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Study Questions for the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*

The Book of Esther

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Study Questions

Esther

Chapters 11–12 (*italic*)

For understanding

1. **11:2.** Around which year does the narrative begin? Which month of ancient Israel's liturgical calendar is Nisan, and to what does it correspond? Who is Mordecai? From what is his name derived? Why was he perhaps given this non-Jewish name?
2. **11:3.** What was Susa? Where was the city built? What other OT figure also served at the court in Susa?
3. **11:4.** If the expression "one of the captives" refers to Mordecai himself, when was he exiled from Israel, and what difficulty does it create for the story? On the other hand, how would the problem of chronology be resolved? What is Mordecai's dream? In what form will the story unfold? According to what order does the dream and its interpretation stand at both ends of the story as prologue and epilogue?

For application

1. **11:5–11.** How well do you remember your dreams? What importance do you give them, or what meaning have they had for you?
2. **11:12.** What, if anything, have your dreams revealed to you about yourself? Do you think any of them may have come from God? If so, for what purpose?
3. **12:2.** Some crimes, such as child abuse, legally oblige others to report them to the authorities; other acts of wrongdoing are left to the conscience of the witness. If you were aware of either type of wrong, what considerations would lead you to reveal it to an authority? What fears might prevent you from reporting it?

Chapter 1

For understanding

1. **Word Study: Ahasuerus (1:1).** What is the name of the Persian king in the Hebrew text of Esther, and what Old Persian term does it render? How do Greek writers reproduce both the Hebrew and the Persian name? Who is the king in question? In the Greek version of Esther, how is his name given, and with which Persian kings must he not be confused? Outside the Bible, how is Ahasuerus/Xerxes described?
2. **1:1.** Who achieved the vast dimensions of the Persian Empire? Into how many administrative districts were Persian lands divided, and what were they called? Why is the number 127 not necessarily in conflict with this fact?
3. **1:9.** Where outside the Bible is Vashti mentioned? Who does the Greek historian Herodotus name as Xerxes' wife? Why might the discrepancy between Herodotus and the Bible not be irreconcilable?
4. **1:12.** What does Queen Vashti refuse to do? What did court etiquette normally dictate about royal women? Beyond that, why may Vashti have refused to come? What does one Jewish tradition speculate about her motive?

For application

1. **1:7–8.** Have you ever been invited to a party at which you were "expected" to be present? What moral difficulty if any did this expectation create for you? What did you decide to do, and how did you feel about it afterward?
2. **1:10–12.** The note for v. 12 gives some reasons why Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command. What choice would she normally have had when the king summoned her? What consideration have you given to the way our society treats women? How have the Church's attitudes toward women changed over the centuries?
3. **1:16–22.** St. Paul's description of the relations between husband and wife in Eph 5:21–30 has provoked much discussion in our era. How do you understand the passage? What is the Church's interpretation of it (CCC 1612–16, 2204–6)? If you are married, how does it apply to your marriage?

Chapter 2

For understanding

1. **2:7.** What is Esther's birth name, and what does it mean in Hebrew? From what is the name Esther likely derived? As a Jewess, to which tribe does she belong? Who is Esther's father?
2. **2:16.** To what does the month of Tebeth correspond? When is the "seventh year"? What explains the prolonged delay?
3. **2:17.** During what period does Esther become the queen and principal wife of Ahasuerus/Xerxes? Though Herodotus makes no mention of Esther, when does his account of Xerxes' reign break off?
4. **2:23.** To what practice does the term "hanged" refer? Of what was it an early form, and for what was it used? What is the Book of the Chronicles?

For application

1. **2:1–4.** What are your standards of beauty in a person of the other sex? What should physical beauty suggest to you about the quality of the person? How do you ordinarily assess the moral attributes of someone you have just met?
2. **2:7.** If you have ever named a person, on what basis did you choose the name (or names)? What did the name mean to you? What do you think the name means to God, since he knows that person by name (cf. Ex 33:17; Is 45:4; 2 Tim 2:19)?
3. **2:10.** At certain times in history, concealing one's ethnic identity has been a matter of life and death. If you or an ancestor changed your surname, what was the reason for the change? Of what in your ethnic background are you most ashamed? Of what are you most proud?
4. **2:18.** Read the note for this verse. What is it about a banquet that would suggest a comparison with heaven? How might you relate that comparison with your experience of the Mass?

