

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Esther is a historical book of the Old Testament that shows how God preserved His chosen people. The book is named for its main character, Queen Esther of Persia, whose courage and quick thinking saved the Jewish people from disaster.

The Book of Esther reports on actual events, but it is written like a short story. The main characters in this powerful drama are King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) of Persia; his wife Queen Esther, a Jewish woman; his second in command, Haman, recently promoted by the king; and Mordecai, a leader among the Jewish people who are scattered throughout the Persian Empire.

In an attempt to stamp out the Jews, Haman manipulates the king into issuing an order calling for their execution. But Esther uses her royal favor to intervene and expose Haman's plot. Ironically, in a dramatic twist of plot, Haman is hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai's execution, and Mordecai is promoted to prime minister. The Jewish people are granted revenge against their enemies. They also celebrate by instituting the "Feast of Purim" to mark their miraculous deliverance.

For centuries scholars have debated the question of who wrote the Book of Esther. The Jewish historian Josephus claimed it was written by Mordecai. But many modern scholars dispute this because Mordecai is mentioned in the past tense in the final chapter of the book. Until new evidence emerges, the author must remain unknown.

The question of date can be answered with greater certainty. The reign of the Persian king Xerxes (Esther 1:1) lasted for about 20 years, beginning about 485 BC. So Esther must have been written some time shortly after 465 BC.

The Book of Esther is valuable historically because it gives us a view of the Jewish people who were scattered throughout the ancient world about 475 BC. The events in the book occurred about 100 years after the leading citizens of the Jewish nation were carried into exile by Babylon in 587 BC. Shortly after the Persians overthrew the Babylonians, they allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their native land. Many did return to Jerusalem, but thousands of Jewish citizens chose to remain in Persia, probably because this had become home to them during their long separation from their native land. This

book shows clearly that God protects His chosen people, even when they are scattered among the nations of the world.

The Book of Esther is a major chapter in the struggle of the people of God to survive in the midst of a hostile world. Beginning with the Book of Genesis, God had made it clear that he would bless His covenant people and bring a curse upon those who tried to do them harm (Genesis 12:1,3). The Book of Esther shows how God has kept this promise at every stage of history. Just as Haman met his death on the gallows, we can trust God to protect us from the enemy, Satan, and to work out His ultimate purpose of redemption in our lives.

One unusual fact about this book is that it never mentions the name of God. For this reason some people believe Esther has no place in the Bible. They see it as nothing but a fiercely patriotic Jewish book that celebrates the victory of the Jews over their enemies. However, a careful reading will reveal that the book does have a spiritual base. Queen Esther calls the people to prayer and fasting (4:16), and God's protection of His people speaks of His providence. The book also teaches a valuable lesson about the sovereignty of God: although the enemies of the covenant people may triumph for a season, He holds the key to ultimate victory.

THE CHIEF CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER ARE:

Esther - Raised by her cousin, Mordecai as his own daughter after her mother and father died (2:7), Esther was a member of a family that had been carried into captivity about 600 BC. She rose from an unknown Jewish girl to become the queen of the Persian Empire. Following several days of revelry, the drunken king Xerxes I (or Ahasuerus) - asked his queen, Vashti, to display herself to his guests. When Vashti refused, she was banished from the palace. The King then had "*all the beautiful young virgins*" (Esther 2:3) of his kingdom brought to his palace to choose Vashti's replacement. Scripture records that "*the young woman [Esther] was lovely and beautiful*" (Esther 2:7). The king loved Esther more than all the other women. He appointed her queen to replace Vashti (Esther 2:17).

Ahasuersus – also known as **Xerxes I** (485 BC - 464 BC), was a king of Persia. In the Book of Esther we see a picture of **the vastness of his empire** (1:1), **his riches** (1:4), **his sensuality and feasting** (1:13-22), **and his cruelty and lack of foresight** (1:13-22). This is consistent

with the description of **Xerxes** provided by the Greek historian Herodotus. Ahasuerus succeeded his father, Darius Hystaspis, in 485 BC. Ahasuerus banished his queen, Vashti, because of her refusal to parade herself at one of his drunken feasts. Following a two-year search for Vashti's replacement, Ahasuerus chose Esther as his queen. In 464 BC Ahasuerus, was murdered, and his son, Artaxerxes Longimanus, succeeded him. In Ezra 4:6, the reign of Ahasuerus is mentioned chronologically between Cyrus (v. 5) and Artaxerxes (v. 7).

Haman - The evil and scheming prime minister of Ahasuerus king of Persia (485 BC - 464 BC). When Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, Haman plotted to destroy Mordecai and his family, as well as all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. But Esther intervened and saved her people. Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai (Esther 3:1-9:25).

Mordecai – He is the hero of the Book of Esther. When Mordecai's uncle, Abihail, died (Esther 2:15), Mordecai took his orphaned cousin, Hadassah (Esther), into his home as her adoptive father (Esther 2:7). Mordecai discovered a plot by two of the king's eunuchs, to assassinate the King, and exposed it, saving the king's life (Esther 2:21-22). Mordecai's good deed was recorded in the royal chronicles of Persia (Esther 2:23). Mordecai showed his loyalty to God by refusing to bow to Haman, the official second to the king (Esther 3:2,5). Haman's hatred for Mordecai sparked his plan to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire (Esther 3:6). Mordecai reminded his cousin, who had become Queen Esther, of her God-given opportunity to expose Haman to the king and to save her people (Esther 3-4). Haman was succeeded by Mordecai, who became second in command to the most powerful man in the kingdom. He used his new position to encourage his people to defend themselves against the scheduled massacre planned by Haman. Persian officials also assisted in protecting the Jews, an event celebrated by the annual “Feast of Purim” (Esther 9:26-32).