

ESTHER & RUTH

THE LORD DELIVERS AND REDEEMS

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON
and IAIN M. DUGUID

ESTHER & RUTH

REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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All boxed quotations are taken from Iain M. Duguid's *Esther & Ruth* in the Reformed Expository Commentary series. Page numbers in quotations refer to that source.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-758-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-759-3 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-760-9 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING ESTHER AND RUTH

ESTHER

The book of Esther is set during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes)—the Persian ruler who reigned from 485–465 B.C. and is best known for his wars against the Greeks. The action thus takes place about fifty years after the decree of Cyrus, which allowed the Jews to return home from their exile in Babylon. Many of the most committed Jews did so, including Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Others opted not to be part of the rebuilding process—especially those who already had comfortable jobs and living situations in the heart of the Persian empire. They preferred comfortable assimilation to the foibles of the Persian empire over the hard path of obedience to the Lord’s call to rebuild Jerusalem and its surroundings. One such family was that of Mordecai, a descendant of King Saul’s family, and Esther, his orphaned cousin. She also had a Jewish name, Hadassah, but publicly went by her Persian alias. These two insignificant nobodies would never have dreamed that they might have a significant part to play in God’s plans; they were just trying to get by in life, even if that meant compromise with the empire.

The **main purpose** of the book of Esther is to show that God is able to take care of his people, using these very imperfect human agents, while remaining hidden from direct view. In the book of Exodus, God’s work is full of dramatic interventions that expose the emptiness of the Egyptian gods. There are great heroes like Moses and Aaron to lead the people and a trail of miracles to attest to God’s presence with them. In the book of Esther, however, there are neither dramatic miracles nor great heroes—just apparently ordinary providence moving flawed and otherwise undistinguished people into exactly the right place at the right time to bring the empire into

line and to secure the future of God's people, when it seemed certain they would be eliminated.

There are no obvious clues as to who the **author** of the book of Esther was. Nor do we know whether it was written immediately after the events it describes or sometime later. None of that affects the meaning of the book, either for its original readers or for contemporary audiences.

The main **theme** of God's sovereign ability to take care of his people, with or without their help, is highlighted by the central turning point of the narrative. This is not when Esther determines to go to the king to plead for her people. That happens at the end of chapter 4; yet the fate of her people becomes worse during chapter 5, which ends with Haman about to hang Mordecai on a tall spike. The turning point is the king's sleepless night at the beginning of chapter 6, during which he asks for a reading from the royal annals (a surprising choice, given the range of options that would have been available to him), followed by a passage being read that mentions Mordecai uncovering a plot against his life. The king (again surprisingly) discovers that nothing has been done to reward Mordecai, and he then asks Haman—who has come to court early to ask for permission to hang Mordecai—for advice on how to reward “the man whom the king delights to honor” (6:6). From there onward, the tide turns in favor of Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews—and against Haman. Were all these things merely a series of random events? Certainly not. Even though God's name is nowhere mentioned in the book, he proves once again his power to rescue his people, even by using compromised people like Mordecai and Esther, who had almost given up on being distinctively Jewish in favor of pursuing career advancement within the Persian empire.

Yet not all the threats to Israel's safety are removed at the end of the narrative. To be sure, Mordecai is now second only to Ahasuerus in the empire, in place of Haman. Yet the king himself—the one who carelessly sold the Jews to slaughter—remains in place. The taxes that had been remitted when Esther became queen (2:18) are reimposed in the end (10:1). There is much for Israel to be grateful for in their deliverance from Haman's evil plan for genocide—something that became celebrated annually at the feast of Purim. Yet this partial deliverance still leaves them watching and waiting for the far greater deliverance that God promised them, through the coming of his Messiah.

Outline

Introduction: The Fall and Rise of a Queen (1:1–2:23)

The Fall of Queen Vashti (1:1–22)

The Rise of Queen Esther (2:1–23)

The Threat (3:1–5:14)

Haman's Plan to Kill the Jews (3:1–15)

Mordecai Persuades Esther to Intercede with the King
(4:1–17)

Esther Approaches the King (5:1–8)

Haman's Plan to Kill Mordecai (5:9–14)

Deliverance (6:1–9:19)

The King's Sleepless Night (6:1–3)

The King Honors Mordecai (6:4–14)

Esther Requests the King to Save her People (7:1–7)

Haman Is Executed (7:8–10)

Mordecai's Plan to Deliver the Jews (8:1–14)

The Jews Are Victorious (8:15–9:19)

Conclusion: Celebrating the Victory (9:20–10:3)

The Feast of Purim Is Established (9:20–32)

Mordecai Replaces Haman (10:1–3)

RUTH

The book of Ruth opens with a key time indicator: “In the days when the judges ruled” (1:1)—a time when everyone did whatever was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It is not clear during what part of the period of the judges these events took place, but the famine with which the book opens would have been during one of Israel's periodic times of unfaithfulness and idolatry. The book ends with the genealogy of King David, who was Boaz and Ruth's great-grandson.