Chapter 3

For understanding

1. **3:1.** How is Haman branded, and when was he introduced into the story? What is an Agagite? How is this detail highly significant from the standpoint of biblical history, as it refers both to King Saul and to Mordecai and Esther? What is Haman's position in the empire?
2. **3:2.** What does the Torah say about acts of homage such as bowing? What are two possible explanations for Mordecai's conduct? According to one Jewish tradition, why did Mordecai refuse to bow?
3. **3:6.** What does Haman do with a personal insult? What does the fact that his thirst for vengeance is far out of proportion to the perceived crime indicate?
4. **3:8.** How does Haman misrepresent the Jews so as to recommend their elimination? How does the king show himself irresponsible and naïve?

For application

1. **3:2.** Among the ecclesial, military, corporate, or other groups with whom you associate, what are the protocols or standards of etiquette for greeting or addressing leaders such as clergy, officers, or executives? Do you know anyone who resists them, and, if so, why do they? How do you explain your own conformity or dissent?
2. **3:5.** How strict are the protocols mentioned in the previous question? How are violations of the protocols treated? How do you want others, such as children or strangers, to address you in public? How would you take it if they ignored your wish?
3. **3:7.** What is stereotyping? How would you recognize it if someone held a stereotypical view of certain ethnic or racial groups? What stereotypes do you acknowledge having about any such groups?
4. **3:8–13.** Over the history of your country, when has the government taken steps to relocate, remove, or eliminate an ethnic group? What were some of the official reasons given for these actions? How are such actions viewed today? What attempts, if any, has the government taken to remedy or provide reparation for them?

Chapter 13 (italic)

For understanding

1. **13:1–7.** What does this addition purport to be? How does Haman, the architect behind the letter, paint the Jews? For what does the edict call, and to what does it give voice?
2. **13:6.** Why are the Jews not named in the decree? Why does the Greek version of Esther put the extermination date one day after the Hebrew version of 3:13? In any case, how are both the 13th and 14th of Adar remembered among the Jews?

For application

1. **13:1–7.** The note for these verses uses the term "ethnic cleansing". As a euphemism, what does it really mean? What instances of ethnic cleansing can you recall from recent world history?
2. **13:4–7.** What is an innuendo? What advantage does the government see in not naming the group being targeted? Considering the size of the empire (India to Ethiopia), what guarantee is there that only Jews would be targeted? Given the vagueness of the decree, how likely is the desired outcome in v. 7 to be realized?

Chapters 3–4

For understanding

1. **4:1–17.** What does Mordecai plead with Esther to do? How is pressure applied to her?
2. **4:11.** Why did no one dare to make an uninvited appearance before the king? At his discretion, however, what could the king do? Who does Josephus say stood around the royal throne? What does the fact that Esther has not been summoned by Ahasuerus/Xerxes for an entire month suggest?
3. **4:14.** Although God is not explicitly mentioned, what is implicit? What does Mordecai invite Esther to see about the hand of God in her unique situation?
4. **4:16.** Of what is fasting a form? When does the heroic moment come for Esther? What do bravery and a spirit of self-sacrifice combine to make her? According to St. Clement of Rome, what quality in her soul prompted God to respond to Esther's fasting and humiliation?

For application

1. **3:15.** Why would the king and his prime minister relax at this point? On the other hand, why is the capital "perplexed"?
2. **4:1–7.** What sorts of opposition to the practice of their faith do Christians face today, both globally and in your locality? In what degree of danger do you think Christians stand?
3. **4:13.** Assuming you are committed to your faith, how comfortable do you feel with the times in which you live? Why do you think God may have placed you where you are?
4. **4:16.** What is the purpose of religious fasting? Why does the Church require periods of fasting, such as during Lent? What is your own personal practice?

Chapter 13–14 (italic)

For understanding

1. **13:8–17.** By what divine role does Mordecai appeal to God? On what does his hope for salvation rest? According to St. Aphrahat, how are Mordecai's and Jesus' prayer and penance similar?
2. **14:1–19.** How does the prayer of Esther mirror the prayer of Mordecai? What does she ask for herself? To the prayers of what other biblical characters does her prayer show many similarities? According to St. Clement of Alexandria, how did Esther deliver Israel from the power of the king and the cruelty of his vizier?

3. **14:9.** On what grounds does Esther appeal to God? In what would destruction of the covenant people result?
4. **14:17.** What is the "wine of the libations"? What is Esther careful to avoid?

