

# Intro to Esther

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## Author and Date

Although we do not know who wrote the book of Esther, from internal evidence it is possible to make some inferences about the author and the date of composition. It is clear that the author was a Jew, both from his emphasis on the origin of a Jewish festival and from the Jewish nationalism that permeates the story. The author's knowledge of Persian customs, the setting of the story in the city of Susa and the absence of any reference to conditions or circumstances in the land of Judah suggest that he was a resident of a Persian city. The earliest date for the book would be shortly after the events narrated, i.e., c. 460 b.c. (before Ezra's return to Jerusalem; see note on [8:12](#)). Internal evidence also suggests that the festival of Purim had been observed for some time prior to the actual writing of the book ([9:19](#)) and that Xerxes had already died (see [10:2](#) and note). Several scholars have dated the book later than 330 b.c.; the absence of Greek words and the style of the author's Hebrew dialect, however, suggest that the book must have been written before the Persian empire fell to Greece in 331.

## Purpose, Themes, and Literary Features

The author's central purpose was to record the institution of the annual festival of Purim and to keep alive for later generations the memory of the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of Xerxes. The book accounts for both the initiation of that observance and the obligation for its perpetual commemoration (see [3:7](#); [9:26–32](#); see also chart, pp. 234–235).

Throughout much of the story the author calls to mind the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Amalekites (see notes on [2:5](#); [3:1–6](#); [9:5–10](#)), a conflict that began during the exodus ([Ex 17:8–16](#); [Dt 25:17–19](#)) and continued through Israel's history ([1Sa 15](#); [1Ch 4:43](#); and, of course, Esther). As the first to attack Israel after their deliverance from Egypt, the Amalekites were viewed—and the author of Esther views them—as the epitome of all the powers of the world arrayed against God's people (see [Nu 24:20](#); [1Sa 15:2–3](#); [28:18](#)). Now that Israel has been released from captivity, Haman's edict is the final major effort in the OT period to destroy them.

Closely associated with the conflict with the Amalekites is the rest that is promised to the people of God (see [Dt 25:19](#)). With Haman's defeat the Jews enjoy rest from their enemies ([9:16,22](#)).

The author also draws upon the remnant motif that recurs throughout the Bible (natural disasters, disease, warfare or other calamities threaten God's people; those who survive constitute a remnant). Events in the Persian city of Susa threatened the continuity of God's purposes in redemptive history. The future existence of God's chosen people, and ultimately the appearance of the Redeemer-Messiah, were jeopardized by Haman's edict to destroy the Jews. The author of Esther patterned much of his material on the events of the Joseph story (see notes on [2:3–4,9,21–23](#); [3:4](#); [4:14](#); [6:1,8,14](#); [8:6](#)), in which the remnant motif is also central to the narrative (see [Ge 45:7](#) and note).

Feasting is another prominent theme in Esther, as shown in the outline below. Banquets provide the setting for important plot developments. There are ten banquets: (1) [1:3–4](#), (2) [1:5–8](#), (3) [1:9](#), (4) [2:18](#), (5) [3:15](#), (6) [5:5–6](#), (7) [7:1–10](#), (8) [8:17](#), (9) [9:17](#), (10) [9:18](#). The three pairs of banquets that mark the beginning, middle and end of the story are particularly prominent: the two banquets given by Xerxes, the two prepared by Esther and the double celebration of Purim.

Recording duplications appears to be one of the favorite compositional techniques of the writer. In addition to the three groups of banquets that come in pairs there are two lists of the king's servants (1:10,14), two reports that Esther concealed her identity (2:10,20), two gatherings of women (2:8,19), two fasts (4:3,16), two consultations of Haman with his wife and friends (5:14; 6:13), two unscheduled appearances of Esther before the king (5:2; 8:3), two investitures for Mordecai (6:10–11; 8:15), two coverings of Haman's face (6:12; 7:8), two royal edicts (3:12–15; 8:1–14), two references to the subsiding of the king's anger (2:1; 7:10), two references to the irrevocability of the Persian laws (1:19; 8:8), two days for the Jews to take vengeance (9:5–12,13–15) and two letters instituting the commemoration of Purim (9:20–28,29–32).

An outstanding feature of this book—one that has given rise to considerable discussion—is the complete absence of any explicit reference to God, worship, prayer, or sacrifice. This “secularity” has produced many detractors who have judged the book to be of little religious value. However, it appears that the author has deliberately refrained from mentioning God or any religious activity as a literary device to heighten the fact that it is God who controls and directs all the seemingly insignificant coincidences (see, e.g., note on 6:1) that make up the plot and issue in deliverance for the Jews. God's sovereign rule is assumed at every point (see note on 4:12–16), an assumption made all the more effective by the total absence of reference to him. It becomes clear to the careful reader that Israel's Great King exercises his providential and sovereign control over all the vicissitudes of his beleaguered covenant people.