The **main purpose** of the book of Ruth is to demonstrate the Lord's covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) to his undeserving people—which often manifests itself in hidden and surprising ways. Naomi interpreted the death of her

husband and sons in Moab as evidence of the Lord's hand of judgment upon her for the sin of leaving the promised land in search of greener pastures (Ruth 1:21). This was indeed an act of unbelief, which resulted in her sons illegitimately marrying Moabite women (1:4). Yet in her bitterness, Naomi underestimated God's grace. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabitess, insisted on coming back to Bethlehem with her, and she turned out to be the means whereby the Lord would meet Naomi's needs—both for food to eat and for offspring to carry on the family name. What must have seemed to Ruth and Naomi to be a sacrifice of Ruth's future turned out to be the opening of a new future for her as part of the Lord's people. Ruth went out to glean in order to provide food for the family, and the "random" field that she chose turned out to belong to Boaz—the man who would ultimately fulfill the role of family redeemer for Naomi and Ruth. The genealogy of David at the end of the book shows how the Lord worked through this individual story of tragedy and redemption to provide for his people's need of a king. Not only was Naomi's bitterness turned to joy, but Israel's need for a godly leader was also being provided—even though no one could have anticipated it at the time. Though the Lord's actions are, in the main, concealed within this book, there are two specific events attributed directly to him: providing food for his people (1:6) and conception for Ruth (4:13). In these ways, the Lord provided for all his people's needs.

What is more, Ruth's covenantal commitment to Naomi and to Naomi's God demonstrated that those who were not ethnic Israelites could still be incorporated into the people of God through faith. If Moabites who joined themselves to the Lord could be accepted, there was hope for other gentiles as well (Isa. 56:3–7).

It is not clear who the **author** was, or when the book was written. The genealogy at the end of the book, and its need to explain customs that had gone out of fashion (Ruth 4:7), requires a date during or later than the reign of King David (1011–971 B.C.); though it could have been written as late as after the exile, when the issue of whether gentiles could become part of the covenant community once again became pressing.

As for its **themes**, the book of Ruth essentially replicates the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32), in two strands. The family of Elimelech, in search of fullness, wandered away from the land where the Lord had promised to bless his people. Contrary to their expectation, Naomi ended

up empty and alone. The Lord took away everything from her—not as an act of harsh judgment but as a means of bringing her back home, where he delighted to replace her emptiness with a new fullness. Similarly, the book opens with the Lord’s people experiencing a famine because of their idolatry, as happened regularly in the days of the judges. Yet through this judgment, the Lord ultimately provided a king to meet their need for leadership. We too have gone astray from the Lord and need to receive his grace and mercy. Because of his covenant faithfulness, he has provided in Jesus Christ the Redeemer we all need. Jesus is the true King toward whom the genealogy of David ultimately extends (Matt. 1:5–6, 16), and he is the Redeemer in whom his wandering people find rest. In him, the gentiles too are incorporated into the people of God by faith and are granted a place in the family of promise.

Outline

Elimelech and Naomi Seek Grain and Offspring Outside the Promised Land (1:1–5)

Naomi Returns to Bethlehem Empty, Without Grain or Offspring (1:6–22)

Naomi and Ruth Receive Grain through the Lord’s Covenant Faithfulness (2:1–23)

Naomi and Ruth Seek Rest in the Home of a Redeemer (3:1–18)

Naomi and Ruth Receive Rest in the Home of a Redeemer (4:1–12)

Naomi and Ruth Receive Offspring through the Lord’s Covenant Faithfulness (4:13–17)

Israel Receives a King through the Lord’s Covenant Faithfulness (4:18–22)

Iain M. Duguid

Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Bible Study series

Author of *Esther & Ruth* (REC)

ESTHER

LESSON 1

STANDING FIRM AGAINST THE EMPIRE

Esther 1:1–22

THE BIG PICTURE

Roughly fifty years before the events that are recorded for us in the book of Esther, many of the exiled Jewish people—especially the ones who were most zealous for Jerusalem and for worshipping at the temple—had returned following the decree of King Cyrus of Persia. As we see, though, not every Jew returned. There were many of God’s people who continued to live out their days in the midst of the great “dispersion,” scattered among the nations following the invasion and destruction of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom). The story of the book of Esther focuses on this community of God’s people—Jewish exiles who were seeking to hold on to their ethnicity and distinctive worship of Yahweh in the midst of powerful (and sometimes hostile) governing authorities.

