

## **Dr. Elaine Phillips, Esther, Session 2 of 4, Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

### **1. Abstract of Phillips, Esther, Session 2 of 4, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

**Dr. Elaine Phillips' lecture** analyzes the Book of Esther, focusing on the first two chapters. **She examines the lavish descriptions of the Persian court**, highlighting the author's use of literary devices like dyads and word repetition to create both grandeur and satire. **Phillips explores the significance of names, titles, and cultural details**, including the roles of honor, royalty, and gender dynamics within the Persian society. **The lecture also contrasts the Hebrew text with the Septuagint**, noting differences in historical context and theological framing. Finally, **she interprets the events leading up to Esther's selection as queen**, emphasizing the political maneuvering and social implications of the narrative.

**2. 16 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Phillips, Session 2 – Double click icon to play in Windows  
media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and  
click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Historical  
Books → Esther).**



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### 3. Briefing Document: Phillips, Esther, Session 2 of 4

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes, ideas, and facts from the provided excerpts of Dr. Elaine Phillips' lecture on the Book of Esther.

#### Briefing Document: Dr. Elaine Phillips on the Book of Esther (Lecture 2)

##### Introduction

Dr. Phillips' lecture focuses on a close reading of Esther chapters 1 and 2, paying particular attention to literary devices, historical context, and the development of key themes. She uses both the New International Version (NIV) and more literal renderings of the Hebrew text. The primary themes explored in these chapters are honor, royalty, power, and hidden identities, all set against the backdrop of the Persian court. The lecture also contrasts the Hebrew and Septuagint versions of the story.

##### Key Themes and Ideas:

##### 1. The Grandiose Introduction of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus):

- The opening of Esther chapter 1 is intentionally grandiose, designed to introduce King Xerxes. His name is mentioned twice at the outset as a stylistic flourish.
- The chapter is characterized by a "continuous procession of dyads" (pairs of words or concepts), such as honor and royalty.
- Names, titles, and positions are of paramount importance, but the text also subtly mocks the Persian upper class.
- **Quote:** *"That's a stylistic touch that sets the stage for the continuous procession of dyads through the description of the Persian court."*
- **Quote:** *"Names, titles, and positions seem to be of primary importance, but the reader becomes aware that, in truth, the text is poking a good deal of fun at the upper crust of the Persian monarchy."*

##### 1. The Importance of Honor (Yakar & Kavod):

- The Hebrew word *yakar* (precious, costly, rare, valuable) is a primary term for honor in Esther, linked to *kaved* (heavy, weighty) and *kavod* (glory).
- Honor, as described in the text, is demonstrated by "an interweaving of these facets of substance, status, and splendor all wound into the self."

- In the Persian court, honor is linked to status, splendor, and dependence for substance.
- **Quote:** *"Honor, linked in Esther repeatedly with royalty, is demonstrated then by an interweaving of these facets of substance, status, and splendor all wound into the self."*
- **Quote:** *"In the public arena, which is indeed our Persian court, respect for status, awe in the face of splendor, and dependence for substance all enhance the reputation of a given individual."*

## 1. Historical and Literary Context

- The text begins with *vayhi bimey* (it happened in the days of), a phrase used to introduce historical biblical texts, suggesting this story should be read as history.
- The vastness of Xerxes' empire (127 provinces from India to Kush) emphasizes his universal sovereignty.
- The number "127" is likely propaganda, used to sound more impressive than the actual satrapies.
- **Quote:** *"Given the importance for Xerxes of consolidating Persia's hold on the vast empire, citing the number of provinces instead of satrapies made it sound more impressive."*
- The setting alternates between the citadel (*bira*) of Susa and the city itself. Susa was one of four Persian capitals, likely Xerxes' winter residence.

## 1. The King's Banquets and Excess:

- King Xerxes held a lavish 180-day banquet, seemingly a diplomatic effort to woo support for a war against Greece.
- The banquet focused on drinking (*mishte*), with no mention of food, highlighting the excessiveness of the court.
- **Quote:** *"Here, there is no mention of food whatsoever. The entire focus was drinking, and significant details of chapter one also have to do with drinking."*
- A separate seven-day banquet for the people of Susa suggests the first banquet was mainly for impressing foreign dignitaries.

