



## An Introduction to the Book of Esther

### Author and Title

Like many OT books, Esther is an anonymous work. The only hints of its origin are the references it contains to some of the key events of the story being committed to writing in either official court records (2:23 and 6:1), or edicts issued by the king or his representatives (3:12-15 and 8:8-14). It is possible that the author was someone like Mordecai, who had access to such material and a keen interest in Jewish affairs. His familiarity with Persian customs of the time suggests that he lived not long after the events described.

However, certain features of the book have troubled both Jewish and Christian readers: it does not mention God, it promotes a festival not prescribed in the Law of Moses, and it has an apparently vindictive spirit that some have found offensive.

As late as the Reformation, Martin Luther criticised it on the grounds that it was too aggressively Jewish and had no Gospel content. Nevertheless, it was recognised as Scripture by the Jews well before the time of Christ, a long tradition clearly evident in Jewish writings just after the NT. For example, Josephus says that the Jewish Scriptures were written from the time of Moses until Artaxerxes (Against Apion 1.40-41), and elsewhere he identifies this Artaxerxes as 'Ahasuerus' in the Book of Esther (Jewish Antiquities 11.184). Therefore he apparently counts Esther as the last book to be written in the Jewish canon. And the Mishnah has an entire tractate, i.e. Megillah, which discusses the time and manner of reading Esther publicly on the Feast of Purim. The Jewish scholar Aquila included Esther in his translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek around AD30. In the Christian church, Esther was listed among the books of the OT canon at the Council of Carthage in AD397, but it was widely and perhaps universally accepted in the Western church before that time, although doubts about its canonicity had persisted among some in the Eastern church.

## Date

Since the Book of Esther is anonymous, it cannot be dated by the years of its author. However, it matches well the time period in which it is set, i.e. the reign of Ahasuerus (486-464BC); hence it is probably from this time or soon thereafter.

## Theme

The Book of Esther tells how a Jewish girl became the queen of Persia and saved her people from a plot to destroy them. She is assisted in this by Mordecai, her cousin and guardian. It also explains how a special festival, called Purim, was established to recall and celebrate the deliverance that the Jews had experienced.

## Purpose

As its content makes clear, Esther was written to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim and to ensure that it would be observed by all future generations of the Jewish people (9:28). It is also clear that it has achieved this purpose, since Jews have continued to observe Purim to the present day, with the Book of Esther being read as part of the festivities.

The word Purim is derived from the Persian word *pur* meaning 'lot', and recalls how Haman, the enemy of the Jews, cast lots to determine the best day to carry out his plan to exterminate them (3:7). Of all the Jewish festivals, Purim is the most secular in flavour, and one of the most joyful. These days it is normally celebrated on only one day, the fourteenth of Adar in February/March time, preceded by a day of fasting. Children are given *gragers*, i.e. rattles, so that, when the story of Esther is read, they can make a loud noise to drown out the name of the wicked Haman whenever it occurs. Other festivities include exchanging presents, giving food parcels to the poor, performing Purim plays, and wearing costumes. In Israel, a Purim carnival is held. It has become a celebration, not just of the deliverance experienced in the days of Esther and Mordecai, but of the amazing survival of the Jewish people for thousands of years in spite of persecution and hardship.

In terms of biblical history, Esther belongs to the period after the Babylonian exile, when Persia had replaced Babylon as the ruling power. The story is set in Susa, the Persian capital, during the reign of King Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes I (486-464BC). Some Jews had returned to Jerusalem, where they enjoyed a reasonable amount of control over their own affairs as described in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Others, like Esther and Mordecai, were still in exile. As a minority group, the Jews were viewed with suspicion and sometimes faced threats to their existence from people in a position to harm them. In this respect Esther and Mordecai's situation was similar to that of Daniel and his friends a century or so earlier.

Apart from the Book of Esther itself, the main sources of information about Persia in the relevant period are the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus (circa 485-425BC), and a limited amount of relevant archaeological evidence from Susa and elsewhere. Esther herself is not mentioned in these sources, and Herodotus gives the name of Xerxes' wife as Amestris. However, Xerxes may have had more than one wife, and it was Esther who was of special interest to the biblical author. In other respects the details of the book agree with what is known of the period from other sources.

