TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of Esther 3-5 for teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig in: history, language, structure, interpretation, and Christ.

How to read this section. Where scholars disagree, the major views held by orthodox Christian interpreters are set side by side and labeled. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible (WEB). Hebrew words are given in Hebrew script with a simple transliteration. Verse numbers in Esther are the same in English and Hebrew Bibles.

1. Historical and Cultural Background

HAMAN THE AGAGITE

Haman is "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite" (3:1). Many interpreters, ancient and modern, link *Agagite* to Agag, the Amalekite king whom Saul spared (1 Samuel 15:8). Mordecai, for his part, descends from Kish, a Benjamite (2:5), the name of Saul's father (1 Samuel 9:1). Read this way, Esther replays an old conflict: Amalek attacked Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Josephus also calls Haman an Amalekite (*Antiquities*, book 11). Others take *Agagite* as an unknown place or family name. *(A widely held interpretation, not stated in Esther.)*

CASTING THE LOT

In Haman's presence, "they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman" (3:7). *Pûr* is a borrowed word, from Akkadian *pūru*, "lot." A small inscribed clay cube from Assyria, the lot of Yahalu (Yale Babylonian Collection, YBC 7058; 9th century BC), calls itself a *pūru* and was associated with the ceremonial designation of the official whose name marked the year; whether the lot actually decided the choice is debated.[1]

TEN THOUSAND TALENTS

Haman offered "ten thousand talents of silver" (3:9). If a talent was about 30 kg, that is roughly 300 metric tons. *(An estimate; ancient talents varied.)* Herodotus put the annual tribute of the whole empire under Darius I at 14,560 Euboic talents (*Histories* 3.95), so the offer was enormous. The king's reply, "The silver is given to you..." (3:11), may decline the money or accept it politely; interpreters differ.

APPROACHING THE KING

Esther 4:11 says anyone who came uncalled into the inner court would die unless the king held out the golden scepter. Herodotus says the Median king Deioces had people deal with him through messengers (1.99), and that Intaphernes, one of the nobles allowed to enter unannounced, was still turned away because Darius I was with a woman (3.118). Reliefs at Persepolis show the enthroned king holding a long staff. *(Outside evidence is consistent with the text but does not describe this exact law.)*

THE CALENDAR

The decree was written "on the first month, on the thirteenth day of the month" (3:12), the day before Passover was to be kept (Exodus 12:6). If Esther's fast followed at once, it overlapped the feast that remembered the exodus. *(A common observation; the text draws no link.)*

2. Literary Structure

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

Many interpreters see Esther arranged as a mirror around a center at 6:1 (see Yehuda Radday's 1981 study).[2] Chapters 3-5 build the crisis:

A	ESTHER 1-2	The king's feasts; an unalterable law; Esther crowned
B	ESTHER 3	**Haman exalted; the king's ring; a decree of death**
C	ESTHER 4-5	**Fasting and mourning; the gallows built**
X	ESTHER 6:1	"On that night, the king couldn't sleep."
C′	ESTHER 6-7	Mordecai honored; Haman hanged on the gallows
B′	ESTHER 8	Mordecai exalted; the king's ring; a decree of life

A′	ESTHER 9-10	The feasts of Purim; days that "should not fail" (9:27)

Feasting and fasting alternate. The king and Haman drink (3:15) while the Jews fast (4:3, 16); Esther then holds a banquet (5:4). The book's reversals start to show: Haman goes home "joyful and glad of heart" (5:9) and ends the chapter building a gallows.

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTERS 3-5

3:1-6	Haman exalted; Mordecai refuses to bow
3:7-15	The lot, the offer of silver, the decree
4:1-3	Mourning in Susa and the provinces
4:4-17	Esther and Mordecai: "for such a time as this"
5:1-8	The golden scepter; the first banquet
5:9-14	Haman's rage; the gallows

3. Commentary

3:1-6, THE REFUSAL. "After these things..." (3:1) covers about five years: Esther was taken to the king in his seventh year (2:16), and the lot is cast in his twelfth (3:7). The king "set his seat above all the princes" (3:1) and commands homage to Haman (3:2). Mordecai "didn't bow down or pay him homage" (3:2). Asked daily, he gives one explanation: "he had told them that he was a Jew" (3:4). Haman "scorned the thought of laying hands on Mordecai alone" (3:6) and seeks to destroy all the Jews.

