

Book of Esther Explained

“Title”

Esther serves as the title without variation through the ages.

This book and the Book of Ruth are the only Old Testament books named after women.

Like Song of Solomon, Obadiah, and Nahum, the New Testament does not quote or allude to Esther.

“Hadassah” (2:7), meaning “myrtle,” was the Hebrew name of Esther, which came either from the Persian word “star” or possibly from the name of the Babylonian love goddess, Ishtar.

As the orphaned daughter of her father Abihail, Esther grew up in Persia with her older cousin, Mordecai, who raised her as if she were his own daughter (2:7, 15).

“Authorship”

The book gives no hint of who wrote it, but whoever it was knew the Persian culture well.

The account has all the marks of a person who was there because he described the events as an eyewitness.

And he was probably a Jew.

Esther is another of the relatively rare instances where there is general agreement on the anonymity of the writing.

The author of the Book of Esther is unnamed, but given the details concerning both royal court life and the Jewish people and their customs, it must have been written by a well-placed Jew in Persia.

Probably not long after the events themselves took place.

Many ancient, and even some more recent, commentators, have attributed the book to Mordecai on the basis of 9:20 and perhaps also 9:32.

While this is not impossible, the most one could safely infer from these verses would be that Mordecai’s writings and royal records were among the unknown author’s sources (compare 10:2).

Some have suggested that Ezra or Nehemiah wrote the account, but no specific evidence supports that view.

There is no good linguistic evidence in favor of such a stance, judging from the style or diction of Esther, Ezra, or Nehemiah.

The book as it stands could have been written sometime after 465 B.C. since (Esther 1:2), seems to imply that Xerxes' reign is finished.

There is no need to suppose that a well-known person was the author.

“Historical Setting”

The events of the book cover a 10-year portion (483-473 B.C.) of the reign of Xerxes I (486 – 465 B.C.).

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of his name, equivalent to the Persian Khshayarsha and the Greek Xerxes.

The events occurred between those recorded in the sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra.

Even though the name of God is nowhere mentioned in the book, His sovereignty and providence are evident throughout.

Vashti's dismissal, Esther's regal position, Xerxes' indebtedness to Mordecai discovered during a sleepless night, and the miraculous deliverance of the Jews all demonstrate God's control and care for His people (Psalm 121:4).

The book also explains the origin of the Feast of Purim (2 Maccabees 15:36), on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar (Feb. / Mar.), when Jews celebrate the deliverance from Haman.

A third theme is evident, that of anti-Semitism.

When fully developed, animosity toward Jews results in genocide: the attempt to exterminate a race.

This satanic scheme is probably much older than the time of Haman.

In Moses' day, Pharaoh attempted to exterminate the Hebrew slaves.

The Jewish tribes of Benjamin and Judah had been conquered and taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.

Several decades later, the Medo-Persian Empire overwhelmed Babylon and inherited the Jewish captives who had assimilated into their Babylonian (now Persian), homeland.

The Persian king allowed a large contingent of Jews to return to Jerusalem but many stayed in Persia.

So it was that a Jewish man named Mordecai had worked his way into a low-level job in the king's court.

This life-and-death drama begins when an egomaniacal, high-ranking official in the royal court hatches a plan to exterminate the Jews.

This official, Haman, is upset because Mordecai has failed to show him the subservience he demands.

The events that unfold from this perceived insult are the stuff of great storytelling, and in this case, marvelous truth-telling about key events in Jewish history.

There are political maneuverings, death threats, shocking plot twists, and a beauty contest of sorts that places Mordecai's young cousin, Esther, exactly where she needs to be at a crucial time for her people.

Her story affirms that God is always present and active in the affairs of human history, even when He seems hidden.

Only God could raise Esther, this female Jewish exile, to a position of unusual authority in a culture that valued neither women nor Jews.

What an unlikely conveyor of God's salvation for His people!

And what a visual foreshadowing of the salvation that would be offered to all through the unlikely vessel of a child born in a cattle stall.

Serving a God who oversees the universe and "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11) does not give Christians a reason to sit idle.

Mordecai and Esther exercised courage, took risks, employed wisdom, and were thoroughly engaged in the events of their day.

Refusing to remain paralyzed by fear or lulled to sleep by indifference, they seized the opportunities that God provided them.

Their responsiveness enabled them to be in the right place at the providential time, so that God's will could be accomplished for them and for the Jewish people.

