

**Bible Studies on**

# Esther

**5 studies**

**Member Notes**

**Study 1: Esther 1-2 - Appearances**

**Study 2: Esther 3:1-5:8 - Hatred**

**Study 3: Esther 5:9-6:14 – The King could not sleep**

**Study 4: Esther 7-8 - Reversal**

**Study 5: Esther 9-10 – Celebration**

**Anthony Elyard**

# Member Notes

### Introduction

For a quick introduction to the book of Esther, it is worth watching the Bible Project's video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JydNSlufRIs>

### Context

God created the world and it was good. Humanity was the pinnacle of creation, but they sinned and were thrown out of God's presence, from the Garden of Eden. But God promised Abraham that his descendants would be blessed and all the world would be blessed through him (Gen 12:1-3). God's people became the people of Israel but they were enslaved in Egypt (Exodus). But God rescued them and gave them the law to live by and a land to live in (Exodus). Once settled in the land, God raised David to be king (2 Samuel 2). David and Solomon's reigns were blessed by God but both kings were sinful (2 Samuel & 1 Kings).

As punishment for their sin, after Solomon dies, Israel is torn in two (922 BC cf 1 Kings 12):

- Israel, the northern kingdom, is made up of ten tribes (capital Samaria)
- Judah, the southern kingdom, is made up of two tribes (capital Jerusalem)

**Israel**, from the start, sets up idols to be worshipped to stop the people from going to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Each king of Israel is evil and does not follow God's ways. God sends prophets to Israel to call them back to Him, but they are ignored. Finally, in 722 BC, God sends Assyria to punish Israel and Israel as a country is destroyed (2 Kings 17).

But there is some hope through Judah.

**Judah** continues to be led by kings who are descendants of David. Some of these kings like Hezekiah and Josiah are godly and follow the Lord. Many do not. God sends prophets to Judah to call them back to Him. Sometimes they are obeyed but mostly they are ignored. Finally, in 586 BC, God sends the Babylonians to punish Judah and the people of Judah and carried them off into exile (2 Kings 25 cf Deut 28:15, 36,64). God's people are scattered.

The Exile was a turning point in biblical history that forever changed the character of Judaism. Without the temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood and the monarchy, God's people could not function as He had commanded. Esther is in this situation after the Exile. Thus, exiled Jews, focused their religious lives on the study of the Law because that could go with them wherever in the world they went.

But God is still in control of His world. The Persian Empire conquers the Babylonian Empire and the new king, Cyrus, decides to send the Jews home (covered in Ezra and Nehemiah) as promised by God (Jer 30:3). However, not all Jews return home. Some stay in Persia for generations, like Esther and Mordecai. This raises the question, does God look after His people even if they are not in the land of Israel?

This exiled group is called the remnant and their survival brings hope. Back in 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that His throne would be eternal. These promises will be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Jesus ultimately deals with the issue that has troubled both Israel and Judah, in fact, what has troubled all humanity: sin. The problem of sin is dealt with by Jesus dying on the cross and rising again. God's people can then come back into His presence, wherever they are.

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### What is the book of Esther about?

The book of Esther is about God, His care for His people and His faithfulness to His promises. Esther, a Jew (from the people of Judah), becomes queen of an evil empire called Persia. But Haman, the second in charge of the empire, wants to destroy all the Jews. The Persian Empire is so big that almost all the Jews in the world are within that empire. Only Queen Esther can save her people but only by risking her life. God uses Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai to save His people in unexpected ways. The Esther story is an example of how at one crucial moment in history the covenant promises God has made were fulfilled.

The big theological question for God's people is their status concerning the covenant they had broken – because they are still in Persia does that mean they are still part of God's people?