3:7-11, THE LOT AND THE ACCUSATION. The lot is cast "from day to day, and from month to month" (3:7). Haman's charge mixes truth and slander: the people are "scattered abroad and dispersed"; their laws are different; "They don't keep the king's laws." (3:8) He never names them. The lot has fallen on Adar, the twelfth month (3:7), almost a year away. The king hands over his ring (3:10) without asking who they are. The ring that gives Haman royal authority now seals the decree against the Jews.

3:12-15, THE DECREE. It is written in the king's name and sealed with his ring (3:12), ordering "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day" (3:13). A copy is "published to all the peoples" (3:14), so neighbors would know the day. Then the narrator sets two scenes side by side: "The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was perplexed." (3:15)

4:1-3, SACKCLOTH. Mordecai tears his clothes and puts on "sackcloth with ashes" (4:1). He comes "even before the king's gate" (4:2) but no farther, since no one in sackcloth could pass inside, and the mourning spreads: "In every province... there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing..." (4:3). In the rest of the Old Testament such mourning is usually directed to God (Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-8). Here the text is silent about prayer.

4:4-12, MESSAGES. Esther sends clothing; Mordecai refuses it (4:4). Queen and cousin can no longer meet; every word passes through Hathach, a eunuch appointed to attend her (4:5), in the city square before the gate (4:6). Through Hathach he sends the decree and "the exact sum of the money" (4:7), and urges her "to make request before him for her people" (4:8). Esther explains the law of the inner court and adds, "I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days." (4:11)

4:13-14, FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS. Mordecai's reply is the theological center of Esther's story. He warns that the palace will not protect her (4:13). He is confident that "relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place" (4:14). And he asks, "Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14) The question is humble ("Who knows"), yet it assumes a purpose behind her position.

4:15-17, IF I PERISH. Esther takes command: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Susa, and fast for me..." (4:16). The fast is total: "neither eat nor drink three days, night or day" (4:16). She and her maidens fast too. She will go in, "which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." (4:16) Then "Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him." (4:17) The orphan who obeyed Mordecai (2:20) now gives the orders.

5:1-8, THE SCEPTER AND THE BANQUET. "Now on the third day, Esther put on her royal clothing..." (5:1). The Hebrew says literally that she "put on royalty," an echo of the crown she had been given (2:17). *(An observation.)* The king "held out to Esther the golden scepter" and she "touched the top of the scepter" (5:2). He offers "even to the half of the kingdom" (5:3), a courtly way of saying "ask generously." *(An interpretation.)* She asks only for a banquet, then a second (5:4-8), and each time the offer is repeated (5:6). Her words are carefully courteous: "If it seems good to the king..." (5:4).

5:9-14, HAMAN'S RAGE. Haman leaves "joyful and glad of heart" (5:9) until he sees Mordecai, who "didn't stand up nor move for him" (5:9). Yet "Haman restrained himself..." (5:10) and went home. There he recounts "the glory of his riches, the multitude of his children" (5:11) and his private invitation from the queen (5:12), then confesses, "Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." (5:13) Zeresh and his friends propose a gallows "fifty

cubits high" (5:14), about 75 feet. The Hebrew *ʿēṣ* means "tree" or "pole"; see *The Gallows and the Reversal* guide.

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
הָאֲגָגִי	*hā'ăgāgî*	"the Agagite" (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24); often linked to Agag of Amalek (1 Samuel 15:8)
כֹּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים	*kōrĕʿîm ûmištaḥăwîm*	"bowed down and paid homage" (3:2); the second verb is also used for worship
פּוּר · הַגּוֹרָל	*pûr · haggôrāl*	"Pur, that is, the lot..." (3:7). *Pûr* is from Akkadian; *gôrāl* is the Hebrew word that explains it.
צֹרֵר הַיְּהוּדִים	*ṣōrēr hayyĕhûdîm*	"the Jews' enemy" (3:10; 8:1; 9:10, 24), Haman's title
שַׂק וָאֵפֶר	*śaq wā'ēper*	"sackcloth with ashes" (4:1, 3), signs of mourning and humbling
רֶוַח וְהַצָּלָה	*rewaḥ wĕhaṣṣālâ*	"relief and deliverance" (4:14). *Rewaḥ*, literally "space, breathing room."
מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר	*mimmāqôm 'aḥēr*	"from another place" (4:14); its meaning is debated (see section 5)
לְעֵת כָּזֹאת	*lĕʿēt kāzō't*	"for such a time as this" (4:14)
אָבַדְתִּי אָבָדְתִּי	*'ābadtî 'ābādĕtî*	"I perish, I perish." (4:16), the same verb as "perish" in 3:13 and 4:14
שַׁרְבִּיט הַזָּהָב	*šarbîṭ hazzāhāb*	"the golden scepter" (4:11; 5:2; 8:4)

5. Interpretive Questions

WHY WOULDN'T MORDECAI BOW?

