

## Esther

The title of the book of Esther comes from the primary character in the story. It is not clear who wrote the book of Esther or when. The narrative shows the author writing as one removed from the events of the story. The book begins with the phrase “this happened during the time of Xerxes” (Esth. 1:1), suggesting it was written long after Xerxes. The linguistics suggest a later date—the late 400s or early 300s BC.<sup>1</sup> A Greek manuscript of the book of Esther is dated between 114 and 78 BC, which means the book of Esther had to have been written long before this and been widely accepted to have been translated into Greek.

The book of Esther is one of the most enigmatic books in the Bible, for there seems to be nothing particularly religious or Jewish about the book, unlike all the other books of the Bible. Not once is God referred to in the entire book. And though Mordecai and Esther have some good character qualities, they are not portrayed as godly people, especially Esther.<sup>2</sup>

First, neither of them returned to the Promised Land after the exile even though Yahweh had commanded through the prophets that all the Jews were to return to the Promised Land (Jer. 29:4-7). The First Testament consistently makes it clear that there is no blessing from Yahweh outside the Promised Land, thus the judgment of the exile.

Second, unlike all the other post-exilic books (Haggai, Zechariah, Obadiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel), Mordecai and Esther did not show any concern for Jerusalem, the temple, or the Jewish community in Israel. They were concerned about the greater Jewish community of Judah and the diaspora<sup>3</sup> only when they were about to be killed, and once they were delivered, they were no longer concerned. Their only agenda was to institute the festival of Purim to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews in the diaspora<sup>4</sup>, was focused on the return of Israel. He faced Jerusalem when he prayed (Dan. 6:10-11) and agonized over the length of their exile (Dan. 9).

Third, Mordecai told Esther to hide her Jewish identity, and Esther complied. No other Jew in the First Testament hid their identity, and this goes contrary to Yahweh’s call to them—to be a unique people who are priests to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:3-6).

Fourth, unlike Daniel (Dan. 1:8), Esther was not concerned about the Mosaic Law or about being defiled in the king’s palace. She sought to win the beauty contest and to sexually please a man who was not her husband (Ex. 20:14), married a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4), and ate unclean food (Lev. 11:46-47).

Fifth, not once did either of them pray to Yahweh, mention Him, or even allude to Him. Even with the overwhelming Jewish annihilation hanging over their heads, they were not moved to cry out to Yahweh for deliverance or to seek His wisdom when dealing with the king.

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<sup>1</sup> See Karen H. Jobes. *Esther*, pp. 30.

<sup>2</sup> See Karen H. Jobes. *Esther*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> The diaspora refers to the Jewish people who were dispersed and lived outside the Promised Land during and after the exile.

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Sixth, at the end of the story, Esther showed great brutality when she asked the king for a second day to massacre the enemies of the Jews even though the threat to the Jews had been eliminated.

Because of these issues, many people have struggled with why the book of Esther has been included in the Bible. Yet the nature of Mordecai and Esther's character should not be surprising in light of all the characters of the Bible that Yahweh has used to tell His story of redemption. Every book in the Bible is filled with instances of Yahweh using flawed people in order to tell the story of humanity's sinful and rebellious nature, and Yahweh continues to redeem them and incorporate them in the great pattern of His redemptive history. Thus, the point of the book of Esther is not the godly character and actions of these Jewish individuals but how Yahweh used them to deliver His people from the threat of annihilation.

## Setting

Genesis tells the story of Yahweh choosing Abraham and calling him to exit Babylon and follow Him as His image bearer (Josh. 24:2-3). Yahweh promised Abraham and his descendants that He would give them a land, make them the great nation of Israel, and bless them so that they could be a blessing to the world by drawing the nations into themselves and restoring them into a right relationship with Yahweh (Gen. 12:1-3; 15).

Eventually the people of Israel grew in numbers but became enslaved in Egypt. So Yahweh demonstrated His great power and love for them by delivering them from their bondage to Egypt and cleansing them via their crossing of the Red Sea. At Mount Sinai He made a covenant with them, declaring that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them as His special possession, make them into a unique and distinct nation, and use them to be a blessing to all the nations (Ex. 19:3-6). Yahweh gave them the Law (a means to live righteously), the tabernacle (a place to dwell with Yahweh like in the Garden of Eden), and the sacrificial system (a means to repent and be cleansed of their sins).

From Mount Sinai Yahweh led them to the Promised Land of Canaan so that He could dwell with them, bless them with the fruit of the land, and make them a beacon of blessing and reconciliation to the nations (Josh. 3-6). Yet, like the pagan nations, Israel continuously sinned and rebelled against Yahweh. For this reason, He allowed the nations to attack them as judgment for their idolatry and sin (Judg. 2:6-23). However, Yahweh continued to pursue them in reconciliation and mercifully delivered them from their oppressors. Even so, they did not change.

Eventually, they rejected the kingship of Yahweh by asking for a human king like all the other nations had (1 Sam. 8). So, Yahweh gave them a leader, Saul, who was selfish and corrupt just like the kings of the pagan nations. However, Yahweh chose a new king, David, and made an everlasting covenant with him (2 Sam. 7). Yahweh promised David that his descendants would always sit on the throne of Israel. David foresaw a day when one of his descendants would become king and priest, and Yahweh would use him to destroy the pagan nations and reconcile the true people of God back to Yahweh (Ps. 110).

