

Lesson 12 - Esther: Instrument of God's Purpose

Objectives

By the end of this lesson the student should know that:

- Identify the main characters in the story (Esther, Mordechai, Haman and the King).
- See that Esther's position as queen helped further God's purposes (the presence of Jews in pagan societies throughout the world).
- Recognize that God can work through us, even though we are not fully aware of His purposes.

For the Catechist

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC marks the end of the Jewish kingdom, the second stage of Israelite Salvation History according to Matthew 1:11-12. Not only did the House of David come to an end, the royal capital, Jerusalem, with its Temple were destroyed and the leaders of Jewish society deported. It was only when the Persians conquered Babylon in 538 BC that the way was opened for Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

While many Jews returned to the Holy Land, a number remained in Babylon. The Jewish colony there prospered under the Persians and is the setting for the Book of Esther. Babylon remained an important center of Judaism for centuries. The Babylonian Talmud (commentary on the Law), developed in the sixth century AD, remains one of the principal sources of Jewish tradition.

In the Greek period, the Jewish colony in Alexandria, Egypt was equally prominent. It was here, in the third century BC, that the earliest Greek versions of the Old Testament were created for Greek-speaking Jews. The definitive Greek version, the Septuagint (LXX) dates from at least the second century BC, as a manuscript from that date was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was this version used by most early Christians and in the Byzantine Churches today.

Some quotations from Esther are identified by letter, rather than by number (e.g. Esther B:5-6) The Septuagint (Greek) version of Esther contains material not found in the Hebrew version. In some translations of the Bible, this additional material is identified by letter; in other translations it is integrated into the Hebrew text. Some versions print both versions of Esther separately; those versions, which do not include the books of the Greek ("second") canon, completely omit this material.

The story of Esther is celebrated to this day by the Jewish feast of *Purim*. People, especially children, often wear costumes at the synagogue service on this day and loudly boo every mention of Haman. This practice has been adapted for this lesson.

Materials Needed:

Opening Prayer: Icon corner, student texts

Introduction: Easel or wall pad, markers,

Guided Reading: *Abingdon s Bible Maps for Children*, Purim Fact Sheet

Activity A: Construction paper, markers, string, crayons, Hamentaschen

Activity B: "Instruments of God's Purpose" Worksheet, pencils

Activity C: "Is God Calling You?" Worksheet, pencils

Activity D: Jesse Tree Worksheet, craft items

1. Opening Prayer

Pray the selection from Psalm 115 on page 58 in the student text. Remind the students that this Psalm mocks the worship of idols, as the prophets did. It praises worship of the true God, Creator of heaven and earth.

2. Review

Review the main points of the previous lesson using the pages from your wall or easel pad. Use the time line on the Unit Page to recall the days of the kings. Stress that after the three great kings (Saul, David and Solomon), the kingdom was divided (Israel or Samaria and Judah). One after the other, these kingdoms fell and Salvation History entered the days of the exile. Use the map facing page 370 of the NAB to show the route of the exile.

Today we will learn how some Jews later returned to the Holy Land while other settled in pagan countries.

3. Introduction

Ask the students to consider the following scenario: there has been a war, and we have lost. Enemy troops have invaded, and we have been given only a few hours to flee our homes. We must leave everything behind except what we can carry with us. Have the students discuss what they would take and why. Remind the students that, while this has not happened here in our lifetimes, people all over the world have experienced exile and many are experiencing it today. Note that today's lesson is set in the days of the Jewish exile to Babylon.

Alternate: Ask the students how many of them are from Native American ("Indian") background. Identify where their ancestors did come from and under what circumstances. Did they emigrate for freedom or a more prosperous life? Did they emigrate freely or were they forced out of their homes? If you know people who were refugees, consider asking them to share their experience with the group. Connect the experience of the Jews in exile with that of today's refugees.

Background Reading (The Septuagint):

Byzantine missionaries and translated into the local languages of their converts, the Old Testament quoted and paraphrased on every page of Byzantine liturgical books, we must turn our attention to the Greek version of the Old Testament, often called the Septuagint (hereafter LXX)" (OTB 14).

"We saw how it was only in 90 AD that the rabbis of Palestine had defined what books were to be considered Jewish Scripture. The LXX represents an alternative Jewish opinion, older by some 400 years, of what constitutes God's revelation to Israel. ... The Greek versions of the books of Daniel and Esther are also longer than their Hebrew counterparts" (OTB 15).

