

INTRODUCTION

1. Title. The book of Esther takes as its name that of the heroine of the story. Her original Hebrew name was Hadassah (see ch. 2:7), but she probably came to be known as Esther about the time of her marriage to Ahasuerus (Xerxes), king (486-465 b.c.) of the Medo-Persian Empire (see PK 598). Her Hebrew name, Hadassah, means "myrtle," while Esther is probably a Persian name meaning "star." Mordecai, who had adopted Hadassah, his cousin, as his daughter, may have given her the Persian name Esther at the time he charged her not to make her nationality known (see ch. 2:10).

The book of Esther is a dramatic story of how God used a courageous young woman of surpassing beauty to save her people at a time of crisis, when extermination threatened them. As in the story of Ruth, we see the important role of women in God's great plan for the salvation of His people. Ruth was a Gentile who decided to identify herself with Israel and to accept their God as her God, while Esther was a Jewess who, in God's providence, became queen of the greatest nation of her time. She realized the truth and urgency of the question addressed to her by her foster father: "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (ch. 4:14, RSV). With a prayer to God, she courageously risked her own life to save the lives of God's people scattered in all parts of the empire. The story of Esther stirs its readers to a realization of the opportunities God's providence may bring to the weakest of the weak. Perhaps we too have "come to the kingdom for such a time as this."

2. Authorship. The author of the book of Esther is unknown. The author's profound concern for the welfare of the Jewish people at a time of national crisis points to him as one of that race. His identification of Mordecai as a Benjamite (ch. 2:5) may suggest that he himself was of the tribe of Benjamin. The fact that the Jews "scattered abroad" (ch. 3:8) alone are mentioned, and never those of Jerusalem and Judea, implies that he was concerned exclusively with the former, and was therefore perhaps one of them. The many Persian words in the book, together with its intimate knowledge of Persian affairs and customs, suggest that he was a resident of Persia proper rather than of one of the outlying provinces of the empire. Recent excavations at Susa (Shushan) confirm the fact that the writer was intimately acquainted with the palace and with Persian court customs and regulations. Impressed by these archeological discoveries, various scholars <Page 458> are inclined to think that the author of the book must have been attached to the Persian court at that time or soon after, at least as a minor official, or that he had direct access to this information through someone who was.

It is possible that the author was Ezra, who led an expedition to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I (457 b.c.). Ezra was a learned authority on Jewish law (see Ezra 7:1-14), and may have served as a royal clerk, probably as a legal counselor of the king (see PK 607). It is apparent that under any circumstances Artaxerxes had great confidence in him (see Ezra 7:25-28). The crisis occasioned by Haman probably came in the year 474/473 b.c., some 16 or 17 years prior to Ezra's departure for Jerusalem. It is therefore reasonable to think that Ezra was sufficiently familiar with the details of the story to have written it. As a zealous patriot (Ezra 7:27, 28), a devout priest (vs. 1-5), a pious reformer

(chs. 9:1 to 10:14), a "ready scribe" (ch. 7:6), and an able administrator (vs. 6, 10, 21, 25, 26), Ezra must have taken a profound interest in this crisis, which came when he was a young man. Certainly he was qualified to write the book of Esther. Again, Nehemiah may have been the author.

From the postscript to the book of Esther (ch. 10) it may be inferred that Ahasuerus (Xerxes) was dead at the time of writing, for "all the acts of his power and of his might" were "written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia."

If this be true, then the book of Esther was written after 465 b.c., in which year Ahasuerus was assassinated by his courtier Artabanus. It is implied also that the Persian Empire was still the great world power; the book would accordingly have been written before the fall of Persia in 331 b.c. The numerous intimate details of the narrative, many of which are now confirmed by archeology, suggest, however, that the writing was done soon after the events occurred, probably by someone personally acquainted with one or more persons named in the story.

Some have suggested that Mordecai might have been the author. The fact that he is known to have held minor court offices (Esther 2:11, 19, 21-23; 3:2-5; 4:1, 2, 6; 5:13) prior to his promotion to be prime minister of the realm (chs. 8:1, 2, 7-10, 15; 9:3, 4, 20, 31; 10:3) would account adequately for the obvious familiarity of the author with the palace and with court customs and regulations. Furthermore, Mordecai is the only person specifically mentioned in the Bible as having this intimate familiarity and also having access to the official texts of the various decrees referred to. Certainly, Mordecai could have written the book of Esther.

A cuneiform tablet now in the Berlin Museum mentions a high state official by the name of Marduka (the Babylonian transliteration of Mordecai), who, with the title sipĀr, served as an influential counselor at the court of Shushan in the time of Xerxes. No other person by this name, and holding this office in Susa under Xerxes, is known, either in the Bible or from other sources.

