

Esther

1. Introduction

- It is the last of the twelve history books of the Old Testament (Joshua to Esther)
- It is set in the 480s/470s BC in Susa, Persia's capital, where some Jews still live in exile. It explains the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim.
- Esther has sometimes been neglected by the church – Christians have not always known what to do with the book.
- However, it is part of Scripture and like all Scripture, it has a specific purpose and particular application for the church today (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

2. Esther is set in an alien culture

- Esther is set in the court of Persia – the second the four great world empires predicted in Daniel (Daniel 2:36-45). Babylon had fallen and the Persia Empire lasted for two hundred years. It fell to Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The Greek empire would continue until the rise of Rome and after this God would set up a kingdom that would last for ever (Daniel 2:44-45).
- Esther begins in 483 BC, the third year of the reign of the third Persian king – Xerxes or Ahasuerus (Esther 1:1-3).
- Herodotus, "*the father of modern history*", tells us a great deal about the reign of Xerxes – his obsession with conquering Greece and his eventual defeat and humiliation.
- Esther is set in the court of Persia. The Jews are a small and vulnerable group. How do they behave in the face of an empire that is impressive, inescapable and invincible?

Key dates

- **587** – Fall of Jerusalem - exile of Judah by Babylon. Daniel serves the kings of Babylon
- **537** – Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon and sets up the Persian Empire. He passes a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1)
- **538** – Zerubbabel returns with first group of exiles to Jerusalem begins to rebuild temple
- **525-520** - Haggai and Zechariah minister
- **515** – The new temple is completed and dedicated
- **490** – Battle of Marathon – Darius, the father of Xerxes, is defeated in first Persian invasion of Greece.
- **486-465** – Xerxes' reign – this is the setting for the book of Esther
 - ⇒ **486** – Xerxes ascends the throne at the age of 32
 - ⇒ **483** – Xerxes calls together leaders from all over his empire to plan his invasion of Greece. He makes his plans for invasion. Vashti is deposed (Esther 1)
 - ⇒ **480** - Xerxes' pontoon bridge across the Hellespont is destroyed
 - ⇒ **480** - Battle of Salamis – a Greek fleet led by Themistocles defeats the armada of Xerxes
 - ⇒ **480** - Battle of Thermopylae - 300 Spartans under King Leonidas and other Greek allies hold back the Persians for three days.
 - ⇒ **479** - Xerxes defeated at Plataea effectively ending Persia's imperial ambitions in Greece.
 - ⇒ **478** - Xerxes returns to Persia. Esther made queen (Esther 2:16-17)
 - ⇒ **474** - Haman's decree against the Jews (Esther 3:7; 8:9). Death of Haman and the feast of Purim instituted
 - ⇒ **465** – Xerxes is assassinated
- **443** – Nehemiah returns to rebuild walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1)
- **330** – Alexander the Great defeats the Persian empire and sets up the Greek empire

3. Esther affirms the dignity of women

- The silent hero of the book of Esther is God – we must be careful not to moralize the book and turn it into a series of moral lessons.
- However, we can learn from the faith and courage of Queen Esther.
- *“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.”*
1 Corinthians 10:11
- Esther is one of two books which bears the name of a woman.
- At this time woman had no voice, no power and no rights. They were afforded little dignity, value or worth. And yet God uses this vulnerable woman to rescue his people and further his purposes.
- The Bible treats women with great respect and dignity and affirms their role in the purposes of God.
- The book affirms the importance of male and female partnership in accompanying God’s purposes (9:29-32)

4. God seems to be absent in Esther

- God is never mentioned by name. God never speaks, He does no miracles and there are no prophets or angels. There is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple and no one prays and or even mentions God. Apart from some fasting (4:3, 16) there’s not even any religious references.
- What we have instead is a powerful megalomaniac of a king who refers to himself as “the king of kings” and “the God-Emperor”. We have a thoroughly secular court with no hint of the fear of God. And we have a vicious and vindictive politician whose principle policy is to utterly destroy the people of God.
- Haman is an Agagite (3:1). This links him with the first attempt to destroy God’s people after their escape from Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Agag was spared by Saul, the son of Kish (1 Samuel 15). Mordecai, another descendant of Kish (2:5) , protects Israel from the descendant of Agag.
- However, although he is not named God is far from absent. He cares for his people and rescues them from their enemies. God’s people can rest assured that God will protect them—even when we can’t see how He’s working.
- This is encapsulated in the central affirmation of the book in Esther 4:14 *“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*
- Mordecai affirms that there is a purpose to Esther becoming queen. God uses earthly instruments, like people’s actions, to accomplish His plans.
- God uses people, situations, events, all quite naturally, very inconspicuously, towards the end He intends. He is nowhere mentioned and everywhere present. He governs human history through the ordinary decisions and actions of people, even if they do not acknowledge Him. God does not need to use miracles or supernatural interventions to further His purposes.

5. The Structure of Esther

- The book of Esther is a unified narrative with three sections
 - ⇒ Esther 1-2 - The rise of Esther
 - ⇒ Esther 3-7 - The rise and fall of Haman
 - ⇒ Esther 8-10 - The rise of Mordecai
- The book is subdivided by ten references to feasts: 1:1-4; 1:5-8; 1:9-12; 2:18; 5:5b-8; 7:1-9; 8:16-17; 9:17, 19; 9:18; 9:20-32.