4. Guided Reading, Pages 59-60

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God's Purpose



The Jews tried to free themselves from Babylonian domination in 587 BC, but were defeated and the king (David's last royal descendant) was deported. The Jews continued to rebel and, in 537 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and deported all but the poorest Jews to Babylon. These were the days of the exile, one of the most difficult periods in the history of the Israelites. They were not allowed to return to the Holy Land for 49 years, until the Babylonians themselves were conquered by the Persians.

The Persians were more lenient to the Jews than the Babylonians had been. The Persians ended the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, allowing them to return to the Holy Land in 538 BC. They began to rebuild Jerusalem and to construct a new temple there, but they could never find the hidden Jews from Solomon's temple. The Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments.

Not all Jews returned to the Holy Land after the Babylonian captivity. Some remained and became prosperous under the Persians. They kept their belief in the one true God, but took part in other aspects of Persian society that did not violate their covenant with God.

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Before the reading, **summarize the objectives of the lesson** on a wall pad or easel pad so that the page can be preserved and used for review next week.

Explain how Jews customarily make loud, raucous noises at every mention of Haman when the story of Esther is read on Purim; then keep very silent as the reading continues (see Purim Fact Sheet). **Encourage the students to boo, hiss, stamp their feet** at Haman's name, provided that they will listen reverently to the rest of the reading.

Have the students read the **four paragraphs on page 59**. Compare the wall map of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms to the map on page 173 of their text and have the students locate the two Jewish kingdoms, Israel and *Judah*. Show, on the map facing page 370 in the NAB, that Assyria was northeast of Damascus and Babylonia was southeast of that city. Have them locate the Assyrian capital, *Nineveh*; the Babylonian capital, *Babylon*; and *Susa*, which would be the capital of the Persian conquerors, the setting of the book of Esther. Have students estimate where these cities would be on the wall map and write the names in the appropriate place.

Identify the *Medes* as an Iranian people conquered by the Persians before they conquered Babylon.

Background Reading (Tradition):

In these two different views of what it and is not Scripture we have a clear demonstration of the process of tradition creating Scripture as we have described above. The difference in content between the Hebrew and Greek versions of Daniel and Esther likewise reminds us that the individual books of the Old Testament, no less than the collection as a whole, underwent a process of evolution" (*OTB* 15).

Among these Jews living in the Persian capital of Susa were Mordechai and his cousin's daughter Esther, an orphaned woman whom he had adopted.

Esther Becomes Queen

In 482 BC the Persian Queen, Vashti, publicly insulted her husband, the king. The king's advisers advised him to punish Vashti publicly and to choose a new queen. "For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and they will look with disdain upon their own husbands" (Esther 1:17).

In the king's search for a wife and consort, the king's most beautiful virgin he brought to Susa and prepared for an entire year to be presented to the king. From them he would choose a new queen to replace Vashti. Among the girls selected was Esther.

During that year, Mordechai would often go and stand outside the king's palace to learn what was happening with Esther. One day he overheard two guards plotting to overthrow the king. Mordechai reported what he had heard, and the plot was foiled. People at court came to know and respect Mordechai as a man.

When it was time for Esther to be presented to the king, she impressed him greatly. "The king loved Esther more than all other women, and of

all the virgins who were the flower and the excellence. So he lifted up the royal diadem on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti" (Esther 2:17).

Mordechai Makes an Enemy

According to Persian law, people were expected to kneel and bow down before the king and Haman, the king's chief minister. One day when Mordechai was spending time at the palace gate waiting for news of Esther, Haman passed by. The Persians saw that Mordechai did not bow down before Haman, so was angered. Mordechai explained that he was a Jew and that he would not bow to anyone but the God of Israel. Haman was appointed to Haman, but refused to obey Haman, and all the Jews with him. Haman told the king and Haman declared that Esther was a Jew and Mordechai's own foster daughter.

Haman convinced the king that these were people in the kingdom who were a danger to national security because of their different customs and laws. The king listened to Haman and issued a decree that all such people be eliminated. "Having found therefore, that this most treacherous people is continually at variance with all men, from by whom and above them, is revealed an open hatred, and commits the worst crimes, so that stability of government cannot be obtained, we hereby decree that all



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Read the section "Esther Becomes Queen" on page 60. Have the students discuss the actions of the characters in this story. Was Vashti right to insult the king? Was the king right to put her away for it? Was Esther right to replace her as queen?

