

Esther

Message

The preservation of the Jews from the attempted extinction initiated through Haman was providentially realized through God's divine interaction through Mordecai, Esther, and King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), and commemorated through the inauguration of the Feast of Purim (14th and 15th of March).



Title

The book's name is derived from its principal character, Esther. The name Esther (*ester*) is believed to have been derived from the Persian word for "star" (*sitareh*). Esther's Hebrew name was *hadassah* (2:7), which means "myrtle."¹ The Jews refer to this book as *megilloth esther* ("Esther Roll") because it is one of a collection of five books (*scrolls*) that are read at various Jewish feasts, with Esther being read at the "Feast of Purim." Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other being Ruth of course. Both of these women are highly esteemed in Jewish history. John Phillips has made the following comparison between Ruth and Esther: "Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew; whereas Esther was a Jewish woman who married a Gentile."²

Author

Although the author of Esther is unknown, the Babylonian Talmud says "the men of the Great Synagogue wrote the roll of Esther" (*Baba Bathra* 15a). The Jewish historian Josephus suggested that "Mordecai wrote the book of Esther" (*Antiquities of the Jews* XI.6.1). Additional Rabbinic circles likewise affirmed that Mordecai wrote the Book of Esther.³ Ezra and Nehemiah have also been suggested as possible candidates for authorship. At the very least, it appears from the text that the writer must have been a Jew who lived in Susa, the capitol of Persia, at the time the events of this book were narrated. He wrote as a pro-Jewish eyewitness to the events he recorded. References within the book suggest that he was familiar with both the Persian court, etiquette, and customs; as well as Jewish customs and nationalism (2:23; 9:20; 10:2). The author appears to have had access to the official chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia which he may have used to translate his record. This is supported by the fact that: (1) purely Persian words and names appear in the book, (2) the Persian word *Purim* is used, (3) minute details about the Persian empire and names of officials are recorded, and (4) Esther is designated as "the Queen."

¹Irving L. Jensen, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," in *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament*, 242.

²*Exploring the Scriptures*, 91.

³See R. K. Harrison. *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1087.

Date of Composition

The Book of Esther was probably written shortly after the reign of King Ahasuerus (486-464 B.C.), and probably not earlier. The repeated use of the past tense in chapter 10, as the author writes about events associated with the reign of King Ahasuerus and Mordecai's involvement (10:2), would support this conclusion. Most conservative scholars would assign a date of composition to the mid-fifth century B.C. (464-415 B.C.).

Historical Background

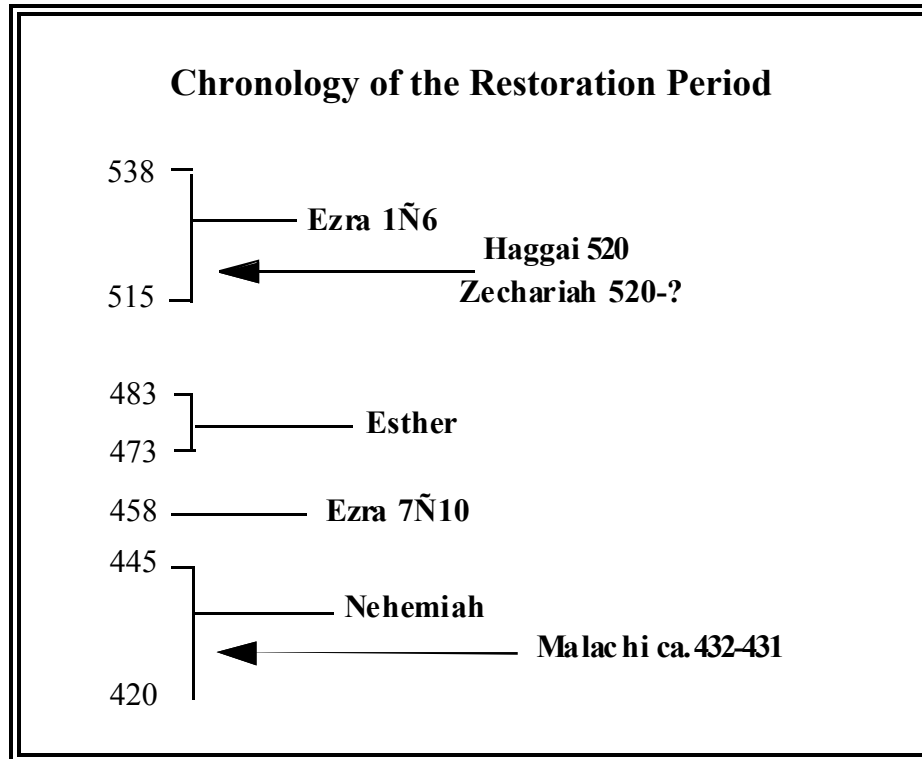
The Book of Esther recounts events that occurred in Persian history (539-331 B.C.), and more specifically, during a decade of King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes reign (486-464 B.C.). Ahasuerus succeeded his father Darius a ruler of the Persian Empire in 486 B.C. During the opening years of his reign, **Ahasuerus** continued his late father's campaign against Greece.

