TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of Esther 6-10 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

ROYAL RECORDS AND BENEFACTORS

The king has "the book of records of the chronicles" read to him (6:1). Herodotus says Xerxes' scribes recorded the names of captains who distinguished themselves at Salamis (*Histories* 8.90), and that royal benefactors were listed and rewarded (8.85). *(Outside evidence is consistent with the text; it does not mention Mordecai.)*

ROBE, HORSE, AND CROWN

Haman asks for "royal clothing... which the king uses to wear, and the horse that the king rides on" (6:8). Wearing the king's own robe was a rare honor; Plutarch tells how a courtier asked Artaxerxes II for his robe and was given it but forbidden to wear it (*Artaxerxes* 5). The wording of 6:8 most naturally puts the royal crown on the horse's head. *(The detail is debated.)*

DATES AND COURIERS

The counter-decree is written "in the third month, which is the month Sivan, on the twenty-third day of the month" (8:9), about seventy days after Haman's decree (3:12). If the king is Xerxes I, the day of reversal, 13 Adar of his twelfth year, fell in early 473 BC. *(An estimate based on the identification of the king.)* Couriers ride "royal horses that were bred from swift steeds" (8:10).

MORDECAI'S RANK

Mordecai ends "next to King Ahasuerus" (10:3), Hebrew *mišneh*, "second." A Persepolis tablet names an official called Marduka in this period; whether he is the biblical Mordecai is uncertain (see *A Queen in Persia*).

IRREVOCABLE LAW

The book of Esther twice presents a royal decree as unalterable: Memucan says so in 1:19, and King Ahasuerus in 8:8. Daniel speaks the same way of "the law of the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 6:8, 15). No Persian source states this rule outright, and some historians doubt it; the Bible presents it as practice at this court. *(The historical question is debated.)*

PURIM

Esther 9:20-32 establishes the feast. The earliest outside reference is usually traced to 2 Maccabees 15:36 (probably late 2nd century BC), which mentions "Mordecai's day," the day after 13 Adar. Jewish practice today includes reading the scroll of Esther, gifts of food, gifts to the poor, and a festive meal, all drawn from 9:19-22.

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).[1] Chapters 6-10 mirror chapters 1-5:

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)**

The center verse is the hinge: from 6:1 on, nearly every element of chapters 1-5 returns reversed. The Hebrew word for it appears in 9:1, *it was turned around* (see section 4).

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTERS 6-10

6:1-14	A sleepless night; Mordecai honored
7:1-10	The second banquet; Haman hanged
8:1-17	The ring, the counter-decree, the city's joy
9:1-19	The day of reversal
9:20-32	Purim established
10:1-3	Mordecai's greatness

3. Commentary

6:1-3, THE NIGHT. "On that night, the king couldn't sleep." (6:1) The reading happens to fall on Mordecai's report of the plot (6:2; 2:21-23), and the servants say, "Nothing has been done for him." (6:3) The deed had been written down years before, soon after Esther became queen (2:19-23), and left unrewarded until this night. In Hebrew, the king's sleep "fled" (see section 4).

6:4-11, THE QUESTION. Haman has come early "to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai" (6:4). The king's question omits a name: "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" (6:6) Haman assumes the answer is himself and designs a near-royal honor: not money, but the king's own robe and horse (6:8). Then he is ordered to give it to "Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate." (6:10).

6:12-14, THE OMEN. Mordecai returns to his post, and the narrator records no celebration; Haman hurries home "mourning and having his head covered" (6:12). His advisers now speak of "fall" three times in one verse (6:13). Before he can respond, the eunuchs hurry him to the banquet (6:14).