Some things to note:

- God is never mentioned in the book of Esther
  - But silence doesn't necessarily mean absence or abandonment
- The book of Esther is never quoted in the New Testament
- The motives and morality of the main characters are rarely made clear, thus leading to the book to seem ambiguous
- So why is the book in the Bible?
- It highlights the challenges we face living in a fallen and ambiguous world
  - The ambiguity of the characters highlights the ambiguity of the Jews living outside of the Promised Land and the ambiguity of living as a Christian when we can't physically see God and are unsure of why things are happening in the world
  - Like Esther and Mordecai, we live in a fallen, pagan world, with no earthly king, no earthly prophet and no earthly kingdom
  - But we have the Holy Spirit, God's word and a spiritual kingdom
- God is there behind the scenes all the way through
  - This is highlighted by the series of coincidences or turning points (that are not coincidences at all, because God is in control) and unexpected reversals
  - God's providence is key in God fulfilling His promises (both then and now)
  - So reversal is the key to the plot of the book of Esther
- The word Jew is used 40 times in Esther (the next highest book has only 9 references)
  - These are God's people but after the exile, they are still not in the promised land
  - Will God still look after His people outside the land?
- Banquet or feast is used 20 times (and only another 24 times in the rest of the Bible)
  - Feasts are used as a literary device to link sections of the book to see the parallels or reversals
- Also, where one sits and what one wears is important for the narrative
  - ie Haman and Mordecai switch places and clothing throughout the book

It is important to know the timeline while reading through Esther. The following table helps give the period and historical setting for each section of Esther:

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Reference	Event	Month	Day	Year of Xerxes's reign	Year
1:3	Xerxes holds his banquets			3	483 BC
2:16	Esther goes to Xerxes	10		7	479
3:7	Haman casts his lots	1		12	474
3:12	Haman issues his decree	1	13	12	474
3:13	Date planned for the destruction of the Jews	12	13	13	473
8:9	Mordecai issues his decree	3	23	13	473
8:12; 9:1	Day upon which the Jews could defend themselves from attack	12	13	13	473
9:6-10, 20-22	Ten sons of Haman executed; the feast of Purim celebrated	12	14, 15	13	473

Source: ESV Study Bible p855

Note:

- ESV uses the name Ahasuerus (Persian) whereas the NIV uses Xerxes (Greek)
- Hughes (amongst others) believes the references are to another king and thus this affects the dates. However, it does not affect the meaning of the book. I have chosen these dates as this appears to be the view of most scholars.
- The gathering for the banquet to plan in 1:3 and the gap in time from 1:3 to 2:16 fits in historically with the Persian planning for an invasion of Greece (480-479 BC)
- Although the book covers ten years, notice that time slows down from chapter 3

### **Plan for these studies:**

The following table gives you a quick overview of the five studies and how they fit together:

Study	Passage	Summary
1	Esther 1-2	Appearances: what the Persian Empire is like
2	Esther 3:1-5:8	Hatred: kill them all!
3	Esther 5:9-6:14	The king could not sleep
4	Esther 7-8	Reversal: save them all!
5	Esther 9-10	Celebration: what God's salvation (kingdom) is like

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### Recommended Commentaries

Two good commentaries on Esther are:

- **The NIV Application Commentary on Esther** by Karen Jobes
- **Teaching Ruth and Esther** by Christopher Ash

### Christopher Ash's three tips in studying Esther

- **Avoid moralising**
  - Unless the narrator indicates that they want us to approve or disapprove of something, that may not be the point of what is being said
  - Many actions that people take in the book are morally ambiguous and perhaps deliberately so
- **Seek Christ in Esther**
  - The book of Esther doesn't mention God, but He is there all the way through
  - Very often there's a human figure who in some way foreshadows or has the shape of Christ
- **Read "Jew" in light of biblical theology**
  - ie read Jew as the people of God

### Appendices:

Three appendices have been added to help your understanding of the book of Esther.

- **Appendix A**
  - Shows a map of the Persian Empire at the time of the book of Esther
  - This helps to understand the breadth and magnitude and therefore power of the Persian Empire
- **Appendix B**
  - Shows a Bible timeline for the whole of the Bible
  - This helps to see where Esther is in the context of the rest of the Bible
  - The book covers the period from 483BC to 473BC
- **Appendix C**
  - Shows a Bible timeline for the period around the book of Esther
  - This gives a close-up of important events around the time of Esther and thus can see the political and religious context of the book

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### Structure of Esther

The structure of Esther is helpful to see the literary pattern in Esther, which helps understand the book. It also helps in understanding the breakup of the Bible studies.

