

ESTHER

GOD STATEMENT: THE GOD WHO _____ (a) HIS PEOPLE

The book of Esther is unusual for two reasons: along with Ruth, it is one of only two books in the Bible named after _____ (b); and along with the Song of Songs, it is one of only two books in the Bible that never explicitly mentions _____ (c) by name.

The author of Esther is _____ (d). On the basis of similarity of writing style, some have suggested that Ezra or Nehemiah wrote it. But no information about its authorship can be recovered with any certainty.

The story of Esther is set in the city of Susa, one of the capitals of the _____ (e) Empire early in the reign of King Xerxes (485-465 B.C.). The ruins of Susa are found in the modern country of _____ (f). The palace of Susa, where Esther lived, has been excavated for almost 100 years. It covered a massive area of twelve acres, and today some of the decorative remains are stored in the Louvre in Paris.

Chronologically, the events of the book of Esther fit between chapters 6 and 7 of _____ (g). The three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther record God's dealing with the Jews after their prophesied 70 years of _____ (h) in Babylon. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the remnant of God's people who _____ (i) to _____ (j) after Babylon was defeated by a coalition of Medes and Persians. The book of Esther deals with the vast majority who decided to _____ (k) in the land of _____ (l) (formerly Babylon) instead of returning to their homeland. Under the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, several thousand Jews returned to the Promised Land under the leadership of Zerubbabel about 538 B.C. After the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt in 516 B.C. no more is recorded about the activities of the remnant in Judea until 457 B.C. when Ezra returned to Jerusalem. The events of Esther take place _____ (m) years before Ezra leads a group of Jews back to the Promised Land from Persia.

With its unexpected and ironic plot twists, the book of Esther is one of the best-written short stories in all of ancient literature. In fact, it's so well written that some people think it's fiction—just too good to be true. But it is true. The storyline centers on a crisis in which the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire faced _____ (n). There are

three main characters in the book. _____(o) is a Jew who had a trusted position as one of King Xerxes palace gatekeepers. Because of his loyalty to the king, he eventually is promoted to prime minister. _____(p) is Mordecai's cousin. She competes in and wins a royal selection process to be King Xerxes' wife. Not only does she win, she also becomes a favored wife of King Xerxes. She eventually uses her position and influence to expose the plot to exterminate the Jews. Finally, _____(q) is the Persian Hitler. He's the villain of the book. When he is elevated to prime minister, he purchases royal permission to exterminate all Jews in the Persian provinces on a set date. In the end, his plan is exposed, he is executed, and Mordecai takes his place as prime minister.

A two-fold division of the book is the most popular way to breakdown its contents: crisis anticipated (chapters 1-5); and crisis alleviated (chapters 6-10).

CRISIS ANTICIPATED (Esther 1-5)

King Xerxes ruled over a vast kingdom that stretched from India in the east to Egypt in the west. In the third year of his reign (around 485 B.C.), he hosted a 180-day conference for all the nobles and high-ranking military officers in his kingdom. At the end of the conference, he threw a seven-day banquet for everyone who lived in the capital. At one point, Xerxes summoned his wife, _____(r), to come and dance for a room full of drunken men; but she _____(s).

Queen Vashti's refusal put the king in a really embarrassing situation. If he didn't deal with his _____(t) wife, the consequences could be catastrophic—it could inspire other wives to be insubordinate toward their husbands. So, something had to be done, and that something was that Queen Vashti was permanently _____(u) from the king's presence.

Soon, however, Xerxes grew increasingly lonely and someone suggested a kingdom-wide beauty contest be held, and the winner could become his wife. Among the women chosen to compete for the queen's crown was a Jewish girl named Hadassah. Her Persian name was Esther. She was an orphan who had been adopted and raised by her cousin, Mordecai. At his request she kept their relationship _____(v), perhaps because of anti-Semitic attitudes that swirled around the palace.

Soon after Esther became queen, Mordecai uncovered a _____(w) against the _____(x). He relayed it to Esther who in turn relayed it to the king. The plot was investigated and the perpetrators were found

guilty and executed. The account was then duly recorded and filed in the royal archives.

Every drama needs a _____(y) and the villain in this story appears soon after Mordecai saved the king's life. The villain's name is Haman, a man recently promoted by King Xerxes to the post of prime minister of the empire. Haman descended from the Amalekite King Agag whom Samuel hacked to pieces in front of Saul after Saul failed to _____(z) God's command to kill him (1 Sam 15:32-33). This set up a deep, ongoing hatred between the Agagites and the Jews, and Haman shared in this deep hatred.

The flashpoint came when Mordecai would not _____(aa) down and pay Haman honor as commanded by the king. Haman was so infuriated that he not only wanted to kill Haman but also every other Jew in the empire. And as prime minister he had the position to pull it off. As second in command to the king, he just needed the permission of one man, the king. The plan was to deceive the king by telling him that a "certain people" were a threat to the empire and must go. Haman also promised to fund the murderous operation by a large _____(bb) (i.e., a bribe) to the king's treasury. The king, not knowing who the people are, but eager to eliminate any people who are rebellious (not to mention his eagerness for the handsome bribe), issues an edict condemning all Jews to death. Because Esther had never revealed her Jewish identity, Xerxes had unwittingly approved the killing of his queen. One of the final details of the genocidal plan was to set the _____(cc) for the mass murder of the Jews—the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

When the Jews heard what was going to happen, they mourned, fasted, and put on sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai sent a message to Esther to beg the king for _____(dd). He suggested that God had brought her to the kingdom for such a _____(ee) as this. She was the queen, through a rather unlikely chain of events, and so was in a unique position to help her people.