7:1-6, THE PETITION. The king repeats his offer from the first banquet: "Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed." (7:2; 5:6) Esther asks for her "life" and her "people" (7:3), using the words of the decree: "to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" (7:4; 3:13). The king asks, "Who is he, and where is he…?" (7:5). She adds that slavery alone would not have been worth troubling the king (7:4). Her silence about her people (2:10) ends here. Esther answers, "An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman!" (7:6)

7:7-10, THE FALL. The king storms into the garden. Haman falls "on the couch where Esther was" (7:8) to beg for his life, and the king takes it as an assault. As he speaks, "they covered Haman's face" (7:8); the custom is not otherwise known. *(Its meaning is uncertain.)* Haman, who raged when a Jew would not bow to him (3:5), now falls before a Jewish queen. *(A literary observation.)* Harbonah points out the gallows "which Haman has made for Mordecai" (7:9). "So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai." (7:10)

8:1-14, THE COUNTER-DECREE. Esther receives Haman's house, and Mordecai the ring (8:1-2). Esther pleads again "with tears" (8:3), and the scepter is held out again (8:4). Her request piles up courtesies: "If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor in his sight…" (8:5). Since the first decree cannot be revoked (8:8), Mordecai writes a second in the same form, words, and couriers (8:9-14). The scribes are summoned as in 3:12, and the letters again go out in haste (8:14; 3:15). The new decree grants the Jews "to defend their lives" (8:11). It goes to all 127 provinces, and this time also "to the Jews in their writing, and in their language" (8:9).

8:15-17, JOY. Mordecai goes out in royal blue and white (8:15). Haman's decree had left Susa "perplexed" (3:15); now "the city of Susa shouted and was glad" (8:15), and "The Jews had light, gladness, joy, and honor." (8:16) Many "became Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (8:17). The verb occurs only here in the Old Testament (see section 4).

9:1-19, THE DAY. On the day the enemies "hoped to conquer them," "the opposite happened" (9:1). Officials help the Jews "because the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them" (9:3). The day, the provinces, and the wording all answer Haman's decree (3:13; 8:11-12). The text reports the deaths in Susa and the provinces (9:6-16), stresses no plunder three times, and ends with rest and "feasting and gladness" (9:17-19).

9:20-32, PURIM. Mordecai and Esther fix the feast in writing. The month "was turned to them from sorrow to gladness" (9:22), and the days are named Purim after the lot Haman cast (9:24-26). The lot meant to fix the day of destruction fixed the day of deliverance (compare Proverbs 16:33). The letter is sent with "words of peace and truth" (9:30). A second letter from Esther and Mordecai confirms it (9:29), and "it was written in the book" (9:32).

10:1-3, MORDECAI. The king "laid a tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea" (10:1), and the book closes with Mordecai "seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants" (10:3), a quiet ending for a man who began at the gate. His deeds are "written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia" (10:2), an appeal to the royal records like the one that began the reversal (6:1).

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
נָדְדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ	*nādĕdâ šĕnat hammelek*	"the king couldn't sleep" (6:1), literally *the king's sleep fled*; compare Daniel 6:18, "his sleep fled from him"
יְקָר	*yĕqār*	"honor" (6:3, 6, 7, 9; 8:16); Haman wants it, Mordecai gets it, and finally all the Jews have it
נָפוֹל תִּפּוֹל	*nāpôl tippôl*	"you will surely fall" (6:13); "fall" returns as Haman falls on the couch (7:8)
צַר וְאוֹיֵב	*ṣar wĕ'ôyēb*	"An adversary and an enemy..." (7:6)
וְנַהֲפוֹךְ הוּא	*wĕnahăpôk hû'*	*it was turned around* (9:1), translated "the opposite happened"; the key word of the book's reversals
מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה	*miyyāgôn lĕśimḥâ*	"from sorrow to gladness" (9:22)
מִשְׁלֹחַ מָנוֹת	*mišlōaḥ mānôt*	"sending presents of food" (9:19, 22); still the name of the Purim custom
וּבַבִּזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם	*ûbabbizzâ lō' šālĕḥû 'et-yādām*	"they didn't lay their hand on the plunder" (9:10, 15, 16)
מִתְיַהֲדִים	*mityahădîm*	"became Jews" (8:17); this verb occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament
פּוּרִים	*pûrîm*	"Purim" (9:26), the plural of *pûr*, "lot"
שָׁלוֹם	*šālôm*	"peace" (9:30; 10:3), the book's last note

5. Interpretive Questions

HOW SHOULD WE READ CHAPTER 9?

