

# Esther - Introduction & Background

## Title

The title of the book is derived from the work's central character. Esther's Hebrew name is *Hadassah* (2:7), which means "myrtle." Her Persian name *Ester* is derived from the Persian word for "star" (*stara*). The LXX entitles the book *Ester* and *Hester* is the book's Latin title. The Book of Esther is one of the five books that the Jews called the *Megilloth* or "Rolls." The other four books are Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. These books were read at Israel's various feasts. The Book of Esther was read at the Feast of *Purim*.

## Authorship

The Book of Esther is an anonymous work. The writer obviously lived in Persia due to his familiarity with Persian culture. For example, he knew about the seven royal advisers "who saw the king's face" (1:14; 4:11), the well organized postal system (1:22; 3:13; 8:10; 9:20,30), the court practices of showing respect for high officials (3:2) the recording and rewarding of the king's benefactors (2:23; 6:8), the king's signet ring (8:8), Persia's irrevocable royal decrees (1:19), the observance of "lucky" days (3:7), the king's horse with a royal crowns (6:8), the practice of eating while reclining on couches (7:8), and the fact that Persian kings did everything on a grand scale (six month banquets, displaying wealth, offering one half of the kingdom, etc...). In addition to living in Persia, the writer was obviously Jewish since his book emphasizes Jewish nationalism and a familiarity with Jewish customs such as the Feast of *Purim*. Because the writer demonstrates a familiarity with the book's various characters, his work seems to be narrated from the perspective of an eyewitness.

Given these criteria, several possibilities for the author of the Book of Esther have been suggested. Josephus suggested that the book was written by Mordecai on the basis of his propensity to keep records (9:20). However, "the way in which Mordecai is referred to in 10:2-3 suggests that his career was already finished." Also, the theory that Mordecai wrote the book is strained due to the fact that he is continually praised throughout the book (6:11; 8:2,15; 9:4; 10:3). Why would someone of Mordecai's humility routinely praise himself?

Others have attributed the work to either Ezra or Nehemiah. While these men ministered in the same post-exilic era when the events of the Book of Esther transpired, there are simply too many vocabulary and stylistic differences between the Book of Esther and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Archer observes that neither the linguistic, style, nor diction similarities can link Esther with these other works. Others have suggested that a younger contemporary of Mordecai composed the book. The Talmud suggested that the men of the

Great synagogue authored the work (*Baba Bathra* 15a). Until more information is forthcoming, it is difficult to dogmatically assert exactly who the book's writer is. However, it is clear that the book's author took advantage of numerous sources. Harrison observes, "His sources included some of the writings of Mordecai (9:20), the Books of the Chronicles of the Median and Persian kings (2:23; 6:1; 10:2), and most probably certain familiar oral traditions, but none of the foregoing furnishes any clue as to his identity." Also, the book's unified theme and chiastic arrangement argue for unified authorship as opposed to multiple authors of different eras.

### **Scope**

The Book of Esther begins in the third year of Ahasuerus or Ahasuerus (1:3), which took place in 483 BC. Esther became queen in Ahasuerus' seventh year (2:16), which was in 479 BC. Haman's plot to eradicate the Jews was to be fulfilled in Ahasuerus' twelfth year (3:7), which was in 473 BC. Thus, Constable sums up as follows. "The king held this planning session in the midwinter of 483-482 BC. The last recorded event in Esther is the institution of the Feast of *Purim* that took place in 473 BC. Therefore, the events recorded in the book spanned a period of about 10 years." Thus, the book's events transpired in between the sixth and seventh chapters of the Book of Ezra or in between Israel's first two returns to the land after the exile.

