

Week 51, Lecture 162.¹ Greek Addition A: Prologue to the Story of Esther

An Outline of the Book of Esther (as found in Catholic Bibles)²

Materials **highlighted in an underlined bold font** appear only in the Greek text, not in the Hebrew text.

I. Prologue	<u>A: 1-17</u>
II. Esther Becomes Queen	1:1-2:23
III. Haman's Plot Against the Jews	3:1-13; <u>B:1-7</u> ; 3:14-15.
IV. Esther and Mordecai Plead for Help	4:1-16; <u>C:1-30; D:1-16</u> ; 5:1-5
V. Haman's Downfall	5:6-8:2
VI. The Jewish Victory and the Feast of Purim	8:3-12; <u>E:1-24</u> ; 8:13-9:23
VII. The Rise of Mordecai	9:24-10:3; <u>F:1-11</u>

Global Observations. One sees that the Greek Materials:

- 1) Provide an introduction (**A:1-17**) and conclusion (**F:1-11**) to the Hebrew.
- 2) They also contain insertions (**B, C, D, & E**) into the Hebrew text at various places.

Addition A, (= Chapter 11:2-12:6 in the Latin Vulgate)

I decided not to make my own translation from scratch.

To avoid copyright problems, I am following the Douay translation of the Greek additions.

At times I have Americanized the English, and modernized the spelling of biblical names.³

At times I have made a few modifications to the translation based on my understanding of the Greek.

Esther Is Complicated!

If left to my own devices, I would want to translate the Hebrew and **both** Greek Versions.

And maybe look at the Latin and the Syriac versions.

But this would slow down the pace considerably.

For purposes of this course, I want to give a "general overview," **occasionally** commenting on details.

My main resources for this lecture are: *NJBC, Catholic Study Bible, Jewish Study Bible*

Addition A:1-11 (Vulgate, Douay 11:2-12)

Introduction.² In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the great, in the first day of the month **Nisan**, Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of **Shimei**, the son of **Kish**, of the tribe of **Benjamin**:³ A Jew who dwelt in the city of Susan, a great man and **among the first of the king's court**, had a dream.⁴ Now he was of the number of the captives, whom **Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away** from Jerusalem with Jeconiah king of Juda:

First Day of the Month of Nisan

This story takes place in the spring. The Passover will be celebrated on the 14th of Nisan.

On a lunar calendar, the 14th of any month is the **full moon**. The first of the month is **new moon**.

Mordecai's Introduction. This introduction is borrowed from the Hebrew of chapter 2, where much of it is repeated. An introduction is needed here so that Mordecai's dream -- the next passage -- can be introduced as a "prologue."

One difference is that in this version Mordecai is already a **high royal official**.

In the Hebrew text he is does not receive this promotion until 7:10-8:2 (NABRE note).

¹ Lectures numbered consecutively. This is this week's 1st lecture, but its number reflects its place in the **total** sequence.

² This outline is part of the introduction to "The Book of Esther" as it is found in all editions of the New American Bible Revised Edition. This introduction has been approved by the USCCB, which holds the copyright to the NABRE.

³ E.g. "honor" for "honour;" "Mordechai" for "Mardochai."

Deportation by Nebuchadnezzar. If the story were historical, this would make Mordecai 115 years old.

Echoes of the Past. There are echoes of the story of King Saul in this portrayal of Mordecai.

Saul was the son of **Kish**. He was from the tribe of **Benjamin**.

When Absalom revolted against his father David, **Shimei**, from the tribe of Benjamin, cursed David.

These stories are found in the Book of Samuel, which has a negative view of Saul

This introduction has a much more positive view of Saul.

Echoes of the past is a common Jewish literary device. We find it often in the NT story of Jesus!

Mordecai's Dream. ⁵ And this was his dream: Behold there were **voices**, and **tumults**, and **thunders**, and **earthquakes**, and a **disturbance** upon the earth. ⁶ And behold two great **dragons** came forth ready to fight one against another. ⁷ And at their cry all nations were stirred up to fight against **the nation of the just**. ⁸ And that was a day of **darkness** and **danger**, of **tribulation** and **distress**, and **great fear** upon the earth. ⁹ And the nation of the just was troubled fearing their own evils, and was prepared for death. ¹⁰ And they **cried to God**: and as they were crying, a little fountain grew into a very great river, and abounded into many waters. ¹¹ The light and the sun rose up, and the humble were exalted, and they devoured the glorious. ¹² And when Mordecai had seen this, and arose out of his bed, he was thinking **what God would do**: and he kept it fixed in his mind, **desirous to know what the dream should signify**.

