

Esther (August 20)

Reading Esther

She had heard and seen them before, but now she lived among them and had to adjust to their speech, their manners, and their food. In her heart, she wanted to stay faithful to her heritage, but in appearance she had pleased a foreign king. She was chosen for him, but not yet by him. Would he have her? Should she desire him?

Life for Esther, a Judean whose culture and faith encouraged purity from foreign ways, was faced with a personal dilemma when chosen for the harem of King Xerxes of Persia. After becoming his queen, Esther faced a national dilemma: the complete destruction of the Judean people from whom she had come. The plot of her story describes the tensions under which God's people lived after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Author and Date

Although we do not know who wrote the book of Esther, from internal evidence it is possible to make some inferences about the author and the date of composition. It is clear that the author was a Jew, but his knowledge of Persian customs suggest that he was a resident of a Persian city. The book was written sometime between the events depicted (approximately 460 BC) and when the Persian empire fell to Greece in 331 BC.

Purpose, Themes, and Literary Features

The author's central purpose was to record the institution of the annual festival of Purim and to keep alive for later generations the memory of the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of Xerxes. Throughout much of the story, the author calls to mind the ongoing conflict of Israel with the Amalekites, a conflict that began during the exodus and continued through Israel's history. Now that Israel has again been released from captivity, Haman's edict is the final, major effort in the Old Testament period to destroy them. Closely associated with the conflict with the Amalekites is the rest that is promised to the people of God. With Haman's defeat, the Jews enjoy rest from their enemies.

The author of Esther also draws upon the remnant motif that recurs throughout the Bible: natural disasters, disease, warfare, or other calamities threaten God's people; those who survive constitute a remnant. The author patterned much of his material on the events of the Joseph story, in which the remnant motif is also central to the narrative.

An outstanding feature of the book – one that has given rise to considerable discussion – is the complete absence of any explicit reference to God, worship, prayer, or sacrifice. This “secularity” has produced many detractors who have judged the book to be of little religious value. However, it appears that the author has deliberately refrained from mentioning God or any religious activity as a literary device to heighten the fact that it is God who controls and directs all the seemingly insignificant coincidences that make up the plot and issue in deliverance for the Jews. God's sovereign rule is assumed at every point, an assumption made all the more effective by the total absence of reference to him.

Blessings for Readers

The book of Esther is a beautiful portrayal of courage in the face of danger and the triumph of good in the face of powerful, sinister forces. Although the name of God is not mentioned, the book of Esther implies divine providence throughout.

As you study Esther, remember why God worked through Esther and Mordecai to deliver the people of Judah. It was all part of God's plan that the Savior would be born to that people in the land God had designated, at just the right moment, “when the fullness of time had come” (Galatians 4:4).