

NAME

The word “Esther” is a Persian term meaning “star.” The book is named after the young Jewess, Esther, and her experiences in the Persian court. Her Hebrew name, Hadassah, means “myrtle.”

This is one of two books in the Bible named for a woman. Ruth is the account of a Gentile who married a Jew. Esther is the account of a Jewess who married a Gentile.

AUTHOR

The author is uncertain. Ezra and Mordecai are both suggested. Mordecai was a man of letters (Esther 9:20,23) and so he doubtlessly kept records which probably were used in this book. Some think that the book is an extract from Persian records. If the book is taken from the records of the Persian kingdom, it would account for several characteristics of the book: the omission of the name of God, the details given concerning the empire of Ahasuerus, the exactness with which the names of his ministers and his sons are recorded, and the fact that the Jews are mentioned only in the third person.

One thing is certain, namely, that the author was a Jew who lived in Persia at the time of these events, and had access to the official chronicles of the Persian Court.

Other suggestions:

- Augustine ascribed the book to Ezra
- The Talmud said the Great Synagogue compiled it
- Some think that Mordecai and Esther co-authored it

DATE

The third year of the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) who reigned from 486-464 B.C. and cover a period of about 12 years (484-473 B.C.) (Esther 1:3). The account of the book falls into the period between the first expedition under Zerubbabel, 536 B.C., and the second restoration under Ezra, 457 B.C.

Although in the canonical order of books it comes after Nehemiah, its events antedate Nehemiah by about 30 years. These events probably took place during the 58 years of silence between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra (see Class Notes on Ezra: Outline: II The Return Under Ezra). This then is the account of those who chose not to return to Jerusalem but to remain in prosperity and luxury of Persia.

THEME

Type of Literature: History & Government

Halley (page 43): Escape of Israel From Extermination

Mitchell: The Providence of God

The word Providence (providential) comes from the same stem as the word “provide,” hence this book deals with the “providing of God.” The entire Jewish nation would have been slain if it had not been for God’s providing. God is seen moving behind the scenes in a marvelous manner, even when His people are disobedient.

Kartozian:

The purpose of the book is to show God's providential care of His people. It illustrates the nature and ways of Divine Providence. The same God who watched over the builders of the temple, also guarded the Jews in the 120 provinces of the Persian Empire. It is an inspired commentary on Deuteronomy 31:6 and Isaiah 54:17.

(WCBS Notes):

The theme (dominant and overwhelming, though unstated) is the Divine providence of Israel out of the land. *"Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep"* (Psalm 121:4 KJV).

Key Word (Nelson's): Providence - The Book of Esther was written to show how the Jewish people were protected and preserved by the gracious hand of God from the threat of annihilations. Although God disciplines His covenant people, He never abandons them.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

"And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (Esther 8:17).

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 8 - According to the Book of Esther, the salvation of the Jews is accomplished through the second decree of King Ahasuerus, allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. Chapter 8 records this pivotal event with the accompanying result that *"many from the peoples of the country declare themselves Jews"* (Esther 8:17).

Setting:

Shushan (Susa) was the capital of the Persian Empire. It was on the plains of the Tigris River and the winter residence of the Persian kings was located there. Most of the Jews still remained in the Persian Empire, those returning to Jerusalem being in the minority.

Principal Characters (adapted from Commentary & Notes on Esther - Kartozian)

1. Ahasuerus or Xerxes I. Ahasuerus ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Greek name Xerxes. The Persian form is Khahayarsha. He is the Persian King who made an expedition against Greece, building a bridge across the Hellespont, only to have it destroyed by a tempest. This crucial battle by land and sea turned the Persians back from conquering Greece and paved the way for the Greeks later to conquer the world. The battle took place in 480 B.C.. His son, Artaxerxes figures in the later chapters of Ezra and in Nehemiah.
2. Mordecai. He was a Jew, dwelling in Shushan, and upright and intelligent man. He was the family of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin (2:5), the first cousin of Esther, whom he had brought up as his own daughter.
3. Haman. He was a high officer at the court of Xerxes; very wealthy (5:11); stood nearest the throne; was entrusted with the King's signet ring and had the power of life or death over his subjects (3:1,10-12). He was vain and full of enmity and selfishness. He was supremely unhappy because one man refused to bow down to him. Haman was an Agagite, a

- descendent of Amalek; so Mordecai could not pay him homage (Exodus 17:16).
4. Esther. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah. Esther being her Persian name. She was an orphan, a woman of great beauty, but also of wisdom and devotion. Her resourcefulness, under the blessing of God, caused right to triumph and wrong to be dethroned.
 5. Vashti. She was the queen of Ahasuerus and was deposed for refusing to come into the presence of the King and his nobles during a drunken spree.

Outline:

- I. The Grave Danger to the Jews 1-3
- II. The Great Deliverance of the Jews 4-10

RECIPIENTS

God's people - specifically the Hebrews...and us. Jews of the Diaspora

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

There is historical connection with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Comparison can also be made with Mordecai's position under Ahasuerus (Esther 10:3) and that of Joseph under Pharaoh (Genesis 41:40), and that of Daniel at the court of Babylon (Daniel 5:16-29).