Continue reading with the section "**Mordechai Makes an Enemy.**" Compare the charges used to describe the Jews in the royal decree with that of any minority in any society, particularly Christians under Communism, Hinduism or Islam. Similar reasons may be heard justifying prejudices against minorities in our own society, including the students' schools. Stress the difference between respecting other people and accepting their values, particularly if they go against the Gospel.

Ask the students how they think Mordechai and Esther would treat this threat to their people. What should they do and why? Compare with the way other minorities have responded to an oppressive majority in recent history.

5. Esther Feasts the King (p. 61)

Read the section "**Esther Feasts the King**" and draw attention to the king's offer to give Esther anything she wanted. Ask:

- Why didn't Esther take advantage of the king's offer and ask for the life of her people?
- Does the king's offer remind you of another king's offer at another banquet recorded in the Bible? (*Herod's offer to Salome who asked for the head of John the Baptist.*)

Read the climax of the story, "**Esther Pleads for the Jews,**" *excluding the final paragraph.* Stress Mordechai's words in Esther 4:14. God's hand was in Esther's choice as queen to preserve the Jews and further Salvation History.

Stress how in previous centuries, when the Jews mingled with and intermarried with pagans, they absorbed their idolatry and abandoned the covenant. Esther's story shows how godly people can live in a pagan society and preserve their own identity as believers. The Jews learned to live in pagan societies (Persian, later Greek and Roman) without

those whom he intended to join in the letters of Haman, who is in charge of the administration and is a second father to us, shall together with their wives and children, be surely destroyed by the sword of their enemies, without any pity or mercy, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month, after of the current year" (Esther 3:4). Haman planned to use this decree against the Jews.

Esther Feasts the King

When Mordechai learned of the decree, he sent word of it to Esther, who marched to confront the king. She told Mordechai to have all the Jews of Susa pray and fast for three days before she talked to the king. Then Esther visited the king and Haman to a banquet. "and the king ordered, 'How Haman make haste to fulfil the wish of Esther.' So the king went with Haman to the banquet. Esther had prepared. During the drinking of the wine, the king said to Esther, 'Whatever you wish, I shall be granted, and whatever request you make shall be done, even if it is for half my kingdom.'" (Esther 5:3-4).

Esther was very clever. She simply asked that the king and Haman come back for another banquet the next day. Haman was so proud of the invitation that he told his wife, "Queen Esther invited no one but me to the banquet with the king, again tomorrow I am to be her guest with the king" (Esther 5:1).

Meanwhile Haman was waiting for the day appointed by the king. In the courtyard of his own house, he built a scaffold planning to ask the king to have the Jew Mordechai hanged on it.

Esther Pleads for the Jews

The next day of the banquet, the king again offered Esther anything she wanted. "Queen Esther replied, 'If I have found favor with you,

The Days of the Return

There are some important milestones in Salvation History after the Jews were allowed to return from exile.

The Temple Rebuilt - Completed in 515 BC, the temple replaced the one built by Salomon and destroyed by the Babylonians. It was rebuilt by King Darius in 515 BC but destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 and never rebuilt.

Rededication to the Law - The Jews realized that they had abandoned their covenant with God in the years before the exile. They remembered that Jewish people to stop intermarrying with pagans and to observe all the precepts of the Law once more.

The Maccabees - In the third century BC the Greeks invaded the Holy Land and tried to introduce idolatry. The Jews, led by Judas the Maccabee (Hannas), revolted and won a period of independence lasting until 63 BC, when Rome conquered the land.

O king, and if I please your majesty, I ask that you ask be spared, and I beg that you spare the lives of my people. For my people and I have been delivered from destruction, slaughter and extinction" (Esther 7:3-4). When the king demanded to know who had ordered the execution of Esther's people, the Jews, the queen identified Haman.

The king was furious and ordered out of the court. His attendants told him how Haman had built a scaffold to hang Mordechai on during the massacre of the Jews. The king ordered that Haman should be hanged on it instead. The

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king issued a new decree allowing any Jews who were attacked to defend themselves and the message was accepted. Esther's influence with the king helped the Jews to live in peace in a foreign land. As Mordechai had once told her, "It was for a time like this that you advanced the royal diadem" (Esther 4:14). Esther's place allowed her to further Salvation History.

Over the next centuries more Jews would settle in the cities of the Persian empire and later the Roman empire as well. They would make the first transition of the Old Testament into Greek, allowing non-Jews to learn of God's saving plan. They would be the first people to whom St. Paul and the other Apostles would go to bring the Gospel of Christ.

