

PREPARATION GUIDE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO



You Were
MADE FOR THIS
MOMENT

COURAGE FOR TODAY AND HOPE FOR TOMORROW

NOT FOR RESALE

You Were
MADE FOR THIS
MOMENT
Preparation Guide

PREPARE YOUR
HEART FOR A STUDY THROUGH
THE BOOK OF ESTHER

DEVELOPED BY
ERICA SMITH

MAX LUCADO

You Were Made for This Moment Preparation Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This preparation guide is designed as a precursor to Max's book *You Were Made for This Moment*. As you eagerly await the arrival of the book, this guide will provide an overview of the book of Esther—the historical background, key themes, scriptures, and characters—to help set the stage for your reading and initiate personal reflection.

And, as a bonus, you will get a sneak peek at the book's first chapter and a special letter from Max.

To enhance your experience with this guide, we encourage you to read the book of Esther in its entirety. If you plan a group study, you may want to gather and read the book of Esther aloud.

As the details of the divine story seep into your heart, you may discover that the story of Esther is a glimpse of your story, and her Deliverer, your Deliverer.



SETTING THE STAGE

DATE AND TIMING

It is important to view the book of Esther in the context of the Babylonian exile. In 605 BC the Babylonian army conquered Judah, home to the Jewish people. After the invasion, the Babylonians took many of the Jewish people into captivity, forcing them to leave their homes and work in servitude for the Babylonian Empire.¹

After years in captivity, things began to look up for the Jewish people. Cyrus the Great, king of Media and Persia, conquered Babylon in 539 BC, extending his Persian Empire. Cyrus issued a decree that allowed Jews the option to return to their former homeland. While some Jews chose to return, others—presumably the ancestors of Esther and Mordecai—chose to stay.

The book of Esther takes place roughly one hundred years after the Babylonian exile and fifty years after Cyrus's decree during the reign of King Xerxes I of Persia around 486 BC. Though many of Esther's contemporaries would have been born and raised in Persia, the Jewish people were nevertheless regarded as strangers in a foreign land. While some Jews were able to attain positions of both influence and affluence, scholars suggest that the Persian people maintained significant power over the Jews, and Jewish life and possessions could be seized and taken away at a moment's notice by the whims of

the Persian elite.² Thus, the timing of the book of Esther is significant because it highlights the dilemma Jews faced regarding assimilating to Persian culture for their well-being and safety or retaining their Jewish identity as a separate and chosen people.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

(approximate dates)³

605 BC Babylon conquers Judah

597-586 BC Jewish captivity and exile to Babylon

539 BC Cyrus the Great, king of Media and
Persia, conquers Babylon

538 BC Cyrus issues decree that Jews
can choose to return to Judea

522 BC King Darius I becomes king of Persian Empire

486 BC King Xerxes I becomes king of Persian Empire

483 BC Vashti is deposed

478 BC Esther becomes queen

473 BC Purim is established

PLACE

At the height of its success, the vast Persian Empire controlled a territory the size of Australia and was approximately 4,464 miles long, spanning from today's India to Sudan.⁴ The Persian Empire under Xerxes had four capitals and the story of Esther specifically takes place in the Persian king's winter capital city of Susa (modern-day Iran).⁵



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LITERARY GENRE

With its narrative style, the book of Esther is easily characterized as a story, though what type of story is up for debate. The possibilities range from court tale to festive comedy to historical novella.⁶ The most crucial descriptor, however, should be that of sacred story.⁷ While Esther is certainly an entertaining account of a bumbling king and a brave queen, it is more importantly a story within the grand narrative of God's redemption and restoration of all humanity.⁸

PURIM

The celebration of Purim was established to commemorate the month when the Jews received relief from their enemies and “their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration” (Est. 9:21–22).

Throughout Jewish history, and still today, the book of Esther is read aloud at the celebration of Purim, which generally falls in late February or early March, around the time of Mardi Gras.⁹ In some Jewish traditions, the reading of Esther is a boisterous occasion that includes costumes and noisemakers.¹⁰

One notable Purim celebration took place in the Nazi concentration camp of Gross-Rosen. Despite blowback from their Nazi guards, to summon courage and sustenance for their tragic circumstances, Jewish prisoners on Purim Eve gave impassioned speeches about the Esther story and God's ultimate victory.¹¹ This poignant and defiant celebration of Purim reminds us that remembrance of God's deliverance in the past provides immeasurable comfort and courage for our present hardships.

KEY THEMES AND SCRIPTURES

THEME: REVERSAL

Key Scripture

On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. (Est. 9:1)

The story of Esther teems with reversal. Circumstances seem as if they will turn out one way, but then the opposite happens. Perhaps the most obvious examples of reversal are Haman and Mordecai. At the beginning of the story, Haman has the king's authority and his signet ring, but by the end Mordecai has the king's authority and his ring. Haman originally intends Mordecai to be impaled on the seventy-five-foot stake, but instead, Haman is impaled on it.¹² And, as our key scripture states, Haman's goal was for the Jews to be overpowered and annihilated, but in the end, the Jews had "the upper hand" (Est. 9:1).

The book of Esther's reversals points to an even bigger reversal in the grand narrative of salvation. Though the consequences of sin is death, because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is a staggering reversal: we are now offered eternal life (Rom. 6:23).¹³

THEME: MADE FOR THIS MOMENT

Key Scripture

And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? (Est. 4:14)

At the beginning of the book of Esther, the Jews, Esther, and Mordecai are characterized as powerless characters, subject to circumstances beyond their control.¹⁴ The author of Esther emphasized this by using passive voice to describe how the Jews were “carried” into exile and Esther was “taken” to the harem.¹⁵ However, in chapter 4 as Mordecai exhorts Esther to act on behalf of the Jewish people, there is a pivotal shift in language. Instead of Esther’s previous polite acquiescence, the author now portrays Esther as taking control of the situation, decisively planning, and giving imperative orders.¹⁶

The author’s emphasis on Esther embracing her role “for such a time as this” inspires us to reflect on our own participation in the world. Are we passive actors amid the world’s problems? Or are we active participants, using our God-given gifts, experiences, and abilities to right the injustices of the world?

THEME: GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Key Scripture

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place. (Est. 4:14)

Over the centuries, many scholars have noted the seeming absence of God in the book of Esther, but as John Wesley aptly put it, "The name of God is not found in this book: but the finger of God is, directing so many minute events for the deliverance of his people."¹⁷ Throughout Esther, there are a series of events that seem more providential than coincidental: the queen's position opening up in first place, the king choosing Esther as queen and then later favorably receiving her multiple times, Mordecai discovering the conspiracy, the insomnia of the king, Haman arriving early at the palace, and Haman's ill-advised begging at Esther's feet.¹⁸ Whether or not we find these events fortuitous, Mordecai decidedly tells Esther that the outcome for the Jews has already been determined: *deliverance will come*. And, of course, by the end of the story, we see that deliverance does come.

This theme of God's sovereignty guides us again to the grand story of salvation. No matter what evil powers try and overtake us, the outcome has already been determined. Deliverance has come. The ultimate victory over the powers of sin and death has already been won by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

THEME: IDENTITY

Key Scripture

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. (Est. 2:10)

The theme of identity is integral to the cultural and social backdrop of the book of Esther. Briefly mentioned earlier in the date and timing section, the Jewish people faced immense pressure to submit to a Persian way of living. The author of Esther highlighted this tension by mentioning both the Persian and Hebrew names of certain characters in addition to Mordecai's firm orders to keep Esther's nationality a secret, both presently in the palace and throughout her childhood (Est. 2:20). Over the course of the story, however, Esther embraces her Jewish identity and her solidarity with the Jewish community becomes paramount to their survival.

The significance of identity in the book of Esther offers us timely reflection for our own lives. In an increasingly secular world, is our identity in Christ a notable witness to others? Are we successfully living *in* the world but not *of* the world? What pressures might we be succumbing to that stand in contradiction to our beliefs?

KEY CHARACTERS

GOD

It would be negligent not to begin with God as a key character in the story of Esther. As we discussed previously in the key themes section, God's name or activity does not directly appear anywhere in the book of Esther, yet God is at the helm of the entire plot. In Esther 4:14, we learn that the outcome for the Jews has already been determined: God has already ordained their deliverance. Therefore, the hiddenness of God in this story may not be so hidden after all.

ESTHER

Esther, whose name derives from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar and is also known by her Hebrew name Hadassah, is traditionally considered the heroine of this story.¹⁹ After all, the book bears her name. Through the centuries, however, there has been debate over whether Esther is the only—or the main hero of this story since Mordecai assumes a prominent leadership role toward the end of the book. Clearly, though, without Esther's unique role as queen and her careful and timely plan to approach the king, there might be no story at all.²⁰

Esther is described as being "beautiful" and having a "lovely figure" (Est. 2:7) and finds favor with those she meets (2:9, 15). Though Esther's attractiveness certainly catches the king's initial attention (4:17), her favor quickly fades, as she laments to Mordecai that the king

has not summoned her for thirty days (4:11). After her time of intense prayer and fasting, Esther's place of favor is restored, reminding us that the inward disposition of the heart far surpasses the result of outward appearances.

MORDECAI

Mordecai, Esther's first cousin, is another hero in this story and serves as a foil to the villain Haman. Scholars suggest Mordecai's name derives from the Babylonian god Marduk,²¹ emphasizing the assimilation to Babylonian culture the Jews had developed during their time in exile and beyond.

Though Mordecai's name implies Jewish secularization, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman portrays resistance to the dominant culture. Mordecai's defiance sends Haman into a tailspin of hatred, resulting in the decree to annihilate the Jewish people. Though the story opens with Mordecai as the underdog, the drama concludes with Mordecai as the top dog, managing Haman's estate and taking on the king's authority Haman once possessed.

HAMAN

Haman, the story's villain, is interestingly described as an ancestor of the Amalekites, a people group at war with the Israelites in 1 Samuel 15.²² The author's connection of Haman and this enemy group seems to escalate Haman's villain role to that of an ancient enemy—perhaps an archetypal representative of all adversaries of God's chosen people.

Curiously, Haman is the most transparent character in the story. The author invites readers to listen in on Haman's insecurities, emotions, and motivations.²³ Perhaps the author's reasoning was to enable us to investigate our own hearts as we investigate Haman's. After a close look, we, too, may identify with the motivations that drive Haman's actions: attaining power, wealth, authority, and recognition. Haman may also be a mirror of our fallen selves, an enemy that can only be defeated by the ultimate deliverer: Jesus Christ.

XERXES

King Xerxes, also known as King Ahasuerus in Hebrew, holds the powerful, yet surprisingly passive, role of king of the Persian Empire. Though the king has supreme authority over his kingdom, the author noticeably portrays Xerxes as spending more time delegating authority than using it.

Throughout the book, King Xerxes is easily manipulated, both by his royal court and by Esther. Xerxes seems to be without volition, a puppet who rarely speaks and is always being spoken through, spoken for, and spoken about. Perhaps this emphasis on Xerxes' lack of will highlights God's supreme will. Where Xerxes lacks personal responsibility, God assumes ultimate responsibility for the outcome of redemptive events and the Jewish deliverance.

SEARCHING *for* SPRINGTIME



*W*inter casts a cold shadow. The days are short. The nights are long. The sun seems shy, hidden behind the grayness. Warmth has packed her bags and migrated to the tropics. Beach weather would be nice.

But that's not going to happen. It's winter.

Spring will see blossoms. Summer sways leafy bushes in the wind. Autumn gives forth a harvest of plenty. But winter? Winter is still, deathly still. Fields are frosty. Trees extend skeletal limbs. Wildlife is silent. Gone.

Winter brings danger. Blizzards. Ice storms. Caution is the theme. Come springtime you'll run barefoot through the meadow and plunge

into the pond. But now? It's best to button up, zip up, stay in, and stay safe.

It's winter out there.

Is it winter where you are? Are you trapped in a perpetual gloom?
Do you know the solstice of sunless days and barren trees?

I know a mom who does. A mom of three kids. Two in diapers and one with a disability. Her apartment is small. Her income is meager. And her husband is AWOL. Life in Camp Chaos was too much for him. It's too much for her as well. But what choice does she have? Somebody always needs to be fed, changed, held, or bathed. So she does whatever needs doing, and it appears she will be doing it forever. She wonders if this winter will ever pass.

So does my friend Ed. He and I have much in common. Our health is good. Our golf game is poor. We both like dogs. We both have marriages that predate the Carter administration. The difference? My wife just asked me what I want for dinner. His keeps asking him who he is. He placed her in a memory-care facility a year ago. They'd dreamed of touring the country in an RV. So far he's spent his retirement sleeping alone and making daily visits to a woman who stares out the window.

Can you relate? When did you first realize that life was not going to turn out the way you thought?

Your parents divorced.

Your spouse cheated.

Your health never recovered.

Your friend never returned.

In that moment a Siberian cold settled over your life. Your world became an arctic circle of dark days, long nights, and bitter weather.

Winter.

This book was born in winter. As I pen these words, every person on the planet is living in the frostnip of COVID-19. A pandemic has locked us down. The mom I told you about? Her income is meager because her restaurant job was discontinued. Ed can still see his wife but only through a window. Church doors are closed. Students are stuck at home. Masks hide smiles. A microscopic virus has paralyzed us.

And an ancient sin threatens to undo us. Those of us who'd hoped racism was fading were convinced otherwise. An officer's knee on the neck of a black man activated a subterranean anger. A volcano spewed into the streets of most countries.

The entire world seems wrapped in winter. We are all searching for springtime.

Winters are a part of life—some personal, some global—but all are powerful. Try as we might to bundle up and lean into the wind, the heartiest among us can fall. The wind is too strong. Nights are too long, and the question is all too common: Will this winter ever pass? You wonder (don't you wonder?) if you will survive this.

If so, God has a six-letter word of encouragement for you: E-S-T-H-E-R.

The book that bears her name was written to be read in wintertime. Written for the emotionally weary. Written for the person who feels outnumbered by foes, outmaneuvered by fate, and outdone by fear. It's as if God, in his kind providence, heard all the prayers of all the souls who have ever been stuck in an arctic February. To every person who has longed to see a green sprig on a barren branch, he says, "Follow me. I want you to see what I can do."

He escorts us to the front row of a grand theater and invites us to

take a seat. He nods at the symphony conductor. The baton is lifted, the music begins, the curtain opens, and we are eyewitnesses to a triumph of divine drama.

The setting is the city of Susa in fifth century BC Persia (modern-day Iran). The empire was to its day what Rome was to the first century. During the reign of Darius I, also known as Darius the Great (522–486 BC), “it controlled more than 2.9 million square miles.” The empire consisted of roughly 44 percent of the world’s population, an estimated 50 million people. It stretched some 4,464 miles from what is now Punjab, India, to Khartoum, Sudan. To get the scope of it, walk from Los Angeles to Atlanta, turn around, and walk back to LA. Or, if you prefer, duplicate the United States map, set the two side by side, and you get a feel for the breadth of the Persian Empire.

The cast consists of a memorable quartet of characters.

Xerxes, the king, had a thirst for wine, a disregard for women, and convictions that changed with the weather. He ruled over Persia from 486 to 465 BC. His name in Hebrew was Ahasuerus, which pronounced correctly sounds like a good sneeze. For that reason his name in Greek—Xerxes—will be my choice. (Besides, any name that makes double use of the letter X is fun to write.)

The book of Esther portrays him as a wimp, an accomplished drinker, but not much of a thinker. He was most comfortable holding a goblet and delegating decisions. The story attributes to him no profound thoughts or statesmanlike decrees. Catch him in the right mood, and he’d agree to genocide.

At least that was the experience of Haman, the villain in our story. His name sounds like “hangman,” which is convenient, because this tyrant

was all about death. He was a wealthy and influential officer in the cabinet of Xerxes. His jet was private. His wardrobe was tailored. He got manicures on Mondays and played golf with Xerxes on Thursdays. He had the ear of the king, the swagger of a pimp, and the compassion of Hitler.

Yes, that's accurate. We see a lot of Adolf in Haman. Both demanded to be worshipped. Both were intolerant of subversion. And both set out to exterminate the entire Jewish race. Can't you almost hear Hitler saying what Haman said?

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries." (Est. 3:8–9 NKJV)

Those "certain people" were none other than the Hebrew nation: the children of Israel, descendants of Abraham, and the family tree of Jesus Christ. They were scattered throughout the Persian Empire. To Haman they were inconsequential flecks of dandruff on the royal robe of Xerxes. But to God they were a chosen race through whom he would redeem humankind.

One of the exiled Jews really got under Haman's skin. His name was Mordecai. You're going to love him eventually. But you'll be puzzled by him initially. Quite content to be quiet, he chose to keep his ancestry under wraps. But a person could take only so much of Haman.

“Mordecai had a cousin . . . whom he had brought up” because she was an orphan. She must have been a head turner. Esther “had a lovely figure and was beautiful” (Est. 2:7). The ancient rabbinical writings position her as one of the four most beautiful women in the world, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail. She gained access to the king because of her appearance, but her story has relevance to yours because of her conviction and courage.

Are you sensing the elements of the drama?

A clueless brute of a king.

A devious, heartless, bloodthirsty Haman.

A nation of Jews under the threat of extermination.

Mordecai, defiant and determined.

Esther, gorgeous and gutsy.

And God? Where is God in the story? Ahh, there's a question fit for the asking.

The book of Esther is known for being one of the two books in the Bible that never mention the name of God. Until this point he has been everywhere, seemingly on every page. In Eden the Creator. In Ur the Prompter. In Egypt the Liberator. In the promised land the Warrior. But in Persia? The trail has grown cold.

At no point do we read “And God said” or “God chose” or “God decreed.” There is no mention of the temple or the name *Yahweh* or *Elohim*, Hebrew nouns meaning God. There is no mention of apocalyptic visions, as Daniel saw, or concern for God’s law, as Ezra expressed. Prayer is implied but not described. The seas do not split. The heavens do not roar. No dry bones come to life.

Why? Why the absence of spirituality? Why the seeming silence of God?

If you are in the midst of winter, you can relate to these questions. God may seem hidden to you. Distant. Removed. Absent from your script. Your world feels cut loose from the sun.

Others hear from God. You don't. Others say they know the will of God. You're bewildered. Others have a backstage pass to his performance. But you? You can't find his name on the playbill. Is he there? Does he care? You're unsure.

Might you be open to a gold nugget that lies in the substratum of the Esther story? Quiet providence. *Providence* is the two-dollar term theologians use to describe God's continuous control over history. He not only spoke the universe into being, but he governs it by his authority. He is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). He is regal, royal, and—this is essential—he is *right here*. He is not preoccupied with the plight of Pluto at the expense of your problems and pain.

He has been known to intervene dramatically. By his hand the Red Sea opened, the manna fell from heaven, a virgin gave birth, and a tomb gave life. Yet for every divine shout there are a million whispers. The book of Esther relates the story of our whispering God, who in unseen and inscrutable ways superintends all the actions and circumstances for the good of his people. This priceless book reminds us that he need not be loud to be strong. He need not cast a shadow to be present. God is still eloquent in his seeming silence and still active when he appears most distant.

Does God seem absent to you?

If so, the book of Esther deserves your attention. Allow yourself to be caught up in the drama.

Act 1—*Confusion*: God's people choose the glamor of Persia over the goodness of God. Compromise replaces conviction. Confusion replaces clarity.

Act 2—*Crisis*: A decree of death places thousands of Jews on life support. What hope does a fringe minority have in a pagan society?

Act 3—*Conquest*: The unimaginable happens. Something so unexpected that "sorrow turned to joy, [and their] mourning somersaulted into a holiday for parties and fun and laughter" (Est. 9:22 THE MESSAGE).

The theme of the book of Esther—indeed, the theme of the Bible—is that all the injustices of the world will be turned on their head. Grand reversals are God's trademark. When we feel as though everything is falling apart, God is working in our midst, causing everything to fall into place. He is the King of quiet providence, and he invites you and me to partner with him in his work. The headline of the book of Esther reads: *Relief will come. . . . Will you be a part of it?*

When all seems lost, it's not. When evil seems to own the day, God still has the final say. He has a Joseph for every famine and a David for every Goliath. When his people need rescuing, God calls a Rahab into service. When a baby Moses needs a mama, God prompts an Egyptian princess to have compassion. He always has his person.

He had someone in the story of Esther.

And in your story he has you.

You want to retreat, stay quiet, stay safe, stay backstage. *I don't have what it takes*, you tell yourself. You could dismiss the "made for this moment" idea as mere folly.

But I oh so hope you won't.

Relief will come. . . . Will you be a part of it?

This world gets messy, for sure. But God's solutions come through people of courage. People like Mordecai and Esther. People like you. People who dare to believe that they, by God's grace, were made to face a moment like this.

For those stuck in acts 1 and 2, be assured act 3 is on the way. In God's plan confusion and crisis give way to conquest. Winters don't last forever. Trees will soon bud. Snow will soon melt. Springtime is only a turn of the calendar away. For all we know God's hand is about to turn the page.



Hi friend,

May God bless you today. I hope this letter finds you well. But all may not be well.

You might still feel paralyzed by a global pandemic, weary from political upheaval, or mourning the ancient sin of racism. You might be swimming in questions such as, When will this end? Will we ever return to normal? Where is God in all this?

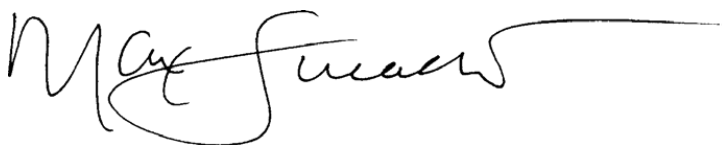
If you are asking these questions, I'd like to offer you a promise that will change your life: No condition is too dark, no situation is too impossible, no problem is so severe that God can't intervene, overturn, and reverse the course of events. God's way will prevail, and you are invited to be a part of the victory.

This is the promise of the book of Esther and the promise of my new book *You Were Made for This Moment*.

If you feel overwhelmed by difficult circumstances, I pray that you would draw courage from Esther's story and God's deliverance. Esther found herself in a seemingly impossible situation when faced with a royal decree that would annihilate her people. Esther had to make a choice. Would she remain silent or would she speak up? Esther could have refused. She could have cowered in fear. But she spoke up. And God used her to save the nation. It's not hyperbole to say that her courage changed the course of history. Nor is it an overstatement to say that God can do the same with you.

You, too, can make a decision in the face of challenging times. You can choose to be undone by fear, or you can choose to be unleashed by our triumphant God.

You, my friend, were made for this moment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Max Lucado". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The "M" is large and loops around the "a". The "L" is tall and loops around the "u". The "d" is small and loops around the "o". The signature ends with a long, horizontal flourish that extends to the right.

NOTES

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6. Tayler, "Ruth and Esther," 87; Fentress-Williams, "Esther" in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha Fortress Commentary on the Bible* edited by Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Mathew J. M. Coomber (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2014), 488.
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13. Bernius, *Ruth/Song of Songs/Esther*, 217.
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15. Jobes, *Esther*, 99.
16. Jobes, *Esther*, 99.
17. John Wesley, "Notes on the Book of Esther" from Wesley Center Online. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-the-book-of-esther/>
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19. Alter, *Strong As Death Is Love*, 95.
20. Keck, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VI*, 16.
21. Alter, *Strong As Death Is Love*, 95.
22. Walton and Keener, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, 806.
23. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 178.