But David's son Solomon pursued the idols of the pagan nations rather than Yahweh. As a judgment for the entire nation's idolatry, Yahweh divided the nation into two kingdoms—the kingdom of Israel, containing the ten tribes, in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). During the next three hundred years, the kings and the people of Yahweh continuously rebelled against His kingship and violated their covenant with Him. Thus, Yahweh sent the pre-Assyrian prophets (734–722 BC) to rebuke Israel for their sins and warn them of the

coming Assyrians, who would carry them out of the land and into captivity in 722 BC (2 Kgs. 17:7-41). Then Yahweh sent the pre-Babylonian prophets (722–586 BC) to rebuke Judah for their sins and warn them of the coming Babylonians, who would carry them out of the land into captivity in 586 BC (2 Kgs. 24). Yet the prophets also promised Yahweh’s people that one day He would send his “Davidic servant” (Ps. 110) to destroy the pagan nations, restore the people back to the Promised Land, and reconcile them and the nations to Yahweh, and that Yahweh would cause them and the nations to prosper in the land of blessing.

Cyrus II (559–530 BC), the Persian king, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BC. By the end of Cyrus’s rule, the Persian empire stretched from Asia Minor in the west to the Indus River in the east. His successors would continue to enlarge the empire, making it more powerful.

Cyrus II allowed the kingdoms of his empire to govern themselves and also granted freedom of religion and abolished slavery. In 539 BC Cyrus II issued a decree allowing all the people of his empire to return to their homelands from which they had been deported under the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. He also allowed them to take the images of their gods and sacred relics back with them and to freely worship their own gods. He had hoped to earn the favor of these gods and hoped they would bless his sprawling empire. Xerxes I (464–424 BC), also known as Ahasuerus, was the fourth king of the Persian empire.



### **Persian Kings**

559–530 BC   Cyrus II

530–522 BC   Cambyses II

522 BC       Smerdis

521–486 BC   Darius I

486–464 BC   Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)

464–424 BC   Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)

423–404 BC   Darius II

### **Jewish Affairs**

539 BC       The first return under Zerubbabel

538 BC       Temple rebuilding begun and halted

520 BC       Temple rebuilding resumed

515 BC       Temple completed

483 BC       Esther

458 BC       Second return under Ezra

Fortification of Jerusalem halted

445 BC       Third return under Nehemiah

444 BC       Walls of Jerusalem rebuilt

433 BC       Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes I

432 BC?      Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the book of Esther is to show that, despite the dangerous and uncertain world of the diaspora, Yahweh used the good qualities of key Jewish people in order to deliver His people from the threat of annihilation. The main focus of the story is not the Jewish characters of the story but the chaotic world of the Persian empire and the complete reversal of Haman's edict against the Jews.

The characters of the story, with the exception of Hamon, are barely developed. The narrator does not develop the characters with their words or his own evaluation. Their motives also are never revealed. Only the actions of the characters are presented.

Yet there is a focus on the palace and world of the Persian empire. This is seen, first, with how much attention is given to the royal palace. Every scene except the two brief episodes in Haman's home (Esth. 5:9-14; 6:12-14) and the brief account of the final victory of the Jews (Esth. 9:1-5) takes place in the Persian royal court. Second, this focus is shown in the fact that Hamon is at the center of the story. He is the only person whose motives the narrator reveals with verbal and inner dialogue, and his threat of the annihilation of the Jews is what drives the plot. All this shows that the narrator is not interested in the quality of the characters but the quality of the situation. And he does not wish to develop this quality but reveal it.<sup>5</sup>

The uncertainty of life for the Jews in the diaspora does not change significantly throughout the story. The climax comes when a whole series of unexplainable reversals begins to happen, pointing to Yahweh's working behind the scenes to deliver His people. Thus, this story shows

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<sup>5</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 306-307.

that Yahweh is able and willing to deliver His people from the uncertain, dangerous, and ungodly world they live in.

The second purpose of the book of Esther is to obligate the Jewish community to institute an annual celebration, its purpose being to memorialize the days and celebration and joy that occurred after the Jewish people were delivered from annihilation.<sup>6</sup> This is seen in the final chapters of the book, when both Mordecai and Esther wrote letters to the Jewish diaspora urging them to keep the festival of Purim and explaining the reason for the two different dates of the festival.

## Themes

There are two major theological themes that stand out in the book of Esther, which develop Yahweh's provision for His people in the midst of opposition: the providence of Yahweh and the human initiative.

### ***The Providence of Yahweh***

Even though Yahweh is never mentioned in the book of Esther, it is clear from the literary devices the narrator uses that he meant for the providence of Yahweh to be seen. This is evident in three ways in the story.

First, the context of the book of Esther favors reading all these elements as a statement about divine providence.<sup>7</sup> The narrator hints in two places that his context is indeed in the First Testament's world of faith. All throughout the First Testament, fasting is directly connected to the idea of stripping oneself of basic needs in order to surrender to Yahweh in prayer. Twice the Jewish community fasts in order to bring about change (Esth. 4:3 and 4:15-17). Though their intercession of prayer is not specifically stated, this is how the Jewish community of the Bible would see it. The second mention of fasting comes right after Mordecai's prompting to Esther to go to the king, hinting at the providence of Yahweh (Esth. 4:14). The connection shows that the narrator sees Yahweh's providence in Mordecai's statement even if Mordecai may not.

Second, there is a remarkable series of sudden and unexpected reversals in the story. The king's making Hamon his vice regent (Esth. 3:1-2) is reversed to the king making Mordecai vice regent (Esth. 9:3-4). The king's giving his signet ring to Hamon (Esth. 3:10) is reversed to the king giving his signet ring to Mordecai (Esth. 8:2a). Mordecai's tearing his clothes in mourning (Esth. 4:1) is reversed to Mordecai being clothed in a royal robe (Esth. 8:15a). The mourning of the Jews of the diaspora (Esth. 4:3) is reversed to the celebration of the Jews of the diaspora (Esth. 8:17a). Hamon's wife telling him to erect gallows for Mordecai (Esth. 5:14) is reversed to Hamon's wife telling him he would fall before Mordecai (Esth. 6:13b-14). Hamon's building of the gallows for Mordecai to be executed (Esth. 5:14) is reversed to Hamon being executed on the gallows he built (Esth. 7:9-10). Hamon's thinking the king wanted to honor him (Esth. 6:6-9) is reversed to the king telling Hamon to honor Mordecai (Esth. 6:11-12)

Third, the narrator develops the First Testament's central themes of the deliverance of Israel and evokes biblical faith by echoing, in its conceptions and in some cases its language, both the Joseph and the exodus narratives.