Our Worship Recalls the Old Testament



As we prepare for the Great Fast we remember how the human race was called from Paradise. We sing this Psalm written in the days of the Jews' exile from the Holy Land.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars of that land we hung up our lute. There our captives asked us for the words of a song, our lamentation, for a joyful song. "Sing for us a song of Zion!" If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you. If I do not recall Jerusalem beyond all my delights (Psalm 137:1-6).

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giving up their belief in the one true God. Many of these Jews would come to believe in Jesus.

Compare this to the founders of your parish who maintained their traditions in America. Also note that we are called to keep our Eastern Christian identity in a society that forgets God more and more each generation.

Read the final paragraph (p. 62), saying that the presence of Jews faithful to the covenant in Greek and Roman cities prepared the way for the Gospel to take root there. When the Apostles went to these cities, they first approached the Jewish colonies there and the Gentiles (non-Jews) who were sympathetic to Judaism. The presence of people of the Old Covenant in these centers made it easier to spread the Gospel of the New Covenant in those societies.

Background Reading (The Remnant):

“The prophetic message of consolation revolves around the notion of the remnant which would return to rebuild the shattered relationship between God and His people in the promised land. 'On that day, the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no more lean upon him who struck them, but they will lean upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God' (Isaiah 10:20-21)" (OTB 99).

**5. Activity B
(Celebrate Purim)**

Jews often don costumes to celebrate Purim. Assign each student to review one of the lessons in Units Two and Three. Let each one pick a character in that lesson and make a mask to represent him or her. Have each one describe his or her character without giving a name and allow the whole group to guess which character is represented.

If available and appropriate in light of the Eucharistic fast, explain and serve *Hamentaschen* to conclude this celebration.

**6. Activity B ("It was
for a time like this")**

Remind the students of what Mordechai said to Esther: God made her queen to serve God's purposes and stop the massacre of the Jews. Even today God sometimes uses people for His purposes without their fully realizing what He intends. Distribute Activity Sheet B and let the students read the story of former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum. Then discuss the article:

- What purpose did the Senator intend by his speech? (*Affecting the vote*)
- What purpose did God intend? (*Saving the life of a particular child*)

**7. Activity C (Serving
God Where You Are)**

Note that, while Esther's position as queen gave her a unique chance to serve God's purposes, each of us has a unique position too. Direct the students to complete the worksheet and think of how we can serve God according to our unique gifts and talents.

**8. Activity D
(Jesse Tree)**

Have the students complete the ornament on the Jesse Tree Worksheet (Esther).

9. Time Line

Refer to the time line poster. Have the students brainstorm the names of people mentioned in this lesson (*Esther, Haman, Mordechai*) and indicate the period in which each lived. Write in the names and dates under each appropriate heading. Reemphasize the idea that, while many Jews returned to the Holy Land after the exile, others settled in neighboring countries.

10. Summary

End the lesson by summarizing the lesson from the aims on page 184, from the elements in the student text on which you focused and/or from any other points raised in the lesson.

11. Closing Prayer

Conclude with the reading of the selection from Esther's Prayer and/or the selection from Psalm 137 on pages 62-63 in the student text.

Purim and the Story of Esther

To properly understand the Book of Esther, you need to read it as the Jews read it during the festival of Purim. As the congregation arrives, it is clear that this is to be no usual evening service. The children, and in many congregations the adults, are in costume. Many are carrying a range of noisemakers: pots and pans, *graggers* that rattle one piece of metal against another when swung in a circle, and anything that will groan or screech or bang. The evening service begins with levity. This is to be a reading of the Scroll of Esther with lots of audience participation.

Making Noise

Everyone in the synagogue boos, hisses, stamps their feet and uses noisemakers (called *graggers*) and cymbals whenever the name of Haman is mentioned during the service. Children are encouraged to hiss, shake noisy rattles (*graggers*), shoot their toy guns and generally make a lot of noise every time they hear his name. At one time, when Haman's name was read, the congregation would shout "Cursed be Haman" or "May the name of the wicked rot!" But nowadays any noise will do.

Dressing Up

People - adults as well as children - wear costumes at Purim. There are differing opinions as to how exactly this custom originated. It may have been an outgrowth of the Purim pageants, and many people choose to dress as characters from the Esther story. Others dress as other Biblical characters. Another line of thinking associates the costumes with the need of the Jewish people to disguise themselves to avoid the massacre which Haman had arranged, and, hence, it is considered appropriate to dress as a decidedly non-Jewish character (e.g., a nun, Santa Claus, the pope). Obviously, between these two ideas, anything goes, and one is apt to find anything from Adam to Zoltar.

