

# The Book of Esther

## From a Jewish Perspective

*To my daughter Erin, who would surely go before the king without an invitation and risk her life to protect her family. She has the heart, the courage and the wisdom of a queen.*

Everyone loves a good story. If it tells of one's own ancestry, shows them in a good light, gives evidence of **ADONAI** at work in their lives to secure their future, so much the better. All this is true in the book of **Esther**. Though no mention is made of the providence of **the LORD**, it is obvious that **He** is orchestrating everything behind the scenes. The dramatic reversal of a horrendous fate that seemed poised to wipe out the entire Jewish race so impressed the human author that he wrote a story for the ages. It continues to be the number one favorite among Jewish families and, as a traditional custom, is read every year at **Purim**. But it nevertheless raises many questions. Is **God** still in control? Is **He** still active in the lives of **His** people and working out **His** plan, or has **He** abandoned Israel? The teller of this epic story answers those questions for his own generation.

### *The Historical Setting*

The book takes place in the Persian period (539-331 BC) after many Israelites had returned from the Babylonian Exile to the land of Palestine to rebuild the Temple and set up the sacrificial system. Most Israelite captives, however, chose not to return to their homeland. They should have returned because both **Isaiah** and **Jeremiah** had urged the pre-exile nation to leave Babylon (**Isaiah 48:20; Jeremiah 50:8 and 51:6**) after seventy years (**Jeremiah 29:10**) so that **ADONAI** could bless them (**Deuteronomy 28:1-14**). **Esther** and **Mordecai** had not returned to the Land and did not seem interested in doing so. The name *Xerxes* is a Greek derivation from the Persian *khshayarshan*, but the Jews called him **Ahasuerus**. He succeeded his father Darius I to the throne in 486 BC and was a strong and effective leader. The events in **Esther** occur between **Ezra 6** and **7**, and extend over a period of at least ten years - from 483 BC, **Ahasuerus'** third year (**Esther 1:3**) to the end of his twelfth year (**Esther 3:7**). At the time that **Ahasuerus** ascended to the throne, Persia was in conflict with the Greeks on their western frontier. The king's father Darius I had been defeated in his attempt to take Athens. The Persian Empire was resting in preparation for its next campaign against the Greeks.

## *King Ahasuerus*

The Greek historian Herodotus, who was born around the time **Ahasuerus** ascended to the throne, wrote a history of the wars between Greece and Persia. About a third of his book dealt with the reign of **Ahasuerus**. Herodotus described **him** as bold, ambitious, handsome, stately and self-indulgent in every way. At one point **he** was attracted to **his** brother Masistes' wife. When she rebuffed **him**, **Ahasuerus** married her daughter Artaynte to **his** son Darius II then seduced Artaynte **himself!** **The king** allowed **his** wife to take revenge on Artaynte's mother, and when Masistes fought back, **Ahasuerus** had **his** own brother and nephews executed along with their army.

This was the same **king** who ordered a bridge to be built over the Hellespont. But on learning that the bridge had been destroyed by a sea storm just after its completion, **he** was so blindly enraged that **he** commanded three hundred strokes of the scourge be inflicted on the sea, and a pair of shackles to be thrown into it at the Hellespont. Then the unfortunate builders of the bridge were beheaded.

**He** was either your best friend or your worst enemy. After being offered a sum of gold equivalent to tens of millions of dollars by Pythius of Lydia toward the expenses of a military campaign, **the king** was so pleased that **he** returned the gold, along with a generous present. But shortly afterwards, when the same Pythius made a request for **Ahasuerus** to spare his eldest son, his only support in his old age, from execution, **the king** furiously ordered the son to be cut into half and the army to march between the halves. In short, Herodotus' portrayal of **Ahasuerus** is exactly what we find in the book of **Esther**, as incredible as **his** deeds may seem to us.<sup>1</sup>