Constable sums up the many events that took place during the scope of the Book of Esther:

- 483: Ahasuerus' military planning session in Susa
- 482: The deposition of Queen Vashti
- 481: The beginning of Ahasuerus' unsuccessful expedition against Greece
- 480: Esther's arrival at Susa for the 'Persia Beauty Pageant' Contest
- 479: Ahasuerus return to Susa: Esther's coronation as the Persian Queen
- 478-75: No Record for these four years
- 474: The issuing of Ahasuerus' decree to exterminate the Jews
- 473: The Jews defense of themselves: the Establishment of the annual feast

### **Date**

Although the events of the book (483–473 BC) transpired during the reign of Ahasuerus (486–465 BC), it is likely that the book was written after the Ahasuerus administration had ended. First, the book indicates that the Feast of *Purim* that was established during his reign had already been in practice for some time (9:28,32). Second, the writer seems to speak of both Ahasuerus (1:1) and his administration (10:2-3) in the past tense. However, the book could not have been written later than 400 BC due to its historical and linguistic characteristics as well as the absence of any Greek influence. "The Hebrew of the book is in line with that of sixth- or fifth-century works such as Ezra-Nehemiah; the use of Persian words is certainly to be expected in a work whose setting is in Persia; and the Festival of

*Purim*, though not popularly celebrated until the Hasmonean times (in the 2nd century BC), is dated in the Persian period." In sum, while the book was not written during the reign of Ahasuerus, there is no reason to assign a date long after its events transpired. Thus, a date of composition of 465–424 BC during the reign of ArtAhasuerus I seems appropriate.

### **Recipients and Place of Writing**

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah both conclude with the returnees struggling to keep God's covenant and rebuild their nation in the challenging post-exilic era. Thus, the events of the Book of Esther were likely recorded for the benefit of these returnees to encourage them in this endeavor with a message reminding them of God's faithfulness. Thus, Martin observes:

More likely, however, is the view that the author lived in Palestine and wrote this account of events transpiring in the Persian Empire for the benefit of his fellow returnees to the land. It is unlikely that the book was written for Persian readers. No doubt it was composed to encourage Israelites that God was working on their behalf, even through some of the people who had refused to come back to the land.

At the time of the writing of the book... the Jews in Palestine were going through difficult times in their struggle to rebuild their nation and to reestablish temple worship.... The Book of Esther, then, would have been a great encouragement to these struggling Jews. It would have helped realize that the surrounding peoples which seemed so awesome could never conquer the unique people of God. Israel was protected by God even though a large number of them were outside the land. The Book of Esther would encourage them to worship the God of Israel, though He is not even mentioned by name in it.

Thus, the Book of Esther was likely written in the land of Israel for the benefit of these struggling returnees.

### **Structure**

The book has two main parts. First, it records the threat or the risk to the Jews (1–5). This section can be further divided into Esther's ascension to the throne (1:1–2:20) and Haman's plot to destroy the Jews (2:21–5:14). This section features Ahasuerus' four banquets (1:3,5-8,9; 2:18). Second, the book records the deliverance or rescue of the Jews (6–10). This section can be further divided into Mordecai's triumph over Haman (6:1–8:3) and Israel's triumph over her enemies (8:4–10:3). This section features Esther's two banquets (5; 7) and the Feast of *Purim* (9).

Another structural observation made by many is the book's chiastic organization:

- A. Prelude: introductory information (1)
- B. Ahasuerus' decree to eradicate the Jews (2–3)
- C. Haman seeks to gain victory over Mordecai (4–5)
- D. Ahasuerus' insomnia (6:1)

- C. Mordecai's victory over Haman (6–7)
- B. Ahasuerus' decree to rescue the Jews (8–9)
- A. Epilogue: Mordecai's ascension (10)

## **Historical Background**

The Book of Esther transpires during the reign of Khshayarsh (Persian name) or Ahasuerus (Greek Name) or Ahasuerus (Hebrew name) of Persia (486–465 BC) in the citadel of Susa (1:1–2). In 490 BC at the battle of Marathon, Ahasuerus sought to conquer the Greeks in order to avenge the previous defeat of his father Darius I (521–486 BC). In the year of his first banquet (1:3) in 483 BC, he assembled an army of 180,000 as well as a fleet of ships. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, Ahasuerus used the occasion of this banquet to plot his military aggression against Greece. Later at Thermopylae, Greece, Ahasuerus won a decisive victory. He also burned Athens.