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<sup>6</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 311.

<sup>7</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 325-326.

Even though it seems Yahweh is not present or active in the uncertain, dangerous, and ungodly world we live in, one can be assured that He is very much actively involved in the lives of His people in order to deliver them and guide them through the chaos into life. This story provides for the diaspora an example of Yahweh's salvation from the chaos around them in the great pattern of Yahweh's redemption history.

### ***Human Initiative***

In most of the stories of the Bible, Yahweh is portrayed as intervening in history and acting primarily through the characters of the stories. Yet, in the book of Esther Yahweh is not mentioned nor portrayed as acting primarily through the characters in the story. There is an emphasis on human initiative, with Mordecai and Esther as absolutely necessary for the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's evil edict.<sup>8</sup> This is especially seen both in Mordecai's urging Esther to go to the king and in her wit as she speaks to the king at her banquets. The tone here suggests there would have been no deliverance of the Jews if it had not been for Mordecai and Esther. Yet, as seen in the above theme, it is clear Yahweh was working behind the scenes. The book does not attempt to work out this tension but merely points out the human initiative and hints at the divine providence.

“There are two conflicting world-views in the book, one represented by Haman, who believes in chance-fate and thinks that on this basis he can annihilate God's people.... The other worldview also lays stress on human initiative. Mordecai urged Esther to approach the king; if she failed to make this move, dangerous as it was, her own life and the life of her people could be wiped out.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Structure**

The genre of this book is a satire that mocks the ridiculous, exorbitant wealth and lack of wisdom in the Persian empire. The narrator uses this satire not to merely mock the palace but to emphasize the point that only the wisdom of Yahweh can bring order to the chaos of the world.

The book forms a chiasmic structure that emphasizes the providence of Yahweh in the king's sleepless night.

**A** Opening and background (1:1-22)

**B** The king's first decree (2:1-3:15)

**C** The clash between Haman and Mordecai (4:1-5:14)

**X** “On the night the king could not sleep” (6:1)

**C'** Mordecai's triumph over Haman (6:1-7:10)

**B'** The king's second decree (8:1-9:32)

**A'** Epilogue (10:1-3)

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<sup>8</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p 335.

<sup>9</sup> See Joyce Baldwin. *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 37-38.

## **Outline**

- I. Hamon's Plan to Annihilate the Jews (1:1-5:14)
  - A. Esther Becomes Queen of Persia (1:1-3:15)
  - B. Esther's Intervention (4:1-5:14)
- II. The Reversal of Hamon's Threat to the Jews (6:1-10:3)
  - A. Hamon Is Executed (6:1-7:10)
  - B. The Counter Edict Is Issued (8:1-10:3)

## I. Hamon's Plan to Annihilate the Jews (1:1–5:14)

In this first division the narrator introduces the major characters and sets up the threat of the Jewish people's annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman and the apathetic king. There are three emphases in this section. First is the palace's pursuit of pleasure, which has led to its being devoid of wisdom and care for the people of the kingdom, making the kingdom a dangerous and uncertain place. Second is Haman's increasing irrational hatred for Mordecai and his need for vengeance. Third is Esther's providential placement in the palace in order to work the deliverance of the Jewish people.

### A. Esther Becomes Queen of Persia (1:1–3:15)

In this section the narrator builds the foundation for all the above emphases, which will set Esther up for her fateful choice of whether to risk her life for the sake of her people.

**1:1-9** In the Hebrew, the king is named Ahasuerus, which was another name for Xerxes I (486–464 BC). The third year of Xerxes I would have been 483 BC. Though the division of the Persian empire into 127 provinces is not found outside the book of Esther, the reference to the number of provinces and the empire's borders emphasizes the vastness of the king's influence over Asia. The king held a banquet for all his officials who were appointed (not born) to office. This banquet lasted for six months. Then he gave a seven-day party for all the other people in the empire, from the least to the greatest.

The description of the length and wealth of the banquet is intended to conjure up the image of unlimited resources. The abundance of wine sets the reader up for the foolishness of drunkards about to unfold. This also contrasts the regular people of the empire, for whom food was not plentiful and survival, not excess of food and material objects, was at the forefront of their minds each day. The king and his officials lived in a world that was not reality for the people they represented, therefore they could neither relate to them nor truly represent them.

In contrast, Queen Vashti had a separate banquet for the women. The independent nature of her banquet and its lack of description is meant to contrast the extravagance of the king's banquet, which subtly and mockingly sets the scene for the satire that is about to transpire.

**1:10-12** While drunk with wine, the king commanded that his wife Vashti be brought to the banquet and her beauty be flaunted before all the men—like a trophy of his great conquest. This banquet was about the king's conquest of land and women. Vashti, however, refused to come to the banquet. Though anyone could guess the reason for her refusal, the narrator's omission of any reason strengthens the tension in the story that Vashti had no rights in relation to her husband, and therefore her reasons were irrelevant.<sup>10</sup> This is emphasized by the king's anger over her refusal. Vashti's refusal to be shown off reveals a sense of propriety and self-respect that places her outside of the mocking characterization the narrator has given the rest of the royal court.<sup>11</sup> The irony here is that the king who rules the world cannot bend his own wife to his will.

**1:13-15** The king then consulted his advisors, which was the normal thing for the king to do. The difference this time was that, first, all of them were drunk, so neither their advice nor his response would be rational. Second, the king raised a domestic squabble to the level of a matter

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<sup>10</sup> See Joyce Baldwin. *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 354.

of state. This is something that should have been dealt with in their private chambers. No laws exist (or should exist) on how to deal with a wife who did not listen to her husband.

**1:16-20** The king's advisor, Memucan, elevated Queen Vashti's refusal as a wrong committed against the entire empire. The advisors were out of touch with the common people of the empire, imagining that the people had any idea what was going on in the palace or would even relate to the intrigue. The advisors lost their common sense and assumed Vashti's disobedience would spark marital disrespect and rebellion in all households.<sup>12</sup> So, ironically, they decreed for Vashti what she had already decided—that she would not be allowed to come into the king's presence. Their decision to demand honor from their wives by an empire-wide edict would have actually verified the rumors of Vashti's actions and the king's embarrassment that they feared and sought to conceal.<sup>13</sup> The wise men were clever but not wise.

**1:21-22** The king was pleased with the idea and did just what Memucan advised. While drunk, he issued a decree, which could never be altered, that Vashti was to be disposed of, and announced throughout the empire that every man should be ruler over his own household. In reporting the king's thoughtless edict, the narrator indirectly comments on the whimsical nature by which laws were made in the land.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the chapter he is portrayed as the world's most powerful and a very generous king; now he is trying to maintain his dignity and image against the defiance of his wife.

The constant portrayal of the king throughout the book is of a man of excess, indulging his own appetites, ruled by impulse, obsessed with his own honor, and unable to make a decision on his own.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the unalterable laws he passes may not be the best for the people of the kingdom. The Persian empire is ruled inexorably by law, but it is not a law that can bring much assurance of stability or justice to those who stand under its mandates.

“Such a world is not to be trusted. It is under the rule of a spoiled, self-indulgent despot, who, though he is not inherently evil, is impulsive and malleable, easily swayed by his nobles (1:10-22), his body-servants (2:1-4), his gran vizier (3:7-11), and his queen (5:1-8; 7:1-10). But the satire has a sinister side. It reveals a society fraught with danger. Though it is ruled by law, this does not guarantee either security or justice, for it is easily manipulated by buffoons whose tender egos can marshal the state's whole legislative and administrative machinery for the furthering of selfish causes.”<sup>16</sup>

“The empire itself is subject to, if not exactly run by, a spoiled and egocentric—though not malign—despot, whose power stands at the disposal of whoever can exploit his malleability, moral flaccidity, demonstrative generosity, and unsteady temperament. In his denseness, erraticism, and rigidity, he epitomizes his empire. His noblemen are obsessed with status, yet advocate laws that are far from dignified; they are devoted to law, yet show no awareness of justice. Such a world is not inherently pernicious—it is not the hellish exile envisioned in the prophetic threats and covenantal curses—but it is the fertile ground for terrifying evils.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See David J. A. Clines. *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 355.

<sup>14</sup> See Joyce Baldwin. *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> See Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, pp. 171-77.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 316.

<sup>17</sup> Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, pp. 248-249.

“The opening chapter has set the tone that cannot be forgotten, conditioning the reader not to take the king, his princes, or his law at their face value, and alerting the reader to keep his eyes open for ironies that will doubtless be implicit in the story that is yet to unfold. Without the rather obvious satire of the first chapter we might well be in more doubt over the propriety of ironic readings in the body of the book. Chapter 1 licenses a hermeneutic of suspicion.”<sup>18</sup>

**2:1-4** The narrator continues to set the tone he established in the first chapter while introducing Esther to the palace. Now sober and no longer angry, the king expressed regret over his loss of Vashti. He may have been king of a vast empire, but he was a prisoner of his own laws. In addition, he took no personal responsibility for what those laws affected.

In order to comfort the king, his attendants suggested that they search the entire empire for many beautiful young virgins to be brought to him. Then they would all be given beauty treatments, and the one who pleased him the most would be his new queen. The only criteria the royal court had for the new queen was her beauty and sexual prowess. This was in contrast with both the Persian documents that stated the queen would be from one of the seven noble families and the book of Proverbs, which emphasizes the wisdom and integrity of the wife.

**2:5-7** The narrator then pauses the narrative to introduce Mordecai the Jew and his adopted cousin Esther. Mordecai’s name is Persian and has connections with the Babylonian high god Marduk. This does not mean he was an apostate Jew, for it was common for the Jews in captivity to receive and use pagan names (Dan. 1:7; Ezra 1:8). Mordecai is introduced here and called “the Jew” throughout the book of Esther. This is the only time in the First Testament that a native Israelite is named and identified by their ethnic or national origin. They are usually identified by the name of their father, though their place of origin may also be given. Only foreigners who lived in Israel were regularly identified only by their country or region of origin, including “Ruth the Moabitess” (Ruth 2:21), “Uriah the Hittite” (1 Sam. 11), or the Philistine “Ittai the Gittite” (2 Sam. 15:19-22; 18:2-12). Thus, this title marks Mordecai first and foremost as a foreigner living outside the land of Israel in the diaspora. Mordecai was a Benjaminite and a descendant of Kish, who was the father of King Saul (1 Sam. 9:1-2). The tribe of Benjamin was not seen in a very good light because of what they did at the end of the book of Judges and because of the reign of Saul, a Benjaminite. Yet Mordecai is portrayed in a favorable light in the book of Esther, which suggests that, post exile, the Jews’ perception of the Benjaminites had changed.

Mordecai’s cousin was Hadasseh, a Jewish name that means “myrtle”—a beautiful fragrant tree. Her Persian name was Esther, which means “star” and comes from the same root as Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love. Mordecai had adopted Esther when her parents died. Being described as beautiful and having a lovely figure sets Esther up to be taken into the king’s harem. She was Mordecai’s ward and would remain obedient to him throughout the story, even when she became queen.

**2:8-11** Many women in the empire, including Esther, were taken into the king’s harem and put under the care of the king’s servant Hegai. The girls’ passivity in being taken by the king is seen in a tight series of three passive verbs in Esth. 2:8—“...was proclaimed,...were gathered,...was taken”—which portrays an irresistible series of events. Once Esther was in the king’s harem, however, the narrator’s choice of language—“earned” or “won favor” (Esth. 2:9, 15, 17)—shows

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<sup>18</sup> See David J. A. Clines. *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, p. 33.

that Esther actively pursued the beauty treatments and actively won the favor of Hegai, revealing her desire to beat out all the other women and become the king's wife. This is completely contrary to the calling of the Jewish people, who were to be holy and distinct from all the other nations. It is also contrary to the actions of Daniel, who determined he would not be defiled by the culture into which he had been taken. In addition, Mordecai had told her to hide her Jewish identity, which no other Jew did throughout the Bible and goes contrary to Israel being a light and priesthood to the nations. Esther's motives for doing all of this are not revealed by the narrator. Though Esther was in the palace, Mordecai stayed close to her every day to see how she was doing. This suggests that his motivation may have been to protect her.

**2:12-14** The whole focus of these verses is on the ability of the women to please the king sexually. They were given an entire year to beautify themselves and train in order to please the king. When she went to the king, she was given anything she needed in order to please him and in the morning was sent away, never to return to him unless he wanted her again. Though these verses are devoid of sensual details, the statement "to go to" is used four times. The repetition communicates the sexual excess of the royal court. The women who were not chosen to be the king's wife would live the rest of their lives in the harem waiting for him to summon them. Their life would be more like widowhood, with no guarantee that the king would remember them. Living in the palace was a small compensation for the king's neglect.

**2:15-18** After four years it was Esther's turn to go to the king, and she took only what Hegai told her to take. She sexually pleased the king better than any other woman. As a result, the king made her his queen and gave another banquet. By mentioning the other women sexually pleasing the king in Esth. 2:12-14 and then simply stating that Esther went to the king in Esth. 2:15-18, the narrator avoids having to mention the sexual nature of Esther and softens a negative characterization of her.

**2:19-23** Once again the narrator emphasizes that Esther kept her identity hidden because this is what drives the plot of Esther being able to stop Hamon's plan to annihilate the Jews, as will soon be revealed in the narrative.

Mordecai was regularly found sitting at the gate (Esth. 2:21; 3:2; 5:9, 13; 6:10, 12) where the city officials gathered, meaning he was able to hear the many political intrigues of the palace. On one occasion, Mordecai was able to discover an assassination plot against the king, and he reported it to the king. As a result, the men were executed, and the event was recorded in the royal records. This event will lead to a future event that begins the series of reversals in the narrative.

**3:1-2** The narrator reveals that Haman was an Agagite, which made him a descendant of king Agag of the Amalekites. Yahweh had declared that He would destroy the Amalekites for attacking Israel after coming out of Egypt (Ex. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19). Later, Yahweh commanded Saul the Benjaminite to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15). But when Saul disobeyed Yahweh and allowed some of them to live, Yahweh took the kingship away from him. This would have created animosity between the Agagites (Haman) and the Benjaminites (Mordecai). Unlike with the other characters in the book of Esther, Haman's character is revealed by the narrator's direct statements, especially the use of inward dialogue. Haman is "allowed no mysteries. His motives, drives, and attitudes are transparent, his twisted soul laid bare to all."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, p. 178.

The king made Haman vice regent over the kingdom and commanded that everyone bow down to him. The narrator does not state why Mordecai refused to bow down. There was nothing wrong with bowing in honor to another person (2 Sam. 14:4; 15:28; 1 Kgs. 1:6), so perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Haman was an Amalekite.<sup>20</sup> Mordecai did not have to worship Haman (Dan. 3:17-18). Not even the Persian kings demanded worship of their people.<sup>21</sup>

**3:3-7** When Haman found out that Mordecai would not bow down to him, he became so enraged that he was driven to destroy not only Mordecai but also his entire race. The fact that he had to learn Mordecai's ethnicity in order to destroy them all shows how irrational his desire to exterminate the Jews was. The choosing of the month to exterminate the Jews by lot continues to highlight the randomness and irrationality of Haman's choices.

“Though determined by lot, the day chosen seems maliciously ironical. The number 13 was considered unlucky by the Persians and the Babylonians, while the thirteenth day of the first month, the day on which the edict decreeing the Jews' destruction was dispatched (v 12), is the day preceding Passover, the commemoration of the deliverance from slavery in Egypt.”<sup>22</sup>

**3:8-11** Haman then requested that the king approve of the extermination of a certain people group. Perhaps Haman did not mention the Jews by name since Xerxes I's predecessors, Cyrus I and Darius I, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-12).

In describing the Jews as a people scattered throughout the empire, Haman made them seem like an enemy who was everywhere in the empire ready to attack. Then he described them as having their own customs, as if they were opposed to the Persian culture. Yet diversity is exactly what the empire valued. His statement that they did not obey the Persian laws was a lie.

So the king gave Haman his signet ring to implement all his intentions. The whole matter was too insignificant a concern to occupy his time or attention. The king was a dope to his prime minister. Haman was unmitigated evil, but the king was dangerous indifference personified.

**3:12-15** So Haman wrote the edict, which could not be overturned, and sent it to all the officials throughout the entire empire: to exterminate the Jews and take everything they had as plunder. Haman would use human, tribal, and racial enmity promoted by greed to set the people of the Persian empire to the task of exterminating the whole Jewish race. It would not take place for eleven months, which would prolong the agony of the Jews and also proved ample time for intensifying of anti-Jewish feelings.<sup>23</sup>

The king and Haman sat down to a banquet while the city was thrown into chaos, a scene that paints a picture of their callous indifference. Haman's fragile ego is seen in the fact that he was willing to exterminate an entire people group merely because one man refused to honor him. Haman's evil was fueled by the inordinate pride of a vast but tender ego.<sup>24</sup> His wounded pride would be healed by the destruction of his enemy (Esth. 5:9-14). He is portrayed as the personification of irrational evil. The fact that this evil could so easily direct the Persian state was what made diaspora life such a dangerous and uncertain place.