The first historical event to which the writer alluded was the extravagant feast hosted by Ahasuerus in Shushan, apparently to celebrate his numerous achievements, and to plan for his ill-fated campaign against Greece. The Book of Esther begins at this juncture, during the third year of King Ahasuerus' reign (**483 B.C.**, [(1:1-21)]. The king held this planning session in the winter of 483-482 B.C. The book concludes some ten years later with the death of wicked Haman for his attempt to exterminate God's covenant people, the Jews (7:9), and with the **institution of the Feast of Purim** that took place in **473 B.C.** The following chart depicts the chronology of this period, and of the Book of Esther:

Chronology of the Book of Esther	
<u>Date</u>	<u>Event Recorded</u>
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 in Susa for the "Persian Beauty Pageant"
479	Ahasuerus' return to Susa: Esther's coronation as Queen
478	No Record
475	No Record
474	The issuing of Ahasuerus' decrees to exterminate the Jews
473	The Jews' defense of themselves: Establishment of the annual Feast of Purim (March 14 and 15)

The Placement of Esther in Biblical History. The story of Esther took place between the first return of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. and the second return under Ezra the priest in 458 B.C. The events of this book take place between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra and cover a period of only ten years of biblical history (483-473 B.C.).

The following diagram depicts Esther's placement in this chronology.



Theological Purpose

In contrast to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, *the story of Esther concerns the Jews who chose not to return to their Promised Land of Canaan, but remained in Persia and her provinces instead*. In spite of this apparent rebellion on the part of the majority of exilic Jews, God nevertheless demonstrated His covenant loyalty to the Israelites. As Unger writes, “The book is designed to show God’s providential care of His dispersed people in their trials and persecutions and to explain the origin of the Feast of Purim.” The book reveals that the God of Israel, who has made a unilateral and eternal covenant with Abraham and his posterity, has pledged to see it through to fruition regardless of what Satanic opposition may arise against Him. God’s promise extends even to those Israelites who chose to rebel against His Person and purposes by remaining in the foreign land to which they had been taken captive, for they were still His covenant people.

Structure

The literary unity of the composition of the Book of Esther is supported by a chastic structure, which identifies 6:1 as the key verse of the book. This tends to diffuse critics

who boldly claim that the book was a random compilation of later redactors. Notice the following chastic structure for the Book of Esther:⁴

- 1 Prologue and background 1:1-22
- 2 The king's first decree 2:1–3:15
- 3 Mordecai threatened by Haman 4:1–5:14
- “During that night the king could not sleep” [Divine sovereignty] 6:1**
- 3' Mordecai triumphs over Haman 6:2–7:10
- 2' The king's second decree 8:1–9:32
- 1' Epilogue 10:1-3

Additional Literary Features. Robert Gordis comments that “From the literary point of view, the book ranks high as an outstanding example of narrative art.”⁵ Like an exciting novel, the real-life drama of Esther pits a beautiful heroine against a hateful and evil villain, builds to a life-threatening climax, and ends with a superb twist [that only a sovereign and benevolent God could orchestrate]” (*Daily Walk*). Writing on the books Genre, Mervin Breneman provides the following insight:

The genre of the Book of Esther is historical narrative. As such, biblical narrative is characterized by the cooperation of three components: ideology (socioreligious perspective), historiography (use of historical persons and events in a narrative), and aesthetic appeal (its influence and persuasion of the reader). Each of these three elements can be readily seen in Esther. The ideology is the orthodox faith of ancient Israel. The book is theological in that its primary purpose is to teach about God and his continuing relationship with his people. It is historiographical in that it is an account of historical persons and historical events as they occurred. It is aesthetic because it is full of drama and suspense and draws its readers to anticipate happenings and events that often are the reverse of what the reader expects.⁶

One peculiar aspect of the book surrounds the question as to why there are **NO** references to God, Jerusalem, prayer, worship, the temple, or sacrifice anywhere in the book. This outstanding feature has given rise to considerable discussion, causing many to judge the book as a “secular” composition of questionable religious value.

However, it appears that the author deliberately refrained from mentioning God or any religious activity as a literary device to heighten the fact that it is God who controls the seemingly insignificant coincidences . . . that make up the plot and

⁴This chastic structure has been adapted from Yehudah T. Radday, “Chiasm in Joshua, Judges, and Others,” *Linguistica Biblica* 3 (1997): 9.