A chiasmic structure has the outer sections paralleling, moving towards a key central section.

The value of a chiasmic structure is primarily two things:

- The centre of the chiasm is usually the key part of the book (whereas with Western literature generally, the climax is at the end)
- Also, the matching sections show the literary links which may bring out contrasts or developments in the storyline

With my adjustments, this structure is based on Scarlett and Hughes's structures. Also, highlighted are some of the reasons for this break-up and the location of some of the important features of the book. The colourings show the break-up of the Bible studies. This is similar to the Bible Project's chiasm.

**A Introduction: the glory of Xerxes (Est 1:1-2)**

**B Two feasts of Xerxes (Est 1:3-22)** king decree 1

**C Esther decreed Queen & Persians killed (Est 2:1-23)** king decree 2, annals

**D First royal decree, Jews fast (Est 3:1-4:17)** turning point 1; king decree 3; Agag

**E Esther's first banquet (Est 5:1-8)** turning point 2; Queen!

**F Second royal decree, Jews celebrate (Est 5:9-14)** Zeresh

**G The king can't sleep (Est 6:1-3)** annals; turning point 3

**F' Haman's humiliation (Est 6:4-14)** Zeresh; reversal 1

**E' Esther's second banquet (Est 7:1-10)** reversal 2

**D' Second royal decree, Jews celebrate (Est 8:1-17)** Esther decree 1; Agag

**C' Esther's decree & Persians killed (Est 9:1-17)** reversal 3; Esther decree 2

**B' Two feasts of the Jews (Est 9:18-32)** Esther decree 3

**A' Conclusion: the glory of Xerxes and Mordecai (Est 10:1-3)** annals

Source:

- Hughes: [http://www.epctoronto.org/press/publications\\_JRHughes/Esther.pdf](http://www.epctoronto.org/press/publications_JRHughes/Esther.pdf) (p20)
- Scarlett: <https://www.forestbaptistchurch.org/chiasmus-lovers-love-chiasmus/>

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There is also a similar pattern with the feasts or banquets in Esther:

B Xerxes's banquet for the nobles of the empire (Est 1:3-4)

B Xerxes's banquet for all the men of Susa (Est 1:5-8)

C Esther's coronation banquet (Est 2:18)

E Esther's first banquet (Est 5:1-8)

E' Esther's second banquet (Est 7:1-9)

D' Feasting in celebration of Mordecai's promotion (Est 8:17)

C' The first day of Purim feasting throughout the empire (Est 9:17, 19)

B' The second day of Purim feasting in Susa (Est 9:18)

The feasts introduce the story (1:3-4, 5-8), bound the climax of the story (5:1-8; 7:1-9) and conclude the story (9:17, 18, 19).

Since the book both begins and ends with pairs of feasts, it is striking that Esther also gives not one but two banquets for the king and Haman. So pairs of events are important in the story.

### **Study 1 – Esther 1-2 “Appearances: What the Persian Empire is Like”**

The book of Esther begins in 483BC, in the Persian Empire. This is after the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. And the Persian Empire has since taken over the Babylonian Empire. A previous Persian king, Cyrus had decided to let the Jews return to Jerusalem (decree in 539BC). But some, like Esther and Mordecai, stayed in Persia. The Persian Empire is the wealthiest and most powerful empire in the world at the time and includes all of Israel.

1. Have you ever had a situation where you wonder where is God? Why doesn't He fix this?

A summary of these chapters is:

- King Xerxes of Persia has a banquet to highlight his wealth
- While drunk, and to impress his male friends, he asks his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, to parade herself before him and his friends
- She refuses and is axed as queen. A search for a new queen leads to Esther, a beautiful Jewish girl who keeps her Jewishness a secret.
- Her cousin and guardian, Mordecai, discloses a plot to kill the king (and this is recorded in the annals – the kings' book of important things)

#### **Read Esther 1**

2. What do you think we should take out of this picture of this lavish banquet that the king is throwing and all the detail given?
3. What does the king do in response to Vashti's refusal?
4. Can you respect someone by being told to do it?