Readers are troubled by the deaths in chapter 9, and rightly take them seriously. Three points are common. (1) **Self-defense.** The counter-decree allows the Jews to defend themselves against those who would attack (8:11; 9:2, 5), on the day their enemies had chosen. (2) **Restraint.** They take no plunder, though permitted (8:11; 9:10, 15, 16). (3) **Description, not prescription.** The narrator reports what happened; Christians read it in light of Christ's teaching (Romans 12:17-21). The ancient Greek translation gives 15,000 in 9:16 instead of 75,000. *(A textual variant; the Hebrew reads 75,000.)*

WHAT DOES 8:11 PERMIT?

The decree allows the Jews to destroy "all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women" (8:11). Some read "their little ones and women" as objects of the attack, mirroring Haman's decree word for word (3:13). Others read the phrase with "assault," meaning those who would attack the Jews' own little ones and women. The Hebrew allows both. In Susa, chapter 9 numbers only men (9:6, 15).

WHY A SECOND DAY IN SUSA (9:13)?

Some see Esther acting wisely against remaining danger in the capital. Others think her request goes too far. The text gives no evaluation. Haman's sons were already dead (9:10); displaying their bodies (9:14) was a public sign that the threat had ended. *(A common reading.)*

WAS PURIM A LEGITIMATE FEAST?

Purim was not commanded in the Law of Moses. It was fixed by the letters of Mordecai and Esther (9:20-32), and the Jews "imposed on themselves" its observance (9:27). Some early readers questioned it. Most Christian interpreters see no conflict: it is a feast of remembrance, not a new sacrifice. John 10:22-23 shows Jesus in the temple at another later feast, "the Feast of the Dedication," though the text does not say He kept it. *(An observation.)*

6. Cross-References

- **Proverbs 16:33**: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from Yahweh." (WEB)
- **Psalm 7:15-16; Proverbs 26:27**: the pit-digger falls into his own pit.
- **Genesis 50:20**: "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..." (WEB)
- **Psalm 30:11**: "You have turned my mourning into dancing for me." (WEB)
- **Daniel 6:18**: a sleepless king; compare Esther 6:1.
- **1 Samuel 15**: Saul, Agag, and the plunder.
- **John 10:22**: Jesus in the temple at a later Jewish feast.
- **Romans 8:28**: "all things work together for good for those who love God" (WEB)

7. How Esther 6-10 Points to Christ

The one hanged on a tree. (A contrast, not a prediction in Esther.) Haman died on a "tree" (Hebrew *ʿēṣ*) for his own evil. Christ died on a tree for ours: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." (Galatians 3:13, WEB)

A decree answered. (An analogy, with a caution.) Haman's decree was wicked; God's law is "holy, righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12), so the two are not alike. The likeness is only this: a written sentence stood against God's people, and God provided deliverance. At the cross God dealt with "the handwriting in ordinances which was against us... nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14, WEB).

Humbled, then exalted. (A gospel parallel.) Mordecai went from sackcloth to the king's robe and ring. Christ "humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death" (Philippians 2:8, WEB), and "God also highly exalted him..." (Philippians 2:9, WEB).

Sorrow to gladness. (A gospel application.) "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy." (John 16:20, WEB) The empty tomb is the final reversal.

Every nation and language. (A theological application.) The decree of life went to every people "in their language" (8:9), and many from the nations "became Jews" (8:17). The gospel goes further: "Go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:19, WEB).

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). - PIERRE BRIANT, *FROM CYRUS TO ALEXANDER: A HISTORY OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE* (EISENBRAUNS, 2002). - HERODOTUS, *HISTORIES* 8.85, 8.90; PLUTARCH, *ARTAXERXES*; 2 MACCABEES 15:36.

NOTES

1. Yehuda T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Gerstenberg, 1981).

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