However, his fleet was defeated at Salamis in 480 BC. Shortly thereafter, he also suffered defeat at the Battle of Plataea. These battles at Salamis and Plataea transpired in between the first two chapters of the Book of Esther. These defeats correspond with the events of chapter 2, which explain that the king held a beauty pageant and named Esther as his queen. Interestingly, Herodotus reveals that Ahasuerus' defeat at Salamis caused him to seek consolation in his harem.

Ahasuerus was known as a "man of emotional extremes." Such self-contradiction offers an explanation as to why he issued a decree to exterminate the Jews (3) and then later reversed himself by issuing a second decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their Persian aggressors (8). Also, the setting of the book revolves around the many Jews who did not return with Zerubbabel in the first return (Ezra 1–6). While many remained in Persia for legitimate reasons, most stayed because of disobedience.

Apparently, the luxury of Persia was far more preferable in comparison to undertaking the arduous return to Jerusalem.

## **Canonicity**

Several arguments have been used throughout the history of Judaism as well as early Christianity to contend that the Book of Esther should not be included in the canon. However, most of these arguments seem answerable. First, the book fails to mention God. However, God's providence is replete throughout the book, God's name may have been intentionally omitted for the purpose of emphasizing His obvious "behind the scenes" activity, Esther's fasting and faith in God are alluded to throughout the book (4:3,16; 9:3), God is possibly referred to when Mordecai speaks of help arising "from another place" (4:14), the names *Jehovah* (1:20; 5:4,13; 7:7) and *Eheyeh* (7:5) may be hidden acrostically at various places in the book, "the book was written in Persia and would be censored or profaned by substitution of a pagan god's name," and "the general disobedience of the

Jews in preferring the comfort of Persia to the hardships of rebuilding their homeland may be another factor" in the omission of God's name.

Second, others claim that the ethical content of the main characters is simply too abased for the book to be a canonical work. For example, much is made of how Esther hid her Jewish identity. However, while Esther did conceal her Jewish heritage (2:10,20), she did reveal it at the appropriate time (7:3-4). Mordecai's advice to Esther to conceal her identity was actually borne out of a desire to protect her from prevalent Persian anti-Semitic attitudes and actions so that she could fulfill her mission. Other factors buttressing the character of Esther and Mordecai are the following: Mordecai and Esther possessed a deeper faith than what is revealed in a surface reading of the book (4:16), Nehemiah also failed to mention God's name when speaking to Artahasuerus (Neh 2:1-8), and it is likely that much of the positive spirituality of Mordecai and Esther has been omitted from the book given its brevity. Moreover, while it is true that the book records the Jews killing many people, they were merely acting in self-defense (8:11) by only attacking their attackers (9:6,15-16). Furthermore, the book even depicts how the Jews exercised self-restraint in this endeavor by not plundering their attackers (9:10,15-16).

Third, it is argued that the book's alleged historical errors disqualify it from being a part of the canon. While it is true that secular history does not mention Ahasuerus' queens (Vashti or Esther), Herodotus also fails to mention Belshazzar (Dan 5). Moreover, Herodotus appears to support the historicity of the Book of Esther when he observes "that Ahasuerus sought consolation in his harem after his defeat at Salamis" (2:16). Also, it is true that 2:5-6 appears to indicate that Mordecai was deported in 597 BC and yet still alive during Ahasuerus reign. However, the nearest antecedent of "who" (2:6) is Mordecai's grandfather Kish rather than Mordecai. Thus, it was actually Kish rather than Mordecai who had been deported in 597 BC. Furthermore, while the slaying of the 75,000 Jewish enemies in a single day (9:16-17) seems incredulous at first glance, their Persian helpers (9:3-4) were known for their callous disregard of human life and the Jews had already been armed before these events took place (8:13).

Fourth, others argue against canonicity since the Book of Esther is never quoted or even alluded to in the pages of the NT. However, neither are many other books (Nahum; Obadiah, Cant) whose canonicity has ever been suspect. Fifth, some have mounted the argument that the Book of Esther should never have been canonized since it is not found in the Qumran material. However, because God's name and laws are absent from the book, perhaps the separatist Qumran group did not deem the book worthy of study. Sixth, those opposing canonicity also argue that God's laws are absent from the book. However, these laws could have been omitted simply because the Persian Jews were disobedient to God and Jewish ritual had been lost in the exile.