For application

1. **13:9–11.** When you petition the Lord for something, how do you begin your prayer? What makes praise of God an act of humility? How is it appropriate as part of a prayer of petition?
2. **13:13–14.** Mordecai claims in prayer that his refusal to bow to Haman is not done out of pride. As one of the "capital sins", how harmful to human relationships is personal pride? At what point does confidence in your own position or accomplishments turn to arrogance?
3. **14:1–3.** Esther tries to humble herself through dramatic expressions of self-abnegation. If you were in dire circumstances like Esther's, what outward manifestations of self-denial would you consider to emphasize the seriousness of your prayer? Why does Jesus recommend hiding the fact that you are fasting at all (cf. Mt 6:16–18)?
4. **14:8–11.** What reasons does Esther give for why God should act on Israel's behalf? When you pray for a certain outcome, what reasons do you sometimes give why God should act? What are some similarities and differences between her approach to prayer and yours?

Chapter 15 (italic)

For understanding

1. **15:7.** What does the king's fierce anger hint that Esther has done? Why does the queen faint?
2. **15:8.** Who is in control of the situation? What theology is implicit here?

For application

1. **15:1–5.** Think of a time in your life when you had to prepare yourself for a task you were terrified to perform. How did you prepare yourself for it, both inwardly and outwardly? What was the contrast between your appearance and the way you felt? What part did prayer play in your preparation?
2. **15:13–14.** How do you evaluate the honesty of Esther's reply to the king? If the person you most dread to approach were to try to allay your fears as the king did, how might you assure him that you were really not afraid?

Chapter 5

For understanding

1. **5:3.** What kind of expression is the king's offer of "half of my kingdom"? How many more times is this offer made in Esther, and when? When does Herod Antipas echo these words? What is ironical in the comparison between Esther and Herodias?
2. **5:8.** What does the pair of feasts mirror at the beginning of the book, and what does it anticipate at the end of the book?
3. **5:14.** How high is "fifty cubits"? What can be concluded from the height of the gibbet? For what did the Persians use gallows?

For application

1. **5:4–8.** Read the note for v. 4. Given the extremity of Esther's fear and the king's concern for her, why do you think she delays making her true request known to him?
2. **5:9–12.** Why does it often happen that pride really does go before a fall? Have you, like Haman, ever congratulated yourself on your worth? How premature was your self-congratulation? Describe a fall or a "comeuppance" that followed.

Chapter 6

For understanding

1. **6:1.** What orchestrates the king's insomnia? What does the Greek version of Esther say explicitly? What is the "book of memorable deeds", and what does it say about Mordecai?
2. **6:8.** How does Persian art depict horses?
3. **6:10.** What does the king's statement show that he is uninformed about, and what does it further suggest? What is the bitter but fitting irony here?

For application

1. **6:3.** In our culture, what kinds of honors do we bestow on others, and for what do we typically honor them? Within your own social circle, including your family, how do you honor others, and for what? Have you ever been honored, and, if so, how was that honor shown?
2. **6:6–9.** Haman plans a grandiose procession, presuming the honor is for himself. If you wanted to honor a family member for any reason, such as an important anniversary, how would you plan for it? What would you consider doing?
3. **6:13.** The Psalms frequently pray that those who plan a trap for the innocent will fall into it themselves (e.g., Ps 141:9–10). Do the Psalms pray for justice or for vengeance? What is the difference? Why does God reserve vengeance to himself?

Chapter 7

For understanding

1. **7:1–10.** How do the tension and suspense of earlier chapters finally ease?
2. **7:2.** What is "the second day"? What does mention of drinking wine recall? How do we know that the parallel is not lost on the narrator?
3. **7:7.** What reason is given for the king's sudden exit? What does he perhaps wish to do?

Study Questions: Esther

4. **7:8.** What is the couch referred to here? For what does the king mistake Haman's pleading? What does the poetic description of Haman's expression mean?

For application

1. **7:2.** Why is wine often served at occasions like fundraisers? Why is the drinking of wine a significant detail in the Esther narrative? How might serving wine help Esther's cause?
2. **7:4.** Notice the sequence of verbs in the first sentence of this verse (repeated in the same sequence in 3:13). For the reader, how does the sequence intensify the doom planned for Esther and her people? What would happen to the meaning if you reversed the order?
3. **7:8.** The RSV translation describes Haman's facial expression this way: "as the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face"; the NABRE renders it: "the face of Haman was covered over." Which is more poetic? Which is clearer? How would you describe his expression in your own words? What artistic renderings of such facial expressions have you seen, and in what context?

Chapter 8

For understanding

1. **8:1.** What is given to Esther, and what does she do with it? In ancient Persia, what happened to the property of a traitor? Of what is the king only now informed?
2. **8:2.** What does placing a signet ring on Mordecai's finger signify? For what was the ring used?
3. **8:8.** Once again, what is the king content to do regarding government policies? What happens to a decree that is ratified by royal authority? This being so, what can Ahasuerus/Xerxes do? What is the reader to note about the edict?

