

THE BOOK OF ESTHER – AN INTRODUCTION

“...I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Esther 4:16

AUTHOR: Unknown

- Some have attempted to attach well-known authors like Ezra or Nehemiah to its writing, but there is no evidence to support this proposition. Others have suggested Mordecai, citing his firsthand knowledge of the events. This seems plausible, but can't be proven either. In the end, the safest position must be to admit that we do not know.
- The title of the book derives from the main character in the book. The Persian name **Esther** means “star” referring to the goddess Ishatar. Her Hebrew name **Hadassah** means “myrtle” which God uses as an illustration of Israel's beauty when He redeems her from exile (Isa. 55:13). **Mordecai**'s name is derived from Marduk, the lord of the Babylonian gods.

DATE: The events in Esther take place in Susa, the captial city of Persia over a decade between **483-473BC**.

- The Persian King mentioned in the book was Xerxes I, also known as Ahasuerus who reigned from **486-464BC**.
- Xerxes' banquet occurred in his 3rd year (**1:3; 484BC**) and Haman's plot against the Jews began in his 12th year (**3:7; 473BC**).

AUDIENCE: Covenant people of Israel in Palestine and Persia

- *Jews in Palestine* were facing continual challenges in rebuilding the nation following their return to the land.
- The temple had taken over 21 years to complete (536-515BC) and Ezra's writings tell of the nation's poor spiritual health.
- Esther's story would have encouraged them not to fear the surrounding nations but to trust God and obey His commands.
- *Jews in Persia* needed to be reminded that though they were disobeying God's command to return to the land, God was remaining faithful to His covenant promises. This should have moved the Jews to join their countrymen in the land.

PURPOSE: To encourage Israel to trust in God who faithfully preserved them in Persia despite their unfaithfulness.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE SURROUNDING THE STORY OF ESTHER

605-586BC Judah exiled to Babylon in 3 waves by King Nebuchadnezzar who also destroyed the temple (2 Chron. 36:17-21)

539BC King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian King and took over his vast empire (Dan. 5:30-31)

538BC King Cyrus issued a decree that the Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home (2 Chron. 36:22, Ezra 1:1)

537BC 1st group of 49,897 exiles (Ezra 2:64-65) returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 1-6) led by Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Jeshua

536-515BC Jerusalem's temple rebuilt under the exhortation and encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1)

485-465BC Events in the book of Esther took place in Persia during their brief period of world domination (539-331BC).

- King Ahasuerus (more popularly known as Xerxes I) reigned from 485-465BC until he was assassinated by his bodyguard
- At this time, many Jews had returned to the land according to the prophet's command (Is. 48:20, 52:11; Jer. 50:8, 51:6; Zech. 2:6-7) but many more chose to not obey the prophetic command and remain in Persia, including Mordecai and Esther.

458BC Ezra led a 2nd smaller wave of a few thousand Jewish exiles out of Babylon and back to Jerusalem (Ezra 7-10).

446/444BC Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem with a 3rd group of exiles (Neh. 2:11), rebuilt the wall (6:15), sees revival (7-12)

433BC Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to continue the work for Artaxerxes I (Neh 13:6)

Feast of Purim is celebrated annually on the 14th day of Adar (Feb/Mar) (9:28). The word *Purim* is taken from the Persian word pur which means “lot.” It recalls Haman's casting of lots while developing his plot to annihilate the Jews.

KEY TERMS / PHRASES: These terms are repeated in Esther and are important in understanding the book.

- “**edict / law**” [x15] edicts of Persian kings were binding and could be amended but not cancelled (1:19; Dan. 6:12).
- “**Jew**” [x52] the Jewish people who remained in the land of Persia are persecuted by Haman and protected by God.
- “**feast**” [x19] feasts celebrate and commemorate events or people. Esther concludes w/ the institution of the feast of Purim
- “**enemies**” [x10] Israel’s enemies appear ready to “**destroy**” [x11] them yet in the end the Jews “**destroy**” their enemies
- “**favor...grace**” [x8] [תִּשְׁבַּח, *hesed*, חַן *hen*] God’s steadfast covenant faithfulness comes to His people through a pagan king
- “**God**” [x0] though God’s sovereign hand is unmistakably present throughout the book, He is never explicitly referenced

OUTLINE OF ESTHER: REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

(1:1-22) Wicked King

(2:1-23) New Queen

(3:1-15) Exalted Villain

(4:1-5:8) Unsuspecting Hero

(5:9-7:10) Poetic Justice

(8:1-10:3) Glorious Reversal

OUTLINE OF ESTHER: REVERSAL OF FORTUNE¹

The splendor of the Ahasuerus and two banquets (1:1-9)

Esther becomes Queen; Mordecai saves the king (1:10-2:23)

Haman exalted to power (3:1-6)

Haman decrees destruction of the Jewish people (3:7-15)

Mordecai and Esther’s plan to reverse the decree (4:1-17)

Esther’s 1st banquet; Haman plans Mordecai’s execution (5:1-14)

Haman humiliated and Mordecai exalted (6:1-13)

Esther’s 2nd banquet; Haman executed rather than Mordecai (6:14-7:10)

Mordecai and Esther’s plan to reverse the decree (8:1-8)

Mordecai decrees destruction of the Jew’s enemies (8:9-14)

Mordecai exalted to power (8:15-17)

Queen Esther and Mordecai save the Jewish people (9:1-19)

Two feasts and the splendor of Mordecai (9:20-10:3)

¹ This chiasm is adapted from the *Esther: Secular or Sacred* by Tim Mackie and Whitney Woolard of The Bible Project, July 23, 2017