

## ESTHER

### The Book of Esther

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the "remnant" which returned to Jerusalem and Judah, while the book of Esther tells about those who stayed in the land of captivity. The book takes place in Shushan, "the palace" (Esther 1:2 Nehemiah 1:1) which was in Susa, the ancient capital of Persia. The number of Jews that stayed in captivity was far greater than the remnant that returned. The author of Esther is unknown. The name of God is never mentioned and Esther is never quoted in the New Testament. Some scholars do not believe that the events recorded in Esther happened because:

1. Esther is the only book not contained in the Qumran scrolls.
2. Feast of Purim was not declared by God or Moses.
3. The absence of the mention of God.
4. A statement attributed to Martin Luther of his own wish that the book of Esther "did not exist at all".

In response:

1. There are many books mentioned in the Bible for which we have no physical record today.
2. Hanukah was not declared by God or Moses and yet it commemorates an actual event in history and is celebrated by Jews today.
3. God is implied throughout the book. Mordecai knew he could not bow to anyone but his God. He believed in the enlargement and deliverance of his covenant people. Esther's request for the prayers and fasting of her people was based on her faith in God's readiness to hear and His ability to deliver.
4. The Book of Esther remains in the Inspired Version of the Bible; while the Song of Solomon was removed because it did not glorify God.

For many, the characters found in the book of Esther are a type and shadow.

### HAMAN - "the man of sin"

- ... in his name (7:6)
- ... in his power (3:1-3)
- ... in his pride (5:11; 6:6)
- ... in his hate (3:9;)
- ... in his doom (7:9-10)

### ESTHER - "the church"

- ... in her beauty (2:15)
- ... in her exaltation (4:16)
- ... in her intercession (7:3-6)

The books containing history of the Old Testament times close after the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

### Background History

At this time in history, Israel had been conquered by its enemies. Jerusalem was destroyed in Babylon's third and final assault on Judah and the temple was in ruins. God now raised up a new nation to overthrow Babylon - Persia. Just as God had used a pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, to discipline His people, He raised up another pagan king, Cyrus of Persia, to deliver them. In Cyrus' first year as king, God moved his heart to issue a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. But unlike the 1st exodus when the Hebrews left Egypt with Moses, in this exodus only a few (a remnant) wanted to go home. It is estimated that out of a total Jewish population of 2 or 3 million only 52,000 left Babylon to go back to Israel.

The Jews returned to Israel in three trips:

1. Approximately 49,897 returned with Zerubbabel's leadership.
2. Approximately 1,754 returned 80 years later with Ezra.
3. No figures on the third return but it occurred 14 years after the second group with the leadership of Nehemiah.

The book of Ezra covers the first two returns. There is a period of 80 years between the 1st and 2nd group during which time the events in the book of Esther took place.

### The Book of Esther

(Read the scriptures and then the commentary)

1:1-8 The name Ahasuerus was a Hebrew name given to Persian kings. The Ahasuerus mentioned in Esther is believed to be Xerxes, the successor of Darius I, who reigned from 485 to 465 B.C. Ahasuerus ruled an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia. In the 3rd year of his reign he gave a feast for the heads of his provinces (127) and court officials.

1:9-12 Vashti was ordered by her husband (after much drinking) to show her beauty to the men at the feast. He had already shown his wealth (vs. 4) why not his beautiful wife! She refused which was an act of courage on her part. A chamberlain was a eunuch. Men were made eunuchs because it was felt that they could serve the king better - they had no wives or children.

1:13-22 By refusing the king, Vashti lost her position. Josephus writes that according to the laws of the Persians, wives were forbidden to be seen by strangers. But the king in anger, wrote a new decree concerning wives honoring their husbands. The queen was admired and envied by all women and if he could not control her independence quite possibly the other women would follow her example. The decree was written in all languages, (so that everyone could understand it), and was sent throughout the land.

2:1-4 The king now found himself without a queen!! He appointed men to spread the word for all the young virgins to gather together so that he could pick a new queen. The women were chosen from all classes of people. The days of purification were an extended period of beautification and preparation that were required to prepare them for presentation to the king. During this time, the women were also trained and educated in the ways of the king's court.

2:5-7 Mordecai was a palace official at the royal city, Shushan, and a descendant of one of the Jews taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. There is some speculation on the name Esther; some scholars believe that it is Persian (star) while others believe that it is Babylonian (after a Babylonian god). Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (myrtle). Mordecai was Esther's cousin (she was his uncle's daughter).

2:8-10 Esther was one of the women gathered unto the king's house. Esther did not reveal that she was a Jew because Mordecai warned her not to.

2:11-15 Mordecai checked on Esther every day. When days of purification (12 months) for each woman ended they were taken before the king including Esther. "And Esther obtained favor in sight of all them that looked upon her" reveals a little of her beauty.

2:16-20 After her purification, Esther in the 10th month of the year was taken before the king and became queen of Persia. Later when the king had a great feast in her honor, Esther still did not reveal that she was a Jew.

2:21-23 While sitting at the king's gate, Mordecai learned that 2 of the king's eunuch planned to kill the king. He told Esther who sent word to the king. The men were hanged and this deed was recorded in the chronicles (records) of the Persian kings.

3:1-2 King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, a Agagite from Amalek. Haman hated the Jews as did all his forefathers (Amalek fought against Israel in the 1st battle after leaving Egypt). Because of his exalted position everyone except Mordecai bowed to him. The religious beliefs of the Jews did not allow him to show reverence to anyone except God (Deu. 6:13-14).

3:3-6 When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down, he was filled with wrath and sought to kill him as well as his people.

