

Esther

Esther's place in history is significant, though perhaps underrated. She appeared on the scene during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes or, as the LXX has it, Artaxerxes). He was the son of Darius the Great and reigned from ca. 486 to 465 B.C. This was about 100 years after the temple was destroyed, and about 30 years after it was rebuilt in Jerusalem. This would have been a few years before Ezra returned to Jerusalem (ca. 458 B.C.) and Nehemiah returned to rebuild the city walls (ca. 445 B.C.). The book, overall, demonstrates how Esther filled a vital role in helping to save the Jews from a devious attempt at annihilation.

One of the issues often raised from the book of Esther is that the name of God does not appear. However, that should not be mistaken for thinking that God is not present in the actions that take place. There can be little doubt that this book is about God's providence in sparing His people from almost certain destruction. In that sense, the book mirrors other failed attempts in history to destroy God's people.

Esther was a beautiful, young Jewish lady who had no expectations to rise to such a great position as Queen of Persia. What brought about the circumstances that allowed Esther to be



so influential? The text tells us that the king gave a fancy banquet, and the wine was plentiful. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for women. On the seventh day of the banquet, his heart "merry with wine," the

king ordered Vashti to come in and display her beauty. She refused, and the king, in his anger, banished Vashti from his presence.

Shortly after, they began searching for another young, beautiful woman to be the Queen. At this point we are introduced to Mordecai, a descendant of one who had been taken as a captive from Jerusalem. He had charge over Esther (Hadassah), for she was a relative but had no mother or father to take care of her. She was one of the young ladies to be brought before the king. She became quite favored among the women and was taken in by the king. However, her national identity as a Jew was hidden because Mordecai told her not to tell, and he continued checking on her welfare. Since the king loved Esther more than all the others, he made her his Queen.

At this point, we are told about a plot to kill the king. Mordecai happened to overhear the plans. He told Esther, and she informed the king in Mordecai's name (2:22). The perpetrators were found and put to death, and all of this,

including Mordecai's name, was written in the king's chronicles. This sets the stage for the rest of the narrative.

Enter Haman, a man who rose in the ranks of authority over all the princes to become the king's right-hand man. When he went out, he expected people to bow down to him. After all, the king had ordered it. However, Mordecai refused to bow because he was a Jew (think of what the Law taught), and this caused Haman to be furious. Rather than just punish Mordecai, he "sought to destroy all the Jews" (3:7). The plot was turned into a law, and the decree went out "to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews" on a particular day. This could not be overturned.

Mordecai learned about this and was very sorrowful over it. He was able to inform Esther about the plans, and she was reluctant at first to try to see the king about it. Mordecai reminded her: "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" (4:13-14)

Esther responded positively and resolved to do something about it, regardless of the consequences. Esther invited both the king and Haman to two banquets. Haman was proud, but again when he saw Mordecai became angry. He decided to try to kill Mordecai. With the advise of his wife, Haman made large gallows on which to hang

Mordecai.

One night, the king could not sleep. By reading his chronicles, Mordecai's name came up and the king determined to honor him. He asked Haman how a man should be honored, and Haman described what should be done thinking the king was talking about him. When it turned out to be about Mordecai, Haman was mortified as he had to carry out the honor.

At the second banquet, Esther revealed that Haman's plot would destroy her people. Haman was declared an enemy, and was hanged on his own gallows; Mordecai was given Haman's position. The Jews were allowed to protect themselves, and they were spared. Esther showed great wisdom and courage. Because of the events recorded in this book, the Feast of Purim was instituted, and is still observed.

Ironies abound in Esther. God was clearly active in the events, and they show how God can use individuals to accomplish great things for His people.

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