

## **“THE KING’S CHOICE”**

**Esther 1:1 – 5:14**

**Maggie Fitzpatrick**

My vocation in Forensic Science began when God led me to a job as a police cadet where I learned about fingerprints. Everyone has unique fingerprints which can be left on evidence at crime scenes to prove a specific person was there. I think the Book of Esther is about the fingerprints of God. The story is full of evidence God was there. God’s fingerprints were all over the events, silently weaving them all together.

I focused on four truths from the Book of Esther:

- 1) God’s Divine providence.
- 2) Hate often has historic roots.
- 3) God uses the unlikeliest people to accomplish His plans.
- 4) God cares for His covenant people.

The book is perhaps one of the most joyous examples of humor in Scripture. The author related events, although serious in nature, with irony and by poking fun at the Persians. The story contains humorous role reversals and plots twists, a courageous heroine, a potential national “crisis” that men would lose control over their wives, a romantic love thread, a divorce, a beauty contest, a foiled assassination, a pathetic pompous potentate who threw drinking parties, threw fits, and made ludicrous laws. There was a looming threat to God’s people, a Jewish orphan became queen of a Gentile nation, suspense, an evil villain – and that’s just in the **first** part of the book!

While God’s name isn’t mentioned, there were many hints of His presence. Commentators believe the author needed to be discreet in recording the story so that the Jews would not be put in jeopardy, therefore, he was careful to be factual but avoided references to supernatural help. Nevertheless, the author found ways of indicating God’s providential care for His people. “Perhaps [God’s] name isn’t mentioned because the emphasis of [the book] appears to be how God works behind the scenes....to bring about the final result.” (gotquestions.org)

Before we get into the story, some historical background is beneficial. Beginning about a century earlier, Babylon conquered Judah and took Jews into exile. Then Persia conquered Babylon and became the world’s superpower and God used Persian King Cyrus to allow Jews to return to Judah. Some returned, but most chose to remain in Persia.

The story takes place during the reign of Persian King Ahasuerus, his Hebrew name, but he’s best known by his Greek name, King Xerxes. Xerxes was portrayed as a proud, pampered, puppet-king, manipulated by the “wise men” in his kingdom.

For every good story there must be a villain and that was Haman. He was an Agagite, a descendant of the Canaanites, enemies of the Jews. Xerxes had elevated Haman to second in command in the kingdom and Haman took his position seriously.

The heroin was Esther, a young Jewish girl. Her Jewish name was Hadassah. The author described her as “lovely in form and features.” (2:7). She was beautiful, a virgin, and obedient to her guardian, Mordecai, who wanted her to keep her Jewish background a secret. She lived like a Persian, at least outwardly, by her name, what she ate, and how she dressed.

Mordecai, Esther’s cousin, adopted her after her parents died. Mordecai’s family had been living in Babylon and he was the great grandson of a Benjamite. Ancient writings confirm Mordecai was a scribe in King Xerxes’ court and conducted business at the king's gate.

Scholars say the book of Esther was likely written by someone very familiar with Persian life such as Mordecai, Ezra or Nehemiah. For example, with eyewitness accuracy, the author described beautiful linen hangings in the king’s gardens, couches of gold sitting on ornate mosaic pavement, and costly stones used for decorations. Archaeologists have found remains of Xerxes’ palace and verified the accuracy of the opulence.

The intended readers of the book of Esther were the Jews, for them to remember the providence of God and to know how the Feast of Purim came to be. Purim is the plural of the Hebrew word *pur*, meaning “lot” as in casting lots. The annual Feast of Purim is one of the most joyful of all Jewish holidays. It’s like a carnival, with feasts, costumes, noisemakers, gift giving and feeding of the poor. During the Feast, the Book of Esther is retold and audiences hiss, boo, stomp their feet and wave noisemakers when they hear the villain’s name and applaud for the heroes.

We know from history King Xerxes was king over the greatest empire in the world, but he wanted more – he wanted Greece. As the book of Esther opens, Xerxes had invited military people to Persia’s capital city, Susa. He was planning a military campaign, so for 180 days he showed off his kingdom to garner support for his war with Greece. After the 180-day tour, he hosted a 7-day-long banquet for the people of Susa, with no restrictions placed on how much alcohol his guests could consume.