- The opulence of the inner palace is described in detail with exotic materials and repetitive dyads, creating a sense of wonder but also highlighting the officious nature of the court.
- **Quote:** *"The rugged syntax in Hebrew conveys a sense of wonder, absolute wonder at the opulence. At the same time, repetitious dyads continued to poke fun at the officious Persian court."*
- The drinking is described as controlled by law (*dat*), but it actually allows people to do as they please, foreshadowing later events.
- **Quote:** *"On the surface, all the details were controlled by law. The word is dat. But the law, in effect, meant the king let people do as they wished."*

#### 1. The Refusal of Queen Vashti and its Consequences:

- Queen Vashti also holds a banquet for women, described with less detail than the king's. This contrast is intentional.
- After seven days of drinking, King Xerxes orders Vashti to be displayed in front of his guests.
- This act was a "consummate act of self-aggrandizement."
- **Quote:** *"To be brought by seven eunuchs on the seventh day may suggest the king intended to show off another possession, his queen, as the grand finale to days of basking in admiration and honor."*
- Vashti refuses to come, which is presented as the first word in the Hebrew text.
- The king becomes furious.
- Vashti's refusal is likely due to her unwillingness to be displayed before drunk men, clothed or otherwise.
- The king consults his sages, "those who knew the times," an ironic jab at the bureaucracy.
- This phrase "knowing the times" also alludes to a political savvy.
- Memucan's speech argues that Vashti's disobedience is a threat to all male honor, moving the focus away from the king's humiliation.
- Vashti's actions are described with a Hebrew word, *ava*, related to *avon*, which means "sin."

- The resulting decree not only banishes Vashti but also attempts to impose obedience on all women, highlighting the impersonal political and legal machinery.
- The decree's final part, "every man is to be ruling in his own house and speaking the language of his people," is interpreted in the literal translation, differing from the NIV version.

### 1. **The Transition to Esther's Story (Chapter 2):**

- Chapter 2 marks a transition, moving from court excesses to a more ominous narrative.
- The king remembers Vashti, what she did, and what was decreed against her.
- The king's attendants propose a search for beautiful young virgins to replace Vashti.
- This whole process is framed as a satire of the Persian court as it is the king's attendants who make the decision.
- The virgins will be gathered from every province and undergo beauty treatments in the harem.
- This all sets up the stage as a beauty pageant.
- The narrator uses the terms "young women," "virgins" and "beautiful" to narrow the field.
- Local populations have no choice in this roundup of young women.
- The narrative is careful to highlight the passivity of the young women in this process.

### 1. **Introduction of Mordecai and Esther:**

- A Jewish man named Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin, is introduced. His genealogy is detailed.
- Mordecai is repeatedly referred to as "Mordecai the Jew," highlighting his distinctiveness in the diaspora context.
- The genealogy discussion is to set up the conflict between Mordecai and Haman who are both descendants of royalty with deep historical conflict.
- The exile is a key shaping event in Mordecai's life and his family history.

- Mordecai is established as a guardian for his orphaned cousin, Hadassah, also known as Esther.
- Esther is the only character to have two names.
- This alludes to her hidden Jewish identity.
- Hadassah means "myrtle", a symbol of peace and thanksgiving.
- Esther's beauty is emphasized through "doublets": "beautiful of form and lovely in appearance."
- Her beauty far exceeded the requirements for being rounded up.

#### 1. **Esther's Entry into the Harem and Her Success:**

- Esther is taken to the harem along with other young women, highlighting their lack of agency through passive verbs.
- Hege, the eunuch in charge of the harem, favors Esther, quickly advancing her in the process.
- Esther does not reveal her nationality or family background on Mordecai's command, raising a sense of danger.
- Mordecai's daily visits to the courtyard reveal his concern for Esther's welfare.
- The harem process was a year long.
- Each young woman goes to the king after a year of treatment with oils and spices, as well as being able to request anything for their night with the king.
- After a single night, the young woman becomes a concubine unless she is "summoned by name"
- Esther only requests what Hege suggests.
- Esther wins favor from everyone who sees her and is taken to King Xerxes in the tenth month of the seventh year of his reign.
- Esther's Jewish identity is given just before she crosses the threshold into the king's palace.
- Esther's strategy, based on restraint, is contrasted with that of the other candidates.

