

# The Book of Esther: Introduction

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## Theme

In one word, the theme of the book of Esther is **providence**. Providence can be defined as the way in which God provides for His people by working behind the scenes in the affairs of life (Esther 4:14; cf. Acts 17:26-27; Rom. 8:28; Phil. 4:19). While God is never explicitly mentioned in the entire book, it is clear He is at work in the events described therein. Like the natural world in which we live, God's name is nowhere, but His hand is everywhere (cf. Rom. 1:20).

## Purpose

The purpose of the book is twofold:

- 1) Emphasize the providence of God in preserving the Jewish people
- 2) Provide background for festival of Purim (Esther 9:17-32)

## Key Verse

Esther 4:14

## Key Characters

Ahasuerus (a-haz-you-air-us); Vashti; Mordecai; Esther; Haman (hay-man)

## Date

The book of Esther takes place between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> years of the reign of Ahasuerus, king of Persia (1:3; 3:7). Most scholars agree that this Ahasuerus is Xerxes I, who ruled from 486-465 BC, making the events of Esther fit in the time gap between Ezra 6 and 7 (516-457 BC; cf. Ezra 6:15; 7:7). Three main factors make this very probable:

- 1) Ahasuerus (Hebrew) and Xerxes (Greek) are accurate translations of the same Persian name *Khashayarsh*.
- 2) The text indicates a time gap of four years, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign when Vashti was removed from being queen, and the 7<sup>th</sup> year when Esther was crowned (1:3; 2:16). It would have been during this time that Xerxes led a military campaign against Greece (483-479 BC).
- 3) The king is contemporary with Mordecai, who is mentioned as the great-grandson of one who was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon along with Jeconiah/Jehoiachin (8<sup>th</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar; 597 BC; cf. 2 Kings 24:10-16; Esther 2:5-6). If we use 40 years per generation, we can estimate the setting of Esther at around 120 years late (assuming Kish was taken around age 40), which would be close to 477 BC, during the rule of Xerxes I.

Note: There are two other men named Ahasuerus mentioned in the Bible (Ezra 4:6; Dan. 9:1). It seems all three are different rulers for the following reasons:

- 1) The Ahasuerus of Ezra appears as ruler between Cyrus (Cyrus II the Great; 559-530 BC) and Darius (Darius I the Great; 522-486 BC; Ezra 4:5, 24).
- 2) The Ahasuerus of Daniel is mentioned as the father of Darius the Mede, who is mentioned as ruling Babylon prior to Cyrus assuming control of the region himself (Dan. 5:30; cf. Dan. 1:21; 10:1).

Another possibility is that this Ahasuerus is Artaxerxes I (464-424 BC; Ezra 7:1; Neh. 2:1), since the Septuagint as well as Josephus understand the name to be Artaxerxes (Josephus Antiquities 11.6.1).

## Writer

Unknown. Some scholars suggest Mordecai or possibly Nehemiah because of the author's knowledge of Shushan and Persian law and customs (Neh. 1:1, 11; 2:1).

## Canonicity

Whether or not the book of Esther is canonical (standard) has been disputed not only by skeptics, but by Jews and Christians as well.

- 1) Martin Luther said:  
I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities. The Jews much more esteemed the book of Esther than any of the prophets; though they were forbidden to read it before they had attained the age of thirty, by reason of the mystic matters it contains (Table Talk, "Of God's Word" XXIV, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.v.i.html>)
- 2) The Apocrypha, a group of extra-biblical books written mostly between the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BC contains six additional chapters to Esther dispersed within the original ten. These additions contain references to God, Jewish law (namely dietary restrictions), and prayer. That these additions were not part of the original can be seen from the fact that they were:
  - a) Originally written in Greek and are not found in the original Hebrew.
  - b) Written during the fourth year of the reign of a certain Ptolemy and Cleopatra (2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BC). This was during the "silent years" as it pertained to Bible inspiration, as stated by Josephus (Against Apion 1.8), and more importantly alluded to by Jesus Himself (cf. Matt. 23:35; last book of Hebrew Bible is Chronicles; cf. Gen. 4:8; 2 Chr. 24:20-21).
- 3) Others note the following to suggest that the story is non-historical, non-inspired, or both:
  - a) Does not mention God
  - b) Only Old Testament book not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls
  - c) Story does not match Persian history, namely that the name of only one wife of Xerxes is known from secular history (Amestris; Herodotus, The Histories 7.61)
  - d) Names of Esther and Mordecai are based on Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk, and are therefore mythological.
  - e) Some renderings of Esther 2:5-6 suggest that Mordecai was one of the Babylonian captives, which would make too old for his part.

We can be confident that **Esther is historical, inspired, and belongs in the Bible** because:

- 1) It was part of the standard threefold division of the Old Testament mentioned by Jesus and corroborated by first century Jewish historian Josephus:
  - a) Jesus refers to the law, prophets, and psalms (Lk. 24:44)
  - b) Josephus refers to 22 books grouped into the law, prophets, and "hymns... and precepts for the conduct of human life." (Against Apion 1.8) The 22 correspond to the 39 of our Old Testament, combining the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles; Ezra and Nehemiah; Judges and Ruth, Jeremiah and Lamentations; and the minor prophets into the Book of the Twelve.
- 2) It provides the basis for the actual Jewish holiday of Purim.
- 3) It fits into Biblical and secular history (see Date section).
- 4) It has been preserved as the Word of God (Ps. 12:6-7; cf. Isa. 40:8)

## Outline

- I. The Threat
  - A) The Queen
    - 1. Removal of Vashti (1:1-1:22)
    - 2. Marriage to Esther (2:1-2:20)
  - B) The Plot
    - 1. Plot to Murder the King (2:21-2:23)
    - 2. Plot to Murder the Jews (3:1-4:17)
- II. The Triumph
  - A) Esther over Her Fear (5:1-5:8)
  - B) Esther and Mordecai over Haman (5:9-8:3)
  - C) Jews over Enemies (8:4-9:16)
  - D) Celebration (9:17-10:3)

## Timeline

David	Babylonian Captivity, Temple destroyed (2 Kings 24-25)	Persia conquers Babylon (Dan. 5:31)	Decree of Cyrus, First return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1)	Temple Rebuilt (Ezra 6:15)	<b>Events of Esther</b>	Ezra's return (Ezra 7:7)	Nehemiah's return (Neh. 2:1)
1000 BC	606 - 586 BC	539 BC	536 BC	516 BC	<b>483 - 474 BC</b>	457 BC	444 BC

## References

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