While Xerxes was hosting **his** banquet, Vashti, his wife, Queen of Persia, was holding **her** banquet for the women in the palace. On the last day of his party, the drunk king commanded Queen Vashti to appear at his banquet, “to display her beauty.” (1:11). But Vashti refused.

We aren’t told why she refused to appear. Modesty? Stubbornness? Independence? Some speculate Vashti was pregnant at the time. Others say she probably was insulted to be paraded before a bunch of drunk men. Vashti’s refusal caused Xerxes to “[become] furious and [burn] with anger” (1:12)

and he asked his “wise men”, “What should be done with her?” Xerxes could have had her killed, but commentators said he didn’t want her dead, just out of his sight.

The great Persian king couldn’t control his wife and his so-called “wise men” were such a big help! They worried that Vashti’s disobedience would ruin the entire kingdom because **their** wives might refuse to cook falafel for dinner. They said, “There [will] be no end of disrespect and discord.” (1:18)

Perhaps they feared **this** husband’s fate: A husband asked his wife, “What’s for dinner?” She replied, “Nothing”. He complained, “That’s what we had last night.” She said, “I know. I made enough for two days.”

So those pathetic potentates wanted a royal decree to strengthen their position as husbands. Xerxes’ absurd decree was, “every man should be ruler over his own household.” (1:22)

Xerxes’ “wise men” suggested he also issue a decree that Vashti may never again enter his presence and to find another queen who, “is better than [Vashti]” (1:19) probably meaning, obedient. So, Xerxes divorced and ousted Vashti.

God had set the stage for Xerxes to find a new queen yet it would be another five years before that would happen. History tells us during that time the king went off to war against Greece, but Greece prevailed, destroying Xerxes’ army. After his defeat, Xerxes returned to Persia, sullen and queen-less. It’s against this backdrop that the story of Esther unfolds.

Xerxes’ counselors suggested the king hold a Miss Persia Pageant to find a new queen and collect a harem of the most beautiful young girls in the kingdom, and then Xerxes could choose a queen from among them. But this wasn’t like our Miss America Pageant. The contestants had to be virgins, mostly in their teens, and the most beautiful in all the kingdom.

Girls collected for the harem would have been taken from their families, never to see them again or to marry. It’s generally assumed the girls had no say in being forced into the harem with hundreds of other girls – Esther included.

Once in the harem, the girls’ care would be overseen by the king’s chief eunuch, Hegai. Each “contestant” would undergo year-long beauty treatments including the application of oil of myrrh to repair their sunburned and wind-damaged skin caused by the dry desert climate.

The author contrasted Esther with other girls in the harem. She had obtained favor from all of those who saw her, including the eunuch, Hegai. He may have considered her the most likely to become queen so he personally tended to what she ate, assigned her seven attendants, and put her in “the best place in the harem.” (2:9). And daily, her uncle, Mordecai, walked near the harem’s courtyard to check on her welfare.

The girls would wait to be called to the king's bedroom for the night. I'm putting this as delicately as possible – but you get the idea. Afterwards, they would permanently become one of the king's concubines and not be seen again by the king unless he summoned them. The goal of all this was for the king to find **one** that would please him enough to become his queen.

Before spending the night with the king, each girl could pick whatever she wanted from the harem – clothes, jewelry, and other beauty-enhancing items. After the night with the king, they could take it all with them and then live their life as a concubine. The author wrote that Esther took nothing but what Hegai suggested, likely meaning she declined excessive luxury.

“The king loved Esther more than any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval.” (2:17) Esther was chosen Queen of Persia and Xerxes held a great banquet for her and, “He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.” (2:18)

Esther had been queen for more than four years when an important event occurred that affected a future situation. While Mordecai conducted official business sitting at the king's gate, he overheard a plot to assassinate King Xerxes. He told Queen Esther and she told the king. The traitors were killed and the event was recorded in the king's records, giving credit to Mordecai.

Haman now enters the story. The king had promoted Haman and commanded all his officials to bow before him. But Mordecai refused. Mordecai's fellow officials told Haman that Mordecai wouldn't honor him **and** told him “who Mordecai's people were” (3:6) Haman wanted Mordecai dead, as well as **all** the Jews in the kingdom.

Ancestral history about Haman and Mordecai is interesting. Being from the tribe of Benjamin, Mordecai was a Jew. Haman was a descendant of the Agagites, a pagan tribal group of the Canaanites. God had ordered King Saul to destroy the pagan Agagites. Haman would have known his ancestral tribe was killed by Mordecai's ancestors, the Jews. And the goal of Haman's ancestors, the Canaanites, was to completely eradicate the entire Jewish nation.