⁵“Studies in the Esther Narrative,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:1 (March 1976):44. For a most insightful article highlighting many of the artistic literary features of the book as well as showing how the literary structure illuminates the theology revealed in it, see Francis C. Rossow, “Literary Artistry in the Book of Esther and Its Theological Significance,” *Concordia Journal* 13:3 (July 1987):219-33.

⁶*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 287.

issue in deliverance for the Jews. God's sovereign rule is assumed at every point in the story, an assumption made all the more effective by the total absence of any reference to him" (*NIV Study Bible*, 710).

Outline

- I. The Jews' Great Danger of Extermination 1–5**
- II. The Jews' Great Deliverance & Elevation 6–10**
 - or
 - I. The Danger to the Jews: Development of the Crisis 1:1–5:14**
(The Threat of Jewish Extinction)
 - A. The Rebellion of Queen Vashti Against King Ahasuerus 1:1-22
 - B. The Replacement of Queen Vashti by Esther 2:1-23
 - 1. The selection of Esther 2:1-20
 - a. Proposal for the selection of a new queen 2:1-4
 - b. Esther sent to king's harem 2:5-11
 - c. Esther selected to be queen 2:12-20
 - 2. The service of Mordecai in detecting and exposing a plot to kill the king 2:21-23
(The conflict between Haman and Mordecai escalates into a crisis)
 - C. The Revelation of Haman's Plot to Exterminate the Jews 3:1–5:14
 - 1. Haman's promotion & Mordecai's refusal to bow to him 3:1-6
 - 2. Haman's plot to exterminate the Jews 3:7-15
 - a. Lot (Purim) cast be Haman 3:7-9
 - b. Haman is granted permission to destroy the Jews 3:10-11
 - c. Messengers dispatched with proclamation of destruction 3:12-15
 - 3. Mordecai's plan to save his people through Esther 4:1–5:14
 - a. Mordecai mourns the news of Haman's planned destruction 4:1-4
 - b. Mordecai enlists Esther to avert the crisis 4:4-17
 - D. Esther Proceeds to Seek the King to Save Her People 5:1-8
 - 1. Haman's hatred of Mordecai's refusal to acknowledge his position 5:9
 - 2. Haman's prideful boast in his powerful position 5:10-13
 - 3. Haman's wife Zeresh's advise: hang Mordecai on a gallows 5:14
 - II. The Deliverance of the Jews: Denouncement of the Crisis 6:1–10:3**

(The Jews Extolled)

- A. Mordecai is Rewarded for Saving King Ahasuerus' Life 6:1-13
 - 1. Haman is *humbled* 6:1-14
 - 2. Haman is *hanged* 7:1-10
 - a. Esther reveals Haman's evil plot: her plea for her people 7:1-6
 - b. Haman is hanged on his own gallows: prepared for Mordecai 7:7-10
- B. Mordecai's Promotion Over Haman's Position and Property 8:1-17
- C. Ahasuerus' Decree Provides Deliverance for the Jews 9:1-19
- D. Institution of the Annual Feast of Purim 9:20-32
- E. The Greatness of Mordecai: His Advancement to Haman's Position 10:1-3

Argument

The Book of Esther provides a veiled⁷ picture of God's providential and faithful care that He demonstrated in protecting His unfaithful Jewish remnant from extermination at the hands of wicked Haman (Satan). The Jews in the book represent the majority of the Babylonian exiles that had chosen to stay in Persia, rather than returning to the land of Israel. Mordecai, Esther, and their fellow Jews are in Persia by choice. *The historical events in Esther took place between the first return of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1–6) and the second return under Ezra; placing the events recorded in Esther between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra.*

The book records the events that transpired during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who in the opening chapter suffers a decimating defeat by the Greeks after which he returned to his palace in Susa to console himself by engaging in extended feasts and orgies. The book may be divided into two sections: **The Danger to the Jews: Development of the Crisis ([The Threat of Jewish Extinction] 1:1–5:14); and The Deliverance of the Jews: Denouncement of the Crisis ([The Jews Extolled] 6:1–10:3).**

Key word: Providence

Key verses: Esth 4:14 *“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?”* **Esth. 4:16** Esther said *“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”* **Esth. 8:17** *“And in each and every province, and in each and every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree arrived, there was gladness and joy for the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.”*

⁷“Veiled” because the name of God (Yahweh) is not mentioned anywhere in the book.

Key Chapter 8 This chapter records the pivotal event with the accompanying **result:**
“that many of the people of the land became Jews.”

The book is also important in showing where the Jews commemorated the Feast of Purim to celebrate their great deliverance from wicked Haman and his evil plot to exterminate the Jewish people—Mordecai and Esther instructed every Jew to **celebrate the Feast of Purim annually on the 14th and 15th of Adar (March) (9:20-28).**