Esther faced a real dilemma. Should she reveal that she's Jewish? If she did, her life would be at stake too. But she determines to risk her life for her people. If she _____(ff), she _____(gg).

So, how was she to make her request known? The queen wasn't allowed into the king's _____(hh) unless sent for, but she knew she had to see him. So she boldly walked into his presence and the king granted her an audience. She suggested a _____(ii) with the king, and she requested Haman as the guest of honor. The king granted her request, and the banquet was duly arranged.

THE CRISIS ALLEVIATED (Esther 6-10)

The day before the banquet, Haman's anger toward Mordecai boiled over. The only thing that could soothe his spirit was Mordecai's death. He found no happiness or satisfaction in anything as long as Mordecai lived. His wife calmed him down with a plan to have Mordecai executed the next day, right after the banquet. Haman was ecstatic with his wife's idea to build a massive _____(jj) to hang Mordecai on the next day.

While Haman no doubt slept like a baby that evening knowing that the next day would be Mordecai's last, the king couldn't _____(kk) a wink, so he got up to read. He asked that records from the royal archives be read to him (if anything could cure insomnia, I'm sure reading government records would do the trick). It just so happened that part of the royal record read to him was the episode when Mordecai uncovered a _____(ll) to assassinate the king. The king suddenly stopped the reader and ask what _____(mm) had been given to Mordecai. A quick perusal of the record revealed none. That was a terrible oversight. Anyone who would save the king's life must be generously rewarded.

As soon as the king woke the next morning he set out to rectify the terrible oversight of Mordecai not being rewarded. Haman arrived at the palace bright and early to get the king's permission to string up Mordecai, but the king had a question first for Haman: "I'm trying to think of a reward to give to someone who really, really pleases me. What would you suggest?" Haman couldn't imagine that the "someone" could be anyone but him, so he described a very _____(nn) and very _____(oo) reward. The king thought it was a marvelous idea and told Haman to go and immediately honor Mordecai in this way.

Things go from bad to worse for Haman. When he returns to the palace for the banquet after honoring Haman, Esther courageously reveals to the king that someone had initiated a plot to exterminate her people. The king erupted in fury and demanded to know who was behind the plot. She said, "Haman." While the king fumed, a member of the royal court told him about the gallows which Haman had "made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king" (Esther 7:9). Xerxes immediately declared, "Hang Haman on it." The king then gave a new _____(pp) that allowed the Jews to defend themselves on the day which his earlier edict had set for their extermination. And so the Jews were spared, and Mordecai replaced Haman as the prime minister of Persia.

To celebrate this historic occasion, the Feast of _____(qq) was established and is still celebrated among Jewish people today. During this feast, Esther is read aloud and the Jews boo, hiss, and stomp their feet and jeer whenever Haman's name is read (some fifty times in the book).

LESSONS FROM ESTHER

- It takes _____ (rr) to speak up for your beliefs and be willing to suffer the _____ (ss) of doing so (Esther 4:16; Gal 4:16; Dan 3:16-18).
- Wherever you are, you're there to serve God's _____ (tt), so use your position to further His _____ (uu) (Esther 4:14; 1 Cor 10:31).
- God is _____ (vv) even where His _____ (ww) is not heard. How can a book that does not mention God's name contribute to our understanding of Him? A culture may essentially cancel God's name, but they can't cancel His presence (Psa 139:7-12).
- God _____ (xx) and _____ (yy) save His people. God's purpose is to save His people (Esther 4:13-14; Luke 19:10; John 3:16). No power or circumstances can stop God from saving His people. We may die for Him here, but He will save us eternally.
- The people of God will always be _____ (zz) and _____ (aaa) because we won't "kneel" to the world (Esther 3:5-6; 2 Tim 3:12-13; Heb 10:32-36). Through the ages God's people have been driven over the face of the earth, exiled, and killed. That will never end until God ends it.
- _____ (bbb) person can make all the _____ (ccc). While in exile, God uses men and women for His glory. Don't ever forget that 1 + God = a majority.
- The _____ (ddd) of God must be first in our lives. Esther was willing to give up all the treasures of Persia for God's kingdom. Are you? (Esther 4:16; Matt 6:33; 10:37-39).
- God is totally _____ (eee) over all things. This is the greatest lesson of all from Esther. Even when we can't see God working, He is (Esther 6:1-3).

KEY PASSAGES FROM ESTHER

- Esther 2:17, 22
- Esther 4:13-14, 16
- Esther 6:1-4
- Esther 7:9-10

FILL-IN-THE-BLANK ANSWER KEY

[a] PROTECTS	[rr] courage
[b] women	[ss] consequences
[c] God	[tt] agenda
[d] unknown	[uu] purposes
[e] Persian	[vv] present
[f] Iran	[ww] name
[g] Ezra	[xx] can
[h] captivity	[yy] will
[i] returned	[zz] hated
[j] Judea	[aaa] persecuted
[k] remain	[bbb] One
[l] Persia	[ccc] difference
[m] 20-25	[ddd] kingdom
[n] extermination	[eee] sovereign
[o] Mordecai	
[p] Esther	
[q] Haman	
[r] Vashti	
[s] refused	
[t] rebellious	
[u] banished	
[v] secret	
[w] plot	
[x] king	
[y] villain	
[z] obey	
[aa] kneel	
[bb] donation	
[cc] date	
[dd] mercy	
[ee] time	
[ff] perished	
[gg] perished	
[hh] presence	
[ii] banquet	
[jj] gallows	
[kk] sleep	
[ll] plot	
[mm] reward	
[nn] lavish	
[oo] public	
[pp] edict	
[qq] Purim	