Isn't that Iran's position on Israel today – to wipe out all Jewish people? Present day Iran was ancient Persia. Sometimes hatred never goes away, especially if it involves Israel. Yet, this is what the Lord Almighty says: “For whoever touches [God's chosen], touches the apple of His eye.” (Zechariah 2:8).

With extreme audacity, or “chutzpah”, I imagined Haman twirling his mustache as he plotted to “destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews.” (3:6) Haman was so sure the king would agree with his devilish scheme that he even determined the date for the genocide.

Haman “cast the *pur*”, that is, he cast lots. *Pur* was like dice, but sticks, stones, pieces of pottery, etc. were used to cast onto a surface marked with the months and the days. Or stones with dates printed on them were put into a pouch. The pouch was shaken until one of the stones popped out

bearing the date they believed their false god had chosen. Haman's pur fell on the "thirteenth day of the twelfth month of Adar." (3:7)

The Word of God has something to say about people's decisions. "People cast lots to learn God's will, but God himself determines the answer." (Proverbs 16:33) This proverb emphasizes the Lord's sovereign control over mankind's plans.

Haman needed the king to write a decree to exterminate the Jews so he deceived him into thinking all Jews should be destroyed. Haman told the king that Jews were a people who "keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people and they don't obey the king's laws. The king should not tolerate them." (3:8)

Haman made his genocidal proposal more appealing with a bribe of tons of silver. The king feigned that he didn't really want the money but commentators say his refusal was more like, "Oh, you don't have to do that." But Xerxes would have needed it to offset the loss of tax revenue when all the Jews were eradicated. The king told Haman, "Do with the [Jews] as you please." (3:11)

The decree was to "destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day, and to plunder their goods." (3:13,14) It's believed the Persian Empire's military was to carry out the massacre. Haman's goal for the planned violence was extreme – almost ludicrous – the complete eradication of the Jews on one day? The order needed to be translated into various languages and then dispatched throughout all the provinces, so the decree would take place a year later.

To celebrate the decree, the king and Haman sat down and drank; although Xerxes didn't know he had just signed his own wife's death warrant.

When Mordecai heard about the decree, "He tore his clothing, put on sackcloth and sprinkled ashes on himself, and walked about the city wailing loudly." (4:1) Not only was Mordecai in mourning but, "In every province, Jews were fasting, weeping, wailing, laying in sackcloth and ashes." (4:3)

It appears Esther didn't know about the decree or why Mordecai was in mourning. Since he could go no further than the king's gate wearing sackcloth, she sent him clothing. He refused to wear them, so, she sent a eunuch to ask Mordecai what was wrong. Mordecai gave him a copy of the edict to give Esther. Through the eunuch, Mordecai told Esther to go to the king, "to beg for mercy and plead for her people." (4:8) She responded that doing so would be **her** death sentence, "unless the king extends the gold scepter to spare [my life]." (4:11)

Mordecai's well-known reply has echoed through history, "Don't think that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your relatives will die. And who

knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13,14) Even if Esther failed to act, Mordecai alluded to divine intervention – that deliverance for the Jews would rise "from another place" implying **God** would deliver His people.

Mordecai's words moved Esther from fear to faith and she improved his plan. She told Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa and for three days all were to fast for her. She and her attendants would do the same. Esther's calling of a fast is seen as an appeal for God's involvement.

Esther said after the three days, "Then I will go to the king...and if I perish, I perish." (4:16) In that declaration, Esther was surrendering her life to God's plan. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul declared: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) Yielding to God's divine purposes should lead us to consider everything this side of heaven is "a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord." (Philippians 3:8)

So, Mordecai "went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him." (4:17)

After three days of fasting, Esther dressed in her royal robes and risked King Xerxes putting her to death by going before him – uninvited. She stood at the entrance to the king's hall where he was sitting, facing the entrance. From his position he could see Esther standing in the court. When he saw her, he pointed his golden scepter toward her, inviting her forward. He was so pleased with Esther he asked what her request was and that he was willing to give her anything.

Esther followed the Persian protocol for making requests, by first asking for a small favor. She asked the king to attend a banquet. Esther added, "And bring Haman along."

