

## ESTHER: INTRODUCTION

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### Historical Setting

The Book of Esther is unique in several ways. For one thing it is a book with several historical problems. The book contains interesting and informative eyewitness accounts about the Persian Empire which were true to life in that period of history but which are difficult to verify from outside sources (see comments under "Historicity").

The book takes place in the Persian period (539-331 B.C.) after many Israelites had returned from the Exile to the land of Palestine to rebuild the temple and set up the sacrificial system. Most Israelite captives, however, chose not to return to their homeland. They should have done so for Isaiah and Jeremiah had urged the yet-to-be-exiled nation to come out of Babylon (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6) after 70 years (Jer. 29:10) and return to the place where the Lord could bless them under the covenantal promises (Deut. 28). Esther and Mordecai had not returned to the land and did not seem interested in complying with the prophetic command to return. The Persian monarch mentioned in the Book of Esther is Xerxes (485-465), known from other sources as Ahasuerus (see NIV marg.), a strong, effective ruler. The events in this book occurred between those recorded in Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. The events in the Book of Esther extend over a decade—from 483 B.C. (Xerxes/ 3rd year, Es. 1:3) to 473 (the end of Xerxes' 12th year, 3:7).

### Characteristics

Esther is the only book of the Bible in which the name of God is not mentioned. The New Testament does not quote from the Book of Esther, nor have copies of it been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Law is never mentioned in the book nor are sacrifices or offerings referred to. This fits the view that the Jewish people residing in the Persian Empire were not following God's will. They were shunning their responsibility to return to Palestine and to become involved in temple worship.

Prayer is never mentioned in the book, though fasting is. In other postexilic books prayer is important to the main characters (both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are good examples), but in the Book of Esther nothing is said about Mordecai or Esther praying. Both Esther and Mordecai seem to have lacked spiritual awareness except in their assurance that God would protect His people.

### Recipients

Knowing who the original recipients of a Bible book were helps in interpreting that book. The Book of Esther includes a number of dates which tie the account to a particular time in the Persian Empire, but no hint is given when the book was written nor is there any explicit evidence about its original readers.

Some scholars suggest that the book was composed in the Persian Empire and then transported back to Palestine and added to the collection of biblical books (OT mss. considered canonical). 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 people who had refused to come back to the land.

At the time of the writing of the book (see comments under "Author and Date") the Jews in Palestine were going through difficult times in their struggle to rebuild their nation and to reestablish temple worship. It had taken the nation 21 years to complete the building of the temple (536-515) and, as is evident from the last half of the Book of Ezra, the people were not in good spiritual condition during the reign of Artaxerxes (464- 424). Of course both Ezra and Nehemiah noted the reason for the nation's lowly condition: the people had not been following the Deuteronomic Covenant and therefore were under God's curse rather than under His promise of blessing. The Book of Esther, then, would have



been a great encouragement to these struggling Jews. It would have helped them 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 also encourage them to worship the God of Israel, though He is not mentioned by name in it.

### **Author and Date**

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 for he described the events as an eyewitness. And he was probably a Jew. Some have suggested that Ezra or Nehemiah wrote the account but no specific evidence supports that view. Many critics of the Book of Esther claim that it was written at a much later date because of its language and style, but recent investigations have shown this idea to be unfounded. The document as it stands could have been written sometime between 470 and 465, during the latter years of Xerxes' reign (cf. 10:2-3), or in the reign of his son Artaxerxes (464-424). There is no need to suppose that a well-known person was the author.

### **Historicity**

Objections to the historicity of the events in the Book of Esther are usually along three lines:

1. One of the purposes of the Book of Esther (see under "Purpose") is to describe the origin of the religious Feast of Purim. Though scholars debate what the word "Purim" means and what it signifies, the Book of Esther explains that the feast is a celebration of God's miraculous deliverance of His people from Haman. What appeared to be an event of "chance" was, of course, the sovereign intervention of God. Many critics, however, argue that this is too simple an explanation and that the story of the Feast of Purim arose as a folktale. However, no evidence whatever contradicts the Esther account as a reliable explanation of how the Feast of Purim began. It cannot be shown to have derived from another source.

2. Many doubt that the account is historical because they say no outside records mention any of the characters in the book. But outside records do refer to Xerxes; however, they make no reference to a queen named Esther or to Mordecai or Haman. In response, it must be admitted that there is no mention of Esther outside this book. (Mordecai, though, is referred to; cf. comments on 2:5-7.) But the fact that Esther is not mentioned in other sources does not prove that she did not exist. Herodotus and Ctesias recorded that a woman named Amestris was Xerxes' queen. She was the mother of the next ruler, Artaxerxes. However, Herodotus discussed Amestris not in connection with the reign of Xerxes, but with the reign of her son many years later. If Amestris is identified with the biblical woman named Vashti who was deposed in 482 (Artaxerxes was born in 483) and then is not mentioned again until her son assumed the throne in 464, there would be time for Esther to have assumed the throne as queen all the way up to the death of Xerxes or at least till the time when the Book of Esther ends. Even if Vashti were deposed before the book was written, the author might have included that fact because it would have fit the book's purpose. The idea that Esther could not have existed because no extant historical record mentions her by name is an argument from silence. Her existence actually fits nicely into the chronology of the Persian period.

3. Some critics presume that the account of King Xerxes seems improbable. Why would the king pick a new queen in such an irrational manner? In response, it must be repeated that no evidence whatever exists which shows that the biblical account is unreliable. In fact the irrationality of Xerxes and the large harem he acquired in Susa have been referred to in other sources.

Much evidence does support the historicity of the facts in this book. Xerxes was a real king in Persia. His drinking parties were well known. Xerxes did have an irrational temper, occasionally exhibiting fits of rage (1:12; 7:10). He did have a palace in Susa and a large harem there. Various features of the court can also be substantiated from other sources.

### **Purpose**

As noted earlier, the Book of Esther was written to encourage the returned Jewish exiles by reminding them of the faithfulness of God who would keep His promises to the nation. The author was describing God's unflinching preservation of His people (even "disobedient people" such as Esther and Mordecai—those not back in the land). The author was also explaining how the Feast of Purim began. That feast, each time it was celebrated, would encourage the remnant.