- Esther was said to "lift up favor" while she also won "grace" from those who saw her.
- The narrative notes Esther is passive, and it is through her passivity that providence allows her to reach the place she was supposed to be.

### 1. **Esther's Coronation and Mordecai's Discovery:**

- The king loves Esther more than the other women, and she becomes queen in place of Vashti.
- The coronation involves a vast celebration.
- Mordecai is again mentioned as sitting at the king's gate during a second gathering of virgins, juxtaposing the two occurrences and hinting at something surprising.
- The reason for this second gathering is unclear.
- Mordecai's presence at the gate marks a place of authority and intrigue, setting the stage for the events that follow.
- Esther's continued secrecy is reiterated, emphasizing the potential danger.
- Mordecai discovers a plot by two eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, to assassinate the king.
- These two are "keepers of the threshold"
- Mordecai informs Esther, who reports the plot to the king, giving Mordecai credit.
- The matter is investigated, the two are found guilty, and they are publicly humiliated by hanging.
- This all sets the stage for Chapter 3.

### **Key Contrasts:**

- **Hebrew vs. Septuagint:** The Septuagint places the narrative in a more theological context with a dream sequence involving Mordecai, whereas the Hebrew text focuses more on historical details and the Persian court.
- **King's Excess vs. Esther's Restraint:** The lavish descriptions of Xerxes' banquets and court contrast sharply with Esther's restraint and strategy, highlighting the differences in their characters and values.

- **Public vs. Hidden:** The narrative juxtaposes public displays of power and excess with the hidden identities of Mordecai and Esther and underlying menace in the court.

**Conclusion:**

Dr. Phillips' lecture provides a detailed literary and historical analysis of Esther chapters 1 and 2. It underscores the themes of honor, royalty, and power, the nature of the Persian court, and the development of main characters. It highlights the author's craft and use of specific terms, literary devices, and the significance of contrasting events and characters. The lecture also sets the stage for the unfolding drama by establishing a sense of underlying danger and hidden conflicts, laying the groundwork for the future conflicts.



## 4. Study Guide: Phillips, Esther, Session 2 of 4

### Book of Esther Study Guide

#### Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the significance of the phrase "vayhi bimey" at the beginning of Esther?
2. Explain the difference between the terms "satrapies" and "provinces" as used in the text regarding the Persian empire.
3. Describe the literary significance of the repeated use of pairs or dyads in the description of Xerxes' court in Chapter 1.
4. What does the term "yakar" mean, and how does it relate to the themes of the Book of Esther?
5. Why is the banquet given for the women in Esther chapter 1 described with such brevity compared to the king's banquets?
6. What are the implications of the king's command to his wine stewards, allowing each guest to drink as he wished?
7. Why does Memucan argue that Vashti's actions threaten not only the king but all the men in the kingdom?
8. Explain the significance of Mordecai's lineage and his family history of exile.
9. What does the name Hadassah mean, and how might it relate to her identity and purpose?
10. How does Esther's strategy of asking for only what Hegai suggested differ from the actions of other women in the king's harem?

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. The phrase "vayhi bimey" (it happened in the days of) introduces the narrative of Esther, similar to the beginning of other historical biblical texts like Ruth, suggesting that Esther is intended to be read as history.
2. While Herodotus mentioned 20 satrapies, Esther notes 127 provinces. Provinces were smaller entities than satrapies, and citing the larger number of provinces was likely used to make Xerxes sound more impressive.