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## Outline

- The Feasts of Xerxes (1:1—2:18)
  - Vashti Deposed (ch. 1)
  - Esther Made Queen (2:1–18)
- The Feasts of Esther (2:19—7:10)
  - Mordecai Uncovers a Plot (2:19–23)
  - Haman's Plot (ch. 3)
  - Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help (ch. 4)
  - Esther's Request to the King: Her First Banquet (5:1–8)
  - A Sleepless Night (5:9—6:14)
  - Haman Hanged: Esther's Second Banquet (ch. 7)
- The Feasts of Purim (chs. 8–10)
  - The King's Edict in Behalf of the Jews (ch. 8)
  - The Institution of Purim (ch. 9)
  - The Promotion of Mordecai (ch. 10)

## Esther Chapter 1

1. Read Isaiah 44:24 – 45:7. Note that Cyrus lived a little over a generation before King Xerxes/ Ahasuerus. What did Isaiah prophesy concerning Cyrus (hundreds of years before his time)?
  - a. According to history, Cyrus not only allowed the Jews to rebuild but also helped financially support other nations with rebuilding their communities. From a selfish perspective, why would this be beneficial to Cyrus and the Medo-Persian empire?
  
2. At the start, what does the author make sure we know about the measure of the territorial kingdom of Persia?
  - a. What is the extent of the time that King Xerxes/ Ahasuerus displayed his vast wealth and how does that demonstrate how much wealth the Persian empire had?
  
  - b. How long was the feast that was exclusive to those living in Shushan/ Susa?
    - i. What is evident about the various surroundings, amenities, and extravagance that is meant to emphasize the extent of the wealth of the Persian kingdom especially during the capital city feast?
  
3. Knowing that the king and his guests were drunk (or at least notably buzzed!), there have been, primarily, 2 scenarios put forward as the circumstances that were brought to Queen Vashti: 1. She was to get completely adorned in royal jewelry with her crown and walk before the king and his guests, or: 2. She was to walk before the king and his guests wearing ONLY the crown. In looking at the context of the passage, which views do you recognize as being possible and why would the 2<sup>nd</sup> one lend itself credibility concerning why the queen rejecting the king's command?
  
4. What was the logic of the king's advisors concerning the direction that they recommended concerning Queen Vashti?
  
5. What was a unique aspect of the Medo-Persian law-making process that certainly should have caused the leadership to be very careful when creating a new law?

## Esther Chapter 2 (Part 1)

1. King Ahasuerus/ Xerxes made his decision concerning Queen Vashti when he was angry and likely, drunk. When time passed and anger subsided, it appears he had some second thoughts about his decision. Why couldn't he just command to have her come back?
  - a. Read James 3:1-12. What important points does the Apostle James make concerning our words?
    - i. As followers of Christ, why is it of the utmost importance that we are careful about the words that come out of our mouths?
2. When the king's advisors noticed his concern, what remedy did they come up with that was to his liking?
3. The book of Esther's timeline is around 478 B.C. This was about 120 years after Jeconiah, King of Judah was taken by Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon). Knowing this, which descendant of Mordecai was likely the one that was exiled at the time of Nebuchadnezzar?
  - a. How was Mordecai related to Esther and why was he taking care of her?
  - b. Though the book is called "Esther", what was Esther's Jewish name?
4. Esther was taken to the king's palace with many women. Who was in charge of her and what is said of her compared to the other women?
  - a. Why didn't Esther reveal her ethnicity to the people who took care of her?

## **Esther Chapter 2 (Part 2)**

5. What demonstrates Mordecai's great concern for Esther?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How long were the women of the harem in the care of the palace before they were to see the King?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How did Esther appear to demonstrate wisdom when it was her time to go and be with the King?
  - a. How did the king respond to the community once he chose Esther to be his queen?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How did Esther's actions demonstrate that she had great respect for Mordecai?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What actions of Mordecai proved he had loyalty to the kingship of Persia even though he was a devout Jew?
  - a. What investigation took place after Mordecai's actions and what was confirmed?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Read Romans 13:1-7. When should we be submitting to the governing authorities and giving them honor and when is it right for us to disobey those authorities?
    - i. Read also, 1 Timothy 2:1-2. How is Paul's request to Timothy similar?

### Esther Chapter 3

1. Haman, in the story of Esther, is identified as an "Agagite". For context on his descendant's history, read 1 Samuel 15:1-33. What was King Saul charged to do and why was he charged to do it?
  - a. In what ways did Saul obey the order and in what ways did he disobey the orders from God?
  - b. When Samuel confronted Saul, how did Saul defend himself?
    - i. How did Samuel correct Saul in his understanding of God's priorities?
  - c. What eventually happened to Agag?
  - d. Why are we certain that some of Agag's family managed to escape that day?
  - e. When applying God's instruction in our time, explain how obedience to God is better than sacrifice:
  - f. What are some dangers of only partly following God's instructions?