“Apocalyptic Stage Props” (Fitzmyer).

(heavenly) voices, tumults, earthquakes, disturbances, dragons, darkness, danger, tribulation, distress, great fear
Any one of them could belong to another literary genre.

When you get more than two of them in the sentence you say: “I am reading an apocalypse.”

The Nation of the Just. This would be the Jews.

The dream foreshadows the danger, and ultimate victory the Jews will face in this story.

Mordecai is puzzling over the meaning at this point.

If this were a “full apocalypse,” there would be a revealing angel to explain the dream to Mordecai (and the reader). Those who know the story -- it is told every Purim! -- have an insight Mordecai does not yet have.

They “cried to God.” Also he was thinking **“what God would do.”**

The Hebrew of Esther never mentions God even once!

Some pious Greek scribes have inserted “God” in an attempt to make the story “more religious.”

There was considerable debate among Rabbis as to whether or not Esther was inspired.

Addition A:12-17 (Vulgate, Douay 12:1-6)

Assassination Attempt Foiled by Mordecai. **12:1** And he dwelt at that time in the king's court with Bigthan and Teresh the king's eunuchs, who were guards of the courtyard. ² And when he understood their designs, and had diligently searched into their projects, he learned that they went about to lay violent hands on king Artaxerxes, and he told the king about it. ³ Then the king had them both examined, and after they had confessed, commanded them to be put to death. ⁴ But the king made a record of what was done: and Mordecai also committed the memory of the thing to writing. ⁵ And the king commanded him, to abide in the court of the palace, and gave him presents for the information.

⁶ But Haman the son of Hammedatha the Bougean was in great honor with the king, and sought to hurt Mordecai and his people, because of the two eunuchs of the king who were put to death.

This story will be repeated in chapter 2 -- where it also occurs again in the Greek text.

However, there, Mordecai reports his findings to Queen Esther, who passes them on to the King

I am reminded of the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish.

It occurs in chapter 5 of Luke, at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

It occurs after the resurrection in John 21. But nobody there says, "Hey! Haven't we done this before?" Such is the nature of oral traditions, and the "conflicts" that arise when writers, unaware of the original context, put them down on paper.

Week 51, Lecture 163. Esther Becomes Queen, Part 1, Esther Chapter 1

Post-Lecture Note. Originally I had planned to do Esther 1 & 2 in one lecture. However, the lecture went longer than I had expected, so I divided it at the end of chapter 1.

Chapter 1. I am using the **RSV translation** of the passages in the book that are in Hebrew.

1:1-3, The 180-Day Banquet. In the **days of Ahasuerus**, the Ahasuerus who reigned from **India to Ethiopia** over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, ² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa the capital, ³ in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and servants, the army chiefs of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces being before him, ⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, a hundred and eighty days.

Days of Ahasuerus.

Adele Berlin ("Esther," *Jewish Study Bible*) says he is commonly identified with Xerxes I, 486-465 BCE. The introduction sets the reader in the splendor of the Persian court.

India to Ethiopia. Contemporary Observation. Remember that modern Iran is in the location of ancient Persia. Iranian desires for more influence in the Middle East draw on memories of the past. At one time they ruled from India to Ethiopia, south of Egypt.

1:5-9, the 7-Day Banquet. ⁵ And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the capital, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶ There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings caught up with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. ⁷ Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸ And **drinking was according to the law, no one was compelled**; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as every man desired. ⁹ **Queen Vashti also gave a banquet** for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Verses 6-7. The main point is to give the reader the impression of **Persian** splendor.

Drinking according to the law, no one was compelled.