Mitchell - Purpose (three-fold)

- It demonstrates God's providential care for His people
- It explains the origin of the Feast of Purim (kept even today)
- It shows what happened to the Jews that did not return to Palestine

Also: God uses small things to accomplish great results. Are we paying attention? Are we available?

Special Note on Providence (Commentary & Notes on Esther - Kartozián)

This is one of the best books in the Bible in which to study the workings of Providence. Providence is secret, mysterious, and even unintelligible until its ends are revealed.

1. Providence works secretly. God, through His providences, is in everything yet He is not seen. In this book Ahasuerus, Vashti, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman seem to be doing all that is done; but back of the action there stands One who is infinitely wise, loving and patient, who guides all things for the accomplishment of His glorious purposes and for the good of His people. His name is not mentioned as He Himself is not seen, yet in all that occurs He is present. Back of all stands God, who controls all and uses them for His glory (Hebrews 1:3). How appropriate is a book which especially shows forth the Providence of God. His hand can be seen everywhere, yet His name is not once mentioned.
2. Providence works through the seeming trifles of life. In this book we see God dealing with and using the most trifling things to carry out His purpose. A whim of Ahasuerus caused Vashti to be set aside and Esther, the orphan Jewess to take her place. A sleepless night caused Mordecai to be exalted to a high position. Many a person's whole life has been changed by what seemed to be a mere trifle. Under the guiding hand of God, none of these "trifles" are insignificant or small.
3. Providence adjusts all circumstances to accomplish His will. The intelligence and wisdom of Providence is clearly seen in this book. Queen Esther came to the throne for just such a time (4:14,16). Sleep is taken from Ahasuerus at precisely the right time (6:1-3). Mordecai is

brought into prominence at the right time (6:10-13). The lot was cast for the destruction of the Jews on the 13th day of the first month, but its execution was to be on the 13th day of the 12th month. God ordained it so that the Jews might have plenty of time to counteract the wicked decisions (3:7; 8:9-17; 9:1,2). The book shows how God adjusted everything to accomplish His will (Proverbs 16:33).

Characteristics Of The Book (Commentary & Notes on Esther - Kartoizian)

1. The book gives a fine picture of Persian life and customs.
2. Although the Jews lived in the Persian Empire, they were recognized as a distinct people, not having been absorbed by the Gentiles.
3. Although the name of God is not mentioned there is everywhere a recognition of His power and care. Although God is not named, the reality of God is there.
4. The Jews have always taken great pride in the book since it records a great triumph. The Feast of Purim instituted at this time, became a national feast and remains so to this day. This feast is a proof of the integrity and validity of the book. National festivals do not usually arise out of fiction.
5. The faithfulness of the God of Israel is clearly portrayed. Haman planned the destruction of the whole Jewish race, but he left out of his plans the faithfulness of the God of Israel.

WCBS Notes:

The historic purpose was twofold: First, to encourage and comfort Jewish people scattered throughout the Persian Empire as to the guardianship of Jehovah of His people in dispersion; secondly, to explain and trace the origin of the Feast of Purim. The book, however, serves a further purpose of giving a glimpse of the condition of non-returning Jews in the Persian Empire, showing, incidentally, their spread over the whole empire.

Problems Regarding Canonicity

Mitchell:

The Problem

It is said that Luther declared himself so hostile to the book of Esther that he wished it did not exist (possibly due to the anti-Semitism of his day and to the lack of any mention of the name of God in the book). Some today have the same view. Certainly the book has its problems. At first glance the book seems totally secular in character. God's name is never mentioned, although the name of a pagan king appears 187 times. The book is never quoted in the New Testament and makes no direct reference to personal prayer, other than a call for national prayer and fasting, or any of the sacred observances of the Jewish law. The superstitious habit of observing lucky days by a heathen is its only approach to the supernatural.

Possible Solutions

It has been suggested that the very absence of the name of God is the book's chief beauty and should by no means be considered a blot on it. One might just as well argue that there is no cream in milk just because the word "cream" is not on the bottle! The milk itself is capable of revealing its own cream content. Or in the words of Matthew Henry, "*If the name of God is not here, His finger is.*" The Jews give the book special emphasis by placing it next to the Pentateuch. They call it the "Book of Salvation." They still read it faithfully each year. The Talmud (Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament) gives Deuteronomy 31:18 as a possible reason why God's name is not mentioned. They say that God was hiding His face from Israel, although He was not forgetful or unconcerned. The book may well be an extract from official Persian Court documents (cf. Esther 2:23 & notes under authorship above). This could account for the secular tone of the

book as well as the omission of the name of Jehovah.

Additionally - the Jews include Esther as one of the five Megilloth. The Megilloth are five scrolls of the Hebrew Bible read in conjunction with the five Jewish festivals. They are:

1. Ecclesiastes - read at Tabernacles
2. Esther - read at Purim
3. Lamentations - read at 9th of Ab (commemorating the destruction of the Temple)
4. Ruth - read at Festival of Weeks
5. Song of Songs - read at Passover

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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