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# The Place of Esther in the Canon of Scripture

Throughout history, different opinions have been expressed concerning the value of **Esther** in what is called the canon of Scripture, or the Bible. On the one hand, Martin Luther, the father of the protestant reformation, was hostile to the book and said he wished it did not exist. On the other hand, the medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135-1204) considered **Esther** the most important biblical book after the Pentateuch.

We know that in regard to the Jewish canon, some rabbis questioned its inclusion. But the 1896 discovery of a collection of some 210,000 Jewish manuscript fragments found in the *genizah*, or storeroom, of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt, revealed that the book must have been widely used among the Jews. There were more fragments of Esther there than any other book outside the Pentateuch. On the other hand, **Esther** was the only Old Covenant book not found at the famous Qumran discovery in 1947. This suggests that the book was neither popular nor celebrated by that Jewish sect. The Essenes celebrated other festivals not found in the Pentateuch, so the absence of the Festival of Purim from the Pentateuch cannot be seen as the only reason.

Beckwith, in his book *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church (1985)*, suggests that the Qumran rejection of Purim can be explained by the unique Qumran calendar. The Qumran community used a calendar divided in 364 days, divided exactly in weeks. Consequently, the same date always fell on the same day of the week. The Feast of Purim would have always fallen on the Sabbath. To have celebrated a high-spirited festival like Purim on the Sabbath would have been contrary to everything they believed.

The book of **Esther** seems to have a firm position in the cannon at least by the first century AD. The school at Jamnia used **Esther** as a part of the Scriptures in 90 AD. Josephus may have viewed it in a similar light. The book is included in the oldest list of the Jewish canon, *Baraitha* in *Baba Bathra* 14a-15a, a Talmudic work in the second century. So it seems that **Esther** was very secure in the Canon of Scripture by the first century.

However, several centuries after Jamnia the book was still disputed by some Jews. The reasons were theological, historical and textual. The absence of some religious elements is clear. The king of Persia is conspicuous, being mentioned 190 times in 167 verses, but the name of ADONAI is hidden within the Jewish text. No reference is made to the Torah, the Covenant, or angels. Kindness, mercy and forgiveness are absent. The theological concept of the providence of God, however, is taken for granted.

In the first and second centuries, four important rabbis presented evidence to show that the book of **Esther** was divinely inspired. Later, the Talmud's objection was based on a late interpretation of **Leviticus 27:34** and **Numbers 36:13**, which those rabbis had interpreted as saying: **these are the commands**. The Talmudic interpretation was, "these and no other." When the rabbis needed an explanation, they could always count on the Oral Law (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click – Ei The Oral Law**). Therefore, the accepted answer to the Talmudic interpretation was that **Esther** had been revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and was passed on orally until the time of **Esther** and Mordecai.

Christians also have had different opinions about the canonicity of **Esther**. It was not included in the list of the canonical books made by Bishop Melito of Sardis in 170 AD. Various other lists of canonical books are from the church fathers, councils, and synods. Athanasius (295-373) did not include **Esther** in the canon but considered it edifying reading along with the extra-biblical books of Judith, Tobit and others. Clement of Alexandria, between 190 and 200 AD, seems to have regarded it as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Origen (before 231 AD) included **Esther** in the books accepted by the Jews. In the West, Esther was usually included in the canon, but in the East, it was often omitted. The Council of Carthage in 397 AD included **Esther** in the canon.

Its firm position in the Jewish canon and the consensus of Christian believers since the early days of the Church indicate that it should be considered part of the canon of Scripture. **We have no choice but to recognize and treat it as part of ADONAI's message to His people.**[4]