of this book is such that it is all presented in a very realistic and honest way. The girls sleep with the king and no one blinks twice. This is simply the way things are done in Persia. Are you beginning to see how seamlessly she fits into the culture? You should ask yourself how she can do this so easily. It is true that we’re working in a different time and culture, but we should ask if God’s rules change. If God still rewards Daniel for keeping the food laws would he smile upon Esther’s choice? If, at nearly the same time but on the far side of the fertile crescent, Ezra and Nehemiah are rebuking the people for their marriages with unbelieving foreigners would they turn a blind eye to Esther’s choices (Ezra 9—10; Neh 13:23–31)?

### Is Mordecai a role model?

One final question to be broached before I turn you loose on the book for yourselves involves the persons of Mordecai and Haman. In a similar way to Esther we want to explore whether Mordecai is intended as a role model. One of the interesting clues the author gives us is his lineage. We have learned in this class that genealogies are much more than mindless records and are important clues to the theological message. Mordecai is identified in 2:5 as “a son of Shimei, son of Kish.” If we look in the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, we find the story of Absalom’s assault on his father’s throne. David flees before his son arrives in Jerusalem and on his way out of town a descendant of Saul curses him (2 Samuel 16:5-17):

*<sup>5</sup>Then king David came to Bahurim. There a man from Saul’s extended family named Shimei son of Gera came out, yelling curses as he approached. <sup>6</sup>He threw stones at David and all of king David’s servants, as well as all the people and the soldiers who were on his right and on his left. <sup>7</sup>As he yelled curses, Shimei said, “Leave! Leave! You man of bloodshed, you wicked man! . . . <sup>13</sup>So David and his men went on their way. But Shimei kept going along the side of the hill opposite him, yelling curses as he threw stones and dirt at them.*

One of David’s mighty men offered to take care of this insubordinate man with the words “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over now and cut off his head.” Of course, this would have been the proper thing to do but David had mercy on him. Just to put this story in perspective, do you remember how David treated Saul when he cut off a small portion of Saul’s robe when Saul was in a cave relieving himself? After Saul had returned to his army David showed him the piece of fabric and said, basically, “I cut off your coat and I could have

cut out your heart, but I didn't." Saul repented that day, but so did David when afterwards the King James version says that "David's conscience smote him." What it means is that even though David acted graciously, and Saul was acting like a beast that David still felt bad for embarrassing "the Lord's anointed." This is the right attitude to demonstrate, and if this is right, then how would evaluate Shimei's actions? He should have been killed for his despicable treatment of God's king and what's important for us is that the writer of Esther wants to paint Mordecai with the same brush. What he's saying is that Mordecai is connected to Shimei—clearly not the most noble stock of Israel. You should ask yourself why.

As for Haman, we all know that he's the bad guy of bad guys, but there's still more to the story. Just like Mordecai, the author wants us to know Haman's background, so his lineage is listed as well (Esther 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). Haman is an Agagite, that is, a descendant of the old Amalekite king, Agag. Again, we turn in our Bibles back to the stories of the monarchy (1 Samuel 15). God had told Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely. When Saul returns from the battle Samuel hears sheep bleating in the background and asks how this could be? Saul responds:

*"I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king." So Samuel said:*

*"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,*

*As in obeying the voice of the LORD?*

*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,*

*And to heed than the fat of rams.*

*For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,*

*And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry."*

*32 Then Samuel said, "Bring me Agag king of the Amalekites."*

*Agag came to him confidently, thinking, "Surely the bitterness of death is past."*

*33 But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women." And Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal."*

Haman is the descendant of this ancient Amalekite king which helps to explain why this descendant of Saul, Mordecai, finds submission to him in the time of Esther so difficult—years of inherited racial animosity.