The text gives only one clue: "he had told them that he was a Jew" (3:4). Bowing to honor rulers was not forbidden; David bowed to Saul (1 Samuel 24:8). Three explanations are common. (1) **Israel and Amalek.** Mordecai, a Benjamite, would not honor an Agagite, given God's judgment on Amalek (Exodus 17:14-16; 1 Samuel 15). (2) **Worship.** The homage had a religious edge; the Greek additions to Esther, which are not in the Hebrew text and are outside the Protestant canon (Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include them), explain his refusal this way. (3) **Unexplained.** The narrator leaves it open, and so should we. In any case, Haman's response is plainly evil.

WHAT IS "ANOTHER PLACE" (4:14)?

Many Jewish and Christian interpreters read "another place" as a veiled reference to God's providence; later rabbis even used "the Place" as a name for God, though that usage comes after Esther. Others think Mordecai meant another human source of help. Either way, his confidence that deliverance would come fits God's promises to preserve His people (for example, Jeremiah 31:35-37). The text itself does not name God, and the guide does not put words in Mordecai's mouth.

DID ESTHER'S FAST INCLUDE PRAYER?

Esther 4:16 mentions fasting only. Elsewhere in Scripture, fasting nearly always goes with seeking God (Ezra 8:21-23; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5-9). Most interpreters assume prayer was involved. The Greek additions supply prayers for Mordecai and Esther, but they are not in the Hebrew text and are outside the Protestant canon, though Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include them. Teach what the text says, and note what fasting meant in the rest of the Bible.

6. Cross-References

- **Exodus 17:8-16; 1 Samuel 15**: Israel and Amalek; Agag.
- **Proverbs 16:18**: "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." (WEB)
- **Psalm 31:15**: "My times are in your hand." (WEB)
- **Proverbs 31:8**: "Open your mouth for the mute, in the cause of all who are left desolate." (WEB)
- **Daniel 3:17-18**: "But if not..." courage that leaves the outcome with God.
- **Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:5**: fasting and mourning before God.

- **Hebrews 4:16**: "Let's therefore draw near with boldness to the throne of grace..." (WEB)

7. How Esther 3-5 Points to Christ

A mediator who risks everything. (A gospel parallel, not a prediction in Esther.) Esther stood between her people and death, saying, "if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Jesus is the "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5, WEB), and He did not merely risk death: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11, WEB)

The scepter held out. (A theological reflection.) Esther approached a throne where she might be killed. In Christ, believers come to a throne of grace by invitation: "In him we have boldness and access in confidence through our faith in him." (Ephesians 3:12, WEB)

A people under sentence. (A theological application.) A sealed decree hung over every Jew in the empire, and no one could revoke it (3:12-13; 8:8). Haman's decree was unjust; the condemnation the gospel speaks of is just, and Christ bore it for His people: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus..." (Romans 8:1, WEB) The answer to Haman's decree comes in Part Three.

Pride and humility. (A theological reflection.) Haman sought honor for himself and was never satisfied (5:13). Christ "humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death" (Philippians 2:8, WEB), and God exalted Him.

8. For Further Study

COMMENTARIES (ACCESSIBLE) - KAREN H. JOBES, *ESTHER*, NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY (ZONDERVAN, 1999). - IAIN M. DUGUID, *ESTHER AND RUTH*, REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY (P&R, 2005). - DEBRA REID, *ESTHER*, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES (IVP, 2008). - JOYCE G. BALDWIN, *ESTHER*, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES (IVP, 1984).

COMMENTARIES (ADVANCED) - FREDERIC W. BUSH, *RUTH, ESTHER*, WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 9 (WORD, 1996). - MERVIN BRENEMAN, *EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER*, NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY 10 (B&H, 1993). - JON D. LEVENSON, *ESTHER*, OLD TESTAMENT LIBRARY (WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX, 1997).

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND - EDWIN M. YAMAUCHI, *PERSIA AND THE BIBLE* (BAKER, 1990). - WILLIAM W. HALLO, "THE FIRST PURIM," *BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGIST* 46 (1983). - PIERRE BRIANT, *FROM CYRUS TO ALEXANDER: A HISTORY OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE* (EISENBRAUNS, 2002). - HERODOTUS, *HISTORIES* 1.99, 3.95, 3.118; JOSEPHUS, *ANTIQUITIES*, BOOK 11.

NOTES

1. William W. Hallo, "The First Purim," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983).
2. Yehuda T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Gerstenberg, 1981).

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