The RSV gives the impression of moderate drinking, and well-behaved guests. Other translations give a different image -- and a better rendering of the Hebrew!
Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; (NRSV)
By ordinance of the king the drinking was unstinted, (NABRE)
And the rule for the drinking was, "No restrictions!" (TaNaK)

V. 9 Queen Vashti's Party. Berlin's comment in the *JSB*.

It was considered indecent for wives of the Persian nobility to attend male drinking parties; the only female attendees were dancing girls. Therefore the queen hosted a separate party for the women.⁴

⁴ Adele Berlin, "Esther.," *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), note to 1:9.

Queen Vashti Refuses the King's Command, 1:10-12a. ¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was **merry with wine**, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served King Ahasuerus as chamberlains, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to behold. ¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs.

“Merry with Wine.” Again, the RSV is understating. These guys are rip roaring drunk!

Berlin (*JSB*) calls the names of the seven eunuchs “tongue twisting.”

The whole idea is to give an impression of a wild Persian drinking party. Probably why Queen Vashti refuses to come.

The King and His Advisors, 1:12b-21.

The King's (Over) Reaction & Response. 12b-15. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him. ¹³ Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times -- for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, ¹⁴ the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom -- : ¹⁵ "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?"

Response of the Chief Advisor, 16-20. ¹⁶ Then Memucan said in presence of the king and the princes, "Not only to the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also to all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷ For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt upon their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸ This very day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will be telling it to all the king's princes, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. ¹⁹ If it please the king, let a royal order go forth from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is to come no more before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. ²⁰ So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low."

The King Follows the Advice, 21-22. ²¹ This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed; ²² he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be lord in his own house and speak according to the language of his people.

Portrayal of the King.

The king is portrayed as a rash and incompetent buffoon, who needs royal advisors to settle a domestic dispute. Berlin's comment is succinct, and to the point.

A domestic incident becomes a national crisis. The danger Memucan sees in Vashti's refusal is preposterous, as is his solution. His attempt to preserve the king's honor makes the king look even sillier and more vulnerable. ⁵

- - Divide Lecture Here - -

Week 51, Lecture 164. Esther Becomes Queen, Part 2, Esther Chapter 2

Post-Lecture Note. Originally I had planned to do Esther 1 & 2 in one lecture.

However, the lecture went longer than I had expected, so I divided it at the end of chapter 1.

⁵ Berlin, "Esther," *JSB*, note to 1:16-22.

The Search for a New Queen, 2:1-15.

Search for New Queen Begins, 2:1-4. After these things, **when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated**, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.² Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king."³ And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai the king's eunuch who is in charge of the women; let their ointments be given them.⁴ And let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

V. 1, When the King's Anger Had Abated. The king is having "second thoughts."

His advisors decide to distract him with pretty women so that he does not make a stupid mistake, and take Vashti back. Many would say that we are obviously reading comic farce.

No real leader could actually be so incompetent! No real leader could be so easily distracted from official policy!

The Beauty Contest. Berlin's Comment.

A beauty contest is hardly the way real queens of Persia were chosen. In fact, Persian queens had to be from the Persian nobility⁶

2:5-7, Characters Introduced.⁵ Now there was a **Jew** in Susa the capital whose name was **Mordecai**, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of **Kish**, a Benjaminite,⁶ who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.⁷ He had brought up **Hadassah**, that is **Esther**, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother; the maiden was beautiful and lovely, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.

Mordecai and Esther Introduced

It is as if the reader has never heard of him -- a sign the Greek chapter A is a later addition.

He is actually named after "Marduk," the Babylonian God.

Esther is the orphaned daughter of Mordecai's uncle. That is, she is his **cousin** (NRSV makes this explicit).

Esther is named after Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess.

She also has a Jewish name, "Hadassah," which means "Myrtle."

It was not uncommon for Diaspora Jews to have both a Heb and a vernacular name, as did Daniel and his friends, and Judah Maccabee.⁷

Many Jews in America continue this custom.

Being named after Babylonian gods does not mean they were not pious.

Consider how many Christians use "Wednesday" and "Thursday" without believing in Wodin or in Thor!

Kish. Because the dates involved would make Mordecai 115 years old,

traditional Jewish exegesis says that it was actually his ancestor Kish who went into exile.