2. How did king Ahasuerus treat Haman at the beginning of chapter 3?
  - a. What did everyone do, except Mordecai, on behalf of Haman, and what was Haman's response to this?
  - b. Once a law was put in place, in accordance with the Medes and Persians, what could be modified?
3. How did Haman determine when the destruction of the Jews would take place?
4. How did the provinces become aware of the date of the Jews' destruction?
  - a. How much advance notice do all the people begin to receive notification of this edict and how might this allow them ample time to prepare?
5. In the law that was delivered, what were the people allowed to do to the Jews?
6. Read the last verse of Esther 3. From the literary structure of how this chapter closes out, how does this contrast the state of the Persian leaders vs. the state of the rest of the people?

## Esther Chapter 4

1. According to Persian history, a sad demeanor was not tolerated in the region where the king lived. Read Nehemiah 2:1-3 and also reference the first part of Esther Chapter 4. What evidence in both of these passages gives credence to those historical details?
  
2. Though the name of Yahweh is not found in the book of Esther, how did the Jews demonstrate they are seeking God's attention and help?
  
3. Though the queen is in a high position in the Persian kingdom, what demonstrates that she was a bit sheltered from what was happening in the kingdom?
  
4. When Esther finally realized the terrible predicament for her people, how did she first show reservations about acting on their behalf and why did she have reservations?
  - a. How did Mordecai respond to Esther's reservations and what famous phrase is often repeated from his instructions?
  
  - b. What then were Esther's instructions and what did she resolve to do?
  
5. Read the following passages: Philippians 4:6-7, Luke 12:22-31, 1 John 5:14-15, Ephesians 6:10-17, Luke 18:1-6. When it comes to challenging circumstances, what does scripture call for us to do?
  
6. Although with God, we are never alone, how do these passages help us understand that we shouldn't attempt to take on life's challenges alone? Proverbs 17:17, Ecclesiastes 4:12, 1 Corinthians 12:20-26

## Esther Chapter 5

1. Not everything that takes 3 days in the Old Testament is a shadow of Christ's death and resurrection, though we shouldn't ignore some that may be. Christ overcame the king of this world (the Devil) and in 3 days the situation went from the most devastating outlook to the greatest news the world has ever known when His death became His resurrection. Do you see any shadow of Christ's accomplishment through Esther's story and if so in what manner?
  
2. How did King Xerxes/ Ahasuerus respond when he saw Esther enter the court that was forbidden without invitation?
  
3. What was Esther's request of the king?
  - a. When the king pressed for her intentions, how did she cleverly keep the answer at bay?
  
4. What does this chapter indicate about why Haman experienced emotional highs and lows?
  
5. How did Haman scheme to make sure his emotional highs didn't come with the lows?
  
6. God does allow both good and bad things to happen to believers. However, God is never surprised by circumstances and His plan cannot be thwarted. How do the following verses help confirm this?
  - a. Proverbs 19:21
  
  - b. Luke 12:4-7

## Esther Chapter 6

1. When the king couldn't sleep, what did he choose to have read to him?
  - a. What did he discover after the reading?
  - b. How did God allow the timing of Haman's arrival to be perfect for what God desired to accomplish?
  - c. We, as humans are created in God's image. Humor, which we enjoy was also created by God. As we review the storyline in this chapter, how does it appear God is using humor?
2. When Haman arrived home and explained to his wife what happened, what did she predict in his future?
  - a. Before Haman could respond to his wife, where was he taken?
3. Though God grants us the ability to make our own decisions, He also can use our wicked plans for His purpose. In looking at the following passage, how is this accomplished by God, and how does it contrast with what the king of Assyria thinks (reference Isaiah 10:5-19)?

## Esther Chapter 7

1. As they enjoyed the banquet, how did Esther set her petition in such a manner that demonstrated humility as well as wisdom?
  - a. Read James 4:10, Proverbs 15:33, Philippians 2:3-4, Titus 3:1-2, 1 Peter 5:5-7. What is each passage indicating? How did Esther embody these passages?
  - b. How did the king's initial response demonstrate surprise and fury?
2. What did Haman realize once the king knew that he was the perpetrator of the destruction of Esther's people?
3. Once the king heard the news, where did he angrily walk out to, and when he returned what did he assume Haman was doing?
4. Harbonah, one of the king's royal eunuchs, may have had some disdain for Haman. What, in this chapter of Esther, seems to point to this?
5. When did the king's rage subside?