3. The repeated use of pairs in the text, such as "nobles and officials," or "splendor and glory," emphasizes the excess, and perhaps the ridiculousness, of the Persian court. It highlights the theme of honor and royalty while also subtly mocking them.
4. "Yakar" means precious, costly, rare, or valuable. In Esther, it relates to the theme of honor. Honor is connected to substance, status, splendor, and the self, all intertwined in the public arena of the Persian court.
5. The brevity of the description for the women's banquet highlights the contrast between the lavishness of the king's banquets and the simplicity of women's gatherings, suggesting a difference in their status and importance in the court.
6. The king's command that guests drink as they wished, under the guise of law, shows how the law is manipulated and used for the king's own desires, foreshadowing the unrestrained freedom given to Haman to write his own decree.
7. Memucan argues that Vashti's public disobedience could inspire other women to disrespect their husbands, causing widespread discord. He shifts focus from the king's personal embarrassment to a broader issue of male honor across the empire.
8. Mordecai's lineage connects him to a history of exile from Jerusalem, highlighting his Jewish identity in the Persian context. It also sets up the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, who is an Amalekite.
9. Hadassah means myrtle in Hebrew, which symbolizes peace and thanksgiving. It may also relate to the idea of replacing the desert thorn, suggesting that she will help usher in a time of peace for the Jews.
10. Esther's strategy of restraint differs from the other women. Rather than trying to enhance her beauty with her own choices, she trusts Hegai, highlighting her humility. This ultimately wins her favor with everyone.

## Essay Questions

1. Discuss the role of banquets in the Book of Esther, exploring their significance to the plot, character development, and themes within the narrative.
2. Analyze the portrayal of power and authority in the Book of Esther, considering the roles of Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther, and Haman. How are these different types of power used and challenged throughout the text?
3. Examine the theme of identity in the Book of Esther, particularly focusing on Esther's dual identity as both Hadassah and Esther. How does the text explore and challenge these concepts, and what message does it convey about the nature of identity?
4. Explore the literary devices used in the Book of Esther. How do these techniques contribute to the overall message and impact of the narrative, and how does it shape the reader's experience?
5. Analyze the role of divine providence and human agency in the Book of Esther. How are these two forces depicted in the text, and how do they interact with each other to shape the course of events?

## Glossary of Key Terms

**Achashverosh:** The Hebrew name for Xerxes, the king of Persia in the Book of Esther.

**Bira:** The citadel of Susa, distinguished from the city itself, where the king and court resided.

**Dat:** The Hebrew word for "law" or "decree."

**Dyads:** Pairs of words or phrases, often used repetitively to emphasize themes and create a particular tone in the Book of Esther.

**Haman:** The antagonist in the Book of Esther, who plots to destroy the Jewish people.

**Harem:** The part of the Persian palace where the king's women lived.

**Hen:** Hebrew word meaning "grace," "favor," often used to describe the positive attention that someone receives.

**Hesed:** Hebrew word meaning "favor," "kindness," or "loyalty," often active favor.

**Ish Yehudi:** Hebrew phrase meaning "a Jewish man," used to identify Mordecai and highlight his Jewish identity.

**Kaved:** A Hebrew adjective meaning "heavy" or "weighty," related to the concept of honor.

**Kavod:** Hebrew word meaning "glory," a cognate of "kaved," also connected with the concept of honor.

**Kush:** The southwestern corner of the Persian empire.

**Lashon:** Hebrew word for "language," often paired with "medinah" (province) in Esther.

**Medinah:** Hebrew word for "province," a smaller entity than a satrapy in the Persian empire.

**Mishte:** Hebrew word for "banquet," derived from the word for "to drink."

**Mordecai:** Esther's cousin and adoptive father who plays a crucial role in saving the Jews.

**Satrapies:** Larger administrative districts of the Persian empire.

**Susa:** One of the capitals of ancient Persia, serving as the winter residence for Persian kings.

**Vayhi bimey:** Hebrew phrase meaning "it happened in the days of," often used to begin historical narratives.

**Yakar:** Hebrew word meaning "precious," "costly," "rare," or "valuable," related to the theme of honor.

## 5. FAQs on Phillips, Esther, Session 2 of 4, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ on the Book of Esther

