

Introduction to Esther

Where is it in the Bible?

Esther is the seventeenth book of the Old Testament and the twelfth and last of the historical books in Christian Bibles. It follows Nehemiah and comes before Job. In Hebrew Bibles, Nehemiah is part of the last section, the Writings or Kethuvim. It is the last of a group of five books known as “The Scrolls” and is between Ecclesiastes and Daniel. Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman.

Esther is the only Old Testament book which has not been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, even in fragments.

Who wrote it?

The author of Esther is unknown. The book itself does not give any hints about who the author might have been. “It was possibly written by a Jew living in the Diaspora, perhaps in a foreign court, as a way of entertaining and inspiring his or her Jewish community and establishing the festival of Purim.”¹ Note: Purim is the only festival not mentioned in the Torah.

When was it written?

The events in the book are said (1:1) to have taken place during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus, who is usually identified with Xerxes I (485-464 BC). Most scholars think that the book was written sometime during the fourth century BC, although some have argued that it is as late as the second century.

There are several forms of this book. The one in Protestant Bibles is the same as what is in the Hebrew Bible and is based on the Masoretic text. The version found in the Septuagint has 107 verses that are additions to the Hebrew text; these are included in Roman Catholic Bibles. There is also another Greek version of the story which may be older than the one in the Hebrew text.

What is it about?

Esther tells the story of how the Jewish people were saved from a plot to destroy them that was devised by an advisor to the Persian king. It is not history, but a comic tale or satire that is read or dramatized each year at the celebration of Purim. The audience is encouraged to make noise to blot out the name of the villain (Haman) each time it occurs (54 times). “Esther can also be read as a wisdom tale that teaches people how they might live in a foreign land, subject to the whims of a foreign power, and how to discover the presence of God when God appears to be absent.”²

¹ Diane Jacobson at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=37>

² *Ibid.*

How is it structured?

- I. At the Court (1:1-2:23)
 - a. Queen Vashti is Deposed (1:1-22)
 - b. Esther is Made Queen (2:1-18)
 - c. Mordecai Thwarts a Plot to Kill the King (2:19-23)
- II. Mordecai and Haman (3:1-9:19)
 - a. Haman Plots to Kill the Jews (3:1-15)
 - b. Mordecai Asks Esther for Help (4:1-17)
 - c. Esther Invites the King and Haman to Banquets (5:1-8)
 - d. Haman Plans to Execute Mordecai (5:9-14)
 - e. The King Honors Mordecai (6:1-13)
 - f. Esther Reveals the Plot (6:14-7:10)
 - g. The Jews are Saved and Defeat their Enemies (8:1-9:19)
- III. Conclusion (9:20-10:3)
 - a. Purim is Established (9:20-32)
 - b. Mordecai is Honored (10:1-3)

What are some things to look for?

- **Feasting and Fasting:** Throughout the book, various people are feasting or fasting. There are ten banquets, and they provide the setting for important plot developments. In fact the book is structured around three groups of feasts: those given by the king in the first part, then those hosted by Esther, and finally the feasts of Purim.
- **Reversal:** The book of Esther is characterized by many reversals and changes of fortune. These often run counter to expectations and provide the humor in the book. Queen Vashti is deposed and the orphan Esther becomes queen. Haman's plans to get rid of Mordecai are derailed when the king asks him to lead the parade in honor of his enemy. Finally, Haman ends up on the gallows he built to hang Mordecai. Orders are given and then reversed. As a result, the Jews who are supposed to be destroyed end up slaughtering their enemies.
- **What about God?** One of the most remarkable features of the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned. In fact, there are no references to worship, sacrifice, or prayer. Outside of fasting, Esther and Mordecai do not observe any distinctive Jewish practices, such as the dietary rules. (Some of these things have been "corrected" in the additions found in the Septuagint.) However, the hand of God can be seen in a number of the "coincidences" which occur. If Esther does not intervene, Mordecai is sure that "relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter" (4:14). Even Haman's wife seems to recognize that the Jews are under the protection of a higher power (6:13).