#### **Read Esther 2**

5. How does this king treat women?

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6. What do we learn of Mordecai and Esther's heritage? Do these specifics remind you of anyone else in the Old Testament?
  
7. How many names does Esther have? Why might this be significant?
  
8. Why do you think Mordecai and Esther won't reveal their ancestry?
  
9. So what is going on? What is God doing?
  
10. Can you relate to some of the same issues as Esther? How?
  
11. Read Matthew 20:25-28. What does Jesus model that is different to the Persian empire?

### Summary

These two chapters set up the context for the remainder of the book: an evil empire, ruled by an all-powerful idiot, surrounded by yes-men, and who see women as objects. But it is an empire with a strong hint of fear and a reason to keep your place in the people of God a secret. It is an ambiguous world for one of God's people, a world like ours now. But a world that God controls and that Jesus has already saved us from. It is a world of opportunity for the Gospel.

### **Study 2 – Esther 3:1-5:8 “Hatred: Kill them all”**

Last time we saw what an evil empire looks like: self-absorbed, focused on appearances and wealth. It is difficult to know how to live as a Christian in a world like this. In this study, we'll look at the hatred of Haman for the Jews. He hates them so much he wishes to kill them all, and he has the power to make this happen. But what does Esther do, as a believer, in response to this?

1. How do you think God uses you in the roles that you have? ie at home; work/school/education; in the community etc

A summary of these chapters is:

- Haman (the new second in charge in Persia) hates the Jews and when Mordecai refuses to bow to him it makes him so angry that he plans genocide
- Esther is in a position to try to stop this at the risk of her life - Will she do it?

#### **Read Esther 3-4**

2. Does Esther have a religious role?
3. What do we learn about Haman?
4. Why do you think he hates the Jews so much?
5. What is the impact of this hatred?
6. What is the response of the Jews? Of Mordecai?

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7. But Mordecai answers Esther's objections in 4:13-14. Why does he say what he says?

8. How does God's power compare to King Xerxes (as outlined in chapter 1)?

Comparison	King Xerxes	God
Dominion	Many nations, 127 provinces (1:1)	The universe (Heb 1:2)
Authority	All his people (1:1)	All creation (Rev 2:26)
Throne	In Susa (1:2)	In Heaven (Rev 22:1-3)
Invitations	Nobles (1:3)	The poor (Mt 22:8-10); All (1 Tim 2:4)
Glory	180 days worth (1:4)	Gives heaven light (Rev 21:18-20)
Wealth	180 days worth (1:4)	All the universe (Rev 21:18-20)
Banquets	187 days and on earth (1:5)	Heavenly banquet (Mt 26:29; Is 25:6)

### Read Esther 5:1-8

9. How does Esther respond (4:15-5:8)?

10. How is identity gained if not from the world?

11. Is Esther an example for us to follow?

12. So who is Esther a signpost to and why?

13. How should we live in light of this teaching in Esther and our identity in Jesus?

### Summary

God has given us the gifts, talents and opportunities that we have. Each day we have a choice as to what to do with them: to serve the world and ourselves or to serve God and His people. This is the challenge of the book of Esther.

### **Study 3 – Esther 5:9-6:14 “The king could not sleep”**

This is the climax of the book of Esther. You can feel the tension rising. What is going to happen when everything looks to be going so badly?

Chapter 1 occurred in the third year of Xerxes' reign, chapter 2 in the seventh year and from 3:12 we're into the thirteenth year of his reign. The author is slowing down the pace of the book. This is usually done to highlight something important. Chapters 5-7 slow right down and happen all within two days. And we get to see what Haman is thinking. He plans to kill all the Jews but can Esther and Mordecai stop this?

1. Have you ever missed out on being honoured for something good that you did? How did that feel?

A summary of these chapters is:

- Haman decides to kill Mordecai, based on the advice of family and friends
- However, the king decides to honour Mordecai for saving his life
- And thus Haman, who thought the honouring must be for him, has to honour Mordecai

#### **Read Esther 5:9-6:14**

2. What do we learn about Haman in this passage?
3. So what happens to Mordecai?
4. How does Haman's wife Zeresh's advice change?
5. The key turning point in the book of Esther is when 'poor' Xerxes cannot sleep. Why would Xerxes read the annals? Is there anything deeper going on?