The king and Haman attended Esther's banquet. They drank. Haman was happy. The king was happy and again he asked Esther, "What is your petition?" (5:6). Her second favor was for the king to come to **another** banquet the next night and then she would tell him her petition. "Oh, and don't forget Haman" undoubtedly because she had something special planned for him.

Haman left for home, puffed up with self-satisfaction, superiority, and smugness – but it all soured when He saw Mordecai at the gate who again refused to kneel before him. Haman "was filled with rage." (5:9) Once home, Haman gathered his friends and wife and "boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him and had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. And that's not all," Haman added, "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to her banquet and she invited us to another banquet tomorrow." (5:11,12) "But that Jew, Mordecai, has ruined my good mood."

Haman's wife and friends proposed not waiting until the date chosen by the pur to kill Mordecai but to build gallows and hang him in the morning. That "delighted Haman." (5:14) Haman was so confident the king would agree to killing Mordecai before his planned holocaust, he had a

75-foot-high gallows built, about the height of a 6-story building, high enough for everyone to see. The gallows **would** be used the next day – only not as Haman expected! Haman’s high spirits would not last long.

Four thoughts stood out to me about chapters 1-5 in the Book of Esther:

### **1) God’s Divine providence**

“Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him.” (Psalm 115:3) Yahweh is in full control of every aspect of life even the things we don’t understand. Events in the story were not luck, coincidence, fate, or chance – but God's providence. The story makes it clear that God was present and working to protect and deliver His chosen people. And if, or when, we fail to follow God’s plan, His purpose will **still** be accomplished because He is the sovereign Ruler of the universe and His plans will not be changed by the actions of mere men.

### **2) Hate often has historic roots.**

Haman hated the Jews. His hatred originated from **his** ancestors hundreds of years before who hated Mordecai’s ancestors. The book of Esther teaches that the arrogant of this world are not as powerful as they think they are and when they oppose God’s people, and therefore God Himself, they bring about their own destruction. Psalm 37:13 comes to mind: “The Lord laughs at the wicked, for He knows their day is coming.”

### **3) God uses even the unlikeliest people to accomplish His plans.**

Throughout Scripture, God has used all sorts of people, both righteous and unrighteous for His ultimate glory. Even though there were moral shortcomings in Esther and Mordecai’s lives, God used them to deliver their people from a massacre. That should be a reminder to us that God can use all people, prone to sin, prone to wander, prone to ignore Him and even deny He exists. And both Esther and Mordecai’s actions illustrate that divine providence does not exclude our responsibility to act with courage when circumstances require it.

### **4) God cares for His covenant people.**

God set a plan in motion to save the Jews from their enemies. What was true for the ancient Jews is true today. “Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:4)

Last month, God clearly showed His protection on Israel when Iran launched hundreds of missiles against them. 99% of the missiles were destroyed before they even touched Israel’s land. Military specialists are quoted as saying the following about the likelihood of that success: “It was miraculous”; “If this is not an act of God, then I no longer know what a miracle is”; “It’s impossible to look at the success of destroyed missiles and not see the hand of God. It just doesn’t happen.”

The book of Esther is not just as a story about the Jews, but also of our **own** heritage. Gentiles used to be excluded from the covenant of the Promise until Jesus came and eliminated the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles have “been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 11:13) While Gentiles don’t observe the Feast of Purim, although it sounds like fun, both Jew and Gentile are His chosen ones in the New Covenant fulfilled by Christ.

Antisemitism, hostility, and prejudice against Jewish people is increasing worldwide. The side effect of antisemitism will also be hatred for those who love Jesus. The only solution is the transformation God brings about in those who believe in His Son as their Savior.

Believers must pray for the nation and people of Israel to have their eyes opened to the Holy One, Jesus Christ, the Son of God because, “It is inconsistent to say one loves the *King* of the Jews but not the *Jews* of the King.” (Amir Tsarfati)

May the book of Esther encourage you that God is always present and He places people, in particular places, at particular times, to accomplish His particular plans.

Sovereign Father, may it be Your will that concern for our own safety never interferes with Your plans for us to share the gospel to lost souls. May we each consider that such opportunities will be **our** “such a time as this”, even if it would mean, “If we perish, we perish.” Give us courage as we personalize the Apostle’s words: “Our lives are worth nothing to us unless we use them for finishing the work assigned to us by You.” (Acts 20:24) Through Your name we pray, Jesus. Amen.