Sweets

Gifts, chiefly plates of sweets or pastries, are exchanged on this day. Popular among Ashkenazic Jews are *Hamentaschen*, a triangular pastry with a poppy seed, prune or other fruit preserve filling. The term is variously translated as Haman's ears, pockets or hat. They are often available in major supermarkets.

Recipe for Hamentaschen (20-24 cookies)

- 2/3 cup butter or margarine
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup orange juice (the smooth kind, not the pulpy)
- 1 cup white flour
- 1 cup wheat flour (DO NOT substitute white flour! The wheat flour is necessary to achieve the right texture!)
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- Various preserves, fruit butters and/or pie fillings (Traditional fillings are poppy seed and prune).

Blend butter and sugar thoroughly. Add the egg and blend thoroughly. Add OJ and blend thoroughly. Add flour, 1/2 cup at a time, alternating white and wheat, blending thoroughly between each. Add the baking powder with the last half cup of flour. Refrigerate batter overnight or at least a few hours. Roll as thin as you can without getting holes in the batter (roll it between two sheets of wax paper lightly dusted with flour for best results). Cut out 3 or 4-inch circles. Put a dollop of filling in the middle of each circle. Fold up the sides to make a triangle, overlapping the sides as much as possible so only a little filling shows through the middle. Squeeze the corners firmly, so they don't come undone while baking. Bake at 350 degrees for about 15-20 minutes, until golden brown but before the filling boils over!

Instruments of God's Purposes Today: Senator Santorum and the "C-SPAN Miracle"

by Kathryn Jean Lopez

Senator Rick Santorum describes how God made him an agent for God's own purposes. "In 1998, I was on the floor of the United States Senate debating the override of the president's veto of the partial-birth-abortion bill. The next morning was to be the vote. We did not have the votes to override the president's veto. The debate had ended that night; it was eight o'clock. The Senate was wrapping up, but there was something inside me that felt that I had to say more, even though there was no one left in the chamber besides the presiding officers. I went back in the cloakroom and called my wife.

"She picked up the phone and we have six little children and they are all seemingly at once crying in the background, and I said, 'Karen, the vote's tomorrow. We are not going to win and everybody's gone. But something tells me I need to say more.' And through the din of the children crying, she said, 'Well, of course, if that's what you need to do, do it.'

"So I went to the presiding officer and said, 'I'll only be a few minutes, I don't want to keep you late.' Over an hour and a half later, I finished my talk.

"And we finished up the Senate and closed it down, and the next day the vote came, [and] not one vote changed. But five days later, I got an e-mail from a young man at Michigan State University. And this is what the e-mail said:

"Senator, on Thursday night I was watching television with my girlfriend. We were flipping through the channels and we saw you standing there on the floor of the United States Senate with a picture of a baby next to you. And so we listened for a while and the more we listened the more we got interested in what you were saying.

"After a while I looked down at my girlfriend, and she had tears running down her face. And I asked her what was wrong, and she looked up at me and said, 'I'm pregnant, and tomorrow I was going to have an abortion, and I wasn't going to tell you, but I'm not going to have an abortion now'"

"In April of that year, a little girl was born and given up for adoption. She is four years old today. Now according to the world, when I spoke on the floor of the Senate that night, I had failed. I did not succeed. But God gave me a gift that many of you as you stand and fight the causes that you believe in may never get. He gave me the gift of knowing that faithfulness to what you believe in can lead to wonderful acts and wonderful miracles."

[Kathryn Jean Lopez is the executive editor of *National Review Online*.]

IS GOD CALLING YOU?

A - Each of us lives in a different family, neighborhood, or circle of friends. What might God be calling you to do in these circumstances:

1. You have an elderly neighbor whose husband recently died and is now all alone. What might God be calling you to do for her?

2. People have been discarding trash in an empty lot behind the church parking lot. The owner can't be located and the city says that cleaning the lot is not its responsibility. What might God be calling you to do?

3. One of your classmates has been injured in an auto accident. Some people at your school would like to raise some money to help the family with the expenses. What might God be calling you to do?

B - One way God calls us is by giving us particular talents that we can use in His service. Identify three talents you have received. Tell how you can use them to serve God.

Find a way to serve God using your talents on a regular basis.

The Just Esther