## Esther 1—3, Background of the Crisis

With this background, let's now work our way through the text of the book. In the first chapter Vashti is deposed, partly because her husband is lost in his own party. The text explains that King is not in full possession of his faculties in verse; he loves his wine (1:10–12)

*<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in **high spirits from wine**, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas—<sup>11</sup> to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. <sup>12</sup> But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.*

We don't know exactly why Vashti won't come or what the King has asked her to do, but partly because the text is silent, we can safely conclude that it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that this provides an opportunity to see inside the king's court and of course for Esther to rise to her position.

As we read this story it is important to be an active reader, that is, you should in some sense stand in judgment of the story rather than just passively accepting that "this is the way things are." What I mean specifically is the funny dialogue that takes place between the king and his counselors. Can you imagine the scene where the men ask for Vashti's punishment so that all the women in the kingdom won't rebel?

*<sup>16</sup> Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. <sup>17</sup> For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so **they will despise their husbands** and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' <sup>18</sup> This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be **no end of disrespect and discord.***

Really? Really? If the first lady of the US refused the President do you think the women of the land would stand up in arms? I really doubt that this is a realistic look at a historical situation. It's not that I think it didn't really happen, but I literally don't think this is a "sober" story. These guys are either in *high spirits* like the King or they themselves are just silly. Memukan, specifically, is intended to be a humorous character. Think of him as you would the character to the right and you'll begin to understand this first chapter. I believe that the critical reader should look at this situation and realize that all the men who are supposed to be in control are anything but. Literarily the text then suggests the question to the reader "Is anyone in control?" Of course, humanly speaking the answer is no! but this just powerfully points us to the Unseen One who is in total control, though no one on the pages of this story knows it!



In chapter 2 Esther is made queen. We've seen the rules of the contest and how she "wins." We've also met Mordecai and have been informed about his lineage as a descendant of Shimei. Finally, we have noted the contrast between Esther's diet and "witness" and "morality" and

“success” with Daniel. I put the last three in quotation marks because she completely fails to *witness* about God and her *morality* is a complete violation of God’s and one must ask “success at what price?” We’re so excited about the Disney story of the poor girl who becomes queen that we completely ignore the means by which she got there. Is it worth the promotion at work if one must sleep with the boss to achieve it? How should we define *success* in a faithful worldview? Hmm . . . I notice that Daniel has his hand up in the back of the class and wants to answer the question. Should we ignore him so we can feel the way we want to feel about this story?

In chapter 3 we learn of Haman’s plot to exterminate the Jews. Evidently this ancient feud between the Amalekite and the Jews erupts afresh between Mordecai and Haman. What really bothers Haman is that Mordecai won’t bow down. Mordecai is often given the benefit of the doubt and people assume that it is somehow morally wrong for him to bow down to a government official. While it would be wrong to worship a false image as the three Jewish boys refused to do in Daniel chapter 3, we must realize that Daniel himself respectfully honored king Nebuchadnezzar. Simply put, Mordecai’s failure to bow down to Haman probably has more to do with his lineage and rivalry than religious purity.

Haman decides to cast the lot or in Hebrew “pur” (the plural is Purim) just for fun, for a chance to see on what day the slaughter will take place. Again, what seems like chance is really providentially guided.



## Esther 4—9, The conflict and victory

In chapter 4 Mordecai urges Esther to intercede for the Jewish people before the king. But she doesn’t go at first, stating that she might die. With some prodding like “sweetheart, you either die now or later when they find out you’re Jewish” persuades her to go. What does this say about her personal motivations? I don’t really blame her, but I’m not sure she ranks up there as an eager, unselfish hero of the nation. Mordecai makes his famous statement in 4:14:

*For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

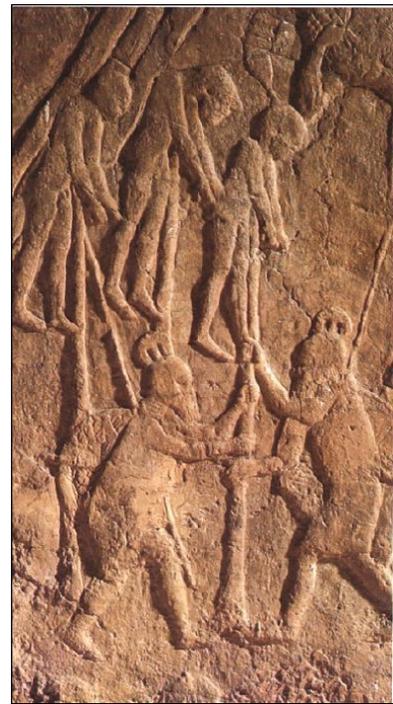
It is often interpreted as a reference to Yahweh, but my question is that if this is what he meant; wouldn’t this have been an excellent time to say it? But there is another, and what I think is a better option. One of the inherent difficulties of this translation is: if help arises from another place then why would Esther perish? In the original language we don’t have any punctuation including question marks. It is entirely possible that Mordecai’s first statement should be understood as a question<sup>1</sup>:

*For if you remain silent at this time, WILL relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place?*

And the proper rhetorical answer would be, “of course not!” This explains why then he concludes with “*but you and your father’s family will perish.*” Mordecai’s persuasion seems to be “You’re our only hope. No one else is going to help and if you don’t do something now, we’re all going to die.”

Finally, we notice that Esther’s request for fasting in 4:16 does not include prayer. Its absence is parallel to the absence of God’s name and although prayer accompanies fasting everywhere else in the Old Testament, we would do well to not add to the text and realize that this is an exception to the pattern. Why would a person fast and not pray? Fasting was and is a universal expression of distress and grief found in every religion, but to whom Esther was directing her petitions, if any, is not mentioned.

Esther’s first attempt at asking for the king’s help is aborted which sets us up for another day and night’s worth of intrigue. Haman goes home and boasts of his wealth, sons and honor but he still isn’t happy because of his hatred for Mordecai. His wife suggests a 75-foot gallows. Now we might joke about how high the gallows really need to be, but I must admit that this isn’t the instrument of execution that involves a rope and a noose. The trouble is that because we, in the modern world have no equivalent word for this ancient practice. The reference in ancient Persia and throughout the Middle East was to impalement. Again, the worldview was very different from ours. The purpose was not to execute a criminal but, even worse from their perspective, to humiliate him by the public abuse of the corpse. This is the reason for a 75-foot device then was to elevate the body far above the crowd to increase the public shame. The concept can be found in the Bible as well where such public shame indicated the curse of God (Deut 21:22–23) and where the action paid the price for sin and a curse was lifted from the land (2 Sam 21). This is actually one of the reasons why Jesus was “hung on a tree [pole]” as an act of humiliation as he was paying the price for our sin. Now, my point isn’t to draw a parallel between Haman and Jesus, just to point out the common cultural background of the idea of *hanging* or *exposing* a body on a *wooden pole* or *tree*. Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”



Chapter 6 contains some of the best, dark humor and drama in all the Old Testament. As Haman enters the court thinking, “I can’t wait to ask the king to kill Mordecai,” the King is thinking I can’t wait to ask Haman how to honor Mordecai.” Both have plans concerning Mordecai. The

King			Haman
Honor him	→	M	← Kill him
Honor him	→	O	← Kill him
Honor him	→	R	← Kill him
		D	
		E	
		C	
		A	
		I	

dramatic moment is intended to be comical as Haman understands the king's question of "what shall I do to honor this man who pleases me," to be a thinly veiled reference to himself. As he imagines an honor he would want for himself, he unwittingly sends the good fortune directly to his worst enemy and he (Haman) becomes the servant of the one he hates. Of course, the king prevails, much to the chagrin and rage of Haman. Perhaps this picture captures the feeling best! Notice how Haman's hopes have been completely reversed. The good things he wanted for himself his enemy now gets, and pretty soon the bad things he wanted for his enemy will be his! To make matters worse, when he tells his wife about his day, she responds "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" Now, let's talk about this for a second. Has Zeresh, his wife, suddenly become a believer in Yahweh? Of course not. Did she not know Mordecai was Jewish yesterday when she suggested the 75-foot gallows? Yes, that's why she suggested her husband kill him. What makes the



difference? I would suggest that having seen this turn of events, and simply being an observer of history, she knows that somehow these Jewish people always end up on top and that her husband is doomed. I wonder if her motives and beliefs are really any different from Mordecai's.

