



Esther

Set after the Exile, but while a large number of Jews had not yet returned to Judah, the book of Esther tells the story of Ahasuerus, the Persian king, who banished his wife Vashti for refusing to come into his presence when he summoned her. He subsequently chose a new wife – Esther – who used her position as Queen to save her people (the Jews) from slaughter at the hands of Haman, the King's right-hand man.

Esther is the only book in the Bible which never mentions God but which focuses on saving God's people from destruction.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 30 mins

Short of time? Just read 1.1–2.18; 5.1–14;
6.14–7.10



Anything tricky?

One of the more uncomfortable features of the story is that once the Jews had risen to power at the end of the book, they brutally slaughtered their enemies.



Genre

Historical story



Inspiring quotes

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.
(Esther 4.14)



About the Author

We know nothing at all about the author of Esther – neither tradition nor scholarship suggests anyone as the author.



What kind of Book is it?

Esther is one of the hardest books to assign to a genre in the whole of the Bible. It tells a story from history but isn't quite history. There are a range of suggestions from 'narrative history' (i.e. a historical story) through to 'satiric melodrama'. See what kind of a book you think it is as you read it.



About the times

Whether it was written near the time it was set, or later, the purpose of Esther is twofold:

- To inspire the celebration of the feast of Purim (which celebrates the events told in the story)
- To hold up an example to Jews living in foreign lands of how to live in the face of persecution.

Most people think that the king Ahasuerus referred to in the book was either King Xerxes (486-465 bc) or Artaxerxes (465-358 bc). Either way the book is set well after Cyrus allowed the exiles to return home in 538 bc and reflects, therefore, a different scenario. Jews who remained in Babylon/Persia after the return from exile and had made a life there.

What were people feeling?

The book suggests that the Jews who were still living in Persia, probably by choice, still faced dilemmas and uncertainties about how to live as Jews in a foreign land.

Other books set around this time

Daniel



How is it structured?

1.1-22	The King banished Vashti
2.1-18	Esther was chosen as queen
2.19-23	Mordecai, Esther cousin, saved the King's life
3.1-15	Haman, the King's right-hand man, plotted to slaughter all Jews
4.1-17	Esther decided to try and save her people
5.1-8	Esther invited the King and Haman to a banquet
5.9-14	Haman built gallows for Mordecai
6.1-13	Mordecai was honoured by the King
6.14-7.10	Esther appealed to the King and Haman was hung
8.1-17	The edict to annihilate the Jews was reversed
9.1-10.13	The Jews took vengeance on their enemies and the feast of Purim was established



Look out for...

One of the biggest discussions about the book is the question of what it is really about, see what you think as you read.

The characters in the story are all fairly stereotypical (with great heroes and villains). Notice this as you read and see if you think there is anyone who does not fit into the stereotype.

A key theme in the book is poetic justice (Haman is hung on his own gallows) – reflect on this theme as you read.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about?
- Esther is famous for never mentioning the word 'God' in the book. Did you find any glimmers of God even though he was never mentioned?
- Why do you think Esther was included in the canon of Scripture? Do you think it should have been?
- The story of Esther is a story of people finding the courage to intervene in dangerous and difficult situations – where might we be called to find similar courage today?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



What could this mean for me?

Esther's decision to save her people, in the end, was a clear choice. Who might we be called to step in to save today and how would we make that choice?



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