At the order of Ahasuerus, and in the royal name and with the royal seal, Esther and Mordecai sent official decrees to all parts of the realm explaining the sudden change in royal policy and authorizing the Jews to defend themselves (ch. 8:9-14; cf. ch. 9:31, 32). Some have thought that what is now known as the book of Esther may have been included in the messages sent out to the Jews by Esther and Mordecai, but the references noted hardly seem to justify such a conclusion. But it is entirely possible that Mordecai may have written the book of Esther in addition to the particular documents noted in the book. The fact that **<Page 459>** he is referred to in the third person throughout the book has no bearing upon the question of whether he may have been its author.

Thus, when all is said and done, the author of the book of Esther remains unknown. All that can be said with certainty is that he must have been a Jew living in Shushan about the time the events narrated in the book occurred.

3. Historical Setting. At the death of Darius I (Hystaspes, or, "the Great") in 486 b.c. his son Xerxes ascended the throne and ruled until his death in 465 b.c., and was in turn succeeded by his son Artaxerxes. The Ahasuerus of the Bible is thus the Xerxes of history. The name Ahasuerus is from the Latin transliteration of 'Achashwerosh, the Hebrew equivalent of the Babylonian Achshiyarshu. The translators of the LXX confused Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes. The Ahasuerus of the books of Ezra and Esther is not the Ahasuerus of Dan. 9:1, who was the father of Darius the Mede.

During the closing years of the reign of Darius Hystaspes and the early part of the reign of his son and successor, Xerxes (Ahasuerus), the Persian Empire was at the height of its power. According to Esther 1:1 the domain of Ahasuerus extended from the northwestern frontier of India westward to the northern boundary of Ethiopia. From east to west its length was 3,000 mi., and in width it varied from 500 to 1,500 mi. Its area was about 2,000,000 sq. mi. Shushan (Susa) was one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, an honor it shared with Ecbatana and Persepolis. The Persians were a branch of the Indo-European family of races, and were the first of that group, in fact, to become the dominant world power. For a further consideration of the period of Persian history in which the events of the book of Esther occurred, see pp. 59-61.

From the viewpoint of Bible history the chief event during the reign of Cyrus (c. 553-530 b.c.), first king of the Persian Empire, was the decree of his first regnal year authorizing the Jews to return to Palestine (see pp. 96, 97), and to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 5:13). Pursuant to this decree Zerubbabel led some 50,000 Jews back to Judea in 536 and began the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:5, 6; 3:1-10). After a time, however, work came to a halt as the result of various difficulties and discouragements that arose (see Ezra 4:1-5, 24; cf. Haggai 1:1-4). So far as the Jews were concerned the reign of Cambyses (530-522), son and successor of Cyrus, was of minor importance, for he seems to have taken little if any interest in their welfare.

But soon after Darius Hystaspes (522-486) ascended the throne he confirmed the original decree of Cyrus by issuing one of his own (see Ezra 4:24; 6:1), which resulted in the completion of the Zerubbabel Temple in 515 b.c. (see Ezra 6:1, 15).

Early in the 5th century Athens assisted the Greeks living on the west coast of Asia Minor in their struggle to be free from Persian rule. Darius met this challenge to his power by leading an army into Greece to punish the Athenians. With an army of insignificant size the Athenians met the mighty hosts of Persia on the beach at Marathon and administered to the invaders a decisive defeat that made necessary the immediate withdrawal of Darius to Asia (490 b.c.). While making preparations for a new invasion of Greece, however, Darius died (486 b.c.). His son and successor, Xerxes I, or Ahasuerus (486-465 b.c.), returned to Greece, only to suffer a major defeat at Salamis (480 b.c.). Xerxes thereupon returned permanently to Asia, leaving his general Mardonius in charge. Mardonius was defeated at Plataea the following year, and as a result Persian forces left Europe never to return.

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The great feast in the third year of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) seems to have been held shortly before he left Shushan (Susa) on his disastrous expedition to Greece. It was no doubt prior to his departure in 482/481 b.c. that the command was issued to "gather together all the fair young virgins" (Esther 2:3). To carry out fully this decree undoubtedly required several months. Soon after Xerxes' return to Susa, apparently, Esther was brought before him and made queen.

Continued reverses at the hands of the Athenian fleet on the western shores of Asia Minor, during the next few years, together with disturbances elsewhere in the far-flung empire, may have conditioned the mind of the king to look with favor upon Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews. This plan, if carried into effect, would have marked a direct reversal of the former friendly and even generous policy of Persian monarchs toward the Jews, as demonstrated during the reigns of Cyrus and Darius. The signal deliverance of the Jews through the courage of Esther served to restore the Jews to royal favor and prepared the way for the labors of Ezra and Nehemiah a few years later, and particularly for the momentous decree of Xerxes' son and successor, Artaxerxes I (465-423 b.c.), in the year 457 b.c.