1. **Why does the Book of Esther emphasize the grandeur and extravagance of King Xerxes' court?**
2. The Book of Esther uses the lavish descriptions of Xerxes' court, including its feasts, wealth, and intricate protocol, to serve a dual purpose. First, it sets the stage for the story by establishing the immense power and authority of the Persian king. Second, it subtly satirizes the Persian court, portraying its opulence and elaborate procedures as excessive and almost comical, highlighting the vanity and vulnerability beneath the surface. This juxtaposition creates a tension that underscores the book's themes.
3. **What is the significance of "honor" in the Book of Esther?**
4. Honor, represented by the Hebrew words *yakar* (precious, valuable) and *kaved* (heavy, weighty), is a central theme in Esther. In the Persian court, honor is intertwined with status, wealth, and splendor, and it is a critical component of a person's identity and reputation. Characters' actions are largely driven by their desire to gain or maintain honor, or, in the case of Vashti, by rejecting it. The concept of honor also reflects the precarious nature of power in the Persian court.
5. **How does the Septuagint version of Esther differ from the Hebrew text in its introduction?**
6. The Septuagint (Greek translation) of Esther significantly differs from the Hebrew text in its introduction. Instead of beginning with Xerxes, it names Artaxerxes as the Persian monarch, and it also identifies Mordecai as an exiled Benjamite. Crucially, the Septuagint includes a theological framework, particularly a dream of Mordecai depicting apocalyptic imagery that foreshadows the struggle between the righteous and the wicked. These additions place the story in a broader theological context.

7. **Why does Queen Vashti refuse King Xerxes' command to appear before his guests, and what are the consequences of her refusal?**
8. While the text does not explicitly state Vashti's reason, it is implied that she refused to appear before the king's drunken male guests because she was unwilling to be objectified and humiliated in such a way. This is a defiance that, in a culture obsessed with honor, threatened to undermine the very foundation of the social structure, not just the king's honor. Consequently, she is deposed and banished from any potential future influence, setting the stage for the search for a new queen.
9. **What is the significance of the recurring patterns of pairs (dyads) in the text?**
10. The recurring use of pairs in the text, such as "nobles and officials," or descriptions of wealth and splendor, serves multiple functions. On the one hand, these patterns emphasize the extensive and all-encompassing nature of the Persian empire and the king's power. On the other, the repeated dyads serve to poke fun at the Persian court by highlighting its excessive formality and over-the-top procedures. This technique also adds to the literary richness and contributes to a sense of wonder at the sheer scale of the kingdom and court.
11. **Who is Mordecai, and what are some important aspects of his background?**
12. Mordecai is a Jewish man of the tribe of Benjamin, specifically identified as "Mordecai the Jew," which sets him in opposition to the Persian royal court. He is the adopted guardian of Esther and a descendant of Kish, who was exiled during the Babylonian captivity. His lineage ties him to King Saul, which creates an important parallel to the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, who is a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites. Mordecai's concern for Esther's safety and wellbeing is emphasized, as well as his prudence in a dangerous political environment.

**13. What makes Esther a significant character, and why does she have two names?**

14. Esther, also known as Hadassah, is a significant character because she is a young Jewish woman who becomes queen of Persia and a key figure in the salvation of her people. Her dual name—Hadassah (myrtle) and Esther (possibly derived from "star" or related to the goddess Ishtar)—indicates her dual identity as a Jew living in the Persian court. Her Jewish identity is kept hidden as a protective strategy while she ascends within the Gentile power structure, ultimately fusing her two worlds when the time is right. She is notable for her beauty and her ability to win favor.

**15. What is the significance of the plot to assassinate King Xerxes, and Mordecai's role in uncovering it?**

16. The plot to assassinate King Xerxes is significant because it is the inciting incident that brings Mordecai into greater favor with the king and further complicates the narrative. The plot itself highlights the instability and intrigue that lurk beneath the surface of the opulent Persian court, hinting at how easily it could be toppled. The fact that Mordecai uncovers the plot is important because his actions will later be remembered, leading to his promotion and, eventually, to the downfall of Haman. This incident also suggests that both political intrigue and divine providence are at play in the unfolding story.