## **Message**

The Book of Esther describes God's sovereign and providential work in protecting from eradication His disobedient people living outside the land and respectively blessing and cursing the friends and enemies of the nation in order to reveal His unconditional commitment to the Abrahamic Covenant thereby furnishing the basis for the Feast of *Purim*.

### **Purposes**

The writer composed the book in order to accomplish several purposes. First, the book was written in order to reveal God's faithfulness to His people despite their disobedience. Second, the book was written to encourage the Jews struggling to rebuild their nation in the post-exilic era by revealing to them God's unconditional commitment to the Abrahamic Covenant. Third, the book was written to provide a general record of God's preservation of His people living outside the land during the post-exilic era. Fourth, the book was written in order to provide an explanation for the Feast of *Purim* (3:7; 9:24,26; 2 Macc 15:36). Such an explanation was needed since *Torah* nowhere mandated this feast (Lev 23). Fifth, the book was written not only to explain the origin of this feast but also to encourage the Jews to regularly celebrate it. Sixth, the book was written to serve as a warning against anti-Semitism.

### **Theological Themes**

Numerous theological themes recur throughout the Book of Esther. First, the book emphasizes God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant (6:13) despite the disobedience of His people. The Jewish race cannot be eradicated and therefore will perpetually endure (Jer 31:35-37). Second, the book emphasizes God's sovereign and providential "behind the scenes" work in order to accomplish His covenant purposes. Third, the book contributes to the theme of God's desire for all to be saved (Gen 12:3) through the work's mention of Gentile salvation (8:17).

### **Christ in Esther**

Although the work contains no direct messianic prophecies, Christ is apparent in the Book of Esther in at least two ways. First, Esther's life typifies Christ as she risks her own life for the benefit of her people and becomes an advocate on her people's behalf. Second, the book reveals Satan's policy of preempting the birth of Messiah by attempting to destroy the nation through which He would be born (Rev 12:4). Ahasuerus' decree to eradicate the Jews would not have only affected those Jews living in Persia but the returnees as well. However, the Book of Esther records how the nation was rescued thus paving the way for the coming of the Messiah. Thus, because the temple was built as recorded in the Book of Ezra and the wall was rebuilt as recorded in the Book of Nehemiah and the race was delivered as recorded in the Book of Esther, the post-exilic stage was now set for the coming of the Jewish Messiah.

### **Unique Characteristics**

The Book of Esther boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the book (along with Canticles) neglects to mention God's name. Second, references to prayer, the Law, offerings, or the miraculous are similarly omitted from the book. Third, the book stresses God's sovereignty through its recitation of numerous "chance" events orchestrated by the Creator.

Fourth, the book contains 18 unexpected reversals. Thus, the book is far more dramatic than other biblical books as is apparent through its numerous plot twists and turns. Fifth, the book features numerous mundane events that God strategically used to bring about His covenant purposes. Sixth, the work is one of two biblical books named after a woman. Seventh, the work is the only book in the entire Bible that furnishes a record of the majority of the Jews that chose to remain in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem. Eighth, the book features six banquets (1:3,5-8,9; 2:18; 5; 7) and seven decrees (1:19; 1:21-22; 3:8-15; 8:3-17; 9:11-14; 9:20-28,29-32). Ninth, the book is one of the few that is never quoted or alluded to in the OT. Tenth, the Persian king is mentioned 187x. Eleventh, "Jews" is found 43x and "Jew" is found 8x.

