

Subject: *Book of Esther - Introduction*

Scripture: *Esther 1:1-22*

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

1. Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named after women (Esther and Ruth). Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew, and Esther was a Jew who married a Gentile.
2. The story of Esther took place in 483-473 B.C. It is the last of the Old Testament historical books. There are 17 historical books in all (Joshua—Esther).
3. The book of Esther contains a total of 10 chapters, 167 verses, and 5,637 words (KJV).
4. Esther tells the story of exiled Jews living in Persia. These Jews did not return to Jerusalem and their homeland after the decree of King Cyrus. The events in Esther took place between Ezra 6 (return to Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel) and Ezra 7 (return led to Jerusalem by Ezra).
5. Esther was written to encourage the Jews and remind them of God's providential care. They realized that their enemies, though ever-present and dangerous, could not completely destroy them because God protected them and remained faithful to His covenant.
6. Esther is one of the greatest dramas in the Bible. This story has the marks of great literature: a dramatic plot, conflict involving a sinister villain (Haman), a hero (Mordecai), a heroine (Esther), suspense, surprise, and irony.
7. Esther is related historically and thematically to other Bible books:
 - Ezra – restoration of the Jews after captivity
 - Nehemiah – rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and spiritual values after captivity
 - Esther – preservation of the Jews who remained in captivity
8. Esther reveals how God uses ordinary people to overcome impossible circumstances to accomplish His purpose.
9. Esther reveals how God protects His people in order to fulfill His plan of redemption. God sovereignly works to destroy those who seek to destroy His people. Esther is a clear fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing; and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3).
10. Esther is a remarkable story that highlights God's providence. God works in many ways to accomplish His purpose. His primary ways of working fall into the categories of "miracles" and "providence," which may be described as follows. In *miracles* God works visibly in a spectacular way (such as the ten plagues in Exodus), whereas in *providence* God works secretly behind the scenes in a quiet way. In *miracles* God overrules, suspends, or interrupts the normal course of things to accomplish His will, whereas in *providence* God uses normal people, things, and events to accomplish His will. Though God sometimes works through *miracles*, His more common method of working is through *providence*.

11. Esther illustrates two well-known verses in the New Testament:

- “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)
- “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

AUTHOR

God is the source and ultimate author of Esther. The human author/writer is unknown.

READERS

Esther was originally written for God’s people in the Old Testament, the Jews. The book was ultimately written for all of God’s people through the ages. One of the main purposes of the book was to reveal the historical origin of and basis for the annually-observed Jewish Feast of Purim (Lots).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

605 B.C. God’s people, the Jews, were carried into Babylon as captives. This captivity under King Nebuchadnezzar lasted for nearly 70 years (605-536 B.C.).

536 B.C. King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire issued a decree allowing Jewish captives to return home to Jerusalem. Yet, only a small number (42,360, Ezra 2:64) actually returned. The great majority did not return to Palestine, but chose to remain in Persia for two possible reasons: 1) They prospered financially in Persia; 2) They had lost their vision of God’s special purpose for Israel.

From 536 to 482 B.C., six things happened to the Jews remaining in Persia:

- 1) The Jews became a numerous people (Esther 9:16).
- 2) The Jews became a widely scattered, yet distinct people (Esther 3:8; 9:2, 20).
- 3) The Jews became a wealthy people (Esther 3:9).
- 4) The Jews became an unspiritual and materialistic people.
- 5) The Jews became a people who had lost their desire to return to their homeland.
- 6) The Jews were still a people that God watched over and providentially protected.

MAIN CHARACTERS

1. King Ahasuerus – This was his Hebrew name. He was also known as Xerxes, his Greek name. He reigned over the Medo-Persian Empire from 486-464 B.C (Esther 1:1). He ruled the empire from four capital cities: Babylon, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and Shushan (Susa).

2. Queen Vashti – She was deposed from her office when she disobeyed the king (Esther 1).

3. Queen Esther – Her name means “star.” Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (“myrtle”). She was a Jew and the adopted daughter of Mordecai. She became the new queen in place of Vashti.

4. Mordecai – He was a Jew and cousin of Esther (Esther 2:5, 7).
5. Haman – A royal assistant under King Ahasuerus (Esther 3:1). He is the sinister character in the story, a vowed enemy of all the Jews and especially Mordecai.
6. God Himself is the main character and director behind the scenes.

UNIQUE FEATURES

1. Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not contain the name of God. This fact is even more unusual since the king of Persia is mentioned 187 times. Although God's name is not present, His hand is everywhere.
2. Esther is not mentioned anywhere else outside this book.
3. The book of Esther is not quoted or mentioned in any New Testament book.
4. The book of Esther has no mention of the Law or the Covenant. There is no mention of sacrifices, offerings, or prayer, although fasting is mentioned. There is no mention of angels, miracles, or life after death.
5. Esther has frequent mention of feasts: Esther 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. In all of these chapters a feast either takes place or is mentioned.
6. The name "Jews" appears 43 times in the plural and 8 times in the singular. The name "Jew" is derived from "Judah," the prominent tribe of Israel.

MAIN THEME

The book of Esther clearly reveals the providence of God. The providence of God has been described as "the hand of God in the glove of history." Providence is the way God works in all the details of life to provide for the needs of His people. The book of Esther reveals "God's unseen hand." John MacArthur comments:

"Throughout history, God has more readily operated behind the scenes than in plain sight. The Scriptures are filled with unusual circumstances in which God worked obviously. But Esther comes close to revealing God's standard operating procedure. God's fingerprints are all over Esther's story. His superficial absence points to a deeper presence. God chose to be subtle, but He was there. The events in Esther give us a model for hope when God works in less than obvious ways in our lives."

When people settled this country, they named a Rhode Island city "Providence." That would not happen in our culture today. The idea of divine providence has all but disappeared from our culture, which is tragic. One way in which the secular mind-set has made inroads into the Christian community is through the worldview that assumes that everything happens according to fixed natural causes, and God, if He is actually there, is above and beyond it all. He is just a spectator in heaven looking down, perhaps cheering us on but exercising no immediate control over what happens on earth. Historically, however, Christians have had an acute sense that this is our Father's world and that the affairs of men and nations, in the final analysis, are in His hands.

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