For application

1. **8:8.** The note for this verse explains what happens in Persia to a decree that is ratified by royal authority. In your society, how are laws enacted? Once a bad law is put into effect, why is it so difficult to repeal it? Rather than repeal the law outright, what mechanisms are available in your government to work around or neutralize it?
2. **8:11.** Read the note for this verse. Is there any group within your country that is entitled to observe its own laws? How is that group free to govern itself while remaining subject to the laws of the nation at large?

Chapter 16 (*italic*)

For understanding

1. **16:1–24.** What does Addition E:1–24 purport to be? What did the first letter contend? How does the second contrast with it?
2. **16:2–6.** How does power corrupt persons in high positions? What does Ahasuerus/Xerxes learn the hard way?
3. **16:10.** What is the term "Macedonian", used to describe Haman? Where did Macedonians live, and what was their relationship to the Persians? What ironically happened to the Persians in the early fifth century B.C.?
4. **16:17.** Since the king cannot revoke his previous decree, what can he do?

For application

1. **16:5–6.** When a crime is committed, how guilty under the law is a person who is unwittingly an accomplice to it? Is the accomplice *morally* guilty of either formal (intentional) or material (physical) cooperation in the crime? How responsible is the king for what would have happened to the Jews under Haman's decree?
2. **16:15.** The note for this verse cites CCC 1963, which describes the role of the Law of Moses. How does that paragraph explain the special function of the Law according to St. Paul? How is the Mosaic Law the "first stage on the way to the kingdom"?
3. **16:16.** Does your country publicly acknowledge the role of God in its affairs? If so, how is that acknowledgment demonstrated? Of what does God's role consist?

Chapters 8–9

For understanding

1. **9:1–15.** On the 13th of Adar, the day scheduled for doom, what do the Jewish people of Persia do? How is this the final and climactic reversal of the storyline? According to St. Athanasius, how did the blessed Esther prevail over the anger of the tyrant, and what does it have to do with the defeat of the devil?
2. **9:16–28.** How is the Feast of Purim celebrated? Though no prayers or liturgical rites are prescribed in the story, how did God's deliverance of the Jews eventually come to be celebrated in the synagogue? What do fixing the precise dates of the feast (Adar 14th and 15th) and making their observance mandatory mean? In later Judaism, extending into modern times, what did the festival come to involve?
3. **Word Study: Pur (9:24).** What is the origin of the Hebrew word *pur*? In Babylon, as in Israel, what kind of object was a lot? In the Book of Esther, how does Haman use it? Because the Jewish people became victors rather than victims on this fateful day, how do they commemorate it? Beyond this, what additional layer of significance does the Greek version of Esther give the feast?
4. **9:31.** How is the Hebrew reference to fasts in this verse open to interpretation? In later Judaism, when did a fast come to be observed?

For application

1. **8:17.** When Christianity became legal in the fourth century, many pagans soon became Christians. What are some of the reasons why they converted? How would bishops determine whether a conversion was genuine?

2. **9:5.** According to the letter from the king (16:20), was the battle fought by the Jews against their enemies a defensive or offensive engagement? In the Christian dispensation, what four conditions for defense by military force would make a defensive war legitimate (CCC 2309)? Should a nation accumulate arms to deter potential adversaries from war (CCC 2315)?
3. **9:6-10.** Read Ezek 18:1-20. How would you evaluate the morality of eliminating all of Haman's male line for the crime of their father? In modern times, what should happen to the family of someone convicted of a notorious crime such as mass murder?
4. **9:20-28.** What historical events have occasioned an annual celebration within the Catholic Church? How, for example, does the Church commemorate the victory of the Battle of Lepanto? Can you think of any other examples?

Chapters 10 and 11 (italic)

For understanding

1. **10:2.** What documents was it common practice in Near Eastern kingdoms to keep? What does the author here claim?
2. **10:4-12.** How is Mordecai's dream in 11:2-12 interpreted? For what does he learn that God is primarily responsible? What belief is likewise reinforced?
3. **11:1.** What type of note is the final verse, and what does it identify? However, on what does establishing the date of the note depend? Why is this not easily determined?

For application

1. **10:5.** Does any given prophecy have only one fulfillment, or may it have more than one? Can you think of an example to support your answer? If more than one, which is the "definitive" fulfillment?
2. **10:9.** Read the note for this verse. Where else in the Bible is this expression used? With what is it connected?