6. So did Haman ask for the wrong thing? (see 6:7-9)
  
7. What did he do wrong?
  
8. In what ways does God shape life for good?
  
9. What circumstances did God use to bring you to Himself?

### Summary

God is in control of all things. We see this in the lives of the main characters in the book of Esther. So many small things happen to lead to God's planned outcome, the salvation of His people. We don't always know what God is doing but we do always know His goal is to love.

### **Study 4 – Esther 7-8 “The Reversal: Save them all”**

Haman plans to kill all the Jews because of his hatred of Mordecai. But Esther comes up with a plan to stop Haman. Esther’s plan is coming together in a stunning reversal of what Haman expected.

1. Can you describe a great reversal in your life?

A summary of these chapters is:

- Queen Esther pleads with the king to save her people
- The king’s eyes are opened and he has Haman killed
- Mordecai replaces Haman as the second in charge of the empire
- Queen Esther and Mordecai come up with a plan to reverse Haman’s decree, thus saving the Jews
- There is a great celebration

#### **Read Esther 7-8**

2. What tactics does Esther use to help get the king’s favour?
3. What reminds us of the seriousness of the situation?
4. How does the king solve his dilemma and what is the outcome for Haman?
5. What do we learn about the king?
6. But how do Queen Esther and Mordecai (now second in charge in the kingdom) get around the kings’ decree to kill all the Jews when a decree cannot be revoked?

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7. What are the results of Queen Esther's request to the king? (see 8:15-17)

So we see a sequence of great reversals in the book of Esther:

Chapter 3	Chapter 8
3:10 – the king gives Haman his signet ring	8:2 – Mordecai is given the same ring
3:12 – Haman summons the king's scribes	8:9 – Mordecai summons the king's scribes
3:12 – letters written and sealed with the ring	8:10 – letters written and sealed with the ring
3:13 – the Jews, even women and children, are to be killed in one day	8:11 – the enemies of God's people, even women and children, are to be killed in one day
3:14 – Haman's decree was displayed publicly as law	8:13 – Mordecai's decree was displayed publicly as law
3:15 – couriers go out in haste	8:14 – couriers go out in haste
3:15 – the city of Susa is bewildered	8:15 – the city of Susa rejoices

8. What does God do ultimately about the problem of evil, the great reversal of sin?
9. How does knowing that God is in control of all things and has conquered sin impact us?

### Summary

In these chapters, the solution to the first decree is determined. Although a horrible situation, the story of Esther and her people is a signpost to the ultimate solution to the problem of evil that Jesus fulfils and triumphs over.

### **Study 5 – Esther 9-10 “Celebration: what God’s salvation is like”**

Because of the decree from Esther and Mordecai, the Jews are empowered to fight any who attack them. God fulfils His covenant promises through His providence (through His control of events). Because the Jews are delivered from genocide, they survived to bear the Messiah, through whom all the nations of the world have been blessed (Gen 12:1-3).

1. Have you ever been saved from a situation you didn’t think you’d get out of? What was your response once it was over?

A summary of these chapters is:

- The decree reverses everything (9:1)
- Now the Jews can defend themselves and they have a great victory over their enemies
- They now celebrate this salvation annually

#### **Read Esther 9-10**

2. Why don’t the Jews take any plunder (after all the decree says they can – 8:11)? It is repeatedly mentioned that they don’t take any plunder, see 9:10, 15, 16.
3. So with all this killing, why are the Jews to rejoice?
4. Why does the author contrast the two sets of feasts (from chapters 1 and 9)?
5. What does Purim celebrate?
6. How has Esther transformed throughout the book?

