

## Introduction to the Book of Esther

Author: Unknown

Date: Around 400 B.C.

Place: Susa during the Babylonian Captivity

Esther is one of only two books in the Bible that tells the story of a woman, the other book is Ruth. Esther was a Jewish orphan brought up by her cousin Mordecai in Susa, Persia. She is a remarkable young woman, she is beautiful, has self-denial, heroism, tact, courage and patriotism. Her course of action during a very difficult and dangerous time for the Jews gives her a distinguished place among the women of the Bible. However, the book is as much about Mordecai and his faith as Esther.

The book is also unique in that it never mentions the name of God, nor is there any allusion to prayer or worship except perhaps fasting. It seems, at first, that God is silent and out of sight in the book. As you study the book though, you find that God is behind the scenes guiding each event. There are only 10 chapters in the book and is easy to read.

The story is set in Persia, completely removed from Israel. From 597 BC through 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, systematically undermined Judah until he destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and took people into captivity. To avoid rebellion and exert complete dominance, both Assyria and Babylonia deported their captives. By uprooting people from their land and their gods, they were easier to control. For the Jews, God's presence in the temple in Jerusalem was a direct source of assurance and security for them, God's chosen people. If God was with them and dwelt among them, who could dare challenge them? However, because of their sin, the Babylonians not only conquered them but also destroyed their temple. In conquering Judah, the Babylonians could claim that their god, Marduk, was superior to the Jewish God, Yahweh – a tremendous spiritual blow to the Jews. Exiled Jews not only lost their homes and their land, but also the certainty of God's presence. About 100 years have passed since the Israelites were carried into Babylon as exiles. But God never forgot them nor abandoned them.

The Babylonian empire was overthrown by the Persians about 70 years later. King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. While many did return to Israel, thousands decided to stay in Persia because it had become their home, they had reared several generations and started businesses.

The book also takes place within the household of the Persian king, Xerxes, which was his personal name. Ahasuerus, which used in some translations, was a title such as that of Caesar, not a personal name. He ruled over 127 provinces and would have been the most powerful man in the world at this time. He ruled from India to Ethiopia. The palace was located in the city of Susa, a world of power, where decisions, obsessions and whims of those in power affected thousands. Xerxes decided to show off his wealth and that's when the trouble begins. The events center around three feasts: The Feast of Xerxes, The Feast of Esther and The Feast of Purim.

The book of Esther teaches that:

- God is always with us, even when we don't realize it, and working in our lives,
- It is better to do the right thing even if it means death
- God saves and rewards His people