## **Outline**

### I. Threat to the Jews (Esther 1:1—5:14)

#### (1) King Ahasuerus disposes Queen Vashti (1:1-22)

##### (A) Background of Ahasuerus (1:1-2)

- (a) From India to Cush as the extent of his reign (1:1)
- (b) Susa as his palace (1:2)

##### (B) Banquets of Ahasuerus and Vashti (1:3-9)

- (a) Ahasuerus' 180 day-banquet in 483 BC (1:3)
- (b) Ahasuerus reveals his wealth (1:4)
- (c) Ahasuerus' seven-day banquet (1:5-8)
- (d) Vashti's banquet entertaining the palace women (1:9)

##### (C) Vashti's refusal to obey the Ahasuerus' command to appear at the conclusion of the banquet (1:10-12a)

##### (D) Ahasuerus' response (1:12b-22)

- (a) Anger (1:12b)
- (b) Consultation with advisers (1:13-15)
- (c) Memucan's advice (1:16-20)
  - (i) Diagnosis of problem: sets the pattern for all Persian wives to rebel against their husbands (1:16-18)
  - (ii) Recommendation to remove Vashti and select another Queen in her place (1:19-20)
- (d) Ahasuerus' edict following Memucan's advice (1:21-22)

#### (2) Esther's elevation as the new queen (2:1-20)

- (A) Beauty pageant among the beautiful Persian virgins (2:1-4)
- (B) Esther taken into the King's harem (2:5-11)
  - (a) Esther's Jewish uncle Mordecai (2:5-7a)
  - (b) Esther's beauty (2:7b)
  - (c) Hegai's favor toward Esther (2:8-9)
  - (d) Esther's secrecy regarding her Jewish nationality (2:10)
  - (e) Mordecai's concern for Esther (2:11)
- (C) Ahasuerus selects Esther as Vashti's replacement (2:12-20)
  - (a) The procedure (2:12-14)
    - (i) Beautification (2:12)
    - (ii) Spending the night with Ahasuerus (2:13-14)
  - (b) Esther spends the night with Ahasuerus (2:15-16)
  - (c) Ahasuerus selects Esther as his Queen to replace Vashti (2:17)
  - (d) Ahasuerus' banquet honoring his new queen Esther (2:18)
  - (e) Esther's secrecy regarding her Jewish heritage (2:19-20)
- (3) Mordecai foils a plot to assassinate Ahasuerus (2:21-23)
  - (A) Conspiracy to assassinate Ahasuerus (2:21)
  - (B) Mordecai discovers the conspiracy and reports it to Esther who in turn reports it to Ahasuerus (2:22)
  - (C) Hanging of the conspirators (2:23)
- (4) Haman's plan to eradicate the Jews (3:1-15)
  - (A) Ahasuerus promotes Haman (3:1)
  - (B) Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman (3:2-4)
  - (C) Haman's rage culminating in his ambition to eradicate the Jews (3:5-6)
  - (D) Haman's specific plan to eradicate the Jews (3:7-15)
    - (a) Lot determines date of eradication (3:7)
    - (b) Haman petitions Ahasuerus to issue the decree calling for the eradication of the Jews (3:8-9)
    - (c) Ahasuerus calls for the decree mandating the eradication of the Jews (3:10-11)
    - (d) Ahasuerus' scribes pen the decree (3:12)
    - (e) Decree disseminated throughout the empire (3:13-15a)
    - (f) Confusion created by the decree (3:15b)
- (5) Mordecai influences Esther to agree to intervene on behalf of the Jews (4:1-17)
  - (A) Esther and the Jews mourned upon receiving the word of the decree (4:1-3)
  - (B) Esther through Hatach contacts Mordecai (4:4-6)
  - (C) Mordecai petitions Esther (4:7-14)
    - (a) Mordecai informs Esther concerning the decree (4:7-8a)

- (b) Mordecai appeals to Esther to appeal to Ahasuerus to halt Haman's plot (4:8b)
- (c) Esther's reticence due to her concern regarding her own life (4:9-11)
- (d) Mordecai explains that Esther's death is inevitable and that God had allowed her to become queen to save the Jews (4:12-14)
- (D) Esther opts to appeal to Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jews (4:15-17)
- (6) Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to her banquets (5:1-8)
  - (A) Esther appears before Ahasuerus (5:1-4)
    - (a) Ahasuerus asks what is troubling Esther (5:1-3)
    - (b) Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to her banquet (5:4)
  - (B) Esther's banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman (5:5-8)
    - (a) Ahasuerus asks Esther to state her request (5:5-6)
    - (b) Esther asks Ahasuerus and Haman to attend another banquet the next day (5:7-8)
- (7) Haman's strategy to murder Mordecai (5:9-14)
  - (A) Mordecai's continued disrespect for Haman and Haman's subsequent anger (5:9-10)
  - (B) Haman's arrogance (5:11-12)
  - (C) Haman's hatred for Mordecai (5:13)
  - (D) Haman's wife advises Haman to build a gallows for the purpose of hanging Mordecai (5:14)

