

ESTHER

God is in Control

Writing of the Book

- The book gives no indication as to its author.
- Whoever it was, he shows great skill as a narrator and had access to court records.
- The author demonstrates a breadth of knowledge about the operation of the Persian court and appears to possess information that would have been known only to Mordecai and Esther.

Writing *continued*

- The setting of the book is the Persian Empire of the early to mid-fifth century B.C., so obviously it must have been written after that time.
- It is most likely that the book was written down in the fourth or even the late fifth century B.C.

Background

- By the early part of the fifth century the rulers of Persia were secure enough to attempt expansion across the Mediterranean at the expense of the Greeks.
- Though this expansion was unsuccessful, the Persians did control the Near East longer than the Assyrians and the Babylonians combined, and it ruled more territory as well.

Background *continued*

- Xerxes I is also called Ahasueras and reigned from 486 to 465 BC.
- He was the son of Darius the Great, who had expanded the empire into India and Eastern Europe, but also suffered decisive defeats at the hands of the Greeks.
- This continued during Xerxes's reign. He had victories in Egypt and Babylon, but the Greeks continued to confound him. This is the political background of the book.

Outline of Esther

I. Esther's Rise to Power (1-2)

II. Mordecai's Refusal to Bow

a. Haman's Anger: Mordecai's Jeopardy (3:1-6)

b. Xerxes' Decree: Israel's Jeopardy (3:7-15)

III. Plan for Deliverance: Esther's Jeopardy (4-5)

IV. Esther's First Banquet

- a. Xerxes' Insomnia: Mordecai Remembered (6:1-5)
- b. Haman's Humiliation: Mordecai Honored (6:6-13)

V. Esther's Second Banquet

- a. Xerxes' Anger: Haman Exposed and Doomed (7)
- b. Xerxes' Decree: Israel Given Right to Defend Itself (8)

VI. Israel's Enemies Destroyed (9:1-19)

VII. Purim Observed (9:20-32)

VIII. Resulting Stature of Mordecai (10:1-3)

Purpose and Message

- Esther has very particular points to make about the saving acts of the Lord.
- The 10 plagues, the exodus, the crumbling of the walls of Jericho, and the return from exile in Babylonia were all evidence of God's ability to accomplish the impossible.
- But God is not so visible in the book of Esther.
- Yet, where others may see coincidences, Israel saw the Lord at work.

Purpose/Message *continued*

- It therefore becomes evident that the well-known themes of prophecy and wisdom could still fuel the hopes of Israelites even though they were scattered among the nations.
- The message comes through clearly: **God's methods may vary, but his purposes do not.**
- His workings may be obscured to skeptics by the disguise of coincidence, **but the people of God recognize his sovereign hand in the ebb and flow of history.**

Purpose/Message *continued*

- His name is not mentioned, but his influence is unmistakable.
- This is particularly seen through the use of irony throughout the book, and the many reversals (Mordecai and Haman being the chief example).
- The significance of all of this is **that there is always more going on than meets the eye**.
- **God's control cannot be controlled, predicted, or thwarted.**

Major Themes Purim

- The book of Esther is read annually at the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Purim (“lots”).
- The festival, observed in late February/early March, commemorates the deliverance reported in the book and, likewise, the book establishes the foundation of the festival.
- The theology of Purim affirms that God is no less at work in the latter than in the former.

Major Themes

People of God

- We recall from Genesis that God chose Abraham and his family to become the people of God in the sense that his revelation would come through them (revelatory people).
- The deliverance of Israel recorded in this book was not done in such a way that it bore witness to the world of God's power.
- Rather it was accomplished so as to confirm believers in their faith in a sovereign God, while skeptics might easily dismiss it as coincidence.

Major Themes

People of God

- Certainly, it was always God's desire that the people through whom he was revealing himself would be in a proper relationship with him (i.e., the revelatory people of God would also respond with faith).
- In the postexilic period, the spiritual condition of the people moved to the top of the agenda, and the *revelatory* function seems at best to have been put on hold until the righteous remnant would emerge.