The chronological data supplied by the book of Esther are as follows:

Event	Esther	Year	Month	Day	B.C. Date*
The great feast	1:3	3		Between	Apr. 14, 483-Apr. 2, 482
Esther summoned	2:12	[6	10	?]	" Jan. 2, 479-Jan. 30, 479
Esther made queen	2:16	7	10	"	Dec. 22, 479-Jan. 20, 478
Haman casts lots	3:7	12	1	"	Apr. 5, 474-May 3, 474
Haman's decree	3:12	12+	1	13	Apr. 17, 474
Mordecai's decree	8:9	12+	3	23	June 25, 474
Purim	3:13;	12+	12	13	March 8, 473

8:12;

9:1, 17-19

4. Theme. The Babylonian captivity marks a distinct break in Jewish national life. For a time the stream of Jewish history disappeared and ran underground, and when it reappeared its whole character was changed. The Jews were no longer so much a nation as they were a people and a church. The Bible contains no history of the Exile and of postexilic times, as history is usually defined, but the spirit of the period is admirably conveyed in the narratives of Daniel and Esther. The book of Esther is one of the five rolls that have been, from ancient times, read in every synagogue on the five festal occasions of the year. It seems to have been this annual cycle of readings that determined the location of Esther in the Hebrew canon. The order of the five is: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. The book of Esther comes fifth because it is read at the final festival of the year, the days of Purim (see on chs. 3:7; 9:26).

Considered as literature the book of Esther is at once both an idyl and an epic. It depicts a crisis in the fortunes of God's people that threatened them with annihilation. The instrument of deliverance is a Jewess, elevated from a quiet **<Page 461>** life with her cousin and foster father, Mordecai, to be queen of a world empire. The narrative displays Esther as a woman of clear judgment, remarkable self-control, and noble self-sacrifice. The challenge of Mordecai, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (ch. 4:14), projected the youthful queen to the heights of heroic

action. In solemn dignity her spirit rose to answer the demand of the hour in the courageous and thrilling words, "If I perish, I perish." When at the critical moment the scepter was held out to her she did not immediately identify the villain, but with remarkable restraint and deliberate care guided the king and Haman into a situation calculated to be most favorable to her purpose. Fiction could not conceive of a more dramatic and surprising series of coincidences than those that led up to the exposure and death of Haman. In Purim, the Feast of Lots, the Jews ever commemorate Heaven's disposal of Haman's evil plan, which a "lot" had presumably indicated would succeed (see ch. 3:7).

The religious character and moral teaching of the book of Esther may be summarized thus:

1. Though God's name does not appear in the entire book, His providence is manifest throughout. No disbeliever in God could possibly have written the book; no believer can read it without finding his faith strengthened. Deliverance is presented by the writer as the result of a living faith in God.
2. The book of Esther provides an account of the origin of an important Jewish national festival, the Feast of Purim, which is still observed with rejoicing each year.
3. A vital moral lesson pervades the narrative. With the passing of Haman's brief day of popularity the transitory nature of earthly power and prosperity becomes painfully evident. God humbles the proud and exalts those who trust in Him.
4. The providence of God is strikingly displayed. Divine power is united with human effort. The means used are human, but the deliverance itself is divine.

Outline of the Book.

I. Esther Made Queen of Persia, 1:1 to 2:20.

- A. The official feast of 180 days, 1:1-4.
- B. The public feast of 7 days, 1:5-9.
- C. Vashti's refusal to appear before Ahaseurus, 1:10-12.
- D. Vashti deposed as queen, 1:13-22.
- E. The search for a new queen, 2:1-4.
- F. Esther taken to the palace, 2:5-11.
- G. Esther made queen of the realm, 2:12-20.

II. Haman's Plot to Exterminate the Jews, 2:21 to 3:15.

- A. Mordecai, a royal officer, saves the life of Ahaseurus, 2:21-23.
- B. Haman's promotion; his resentment toward Mordecai, 3:1-5.

- C. Haman's plot to take revenge on Mordecai's race, 3:6-11.
- D. Haman's decree of extermination against the Jews 3:12-15.

III. Esther Champions the Cause of Her People, 4:1 to 5:8.

- A. In consternation, the Jews fast at Haman's decree, 4:1-3.
- B. Mordecai appeals to Esther, 4:4-14.
- C. Esther accepts the challenge, 4:15-17.
- D. Esther entertains the king and Haman at a banquet, 5:1-8.

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IV. The Fall of Haman, 5:9 to 7:10.

- A. Haman's plot to hang Mordecai, 5:9-14.
- B. Ahasuerus reminded of Mordecai's loyal service, 6:1-3.
- C. Haman compelled to honor Mordecai, 6:4-11.
- D. Haman warned of the failure of his plot, 6:12-14.
- E. Esther accuses Haman before Ahasuerus, 7:1-8.
- F. The execution of Haman, 7:9, 10.

V. The Triumph of the Jews Over Their Enemies, 8:1 to 10:3.

- A. Countermanding the decree of Haman, 8:1-14.
- B. Mordecai advanced and his people restored to favor, 8:15-17.
- C. The deliverance and rejoicing of the Jews, 9:1-19.
- D. Proclamation of the Feast of Purim, 9:20-32.
- E. Mordecai made prime minister of Persia, 10:1-3.