7. What is the upshot of what Esther gains for her people? (see 9:22)
  
8. What does Daniel or Isaiah promise the Saviour/Messiah will do? (Isaiah 14:3; 28:12; 63:14; Daniel 12:13)
  
9. How does Jesus give us rest?
  
10. Jesus dies forgiving His enemies, why?
  
11. Who are our enemies and how can we have rest from them?
  
12. What does the book of Esther foreshadow?
  
13. Are we responsible for what we do or is God?
  
14. Who are our enemies today? How does the book of Esther inform how we are to engage them?

### Summary

The absence of God's name in Esther is not trying to tell us that God Himself is absent. Rather, it tells us that when God appears to be far away, He is very close. God appears to us, but He appears invisibly and He speaks silently. We need to look closely at ourselves and our actions and identify as one of His people. God wants us to be like Esther and He shows what this ultimately looks like through His Son: one who identifies with His people and is willing to lay down His life for them.

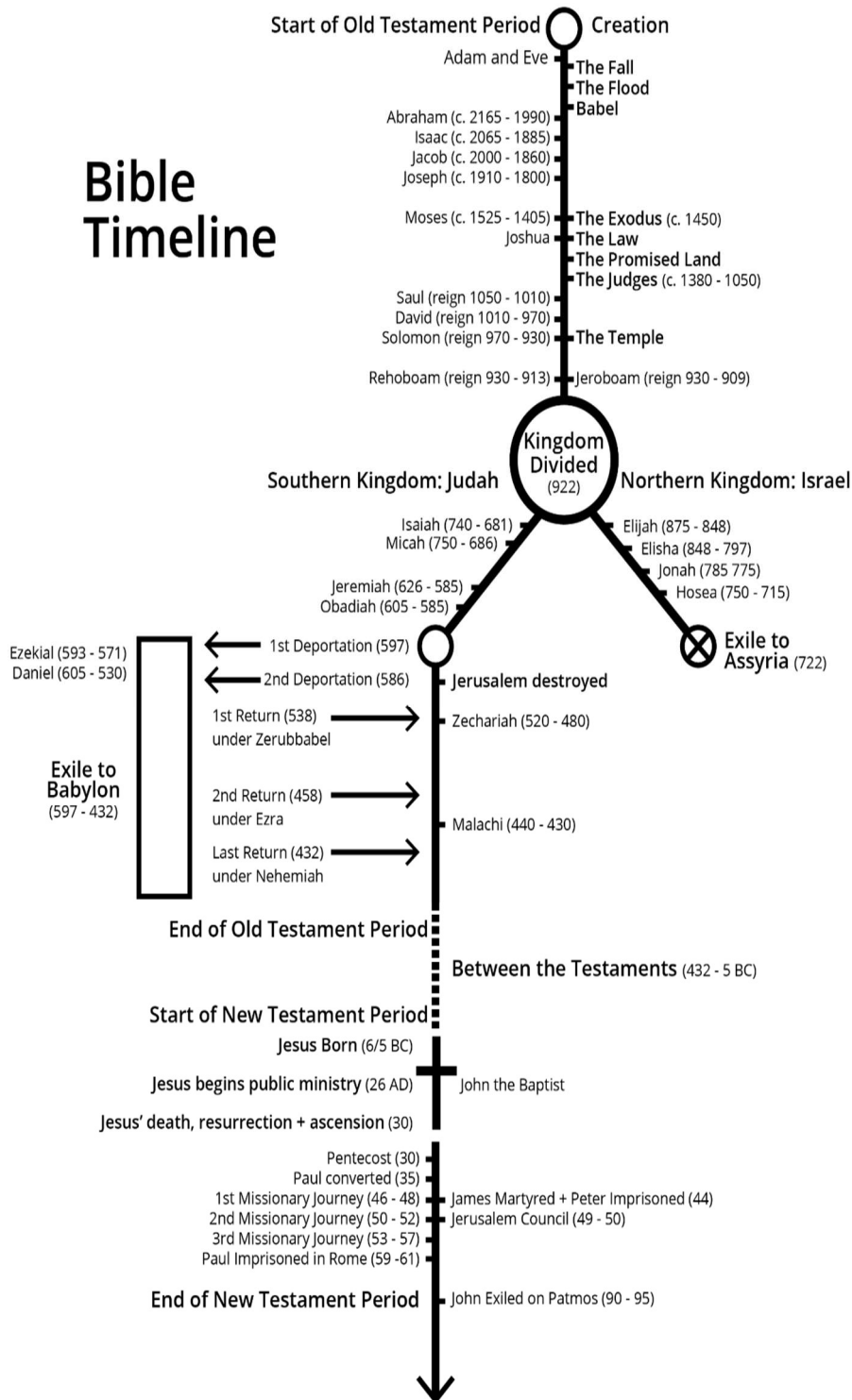
Appendix A – Map of the Persian Empire at the time of Esther (473BC)