When Esther finally does get to her point it's the end for poor Haman. The king is in a rage and returns from his short "cool down" just in time to find Haman pleading for his life and falling down upon the reclining queen. This is an "oops moment" if there ever was one. "Anybody know where we hang this guy?" "There just happens to be a fresh 75-foot gallows just outside—well, how lucky, how convenient!" Not only that, but Mordecai gets several of the things that his enemy boasted about, namely his honor, his wealth, but not his sons. That won't come until the day of slaughter when the King asks Esther how she liked the slaughter and she asks for the death of all Haman's sons as well.

## The meaning

So, what does all this mean? These verses summarize things pretty well.

*9:24 For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. 25 But when the plot came to the king's attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 (Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word pur.)*

Remember what we just learned in Haggai and Zechariah—these promises of God were in serious doubt after the exile in Israel. The problem was that the curse of the Law still hung heavy over the people. The lack of king, God’s presence in the Temple, the loss of the *Urim* and *Thummim* and the small temple of Zerubbabel all conspired to fuel the fear that God had given up on his people.

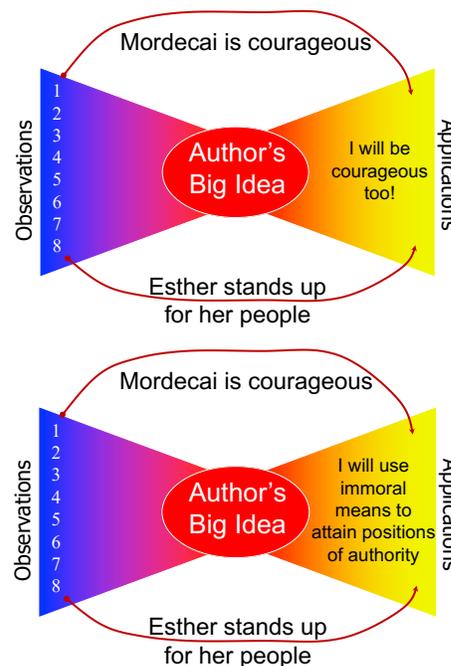
Daniel 9:24-27  
 Micah 5:2  
 2 Sam 7  
 49  
 12  
 3:15

No King  
 No God in the Temple  
 No "hot-line" to heaven  
 Squatty little Temple

What the book of Esther does is smash all those doubts with a powerful story of how God cares for his people who don’t even care enough about him to mention his name, return to his land, pray to him, or follow his laws from what they eat to whom they sleep with. I’m not trying to make Esther and Mordecai out to be evil people; I think they’re just like typical Israeli’s today who love their country but have pretty well compartmentalized God completely out of their lives. Does this ruin the story? Depends on who you think the hero is. Would the story of Hosea be better if Gomer were faithful? Perhaps, but we’d never know how incredible Hosea’s love if Gomer had been more like Ruth would we? Anyone can love Ruth, but it takes a man with God’s heart to love a Gomer and in my opinion, Esther is beautiful on the outside but inside I can’t tell the difference between her and Gomer. But that doesn’t hurt the story for me, because it simply tends to magnify the love of God who would care for his people, not because they’re nice, but because he is unconditionally committed to them. And if he cares for the people in Susa, how much more do you think he will care for those faithful people who are trying to scratch out a living in Jerusalem and waiting patiently for Messiah to come?

