

## **General Comments on the book of Esther**

The book of Esther is similar to the book of Daniel in that it is a manual for how Jews can survive in exile. The original story of survival in exile is the Joseph story in Exodus, and the same literary context is present in Esther. God is present in the background, engineering the survival of the Jewish exiles as they live among foreigners who are at times hostile.

In the Esther account, same as in Daniel, we see political intrigue, threats of intimidation for religious and cultural assimilation, and individuals being in the right place at the right time and having to make difficult decisions. The book of Esther is unique in that it presents the Lord as very much in the background, as the people never speak of Him and hints at religiosity are few and subtle. It suggests the people were not particularly zealous in their faith and miracles were largely absent, leaving the people to their own devices absent the Lord's direct assistance, which results in them being placed in difficult circumstances. The reader is left wondering if the people were more religiously zealous, then the Lord would have done more to assist them directly, as in the case of Daniel. There are two references to religion: Mordecai's refusal to bow to any but God, and the widespread fast Esther requests. However, note, in both cases, there is no explicit mention of religion or God, they are simply practices observed. The charitable reading is these are oppressed people practicing their religion quietly, the uncharitable reading is they are secularized but culturally Jewish.

One point emphasized in the book of Esther is how morally corrupt the culture of their captors is and how bureaucratically ineffective the king and government is. The general read on this is that the Jewish people will find themselves among nations who are this way and they must keep themselves separate from it and unsullied by it in order to survive. The narrative presents the Jewish people as working hard, doing well, being conscientious among their Persian captors, but keeping distinctly separate enough from them to be seen as a different body of people, different enough to be persecuted. And they need to be this way. Not offensive to their captors, not looking for opportunity to cause problems, but quietly observing their religion while doing their jobs well. If they do, then they will benefit in the long run, despite trials, although they might not be immediately delivered from captivity.

Clearly, a noteworthy point is the main character in the book is a woman. Esther takes calculated risks to protect her people from an existential threat at personal risk. She could be selfish and deny her heritage and religion, but she doesn't, and in doing so, she effectively saves the Jewish people from extermination. While it is easy to read this as a simple act of heroic bravery, the story presents a more nuanced character where Esther realizes in the long run she will be killed one way or the other, so she needs to take the risk that has the potential for greater good (cf. 4:7-17).

The book of Esther is presented as a clear work of literature with a deliberate thematic structure, centering on ch. 6, where Haman is forced into humiliation while Mordecai is exalted:

1:1-8 Greatness of Ahasuerus

1:1-8 Two Banquets of Persians

2:10-20 Esther identifies as a Gentile

3:1 Elevation of Haman

3:12-15 Anti-Jewish Edict

4 Fateful exchange of Mordecai and Esther

5:6-8 First banquet of Ahasuerus, Mordecai and Esther

6 Royal Procession  
(humiliation of Haman,  
elevation of Mordecai)

7:1-6 Second banquet of Ahasuerus, Mordecai and Esther

7:1-6 Fateful Exchange of Ahasuerus and Esther

8:9-14 Pro-Jewish edict

8:15 Elevation of Mordecai

8:17 Gentiles identify as Jews

9:20-32 Two banquets of Jews

## 10 Greatness of Ahaseurus and Mordecai

(Taken from Jon D. Levenson's [Esther: A Commentary, page 5](#), where he breaks out the structure based on the recurring banquets, and [page 8](#), where he breaks it up by subject.)

This is not to say that there were not literal ancient persons who ultimately became the literary Esther and Mordecai. It is to say the book of Esther we now presently have is not a historically accurate text in the modern sense. It is work of literature with a clear didactic purpose of teaching the Jews about the origin of the feast of Purim, and to provide a handbook of how to survive and prosper in exile.

Also noteworthy is the fact that there is no historical record of any of the main characters of this book (e.g., Asaheurus, Vashti, Esther, Mordecai, Haman). Given the less than flattering portrayal of the king of Persia, it is no wonder his name was changed. The Persian king at the likely intended time period of the book is [Xerxes](#), but he is not explicitly identified in the text.