

BOOK OF ESTHER

Approximate date: 460 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate); 330 B.C.E. (Left)

Time period: Jews dispersed throughout the Persian Empire

Author: anonymous (some Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Location of author: Persia (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel after the exile (most Left)

Target audience and their location: Jewish people in Persian Empire (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish people having returned from the Babylonian Exile, probably during the time of the Maccabees (Left)

People:

Ahasuerus/Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai (son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish), Hadassah/Esther, Bithgana, Teresh, Haman (son of Hammedatha, the Agagite), Hathach

People mentioned:

Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, Carcas (Xerxes' eunuchs), Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, Memucan (Xerxes' advisors/experts), Nebuchadnezzar, Jehoiachin, Shaashgaz (eunuch), Abihail, Zeresh, Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha (ten sons of Haman)

Places:

Susa, Persia, Media

Places mentioned:

India, Cush, Babylon

Key Themes and Events:

King Xerxes holds a banquet where he intends to showcase his wife, Queen Vashti / Vashti refuses, and an edict is released calling for a new queen to be found / the (unknown) Jewess Esther found favor by King Xerxes / Mordecai is given credit for reporting an assassination plot on King Xerxes / Mordecai as a Jew refuses to bow before Haman / Haman develops a scheme to exterminate the Jews in Persia / Mordecai and the Jews wail in sackcloth and ashes over the decree of Haman / Esther prepares herself to go before King Xerxes / Esther is granted the request to hold a banquet for Xerxes and Haman / King Xerxes has Haman honor Mordecai for having saved his life from potential assassination / Esther pleads with King Xerxes to spare the lives of the Jews / King Xerxes insists that the evil Haman be hanged on his own gallows / Mordecai

is appointed over Haman's estate / the Jews throughout the Persian Empire are given the right to defend themselves against their enemies / the Jews in Persia eliminate their most lethal enemies / Haman's sons are executed / *Purim* is celebrated for the first time, commemorating the deliverance of the Jews / *Purim* is designated as a festival that all the Jews should keep / Mordecai is made second to King Xerxes

Key Scriptures: Esther 1:19-20; 2:17-18, 22-23; 3:5-6; 4:1-3, 14-16; 5:14; 7:3-6, 9-10; 8:11-12; 9:18-23, 30-32; 10:3 / **Esther becomes queen** (1:1-2:23); **The Jews are threatened** (3:1-4:17); **Esther intercedes for the Jews** (5:1-8:17); **The Jews are delivered** (9:1-10:3)

Theological Summary: The Book of Esther is one of the most unique texts in the Tanach, with those who read it demonstrating a wide variety of opinions: from Maimonides who placed it second only to the Torah, Luther who thought it was gaudy and sensual, and the feminist theologian who places it at the center of her theology. In the Christian theological tradition, Esther is placed among the Historical books, whereas Jewish tradition places it among the Five Scrolls or *Megillot* to be read during holiday times. Esther tells the story of a Jewish girl who becomes the new queen of Persia, and is placed in a position to save the Jewish people from extinction.

The purpose of Esther's composition was primarily to justify the celebration of *Purim*¹ as a holiday for the Jewish people during and immediately following the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus, known in Greek historical works as Xerxes (3:7; 9:26-32).² The young Jewess Esther becomes the queen of Persia, and her cousin Mordecai learns about the genocidal plans of the evil Haman toward the Jews. The location of these events is in the Persian city of Susa. The text may easily be described as a Jewish novella, with the term *Purim* derived from the lot or *pur* (פּוּר) Haman cast to determine the date of execution for the Jews (3:7; 9:24).

Conservative theologians regard the author of Esther as being anonymous,³ but most certainly a Jew. Jewish tradition in the Talmud (b.*Bava Batra* 15a)⁴ attributes authorship of the book to the figures of the Great Synagogue. The author of Esther was most probably a Persian Jew who was quite familiar with the inner workings and social structure of the Persian Empire, as he demonstrates no knowledge of events or circumstances going on in the Land of Israel. The text of Esther was likely composed before Ezra's return to Jerusalem, and with that was probably written shortly after the events it depicts, sometime in the late Fifth Century B.C.E. Esther 9:22 suggests that the festival of *Purim* was celebrated for some time before Esther's composition:

"[I]t was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

¹ D. Harvey, "Esther, Book of," in *IDB*, 2:150.

² Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1087-1088.

³ D.F. Payne, "Esther, Book of," in *ISBE*, 2:158; F.B. Huey, Jr., "Esther," in *EXP*, 4:776; Dillard and Longman, 191.

⁴ "The Men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel, and the scroll of Esther" (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

Liberal scholars often advocate a later composition for Esther, as early as the late Fourth Century B.C.E. Various Greek “loan words” present in the text make some suggest that Esther is a composition of the early Hellenistic period.⁵ Liberals will often consider the events portrayed in Esther to be pseudohistorical, and perhaps even to be read as a comedy.⁶ Many doubt that the events ever took place,⁷ and conclude that they are only a “festal legend” (*IDBSup*).⁸ The people in the Book of Esther are often viewed as only being caricatures of other figures that antagonized the Jewish people.

Doubting the historicity of Esther is not only a feature of modern higher criticism, but even some Jews of ancient times doubted its validity (b.*Megillah* 7a).⁹ Many try to connect the feast of *Purim* to the Maccabean period and their victory over the Greeks,¹⁰ including Haman being modeled after Antiochus Epiphanes.¹¹ Many liberals, however, do consider the story of Esther to have great value, particularly concerning Esther as a female protagonist in a male-dominated Persian society.

Conservatives and liberals all recognize that the Book of Esther is not to be taken as “sober history” (*NBCR*),¹² as there are certainly elements in the story that are meant to guide the reader. But how far we take this has led to a diverse array of conclusions. Many liberals will claim that the Persian Empire was tolerant of minorities, thus casting doubt on Esther’s claim of genocide against the Persian Jews. Others will argue, “The writer displays a most intimate and accurate knowledge of the Persian court and customs, so much so that Esther is used to fill gaps in the accounts of classical historians” (*EDB*).¹³ Conservatives will commonly note that the Greek historian Herodotus writes that King Xerxes was ruthless and despotic,¹⁴ and that we cannot make broad generalizations of Persian culture.

Perhaps the most significant support for the historicity of Esther among external data is a reference to a certain *Marduka* (Mordecai) among Persian records,¹⁵ proving that the Biblical Mordecai could certainly have existed. Today there appears to be a trend in liberal scholarship toward accepting some historicity of the text, as some note that “nothing in the story seems improbable, let alone unbelievable” (*ABD*),¹⁶ with some even dating the text (or at least a proto-text) in the late Persian period.¹⁷

⁵ W.L. Humphreys, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 280.

⁶ Adele Berlin, “Esther,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1623.

⁷ Harvey, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:151.

⁸ Humphreys, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDBSup*, 279.

⁹ Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1090.

¹⁰ Harvey, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:151; Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1088-1090; J.G. Baldwin, “Esther,” in *NBCR*, 412.

¹¹ Payne, “Esther, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:158.

¹² Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 413; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1090-1092.

¹³ Ilona N. Rashkow, “Esther, Book of,” in *EDB*, 428; cf. Payne, “Esther, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:159; Dillard and Longman, pp 191-192.

¹⁴ Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 413.

¹⁵ Clyde E. Harrington, “Esther, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 326; Payne, “Esther, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:159.

¹⁶ Carey A. Moore, “Esther, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:638.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:641.

The textual witness for Esther is immense. “[T]here are more MS copies of Esther than of any other book of the OT” (*NBCR*),¹⁸ and there is extensive Rabbinic commentary on Esther in the Talmud. This high regard for Esther actually sees it placed second to the Torah among some manuscripts.¹⁹ There exist three major editions of the text of Esther,²⁰ notably the Hebrew Masoretic Text, Greek Septuagint, and a second Greek edition. There are additions to the Book of Esther found in the LXX that have a major religious character. These chapters are a part of the Apocrypha in Additions to the Book of Esther,²¹ and are considered canonical in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

A theme seen throughout Esther is an ongoing conflict between Israel and the Amalekites (2:5; 3:1-6; 9:5-10), something that originally occurred during the Exodus (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) and continued throughout Israel’s history (1 Samuel 15; 1 Chronicles 4:43). The author of Esther views the Amalekites as the epitome and/or sum of Israel’s enemies, with Haman depicted as a descendant of King Agag.²²

The Book of Esther also relies heavily upon the Jewish people being portrayed as God’s faithful remnant. Evangelical Christian theologians are very keen to note that the continued existence of the Jewish people demonstrated in Esther is imperative due to the promises of the coming Messiah.²³ Some also suggest a reliance upon the themes seen in the story of Joseph regarding God’s preservation of the Jews in Susa (2:3-4, 9, 21-23; 3:4; 4:14; 6:1, 8, 14: 8:6).