I think you’ve gotten the main theological idea but let me spend just a bit more time talking about the art of interpretation here. Can you hear a major caption buried in there anywhere? What we’ve tried to do is to explain the singular big idea of the author. The problem is that people, who aren’t trained in listening carefully for the whole voice, will often attempt to make quick and easy applications such as following some positive action of a character and then drawing a one-to-one application. The problem is twofold: Most importantly it obscures and misses the author’s main point and secondly, it allows no interpretive control over the book, that is, we could almost make the book say anything we wanted it to. In fact, if this is our hermeneutical method then there is nothing to prevent us from coming up with an application like this!

If we stay true to our interpretive rules, we’ll ask different questions and get better answers. They may not seem as immediately relevant, but really don’t you think we should let God be the one who decides

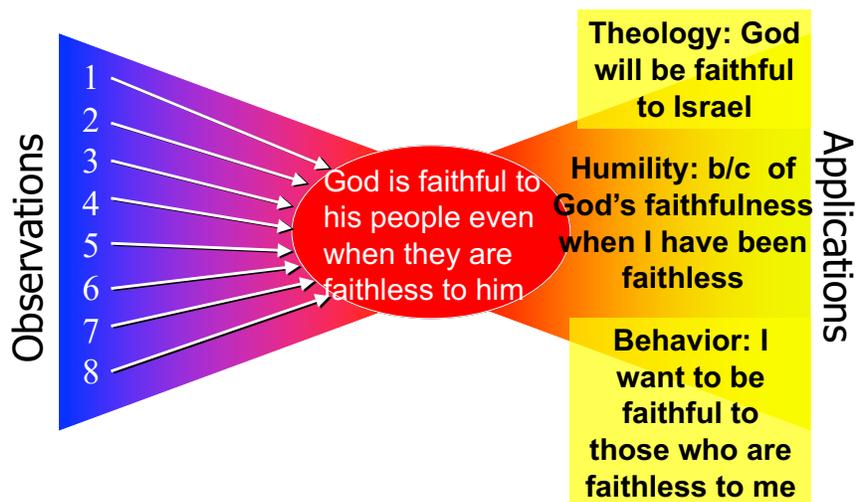


what's relevant and what we really need? This is another application of inerrancy. If God's word is true and accurate then it is also smart and wise and knows exactly what we need—far better than we do (2 Tim 3:16–17). Ponder for a moment what relevant applications would come our way if we focused first upon God.

*First*, in terms of theology we would learn that God will be faithful to Israel and this is why I still believe he has a future for the nation today. 99% of Jewish people today are no different than Esther and Mordecai were, very patriotic and zealous for their nation, but religiously apathetic.

*Second*, personally it is very humbling to realize that I, just like Esther, have received overwhelming good from God, not because of my faithfulness, but only because of his.

*Finally*, when we have spoken about the rule of finding out what the passage says about God, it doesn't mean that there aren't implications for me. As I see the character of my father displayed if I'm an adoring child my only goal is to become like him. According to this book (and countless other passages in the Bible) one of the best ways to do that is to be faithful to those who aren't faithful to me. To bless those who curse and to feed those who are enemies. Why? Because that's what my father does. He overcomes evil with Good and keeps his promises no matter what.



The reason the book of Esther is powerful and necessary is because there are still many Christians who still don't really believe God loves them and that's why they're desperately seeking to find affirmation from others or in a multitude of ways. For others this truth is important because, if they're honest, they really don't care much for Him. His name never comes up in normal conversation and they never pray to him. Life is spent trying to survive on one's own and He is basically absent from everyday life. Even so, He still cares for them. But as much as we have seen this testimony of the unconditional nature of God's promises in the Old Testament and the offer of Grace, we would remiss if we did not also warn of the truth that God is just and there will, one day, be an end to his offer of mercy. That is why humans cannot presume upon the grace of God. Today is the day of salvation. Look to Him while he may be found.

<sup>i</sup> See Frederic Bush, *Ruth–Esther*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 90.