

Memoirs of a Concubine: A study of Esther
The Great Canadian Bible Study - 2007

By Faye Reynolds

Some introductory words from the author:

This study is not a recommendation for the book, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, or its movie counterpart. However, there are some interesting parallels between this story and the book of Esther that give new insight into the journey that Esther must have travelled.

It will be helpful if each participant has a copy of the study before them for the comparative materials and questions.

In Vacation Bible School many years ago, the Book of Esther was presented as a gripping cliff-hanging flannelgraph story not easily forgotten by those in attendance. The visuals typically pictured Esther as a beautiful mature woman who had found the favour of a handsome, honourable king and consequently lived a wonderful fairy tale existence as the Queen of Persia. These images have been blown away with the realization that Esther was probably a very young woman, in her early teens. As an orphan, she lived with her uncle who, for reasons beyond modern understanding, willingly gave her up to become a concubine (plaything) of an over-indulgent, likely very fat (by the number of parties he throws) older king. Note these comparisons between the life of a Geisha and Esther's story:

| Memoirs of a Geisha | The Story of Esther |
|---|---|
| Mother dies and father sells her, believing her life could be better than he can ever offer her. She is sold to be either a prostitute or Geisha. | An orphan whose uncle releases her to the King's court of concubines perhaps also believing it offered her a better chance at life. |
| Chiyo is tested to be certain she is a virgin around 12 years old. | Hadassah must also be a virgin likely 12 years old. |
| Chiyos name is changed to Sayari. | Hadassah's name is changed to Esther. |
| Sayari is favoured because of her blue eyes and therefore is placed into training as a Geisha, an honourable position compared to being a prostitute. | Esther is favoured because of her beauty and is put through a year of beauty treatment to gain a higher position in the king's harem. |
| Sayari gains the favour of an unattractive man who protects her and ensures her future safety. | Esther gains the favour of the king's eunuch and becomes the chosen virgin from the harem. |
| Sayari becomes a woman of influence, in spite of her circumstances. | Esther becomes a woman of influence, in spite of her circumstances. |

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What is most important to realize through this exercise is what an awful journey for a young woman to take – to be removed from all that she loved in order to become sexual amusement for a man of power. Esther is NO LOVE STORY. It is a story of abuse that echoes the oppressive plight of women in many cultures. Today even in Canada young girls are brought here and trafficked (literally sold) into prostitution because they believe that a life in Canada must be better than life in her homeland.

The Book of Esther was not easily accepted into the Old Testament canon because it never mentions God once in all ten chapters. It is rich in satire, filled with burlesque, robust with court intrigue and bursting with a cast of wild characters. If you prefer your Bible reading to be moralistic, straightforward, somber and sacred, Esther is not your cup of tea.

Esther is also a story of survival – a story of incredible courage and resilience. There is no doubt about the power of God’s presence in this girl’s life to overcome the oppressive circumstance forced upon her. Through this study, we hope you will see Esther with new eyes and come to an even a greater understanding of this truly amazing young woman.

Background

After the exile and the fall of Babylon to Persia, many Jewish exiles chose to stay in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem. They could live comfortably there but were still vulnerable to persecution by the foreign power. It was wise for Esther to keep her heritage a secret in this potentially hostile environment.

1. **Read Esther 1: 4 – 12:** *Describe briefly what kind of man was King Xerxes (also known by the Hebrew name, Ahasuerus).*
2. *What did he ask of Queen Vashti? What was unreasonable about his request?*
3. **Read verses 18 – 22:** *What was the threat created by Vashti’s response and what was the consequence? How do you react to this as a woman?*
4. The king is advised to search the kingdom for “beautiful young virgins” (2:2) to feed his excessive appetite for more than food and drink. **Read chapter 2: 5 – 15.** *Why do you think Mordecai placed Esther into this situation? What evidence do we have of how much Mordecai cared for Esther? 2:14 reveals what the life of a concubine was like. At the risk of being crude, one can see what a difficult, oppressive situation it was for a young girl to face. From our North American perspective, was the hope of a better future worth the dehumanization that Esther went through?*

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The Plot

1. **Read 2: 21 – 3: 6:** *What motivated Mordecai to report the conspiracy plot on the king and yet ignore the king's command to honour Haman? What chain reactions did his attitude bring about?*
2. *Describe an example where being a person of integrity has caused conflict or created more hardship than it seemed it was worth.*
3. The date in **Esther 3:7** tells us is now 9 years since Esther became a concubine, which would still leave her barely 20 years old. We see even more clearly what kind of man she was forced to live with as he easily gives permission for the genocide of thousands of Jews living in the land of Persia. (**See 3: 8 – 11.**)

The Miracle

1. **Read 4: 1 – 16.** *What do we learn about the relationship of Mordecai and Esther? What is Mordecai asking of Esther and what is Esther's fear? Is his request reasonable? Was there any other choice?*
2. **Esther 4: 14** is the pivotal verse in this book. In this verse we find the familiar phrase, "For such a time as this." *What do these words mean to you?*
3. *What are some situations today that God is calling us to speak up in "such a time as this"? What are the issues that the church needs to address? What are the costs of raising such issues? Is there a place for women to lead the way in calling for justice?*
4. We talk about the power of prayer. Yet on what occasions has the church fasted and prayed for three days for a cause of injustice? *What kind of issue would bring you to your knees to fast and pray for three solid days? Again, how could women lead the way in such a calling?*
5. **Read Chapter 5: 4 – 8.** Esther is very astute and makes a suggestion that plays on the king's first love – food! She asks for a banquet, knowing he's always game for a party. *What other character traits of Esther are revealed by her actions?*
6. **Read Chapter 6: 1.** *How does God enter the scene even though He is not named? Name examples where God has intervened to prepare a person's heart for action.*
7. Summarize chapters 7 – 8 in regards to Esther's part in saving her people. *What did she risk and what did she gain? What was Esther's part in this miracle? What was God's part?*

Today God is calling women "for such a time as this". Though we may feel as innocent and helpless as young Esther, we have been placed where we are and given what we have to be used by God for mighty things. Like Esther, we can overcome many difficult situations such as abuse, divorce, discrimination, physical illness and numerous other painful pasts. God is calling us all to fast and pray against injustice and oppression. God is calling each of us to take risks for His sake. May Esther's example inspire us to speak and act with courage and faith!