Israel

Appendix B – The Bible Timeline

Bible Timeline

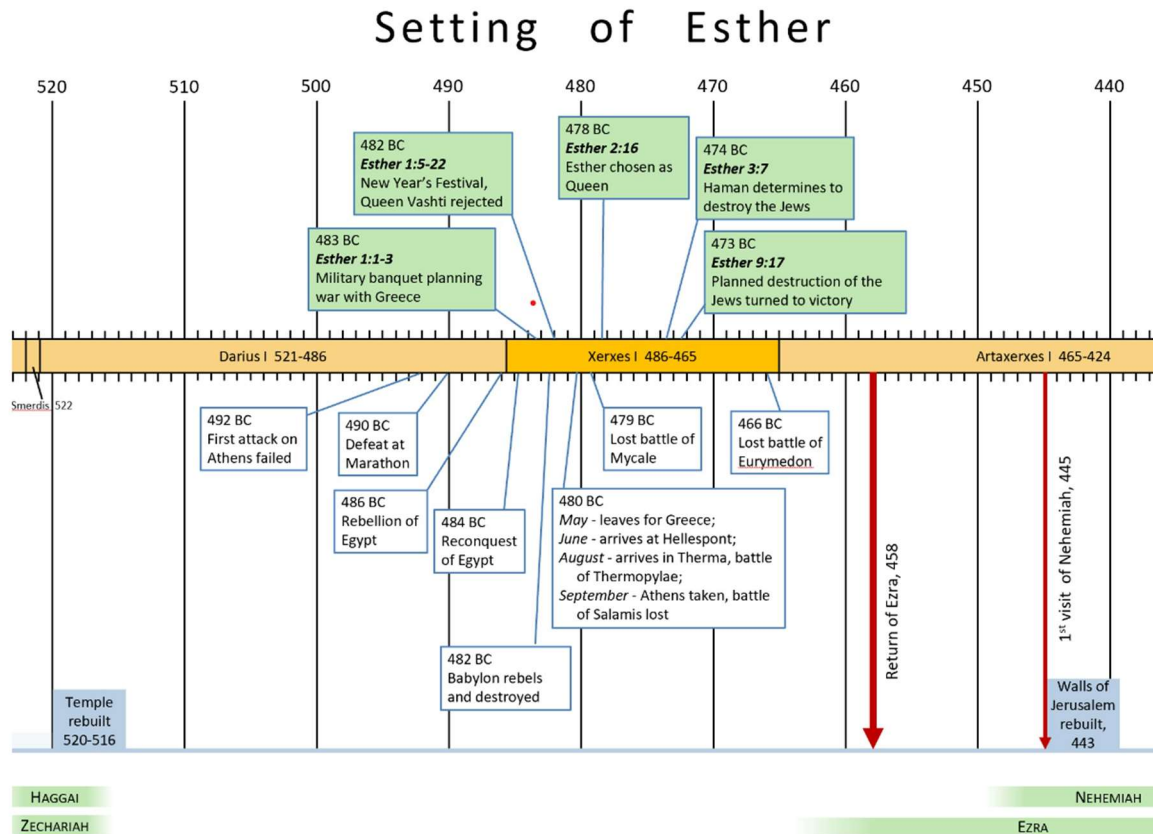


480BC

Esther becomes Queen

## Appendix C – Bible Timeline – focusing on Esther

Esther becomes Queen in 480BC, after the decree from king Cyrus (the first Persian king) for the Jews to be able to return from Babylon to Jerusalem (539BC) but before Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's walls (457-445BC).



Source: <https://crossroadsbible.net/2019/01/18/esther-chronology/>

Note:

- The first deportation of Jews to Babylon occurred in 605BC
- The second deportation of Jews to Babylon occurred in 597BC
- The fall of Jerusalem occurred in 586BC