

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Esther

Seventeenth of 37 Old Testament books, between Nehemiah and Job. Like Ruth in extolling the virtue of a Hebrew woman, Esther reports a crisis that came to the Jews during their sojourn in the kingdom of Persia (about 500 years before Christ) and the divine providence that solved it.

Heavily historical. Some see this story as Hebrew myth, but its accuracy is supported by dates and names, by the writer's knowledge of Persian customs, and by recent archaeology. King Ahasuerus here is likely Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.) of Persian history.

Modestly theological. Like Song of Solomon, Obadiah, and Nahum, Esther is not mentioned or alluded to in the New Testament. Nor is God's name found here, yet the writing is firmly undergirded with Hebrew faith and permeated with the providence of a God who foils diabolical schemes and delivers His people (Psa. 121:4).

earlier order to kill all Jews in the realm at an appointed time. The feast of Purim ("lot") is celebrated by Jews on Adar 14-15 as their memorial to this remarkable survival and victory (7:7—10:3).

Purim is one of two festivals outside the Mosaic law still celebrated in Israel (9:17-32). The other is Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights (John 10:22), which marks the victory of the Maccabean Jews over Antiochus and the Syrian invaders in 164 B.C.

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The fourth chapter contains classic expressions of faith and duty, spoken under the stress of an unjust royal decree. Mordecai encourages Esther to go before the king with the plight of her people by asking, "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14).

Facing possible death for her boldness, Esther agrees with the response "If I perish, I perish!" (v. 16).

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The eighth chapter contains a further glimpse of Esther's character (8:3-6), an explanation of the law of the Medes and Persians (8:8), the longest verse in the Bible (8:9), and a preview of the modern phrase "have a good day" (8:16, 17).

While God is not mentioned in this book, His nature is clearly in the fulfillment of His repeated promise (elsewhere) to preserve the Jewish people, and through divine providence (8:5-17).

Esther in a sentence: The feast of Purim marks the days of deliverance when the courageous queen of an ancient, powerful monarch intercedes in behalf of her Jewish people to have their death decree, obtained by the scheming of a wicked, royal advisor, reversed.

THE DRAMA

Setting

The story of Esther takes place in the kingdom of Medo-Persia. In this powerful empire that controlled the world from India to Ethiopia for two centuries were people of many nationalities and religions. Some of them were Jews from Israel who had come there 100 years earlier during the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies. Now Medo-Persia has replaced Babylon, and many Jews have been permitted to return to Jerusalem (in 536 B.C., etc.). To those Jews who remain in the land of their captivity beyond the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, this story happens.

Main Characters

Ahasuerus - powerful Persian king
 Esther - Ahasuerus' new queen; a Jew
 Mordecai - Esther's cousin, her guardian; a Jew
 Haman - senior aide to Ahasuerus; hater of Jews

Plot

When Queen Vashti challenges the authority of King Ahasuerus, he deposes and replaces her with the lovely Esther, not knowing her ethnic identity. In a separate action, Haman, jealous of the principled Mordecai, bribes the king to decree death for all Jews in the kingdom and builds the gallows for Mordecai (1:1—3:15).

Turning Point

After Mordecai and other Jews humble themselves with fasting, Esther risks her life by approaching the king uninvited. At this pivotal moment, Ahasuerus extends her the golden scepter. Esther gradually reveals to him the plot to kill her people and names Haman, raging over the honor bestowed on Mordecai for his previous favor to the king, as the plot's chief perpetrator (4:1—7:6).

Climax

The king orders Haman hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, installs Mordecai in the royal post previously held by Haman, and reverses his