

Part 1: Introduction to the Book of Esther

ESTHER

God's Silence Does Not Equal God's Inactivity



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Jewish History

- The Persian ruler Cyrus released the Jews from Babylonian captivity in 538 BC so that they could return home and rebuild their temple.
- Because of opposition and disobedience, the Jews did not finish the temple until 516 BC.
- Many of the Jews did not return to Jerusalem. (These people are called the Diaspora.) Several generations later, Esther was one of these Jews living outside of Judah, in Susa (Persia).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Persian History

- Darius I was the father of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus). Darius wanted Greece. Yet he failed to capture Athens in 492 BC and lost the battle of Marathon two years later. Then, in 486 BC, Egypt rebelled. Darius died shortly thereafter.
- Xerxes stepped in for his father, conquered Egypt, and prepared to attack Greece. He was married to Amestris (Vashti), the mother of Artaxerxes I.
- The story of Esther begins with Xerxes hosting a military planning banquet for his upcoming onslaught of Greece (c. 483 BC).

BRIEF SUMMARY

- Overarching Narrative
 - Chapters 1–2: Ahasuerus hosts a banquet. He calls for Vashti, but she refuses to come. The king replaces her with Esther. Mordecai saves the king.
 - Chapter 3: Ahasuerus promotes Haman. Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Haman conspires to kill the Jews. The date of the slaughter is set by a “roll of the dice.”
 - Chapters 4–5: Mordecai enlists Esther to save the Jews. She agrees at the risk of her life. She hosts a banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman. Haman builds a 75 foot pole to impale Mordecai on the next day.

BRIEF SUMMARY

- Overarching Narrative
 - Chapter 6: Ahasuerus cannot sleep that night. He reads the royal records and discovers that Mordecai saved his life. Mordecai is honored to the chagrin of Haman.
 - Chapters 7–8a: Esther hosts another banquet. She reveals her ethnicity and the plot of Haman. The king impales Haman. Esther and Mordecai craft a counter-decree to save the Jews.
 - Chapter 8b: The decree is sent throughout the Persian Empire. Mordecai is promoted.

BRIEF SUMMARY

- Overarching Narrative
 - Chapters 9–10: The Jews destroy their enemies. Purim is instituted. Mordecai is memorialized as an example of devotion to his people.

BRIEF SUMMARY

- Unique Features

- God is never mentioned in Esther. The focus is on the people of God. (The word *yĕhûdî* [“Jew”] is used more times in Esther than in the entire Old Testament combined.) But God is not absent!
- Esther has a female leading character. Esther begins as a pitiable (and scandalous!) Jewish girl but develops into a heroine for her people.
- The story also has a historical function. It describes the origin of the Jewish feast, Purim, which is celebrated on the 14th and 15th of Adar. (Purim was just celebrated on February 25–26.)

IMPORTANT THEMES

- Salvation History

- God never forgets his promises. He continued to work out his plans for his people, even when his people are faithless and in a foreign land.
- Esther ties up a loose end in the Old Testament, namely the divine judgment of the Amalekites (Exodus 17:14; 1 Samuel 15:3; Esther 2:5; 3:1).
- The providential work of God in Esther paved the way for the coming of Christ. Many Gentiles at that time became Jewish proselytes (Esther 8:17).

IMPORTANT THEMES

- Divine Providence
 - God never abandons his people—even when he appears to be silent! He works for them in unimaginable ways (Romans 8:28; Ephesians 3:20).
 - The amazing “coincidences” of Esther are actually proofs of divine providence: Vashti is deposed, Esther is selected, Mordecai saves the king, the king can’t sleep and reads just the right document, and then Esther and Mordecai are in a position to deliver the people of God.
 - The main point of Esther is God is in control.

IMPORTANT THEMES

- Imperfect People
 - Esther is not a clean story. It is filled with drinking, sex, and murder. The “heroes” are flawed, but God uses the heroes and the villains of the story to rescue his people.
 - God can accomplish his will even without the cooperation of people. But the “transformation” of Esther speaks to the power of God. He does the same for us today (Philippians 2:12–13).

MODERN APPLICATIONS

- Divine Presence and Providence
 - Many people wonder where God is and why he is “silent.” Esther answers those questions.
 - Without his name recorded or his voice heard, God manifests his presence and providence in Esther. He is active today, and we can trust him.
- Divine Care and Deliverance
 - God cares for and listens to us; we can cast all our anxieties on him (1 Peter 5:6–7).
 - Salvation awaits us as the people of God!

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