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<sup>20</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 385.

<sup>21</sup> See Lewis B. Paton. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 196.

<sup>22</sup> Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 386.

<sup>23</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 387.

<sup>24</sup> See Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, p. 179.

## **B. Esther's Intervention (4:1–5:14)**

In this section Mordecai and Esther moved into action in an attempt to change the mind of the king concerning the annihilation of the Jews.

**4:1-3** When Mordecai heard of the edict, he put on sackcloth and ashes, which was the custom when mourning, and sat outside the palace gate because he was not allowed to enter. His inability to enter the palace, even as an official, stresses the restrictions on entry into the king's presence and thus the difficulty to gain an audience with the king to address the issue. Likewise, the ashes and mourning were not allowed to disturb the merry world of the king. By sitting at the palace gates, Mordecai intended to forcibly bring the matter to the queen's attention. All the Jews in the empire were mourning as well. This contrasts the Persians' extravagant feasting. The mourning was so great that it would abolish Passover, the celebration of Yahweh's deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

**4:4-8** Esther tried to alleviate Mordecai's distress by sending him new clothes, but he did not take them. Then she sent her servant Hathak to inquire of Mordecai. Her inability to go to Mordecai shows that, even as queen, she too was restricted in her movement. Mordecai then told Esther everything. The fact that she knew nothing of an edict that had been issued in the very palace she lived in and by the king she was married to shows how sheltered she was from the realities of the kingdom in her life of privilege and comfort. His request was that she go and talk to her own husband about the matter.

**4:9-11** Esther told Mordecai that was not able to go to the king, for anyone who entered the king's presence without permission would be executed unless he extended his favor toward them. Not only that, but it had been thirty days since he had last sent for her, which implied he had moved on to other women. It was not likely that any king would extend favor to someone who came in uninvited. Everything in this story reveals how disconnected the king was from the realities of his empire.

**4:12-14** Mordecai responded by telling her that it was not likely she would escape the extermination of the Jews when it was all finished. His point was basically, "Either way, you are going to die." Mordecai then expressed a confidence that the Jews would be delivered in one way or other and that perhaps Esther was placed in the palace just for this time, in order to deliver the Jews. One of the most puzzling parts of the book of Esther is that if there were ever a time to mention Yahweh, it would have been here. Yet Mordecai did not, which makes one wonder how much he really saw Yahweh's hand at work in the lives of the Jews. Even so, he believed they would be delivered because the Jews had been repeatedly delivered in miraculous ways throughout their history. His fasting put his comments in a religious context. It is clear that he did believe Yahweh would be behind the deliverance of the Jews and that He had put her in her place of power. In any case, it is not clear that he had an intimate relationship with Yahweh considering the points mentioned in the introduction.

**4:15-17** Esther was persuaded and told him and the Jews to fast for three days on her behalf and then she would go to the king. The fact that she commanded them to fast and courageously resigned herself to death shows that she was not simply obeying Mordecai as in the past. Rather, this was her choice, and there was a resolute confidence in it. Even though Esther did not demonstrate a high level of godly character and obedience, that does not take away from the fact that she was a very intelligent and courageous woman whom Yahweh used to save His people. She had not been cowed into submission by Mordecai; there is firm conviction. This is a decisive

turning point, for she began as a nonentity, valued in the courtly world only for her beauty and body, but now she resolutely accepted Mordecai's challenge to use her position as queen to act for the salvation of her people.<sup>25</sup>

**5:1-8** So Esther went before the king, and not only did he extend favor toward her, but he offered her anything she wanted, even up to half of the kingdom. Esther asked that he and Haman come that day to a banquet she had prepared for them. At the banquet he asked again what she wanted, and she invited him to another banquet on the next day. At first it might seem as though she had lost her courage and was inviting them to another banquet in order to stall on what she must ask. Yet the preciseness of her requests and the fact that she repeated twice at the banquet that the king had offered her everything shows that this was a deliberate plan. Esther was getting the king to spend time with her so they could reconnect as a couple and he could be reminded that she was a very real person whom he enjoyed. This was especially important because it had been thirty days since he had last seen her. Then, when she made her request to save the Jews, which she was as well, he would be more emotionally involved with her and more likely to grant her request. Her plan of action showed great wisdom, for her request would be a relational one with the king rather than a political request.

**5:9-14** Haman went home in high spirits because his ego had been stroked, having been invited by the queen to a banquet. But his enthusiasm was diminished when he saw Mordecai, who still refused to bow before him. Infuriated, he restrained himself, knowing that Mordecai would be slaughtered soon. Haman then called his wife and friends together just so he could boast about how great he was and that he had been the only person, other than the king, whom Esther had invited to a banquet. Then he revealed his deep shallowness and low self-esteem, stating that all of it brought him no joy as long as he still saw Mordecai alive. It is quite pathetic that his happiness was completely dependent on one man bowing down to him.

Then his wife came up with an idea to cheer him up, suggesting that while he awaited the next banquet and the slaughter of Mordecai and the Jews, he could comfort himself by building a giant pole on which to impale Mordecai. This was most likely not a modern-day gallows with a rope around the neck but an impaling stick, a common form of execution in the Persian empire. Darius I, Xerxes I's father, was known to have once impaled 3,000 men.<sup>26</sup> The 75-foot pole may have been on a hill, the height of the pole possibly including the height of the hill. This method of execution was sick and twisted and exposes the depravity of the wealthy ruling class.

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<sup>25</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 321.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Martin, "Esther," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, pp. 704-5.

## II. The Reversal of Hamon's Threat to the Jews (6:1–10:3)

In this second division, the reversals of fate for both the Jews and Haman began to unfold and would lead to the deliverance of the Jews. This series of events is set into motion with the sleepless night of the king.