### Key Themes

Esther does much more than explain the origin of Purim. It is a most entertaining story, and it communicates some important truths about how and why the Jews survived such an overwhelming threat. This message can be summarised under three headings:

1. Divine providence. While God is never mentioned in the book, there are many hints of his presence. The downfall of Vashti (1:10-22), the decision to hold an elaborate 'beauty contest' as a way of replacing her (2:1-18), and Mordecai's overhearing of a plot against the king (2:19-23) all conspire to move Esther and Mordecai into positions of power before the threat posed by Haman emerges (3:1-3). Once it does, the perfect timing of apparently fortuitous events again and again tips the balance in favour of the Jews and against their enemies. The king's insomnia on the night before Mordecai's execution (6:1-3), Haman's entry at the moment Ahasuerus is wondering how to reward Mordecai (6:6), and the king's return just when Haman is falling on Esther's couch (7:8), all significantly affect the eventual outcome, but none is knowingly caused by any of the human characters. Moreover, the characters themselves seem to be aware that something more than chance is shaping events. Mordecai is sure the Jews will be delivered in some way or other and suspects that Esther has **<<come to royal dignity for just such a time as this>>** (4:14b). Even Haman's wife knows that if Mordecai is a Jew, then Haman is destined to fall before him (6:13), and Esther's calling of a fast before approaching the king can hardly be anything other than an appeal for divine help (4:16).

The deliverance experienced here in Esther is very different from the exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses. There are no signs and wonders, no special revelations, no prophet like Moses, and no one even mentions God! Yet the way the story is told makes it clear that, even when God is most hidden, he is still present and working to protect and deliver his chosen people.

2. Human responsibility. Although the story shows that the outcome is a divine gift rather than a human achievement, Esther and Mordecai do show great initiative and courage, and their actions are obviously significant. A little

over a century earlier, the prophet Jeremiah had written to the exiles in Babylon about the responsibilities and benefits of good citizenship, especially under foreign rule: <<*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*>> (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

Esther and Mordecai are not unambiguously noble in the way that Daniel and his friends were. Nevertheless, Mordecai's action when he discovers a plot to harm the king (2:19-23) is a good example of someone behaving as Jeremiah had advised, and it shows the benefits that this can bring. Furthermore, Esther's careful planning, along with her willingness to put her own life at risk to save her people, is especially heroic (4:16). Esther and Mordecai both illustrate the fact that divine providence does not negate the responsibility of people to act with courage and resolve when circumstances require it.

3. *The absurdity of wickedness.* Ahasuerus and Haman were important people who wielded considerable power. However, the story of Esther again and again evokes laughter at their expense. Ahasuerus rules over 127 provinces but cannot control his wife Queen Vashti, and his so-called 'wise men' are no better (1:12-13). But the most telling humour is at the expense of Haman. The reader is clearly meant to laugh at the way his vanity traps him into having to publicly honour the very man he intended to kill (6:6-11), and his death on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (7:8-10) is a classic case of a villain falling into his own pit (Psalm 7:15). This is all obviously meant to teach that the arrogant of this world are not nearly as powerful as they think they are, and that when they oppose God's people, and therefore God himself, they only succeed in bringing about their own destruction. God laughs at such people (Psalm 2:4), and the story of Esther invites the reader to laugh with him.

### Relevance for Christians Today

Esther is part of a much larger story that runs all the way from Abraham to Christ and, through him, to the church. If Haman had succeeded, the Jewish people as a whole would have been destroyed, and the story of God's saving work in and through Abraham's descendants would have come to an end. There would have been no fulfilment in Christ, and therefore no Gospel and no Christian church. Nothing less than that was at stake. That is why Christians should read the Book of Esther, not just as a story about the Jews but as part of their own heritage. It is because of this fundamental connection between God's purposes in the OT and NT

that Christians are to value and learn from the whole Bible as the Word of God, as taught by Paul (1 Corinthians 10:11). This side of the Cross, Jews and Gentiles have been made one new people in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-16). Christians are not obliged to observe the Feast of Purim, but they are to take to heart the truth that God providentially watches over his own, and that no power levelled against them can ultimately prevail (Romans 8:28).