“Background – Setting”

Esther occurred during the Persian period of world history, ca 539 B.C. (Dan. 5:30-31), to ca. 331 B.C. (Dan. 8:1-27).

Ahasuerus ruled from ca. 486 to 465 B.C.; Esther covers the 483-473 B.C. portion of his reign.

The events of Esther occurred during the wider time span between the first return of the Jews after the 70 years captivity in Babylon (Dan. 9:1-19), under Zerubbabel ca. 538 B.C. (Ezra chapters 1 - 6) and the second return led by Ezra ca 458 B.C. (Ezra chapters 7 - 10).

Nehemiah's journey (the third return), from Susa to Jerusalem (Neh. Chapters 1 - 2), occurred later (ca. 445 B.C.).

Esther and Exodus both chronicle how vigorously foreign powers tried to eliminate the Jewish race and how God sovereignly preserved His people in accordance with His covenant promise to Abraham (ca. 2100-2075 B.C.; Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-8).

As a result of God's prevailing, Esther (chapters 9 and 10), records the beginning of Purim, a new annual festival in the 12th month (Feb. / Mar.), to celebrate the nation's survival.

Purim became one of two festivals given outside of the Mosaic legislation to still be celebrated in Israel (Hanukkah), or the Festival of Lights is the other (compare John 10:22).

The book of Esther relates an amazing chain of events that first threatened, and then safeguarded and established, the welfare of God's people in the mighty Persian Empire.

It is at once a sweeping story of geopolitical intrigue and a highly personal account of two people caught up in those events.

The faith and courage of young Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai blends with the providential working of God behind the scenes to protect His people, creating a fast-paced narrative about a less familiar period of biblical history.

Yet commentators through the years have noted one significant irony: the book of the Bible that most clearly demonstrates God's providence in the lives of individuals and nations never mentions Him by name.

Providence speaks of “prearrangement.”

In a biblical context, divine providence refers to a sovereign God orchestrating the affairs of humanity by direct and indirect intervention and arrangement.

Although the hand of heaven is hidden throughout the Book of Esther, the way that people and affairs align to ensure the preservation of God's people is not coincidence.

The unlikely event of a modest, young Jewess being appointed queen of the most powerful nation on earth for “such a time” (4:14), and purpose as Esther was, is a grand example of divine providence in action.

The story of Esther teaches us that God purposely guides His people’s steps even when we are not aware of it, even when things don’t make sense.

But God has a purpose in what He does in the lives of those He loves.

Every thread woven into the fabric of the Christian life is part of the ultimate tapestry that someday they will view in glory.

Even with God ordering a person’s steps, that individual is still responsible to walk through the LORD’s open doors (Prov. 16:9).

Every time Mordecai and Esther had the opportunity to be promoted” or do the next right thing, they stepped forward in faith without regard for their own safety or reputation.

Esther presents a balanced view of the interaction between the will of God and the responsibility of individuals.

So significant is the story of Esther to Jews that the book is read every year at the Jewish celebration of the festival called Purim.

Hebrew Purim is the plural form of Pur, a word for lots – painted or carved stones or pieces of wood with markings (like our dice today), though not used for gambling.

Lots were tossed, or “cast,” as a decision-making tool, and in Esther, the Purim were cast to determine the day the Jews in Persia would be killed (3:7; 9:26).

That never happened because Haman’s diabolical scheme was discovered by Mordecai, who relayed the details to his young cousin, Persia’s new queen.

Because events unfolded as they did, Haman’s ploy was foiled, and he was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for executing Mordecai; the king issued a decree that would protect the Jews from harm; and a great celebration was held throughout the vast Persian Empire “from India to Ethiopia” (8:9).

In fact, “many of the people of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews fell upon them” (8:17).

And the Jews have celebrated their great deliverance ever since at the annual feast of Purim.

Yes, God is in control, but there are still kingdom victories to be won.

And He intends to use our active steps of faith to accomplish those plans.

The book of Esther is a remarkably different biblical book because;

1. Neither the word for God nor the name Yahweh (LORD), occurs in the Hebrew text;
2. The scene is Shushan (Susa), the winter capital of Persia, not Israel;
3. The book concerns the marriage of its Jewish heroine with a Gentile king; and
4. It solves the problem of an incipient anti-Semitism by a bloody self-defense, which is even repeated on the following day by Esther's request!