## II. Deliverance of the Jews (Esther 6:1—10:3)

- (1) Haman forced to honor Mordecai (Esther 6:1-14)
  - (A) Ahasuerus becomes aware of how Mordecai thwarted the earlier assassination attempt (6:1-3)
    - (a) Ahasuerus' sleeplessness (6:1a)
    - (b) Ahasuerus discovers Mordecai's good deed upon reading the archives (6:1b-3)
  - (B) Ahasuerus compels Haman to honor Mordecai (6:4-14)
    - (a) Ahasuerus asks Haman how a man should be honored (6:4-6)
    - (b) Thinking he would be the recipient Haman suggests a lavish reward (6:7-9)
    - (c) Ahasuerus commands Haman to bestow this reward upon Mordecai (6:10)
    - (d) Haman honors Mordecai (6:11)
    - (e) Haman expresses his grief before his family and friends and his wife predicts his demise (6:12-13)
    - (f) Haman is invited to Esther's second banquet (6:14)
- (2) Ahasuerus hangs Haman (Esther 7:1-10)

- (A) Ahasuerus asks Esther to state her request (7:1-2)
- (B) Esther reveals Haman's plot to eradicate the Jews (7:3-6)
- (C) Ahasuerus' anger (7:7-8)
- (D) The hanging of Haman on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai (7:9-10)

(3) Ahasuerus' edict protecting the Jews (Esther 8:1-17)

- (A) Ahasuerus gives Esther Haman's house (8:1)
- (B) Esther sets Mordecai over Haman's house (8:2)
- (C) Ahasuerus issues a decree protecting the Jews (8:3-17)
  - (a) Esther petitions Ahasuerus for the decree (8:3-6)
  - (b) Ahasuerus authorizes the decree (8:7-8)
  - (c) Ahasuerus' scribes compose the decree (8:9)
  - (d) Decree disseminated throughout the kingdom (8:10-14)
  - (e) Rejoicing (8:15-17)
    - (i) Among those in Susa (8:15)
    - (ii) Among the Jews (8:16-17)

(4) Destruction of the Jews' enemies (Esther 9:1-19)

- (A) Jews feared (9:1-2)
- (B) Jews helped by Persia's leaders (9:3-4)
- (C) Jews kill 500 people in Susa (9:5-6)
- (D) Jewish victory over Haman's sons (9:7-14)
  - (a) Killing of Haman's sons (9:7-10)
  - (b) Ahasuerus' inquiry to Esther regarding what should be done with the corpses of Haman's sons (9:11-12)
  - (c) Esther's response: Haman's sons should be hanged (9:13)
  - (d) Ahasuerus hangs Haman's sons (9:14)
- (E) Further Jewish victories (9:15-17)
  - (a) Susa: 300 killed (9:15)
  - (b) Other provinces: 75,000 killed (9:16-17)

(5) Establishment of the Feast of Purim (9:18-32)

- (A) Jews celebrate their victory on the 14th and 15th days of Adar (9:18-19)
- (B) These days of celebration (14th and 15th days of Adar) become annually mandatory for the Jews (9:20-28)
  - (a) Decree disseminated to the Jews throughout the kingdom (9:20-22)
  - (b) Jews agree to celebrate the feast (9:23)
  - (c) Victory over Haman as the reason for the celebration (9:24-25)
  - (d) Celebration named Purim after Pur (9:26a)
  - (e) Feast to be celebrated annually (9:26b-28)

- (C) Feast confirmed through Esther's decree (9:29-32)
- (6) Mordecai's elevation(10:1-3)
  - (A) Powerful Ahasuerus makes Mordecai's second-in-command on account of the latter's greatness as recorded in the Book of Chronicles (10:1-3a)
  - (B) Mordecai is respected among the Jews for his ongoing work on their behalf (10:3b)