

THE BOOK OF ESTHER – NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ONE

The story of Esther is unique but powerful. From a historical point of view it stands alone in the Old Testament in a time when there were no other recorded prophets or leaders, between 483 and 473 BC. The first contingent of Jews had returned from captivity in Babylon, now Persia, under the leadership of Zerubbabel with instructions to rebuild the temple in 536BC. Sixteen years after Esther's story Ezra would lead a large number of Jews back to Judah who would include many who could re-establish the ministry in the rebuilt temple. This is the group who would never have made it without the role Esther played in saving them. Nearly a century later in 445BC Nehemiah would return with a further group and a commission to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem. Esther is nowhere else referred to in the Old Testament. It is never quoted in the New Testament. It does not even mention God. It is the one glimpse of what happened to the Jews remaining in Persia who came very close to suffering a holocaust.

Esther tells the story of 3 men and 2 women who between them held the lives of tens of thousands in their hands. The first is Ahasuerus, better known in history as Xerxes the Great, a brilliantly successful military leader who briefly ruled from India to Ethiopia to Greece and was eventually assassinated by one of his own people. It was his army which was stopped by a force of 300 Spartans at the battle of Thermopylae, and which inspired the movie 'The 300'. The book of Esther tells of a different aspect of Xerxes' life, his marriage.

The story begins with some lavish showing off in which Xerxes bragged about his early success as king to a vast audience of followers. The celebration lasted for 6 months in which no expense was spared and ended with a seven day party in which a great quantity of alcohol was consumed. Xerxes' final scene of showing off was to be of his beautiful queen Vashti who was to parade before the guests on some royal catwalk. The intention presumably was to demonstrate that Xerxes was as successful with glamorous women as he was with foreign armies.

Vashti had also been running a party for women where it is likely that they too had been drinking more than just coffee! When Xerxes' demand for her to appear at his party arrives there is a dramatic and predictable conflict of wills. He says 'Come' and she says 'No'. In modern times their royal fallout would have been in all the news media. The social consequences would have been profound. Every man would have tried unsuccessfully to exert his will. Every woman would have refused to be ordered around by her husband. To avoid the feminist revolution beginning more than 2000 years earlier than it actually did, Xerxes urged on by all his male advisors, divorces his wife and begins to look for a woman who will do what she is told.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER ONE

1. What place could a story without any mention of God possibly have in the Bible? (II Tim. 3:16)
2. What light does the behaviour of King Ahasuerus cast on how male pride grows and the means men try to use today to dominate in their society? What place may alcohol have in marital conflict and breakdown?
3. Why does Queen Vashti refuse to conform to her husband's demands? What influence do you suppose her female friends may have had in her defiance?

4. Who was right and who was wrong in this marriage breakdown?
5. What insight does this story give into why divorce happens? Is there any way that Bible teaching could have changed what they both did?(I Tim.2:8-12)

CHAPTER TWO

We are now introduced to two further characters in this story of romance and conflict. The king's advisors urge him to begin a nationwide talent contest for a new queen. Eligible young virgins are invited to enter. Much time and preparation goes into preparing them for their debut with the king in which one by one they spend a night with him. One of those recruited is a lovely young woman named Esther who is Jewish and an orphan. Esther's Jewish ancestry is kept secret. She has been cared for since the death of her parents by her uncle Mordecai who had been one of the original exiles after the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC and must therefore have been of considerable age. Mordecai keeps a fatherly eye on the royal harem to make sure Esther is treated well. Esther wins the beauty contest and is chosen to be the new queen. Following her coronation there is yet another big party, a public holiday is declared and royal gifts are distributed widely. All looks to be set for a glittering future for Esther but then a dramatic story begins to unfold. Two of the king's close officials become angry with him and plan to assassinate him, a common way of changing the government in those days. Somehow Mordecai hears about their plot and tells Esther who in turn informs the king. He acts rapidly and the would-be assassins are executed.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER TWO

1. How does the Bible tell a similar story of a bride who is unfaithful who in the New Testament is replaced by a new one?(Jer.3:1-20; Ezek.16:25-29)
2. How is the idea of a great celebration when a new bride is chosen used in the New Testament?(Matt.22:1-14; Luke 15:6-10; Rev.21:2)

CHAPTER THREE

The fifth major character now joins the scene. Haman was an Agagite which may mean a connection with the Amalekites, Israel's old enemies.(Num.24:7; I Sam.15) Somehow he pushes his way into favour with the king and is rapidly promoted to a senior role in the administration of Persia. Everyone knows that the safe thing to do is to bow before Haman as if he is God. Most do so but Mordecai refuses presumably because as a Jew he knows he should worship no-one but the Lord. In doing so he puts his life at risk like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3 who refused to worship the statue which is likely to have resembled King Nebuchadnezzar and so they were thrown in the fiery furnace. When Haman hears about Mordecai his pride compels him not only to plan to kill Mordecai but his entire Jewish nation. To gain his end he needs the approval of the king, his boss. He achieves this by implying that as a nation the Jews are subversive and he offers a huge bribe. The ten thousand talents were probably part of what he had collected corruptly as the king's deputy. The deal is made and a date is set for the day of Jewish genocide. Instructions are sent throughout the empire to carry out the order. All the lesser officials who will carry out mass murder will be able to loot the Jewish families who would be their victims.

Ahasuerus and Haman begin another drinking bout while they wait for the fatal day to dawn. Everyone else is confused as word gets out about the fate of the Jews. There would be fear among the Jews and a struggle with conscience for everyone else. What would God do?

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THREE

1. Who is the real enemy of the human race?(Jn.8:44; I Pet.5:7-9; Rev.12:7-12) What is the basis of his hatred of mankind? How will it eventually be expressed unless he is dealt with?
2. What examples of similar activity on the part of our enemy are there throughout the Bible?