## *Unique Characteristics*

Just as **Esther's** Jewishness was hidden for most of the book, the name of **God** is also hidden. As if written in a code specifically designed for the Jews, the name of **ADONAI** is hidden four times in the Hebrew text for those who would care to look for it. As will be explained further in the commentary itself, the name **YHWH** is hidden in **1:20**, **5:4**, **5:13** and **7:7**. Other unique characteristics are seen in the fact that the Renewed Covenant does not quote from the book of **Esther**, nor have copies of it been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Torah or its sacrifices are also never referred to in the book. There is no mention of even one tiny miracle in the book. Prayer is never mentioned, although fasting is. In other postexilic books prayer is very important to the main characters (**Ezra** and **Nehemiah** are good examples), but in **Esther** nothing is said about it. I think it is fair to say that both **Esther** and **Mordecai** seem to have lacked spiritual awareness except in **their** assurance that **the LORD** would protect **His** people.

### *Intended Audience*

Knowing who the original recipients of **Esther** are help us to interpret the book. **Esther** includes a number of dates that tie the account to a particular time in the Persian Empire, but no explicit evidence about its intended audience. Some believe that the book was written in Persia and taken back to Palestine, where it was added to the collection of biblical books. More likely, however, the author lived in Palestine and wrote his account of the events that he had seen transpire in the Persian Empire for the benefit of the Jews who lived both inside and outside the Land.

At the time of the writing the Jews in Palestine were going through difficult times in their struggle to rebuild their nation and to re-establish Temple worship. The people were not in good spiritual shape. Of course, both **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** noted the reason for the nation's lowly condition: the people had not been following **God's** Word and, therefore, were under **His** curse rather than **His** promise of blessing (**Deuteronomy 28-30**). The book of **Esther**, then, would have been a great encouragement to those struggling Jews. It would have helped them realize that the surrounding enemies that seemed so overwhelming could never conquer them.<sup>2</sup>

### *Author and Date*

The author of **Esther** is unknown, but he was almost certainly a Jew living in the Persian Empire, perhaps even Susa, for he had as accurate a knowledge of Persian customs and terms as modern archaeologists have. **The Talmud says the men of the Great Synagogue were its authors** (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Lg - The Great Sanhedrin**). But more than likely, the author was a single person, and not necessarily a famous one at that. His description of the citadel of Susa was very precise. The account has all the characteristics of a person who was actually there, for he described the events as an eyewitness. On the one hand, he probably wrote after the death of **Ahasuerus** in 465 BC, when such an unflattering description of **the king** would not have endangered either himself, **Mordecai** or **Esther**. On the other hand, he almost certainly wrote before Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 331 BC, for he used Persian words frequently, but never Greek ones.

### *Purpose of the Book*

**Esther** was written to encourage the returned Jewish exiles by reminding them of the faithfulness of **ADONAI** who would keep **His** promises to the nation. The author was describing **God's** unfailing preservation of **His** people, even disobedient people such as **Esther** and **Mordecai**, who had not returned to the land of Palestine. The human author also explained how the feast of **Purim** began. Each time the book of **Esther** was read, it would encourage Jews either in the Land or in the Diaspora.

The book of **Esther** is still treasured by Jews today and read annually in the synagogues on Purim because they find in it the reassurance that they will survive as a people against the powers that want to destroy them. Its contemporary significance for the Jewish people is captured in the words of Robert Gordis:

Anti-Semites have always hated the book, and the Nazis forbade its reading in the crematoria and the concentration camps. In the dark days before their deaths, Jewish inmates of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and Beergen-Belsen wrote the book of **Esther** from memory and read it in secret on **Purim**. Both they and their brutal foes understood its message. This unforgettable book teaches the Jewish resistance and annihilation, then as now, represents the service of **God** and devotion to **His** cause. In every age, martyrs and heroes, as well as ordinary men and women, have seen in it not merely a record of past deliverance but a prophecy of future salvation.<sup>3</sup>