The grammar does not support this interpretation⁸

V. 5, "A Jew." Originally "Jew" meant someone from the tribe of Judah.

Mordecai is from the tribe of Benjamin. Berlin Comments

"Yehudi" does not refer to a member of the tribe of Judah (Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin), but to a Jew from the kingdom of Judah (where all the Babylonian exiles were from); this is the **beginning of the usage of "Jew" in the sense that we now know it.**⁹

⁶ Berlin, *JSB* note to Esther 2:4.

⁷ Berlin, *JSB*, note to Esther 2:7

⁸ Berlin, *JSB*, note to Esther 2:6

⁹ Berlin, *JSB* note to Esther 2:5.

Esther Chosen as a Contestant in the Beauty Contest, 8-11. ⁸ So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many maidens were gathered in Susa the capital in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai who had charge of the women. ⁹ And the maiden pleased him and won his favor; and he quickly provided her with her ointments and **her portion of food**, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. ¹⁰ **Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to make it known.** ¹¹ And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

Esther Keeps Her Jewish Identity Secret!?

It is far-fetched to think that Esther could keep her Jewish identity secret. But, this is essential to the plot of the story. Consider the unrealistic situations that arise in the American genre of "situation comedy."

V. 9, Her Portion of Food

Recall that in Daniel it was a "big deal" that Daniel and his companions would not eat pagan food (Dan 1:8-16). Here Esther has no qualms about eating pagan food!

Also, there seems to be no problem with intermarriage to a pagan king!

These are some of the other reasons why Rabbis questioned whether or not Esther was part of the Scriptures.

"Soil the hands."

They phrased the question as to whether or not Esther "soiled the hands."

That is, did you have to "purify" your hands after reading it.

Think of how we **purify** the chalice with a **purificator** at the end of Mass.

Why is it "impure?" Because it has been in contact with the blood of Christ!

In biblical thought something can be "impure" not because it is wicked, but because it is **extremely sacred**.

Ultimately the Rabbis decided that Esther did indeed "soil the hands" -- even though the story never mentions God!

Explanation of Details of the Contest, 12-15. ¹² Now when the turn came for each maiden to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being **twelve months** under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women -- ¹³ when the maiden went in to the king in this way she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. ¹⁴ In the evening she went, and in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. ¹⁵ When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.

The **twelve months of beautification** is more for dramatic suspense and poking fun a Persian customs.

We are not dealing with history.

Esther is portrayed as have the good sense to follow the advice of the eunuch, who knows what the king likes.

Esther Is Chosen Queen, 2:16-18. ¹⁶ And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, **in the seventh year of his reign**, ¹⁷ the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ Then the king gave a great banquet to all his princes and servants; it was Esther's banquet. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality.

Seventh year of his reign. This story started in the third year of the reign.

So it has taken 3-4 years to find a new queen.

Assassination Attempt Foiled by Mordecai. ¹⁹ When the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was **sitting at the king's gate**. ²⁰ Now Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. ²¹ And in those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, **and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai.** ²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the Book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king. (RSV)

Even the names, Bigthan and Teresh, are the same as in the version we read in Greek A.

The main difference between this story and the one in Greek A is the role of Queen Esther.

Post-Lecture Note. The Greek story (A:17 = Vulgate 12:6) reports that the arrest and execution of the eunuchs was the reason for the beginning of Haman's hostility to the Jews. This is not found in the Hebrew version.

19. Sitting at the King's Gate.

Berlin interprets this not as a location, but as the his job title. He is a member of the King's Secret Police. His job is to watch out for people who are trying to harm the king. He seems to be doing a good job.

Relation to Greek "Addition A."

This is an earlier version of the story that appears in the Greek Prologue.

The Greek text also contains this story at this point, even though it inserted the variant version earlier!

I get papers from students with similar discrepancies.

On page 1, a student will quote a particular theory -- with approval.

On page 3, the student will quote an opposing theory -- with approval! -- apparently unaware of the contradiction.

Level of Education of Biblical Writers

Many biblical writers had the equivalent of a good high-school education.

Some of them had the equivalent of some "junior college" or "college."

Most people who have been to college have as good or better an education than the people who wrote the Bible.

Yet look how many mistakes we make in our writing!

Even though I have a doctorate, I still find many mistakes in my own work!

Post-Lecture Addition (And sharp-eyed students -- some online!-- often pick out those that I have missed!)