### A. Hamon Is Executed (6:1–7:10)

In this section the smaller threat to the Jews by Haman is eliminated. But the bigger and unchangeable threat—the edict to annihilate the Jews, left behind by Haman—still stands.

**6:1-3** That night the king could not sleep, so he had the historical records read to him that he might be bored to sleep. Instead, his attendants just happened to read the part about Mordecai saving the king's life. While Esther prepared to speak to the king about the extermination of the Jews, Yahweh was working in the background to deliver His people. The king learned that Mordecai had not been rewarded, and he decided to reward him that day.

**6:4-10** The king asked if there were any advisors in the palace whom he could consult on how to reward Mordecai. Haman just happened to be in the palace. It is not clear why Haman was in the palace late in the night to tell the king about impaling Mordecai. The king asked Haman how someone should be rewarded greatly, and Haman, thinking it was himself the king had in mind, answered based on what he would want. Haman could have asked for wealth, power, or women but instead asked for honor, praise, and recognition. Haman was a man of hubris and needed everyone to recognize and praise him in order to feel significant. The king then told Haman to do these things for Mordecai, spotlighting a special irony on Yahweh's bringing Haman into the palace at such a moment.

**6:11-14** Haman then led Mordecai through the streets on a horse while praising Mordecai for his deeds. The narrator does not say anything about the reactions of these two bitter enemies, leaving this to the imagination of the reader. This scene is dripping with ironic humor.

Afterward, Mordecai went back to doing what he had been doing, but Haman went back to complain to his wife and friends and wallow in his misery. Once again, we see how deeply this affected Haman's low self-esteem and fragile ego in the contrast between how the event ruined Haman's whole existence and the fact that Mordecai simply went back to living his life. His wife was not encouraging and had no hope to offer Haman. She saw this as the first sign of a downward fall at the superiority of Mordecai. In the reality of their lives, this was an extremely fatalistic view of the events, which led only to despair. In the context of the narrative, it was the prophetic turning point of the story that led to Haman's downfall. The scene ends with the eunuchs rushing Haman off to the banquet of his demise.

**7:1-4** While drunk at the banquet, the king asked Esther what it was she wanted. She had to expose the treachery of Haman without appearing in any way to be accusing the king. Though the king was guilty and should be held accountable, he was also the only person who could save her people, and it would do no good to alienate him with an accusation.

First, she no longer used the third person when addressing the king, which was court protocol and what she had done up to this point. She said, "If I have found favor with *you*, O king." This connected him to her emotionally and emphasized her special relationship with the king.

Second, the king had granted her any "wish" or "request," using these words interchangeably and intending them to be a single entity (Esth. 5:6; 7:2). Esther treated the words as two distinct

objects: “Let my life be granted to me as my *wish* and my people as my *request*” (Esth. 7:3). Thus, she fully identified herself with her people: to threaten one was to threaten the other.<sup>27</sup> She was the one to whom he was emotionally connected, and by mentioning her plight first and then connecting it to the plight of her people, they might be spared by what he felt for her.

Third, she used the exact wording of Haman’s edict and then used the passive voice in “sold for” to allude to the transaction between the king and Haman (Esth. 3:9-11) to avoid referring directly to the seller in the transaction, which was the king.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, she emphasized her and her people’s extermination without mentioning the name of the person behind it; this way the king would be connected to the treachery and horror of what would happen to her rather than to his esteemed vice regent. By repeating the synonyms *destroyed, killed, and annihilated*, she emphasized the horror and certainty of what would happen to them in order to evoke an emotion of shock and anger over what was about to happen.

**7:5-7** The king had no memory of Haman’s plot to exterminate the Jews or of his own part in it. So with great irony he asked for both the identity and location of the perpetrator, not aware he was sitting next to him. Learning that it was Haman, the king left the room enraged. He no longer had anyone to consult for what to do, so he left the room at a total loss of a next step. Should he kill Haman over a plot against his wife, of which he was also guilty?<sup>29</sup> The king had shown himself to be a weak and unstable despot who threw the lives of his people away at the whim of his vice regent. Now that his most-favored queen and most-favored vice regent were pitted against each other before him, there was no clear course. All of Esther’s cleverness had taken this into account, and now the fate of the Jews, including hers, hung on this moment of the king’s reentry into the room.

**7:8-10** Haman, realizing with great shock and horror that his life was dependent on what the king decided to do when he returned to the room, threw himself at Esther, where she was reclining, and begged for mercy. When the king returned and saw Haman on Esther, he assumed Haman was assaulting her. It seems utterly ridiculous to assume this was actually how the king interpreted the scene. But in choosing to interpret it this way, the king was free to sentence Haman to death for assaulting his wife while absolving himself of any guilt in the extermination of the Jews and still dealing with the problem Esther had presented to him. The convenience of the situation relieved the king once again of having to make an independent decision.<sup>30</sup>

Immediately the king’s men covered Haman’s face for execution. Harbona, the king’s eunuch, pointed out that Haman had already built an impaling pole for Mordecai—once again showing that the king was unaware of what was happening in his capital. Ironically, Haman was impaled on the very pole he had built for Mordecai.

Once Haman was dead, the king’s anger subsided, revealing that the king was never truly angry or horrified over the extermination of the Jewish population; rather, the affront to his honor in the attack upon his queen had moved him to rage. After all, he was the one who had casually fated the Jews to death with no thought to who they were. Now Esther and Mordecai faced the impossible task of revoking an irrevocable law in order to save the Jews from extermination.

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<sup>27</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 432.

<sup>28</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 432.

<sup>29</sup> See David J. A. Clines. *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, p. 312.

<sup>30</sup> See Frederic W. Bush. *Ruth, Esther*, p. 433.

## **B. The Counter Edict Is Issued (8:1–10:3)**

In this third division, Esther had to come up with a way to counter Haman's edict despite the king's indifferent and callous attitude toward the Jewish people.

**8:1-6** On the same day, the king gave Haman's estate to Esther and made Mordecai his vice regent. Surprisingly, the king made one of the very few decisions on his own in the whole story. This shows that he saw only Esther as the victim and so was making recompense,<sup>31</sup> as if this had been her plan all along—to remove Haman and appoint Mordecai. The king was choosing to not deal with the issue of the extermination of the Jews because of his own complicity in the issue.

Seizing the moment while everything was fresh in his mind, Esther threw herself at the king's feet, weeping and begging for the lives of her people. Her life was no longer in danger, and he had already shown he did not care about the plight of the Jews. Now she demonstrated how much this decree pained her, pleading that if "she had found favor with the king," he might save her people so that she would not be in distress anymore. Once again, she brought it back to herself, knowing this was the only factor that would move him.

**8:7-14** The king then gave his signet ring to her in order to write a new decree that would protect the Jews. Once again, he was unwilling to take responsibility and figure out how to handle the situation, leaving the task instead to Esther and Mordecai. So Mordecai wrote a new decree in all the languages of the provinces and sent it throughout the empire. The edict allowed the Jews to protect themselves by killing anyone who tried to kill them. However, the edict made it clear that the Jews were not allowed to attack anyone they wanted, only those who tried to kill them first and only on the thirteenth of Adar.

**8:15-17** A complete role reversal is seen in these verses. First, Mordecai was no longer wearing sackcloth and ashes outside the palace, instead wearing royal robes and coming out of the palace. Second, the Jewish people were no longer fasting in sorrow but feasting in celebration.

**9:1-10** When the day came for Haman's edict to be carried out by those who wished to harm the Jews, most of the people of the empire were afraid of the Jews because of the edict of Mordecai. No one could stand against the Jews because the people feared them, and the satraps and governors of the land stood with the Jews because they feared Mordecai. That day the Jews killed many people who tried to kill them in the empire, including the sons of Haman. The narrator points out two significant differences from what Haman's edict intended. First, those who carried out the command of Haman's edict attacked the Jews first with the intent to kill, whereas the Jews killed only those who attacked them first. Second, Haman's edict allowed the people to take anything belonging to the Jews they killed, whereas the Jews took nothing from those they killed. This is a significant difference between the motive and actions of the two edicts.

**9:11-15** When the day was over and the facts were presented to the king, he turned to Esther and offered her whatever she wanted. It seems that the king had become partial to the Jews now since they had not demonstrated weakness on the day of the battle. And as impulsively as ever, he had now taken sides with the Jews and cared about their fate. Esther asked that the edict be allowed to be carried out again on the next day in the capital of Susa only and that the sons of Haman be impaled. This would have been the impaling of their dead bodies for all to see as a warning, which was a common practice in the ancient Near East. The second day of killing, however, was

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<sup>31</sup> See Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, pp. 89-90.

completely uncalled for and immoral. Haman's edict allowed for only one day, and that day had passed, so the Jews were now completely safe under the law of the Persians. But Esther asked that they could now initiate the killing of those whom the Jews thought might be a threat. Though this might be politically prudent, it was morally deplorable. Unlike before, Esther did not plead for the lives of her people nor justify her actions to the king.<sup>32</sup> But with steeled emotions, she acted like a Persian queen and issued the deaths of suspected enemies. Mordecai did not urge her, nor is he mentioned. She had come into her own as a queen and acted on her own. The narrator does not justify or even explain Esther's actions but merely records what transpired. This may have been when she received her nickname "Esther," which alludes to the Babylonian goddess of love and war. The king then issued the edict, and the Jews of Susa were given another day of killing anyone they suspected of being their enemies.

**9:16-19** The recording of the second day of killing was not just for literary purposes but also for liturgical purposes. The narrator recorded these events to also explain why the Jews celebrated Purim on two different days. The Jews of the provinces celebrated Purim on the fourteenth of Adar because they killed in self-defense on the thirteenth and rested on the fourteenth. But the Jews of Susa celebrated Purim on the fifteenth of Adar because they killed on the thirteenth and fourteenth, following Esther's second edict, and rested on the fifteenth. This explains the need for the two letters from Mordecai and Esther that follow.

**9:20-28** Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of the Persian empire to encourage the Jews to celebrate Purim on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar so that there would be no division among them over which day was the more correct day. He encouraged the people to make the holidays days of joy and celebration, for it was the day on which Haman's edict for the extermination of the Jews was overturned. The word Purim comes from the word *pur*, which means "lot" because that was how Haman had picked his date of the extermination of the Jews.

**9:29-32** Esther then wrote her own letters to confirm Mordecai's letters regarding the celebration of Purim on two different days. Mordecai wrote in order to obligate the Jewish community to celebrate the festival, whereas Esther wrote to confirm. She collaborated what had already been done on the fourteenth of Adar in accordance to her second edict and added her authority as queen to Mordecai's letter.

**10:1-3** The book ends with the king honoring Mordecai throughout the entire Persian empire because of his acts of power and might. But among the Jews Mordecai was held in honor not for his power or even for the fact that he saved the Jews but that he continually worked for the good and welfare of his people. Mordecai entered the narrative as "the Jew" in the uncertain and dangerous diaspora of the Persian empire. Now he was the vice regent of the empire working for the good of the Jewish diaspora.

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<sup>32</sup> See Karen H. Jobes. *Esther*, p. 200. See also Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, p. 112.

## **Conclusion**

The pagan nations destroying the nation of Israel and carrying the Jewish people into exile left many of the Jews with the feeling that Yahweh had abandoned them and that they were on their own in the uncertain and dangerous life of exile. Yet the book of Esther shows that even when it does not seem like Yahweh is present and involved in the lives of His people, He is in fact actively stepping into history in order to fulfill His promises to His people. And though Esther was not the godliest person, much like many of the people in the biblical stories, Yahweh used her to carry out the deliverance of His people as He had done with other flawed people in the past Moses, the judges, Elijah, etc.

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