Sadly, the evil of anti-Semitism still exists, and it would be foolish to think that Christians are immune from it. The history of the church indicates otherwise and, as part of the Christian Canon, the Book of Esther still warns against it. However, the only real solution to it is the Gospel, and the transformation God brings about in the hearts of those who believe it. That is a beginning, however, not an end, and Christians are called to live in a world with some striking resemblances to the one Esther and Mordecai lived in. Governing authorities are often indifferent and sometimes even hostile to the faith of believers, and especially in the West, events often take their normal course with little or no evidence of the miraculous. But the Book of Esther, like the NT, teaches how to live in that world with courage and integrity, carrying out responsibilities to the best of one's ability and trusting God in his providence to protect and provide.

### **History of Salvation Summary**

For each following generation of Jews, the Book of Esther answers the question, 'How is it that we are still here?' by pointing to God's often hidden purpose. In the larger story of the Canon, it shows how God has preserved the offspring of Abraham for his purpose of bringing blessing to the whole world through them by raising up the Messiah and by including Gentile believers in his people. Thus Gentile Christians own this as their story too.

### **Literary Features**

The Book of Esther is a story par excellence. It has virtually all the ingredients that people through the ages have most loved in a story: a beautiful and courageous heroine, a romantic love thread, a dire threat to the good characters, a thoroughly evil villain, suspense, dramatic irony, evocative descriptions of exotic places, sudden reversal of action, poetic justice, and a happy ending.

The specific type of story represented by the Book of Esther is hero story, as the action is constructed around the engaging central figure of a heroine whose Persian name Esther means 'star'. However, the story is also a patriotic story of national history, a rescue story in which a whole nation is delivered from destruction. The U-shaped descent into potential tragedy and ascent to a happy ending is a plot pattern known as comedy.

The heroine Esther is a developing character, not a character who displays admirable qualities right from the start. In her early days in the harem, she fits

right in with the pagan lifestyle that prevails among the young women who spend a whole year beautifying themselves in a spa. People in the harem do not even know that Esther is a religious person. She has two names, hinting at the identity crisis that she undergoes when she rises to the highest level of Persian society. But Esther becomes heroic when she is transformed by the ordeal of needing to save her nation.

There is satire, i.e. the exposure of vice or folly, in the book, focused especially on the character of Haman, who is both narcissistic and vengeful.

### The Persian Empire at the Time of Esther circa 479 BC

Long before Esther’s time, the people of Israel and Judah, later called Jews, had been dispersed throughout the Near East by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Eventually the Persians absorbed nearly all of these lands into their empire, which reached its greatest extent during the time of Esther. Thus Haman’s plot to exterminate all Jews throughout the Persian Empire would have annihilated virtually all of the Jewish people, and Esther’s daring actions saved them from complete destruction.



Regional Map

## Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1-2:23)
  - a. King Ahasuerus Deposes Queen Vashti (1:1-22)
  - b. Esther Becomes Queen (2:1-18)
  - c. Mordecai Discovers a Plot (2:19-23)
- II. Main Action (3:1-9:17)
  - a. Haman Undertakes to Destroy the Jews (3:1-15)
  - b. Esther Agrees to Help the Jews (4:1-17)
  - c. Esther's Banquet (5:1-8)
  - d. Haman Plans to Have Mordecai Hanged (5:9-14)
  - e. The King Honours Mordecai (6:1-13)
  - f. Haman's Downfall and Mordecai's Advancement (6:14-7:10)
  - g. Esther Saves the Jews (8:1-17)
  - h. Destruction of the Enemies of the Jews (9:1-17)
- III. The Feast of Purim Inaugurated (9:18-10:3)