As you may already know, Esther is the only book in the biblical canon not to mention the name of God. However, the fingerprints of God’s sovereign care and preservation of his people—even in the midst of their exilic dispersion—are all over this account. In this opening passage today, we will find the setting for the story. The great and powerful King Ahasuerus sits on the throne in Susa, the capital city of the empire of Persia. In the midst of great feasting, the merry (and intoxicated) king sends for Queen Vashti to come before his guests and him, in order to show off her beauty. Shockingly,

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. As you read through the first nine verses of this passage, what observations do you make about the descriptions that are included? What does the narrator seem to want you to notice about King Ahasuerus and his great party?

4. What are you learning about the kingdom of Persia as you read and study this passage? Why might it have been difficult for a faithful, God-fearing Jewish person to live in this kind of kingdom?

5. How does the chapter end? What questions do we, as readers, have as we come to the end of chapter 1?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. What does Esther 1:1 tell us about the power of King Ahasuerus and the vastness of the Persian empire? How does this compare with the state of the nation of Israel during this period?

7. As you read through Esther 1:1–9, what does the narrator seem to emphasize? What seem to be the values and concerns of the king and his subjects? How does this contrast with the kingdom of Jesus Christ?

8. What seems to be the motivation behind the request that King Ahasuerus makes of Queen Vashti (1:10–11)? Why might she have refused this request—despite the potential consequences?

9. How do the “wise men” of the king advise him to deal with the refusal of the queen, and why do they give him this advice (1:16–20)?

10. As the chapter ends, how does King Ahasuerus demonstrate his immense power throughout his kingdom? How might the final verse (1:22) be ironically and subtly pointing to future events in the story of Esther?

A Display of Excess, pg. 8

We are meant to be impressed and awed by this display of excess—and a little revolted by its wastefulness. . . . Ahasuerus is the very picture of power and wealth, both of which are squandered on his own appetites.

11. Do you see any direct evidence of the hand of God in the events of this passage? Why might the absence of any mention by the narrator of God's name and God's work point to important lessons for God's people in Esther's day—and in our day?

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. In the years leading up to the events of the story of Esther, many of God's people had returned to the land of Israel to rebuild the walls and the temple in Jerusalem—we read their stories in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. While God certainly was working in and through the returned exiles in Jerusalem, what does the book of Esther tell us about his work on behalf of his people wherever they live? Why is this so encouraging?
13. Proverbs 21:1 describes God's sovereign power over the highest rulers of the earth in beautifully poetic terms: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." What might God be doing in and through the heart of King Ahasuerus in this passage?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. Robert Shaw, writing about God's providence, declares, "God has the interests of his own people ever in view; he knows what is most conducive to their happiness; and he will make all things, whether prosperous or adverse, to co-operate in promoting their good (Rom. 8:28)."¹ Why is this truth about God's providence sometimes difficult for us to believe? How must we, as God's people, be comforted by God's providence?
15. Question and answer 34 of the Heidelberg Catechism explain that we call Jesus our Lord "because He has redeemed us, body and soul, from all our sins, not with gold or silver, but with His precious blood, and has delivered us from all the power of the devil, and has made us His own possession." How does this selfless love of our King, Jesus, contrast with the selfish love of King Ahasuerus for his bride in Esther 1?

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. What should we be learning from the description of the decadence and selfishness that King Ahasuerus displayed in his reign, partying, and rash decisions? How is this passage urging us not to take even powerful global rulers too seriously?

1. Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1845; repr., Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2008), 114.

17. How is this passage calling us to remember the significance and reality of God’s sovereignty—even in the context of seemingly meaningless political moves and decisions? Why must we intentionally remember God’s providence in all the details of our world?
18. In what ways can you discipline your own heart and mind to remain steadfast in your loyalty to King Jesus, rather than to the kingdoms and power of this world? How does Jesus Christ, the great King, treat his bride, the Church?

PRAYER PROMPT

As you close this time of study in Esther 1, spend some time praising God for his sovereign care and providence—even when you do not readily observe his hand. Thank him that he is always at work for the eternal good of his people, whom Jesus Christ died to redeem. Pray that God would help you to remember the deep, selfless love of your perfect Bridegroom, even as you live daily as an exile in a fallen world.

A Great and Gracious King, pg. 15

The Lord too is a great king whose decrees cannot be challenged or repealed . . . [but] God doesn’t use people for his own purposes as if they were disposable commodities. Rather, he graciously invites them into a loving relationship with himself.