3:7 A lot, or pur, was cast to determine when this would happen. The 1st lot is cast for the day, the 2nd lot is cast for the month.

3:8-11 Haman went to the king with his complaint. He twisted the religious beliefs of the Jews to show this as a rebellion against the king. Haman persuaded the king to sign a decree with the promise of a lot of money. One Jewish silver talent is equal to \$384,000 today. The king did not take the money, but gave Haman the people necessary to do the deed.

3:12-15 Now Haman had the written consent of the king. The decree was sent quickly through all the land to kill all Jews on one day and claim their property. There were about 10 months between the publication of the decree and the execution date. Some people believe it was the fear of the decree that would force the Jews to leave their property and escape to other lands. Without any effort, Haman would then be rid of the Jews as well as claiming their property.

4:1-3 When Mordecai found out all that was done, he went into mourning (rent his clothes, put on sackcloth/ashes). He was not allowed to enter into the presence of the king dressed in mourning. All of the Jewish people mourned.

4:4 Esther's maids knew because of his clothes that he was in mourning and they told Esther, who sent Mordecai clothes that he refused.

4:5-9 Esther sent a messenger to find out what had happened. Mordecai told him everything and gave him a copy of the decree to show to Esther. He sent a challenge for Esther to save her people.

4:10-12 This was not an easy challenge for Esther. Going unsummoned before the king meant death - unless he extended his golden scepter. Esther had not been summoned for 30 days.

4:13-14 Mordecai sent a reply - if you do nothing, help will come from somewhere else and you will be destroyed! Who knows but what you were placed here for this time. God is not mentioned, but is implied!! We do know that God will accomplish His plan and if we do not cooperate, His plan will still be carried out - He will use someone else!

4:15-17 Esther agreed to help even if it meant her death. These verses show how important fasting should be to us!

5:1-4 Esther dressed appropriately, went to the king and requested that the king and Haman come to her banquet.

5:5-8 At the banquet the king told Esther that he would give whatever she desired but she chose not to tell him but to invite him to a second banquet, saying that she would let him know then.

5:9-14 Haman left the banquet happy! Wouldn't you be if you and the king had a banquet thrown in your honor by the queen. He boasted to his friends and his wife and then pouted about Mordecai. The gallows that was built was 75 feet high. In the Western world we build gallows with a noose for hanging but it is believed at this time, the gallows built was a long pole (75 feet high) with a sharp point at the top, with steps up the side. A condemned man would walk up the steps, the middle of his back placed on the sharp point of the pole, with the weight of his body driving the pole/stake through him. It was a long and horrible way to die!

6:1-3 The book of chronicles that were read to the king were records of the kings of Persia.

6:4 By coincidence?? Haman was coming to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai.

6:5-10 Haman thought the king was going to honor him. Imagine his surprise when he learned it was Mordecai! To be given royal robes to wear was a sign of honor.

6:11-12 Haman did as the king commanded him but returned to his house with his head covered - a sign of shame.

6:13-14 A prophecy was given to Haman - he would not prevail against Mordecai.

7:1-4 At the second banquet, Esther told of the plan to destroy her people. She could have accepted her people being servants.

7:5 The Jewish historian, Josephus, writes that the decree was sent out by Haman as if by the king, which could have explained the questions that the king asked Esther. Also, the king had given Haman his ring, and the decree could have been sealed by Haman.

7:6-10 During this time, in the Middle East, banquets were served to the guests as they reclined on pillows or couches. The word for bed in the Hebrew language means a bed (as extended) for sleeping or eating; a sofa. The king mistook Haman's begging for an assault on the queen. Haman's face was covered - a sign that he was no longer worthy to look on the face of the king. Haman was hanged upon the gallows that he had built.

8:1-2 Haman's family was then given to Esther and Mordecai was given Haman's place of honor in the king's court.

8:3-17 Esther pleaded with the king to reverse the decree but since the law of the Persians could not be revoked, the decree to kill the Jews still stood. But a second decree was issued, one that would allow the Jews in the land to assemble and defend their lives.

9:1-25 On the day that their enemies thought to have power over them, the Jews gathered together and slew them. Haman's ten sons perished and their bodies were hung on their father's gallows.

9:25-32 The Jews celebrated their deliverance from the massacre planned by Haman. They called the celebration the "Feast of Purim." The word "purim" is Persian and comes from "pur" meaning lot. (Lots had been cast to determine which day and month that the Jews would be destroyed).

Chapter 10 Mordecai became second in command of the kingdom, next to the king.

#### Feast of Purim

To celebrate their deliverance from Haman's decree to kill them, the Jews proclaimed a Feast Day, the Feast of Purim. The day before the Purim is the Fast of Esther, a sunrise-to-sundown abstention. One of the great differences between this feast day and the others is the number of children on hand for the celebration. Purim is Children's Night in the House of the Lord. After the evening prayers, the reading of the Book of Esther begins, solemnly, with the customary blessing over a scroll and the chanting of the opening verses in special music heard only on this day. This feast was instituted by the Jews for all generations as a memorial. This feast is still observed today. If you want to know more on the Feast of Purim, there are many books that you can get through your library.

Interesting note: In World War II when Hitler took Poland, he allowed for a short time, the Jewish synagogue to remain open. However, he refused to let the Jewish people read the book of Esther. He felt it gave them hope!

For such as a time as this, Esther came into the world to be an instrument in God's hand to save His covenant people. You are placed on this earth by God's plan and not by chance. These are the last days and you are here for such a time as this. Your calling may not be to save a nation But if you choose, you will have a role in building the Kingdom. What will your response be?