It is undeniable that Esther confronts us with a major Tanach example of Israel interacting with other cultures. Our principal protagonist is actually named *Hadassah* (הַדַּסָּה) meaning “myrtle,” but is given the Persian name *Ester* (אֶסְתֵּר) meaning “star” (2:7).²⁴ Understanding Persian history and society is imperative to properly grasp the concepts in Esther, as great banquets are the focal points of much of the story. We also do see drunkenness and lewd sexuality in Esther.²⁵ A common misconception about the evil Haman “hanging” is that he was hanged on a gallows similar to today, when in the Persian context it was probably impalement followed by the public display or “hanging” of the corpse for the public to see. The writing style of Esther is undoubtedly affected by Persian techniques.²⁶

The major discussion of the validity of the Book of Esther often concerns the absence of any direct reference to “God” (*EXP*).²⁷ Many have considered the text to be entirely secular, and not religious at all. Esther had difficulty gaining canonical status in both the Jewish and

¹⁸ Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 412.

¹⁹ Huey, in *EXP*, 4:776.

²⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 1101-1102; Huey, in *EXP*, 4:781-782; Moore, “Esther, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:641-642.

²¹ Payne, “Esther, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:158.

²² Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1085.

²³ Dillard and Longman, 197.

²⁴ Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1085; Rashkow, “Esther, Book of,” in *EDB*, 427.

²⁵ Moore, “Esther, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:633; Berlin, “Esther,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1623.

²⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1096; Rashkow, “Esther, Book of,” in *EDB*, 428.

²⁷ Huey, in *EXP*, 4:784-785.

Christian theological traditions,²⁸ and the Qumran community did not consider it canonical at all. Some Jewish and Christian scholars have considered the book grossly immoral.²⁹ Neither Esther nor Mordecai make a reference to the Torah or Tanach, or demonstrate that they follow the “commandments,” per se.

In response to these claims against Esther, it is proposed that God not being mentioned directly is so that this book could circulate more freely among Jews in Persia.³⁰ Many conclude that the anonymity of God is a literary device used to heighten the reader’s sensitivity to Him working through the life circumstances of human beings.³¹ It is only by God’s faithfulness to His people that they are saved, as He moves on the hearts of the protagonists. The Book of Esther has offered Jews throughout history a great deal of hope during times of distress.³²

The Book of Esther is often very important for Messianics during the season of *Purim*. It causes all of us to consider the role of anti-Semitism in today’s world, and the role that we can play to combat it. It most certainly causes us to consider how God works through the human condition without us often seeing. Esther gives us a critical lesson of how God can use us to save and/or help His people during times of terrible distress. Esther is a great text that teaches us about the salvation history of God,³³ and at the same time asks us questions about how He can use *both* men and women to accomplish it.

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²⁸ Harvey, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:151; Payne, “Esther, Book of,” in *ISBE*, 2:158; Huey, in *EXP*, 4:779; Moore, “Esther, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:635-638; Rashkow, “Esther, Book of,” in *EDB*, 427-428; Dillard and Longman, 189.

²⁹ Moore, “Esther, Book of,” in *ABD*, 2:635.

³⁰ Harrington, “Esther, Book of,” in *NIDB*, 326.

³¹ Harvey, “Esther, Book of,” in *IDB*, 2:150.

³² Baldwin, in *NBCR*, 412.

³³ Dillard and Longman, 197.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON ESTHER:

- 1. Explain the significance of Esther entering onto the scene as a queen to King Xerxes.**
- 2. What do you believe that the figure of Haman fully represents? Consider his plan to annihilate the Jews in Persia.**
- 3. What was the “offense” that enraged Haman against Mordecai?**
- 4. Why do you think that there is no specific mention of God in the Book of Esther?**
- 5. Do you believe it is Biblically appropriate to commemorate the Feast of *Purim*? Why or why not?**
- 6. Do you believe that today’s Messianic community takes the message and themes of Esther seriously?**

REFLECTION ON ESTHER’S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Esther: