Esther

The story of Esther's life fits between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, between the first return led by Zerubbabel and the second return led by Ezra. It provides the only biblical portrait of the vast majority of Jews who chose to remain in Persia rather than return to Palestine after the Exile. God's hand of providence and protection on behalf of His people is evident throughout the book, though His name does not appear once! Haman's plot which brings grave danger to the Jews (chapters 1–4) is countered by the courage of beautiful Esther and the counsel of her wise cousin Mordecai, resulting in a great deliverance (chapters 5–10). The Feast of Purim becomes an annual reminder of God's faithfulness on behalf of His people.

INTRODUCTION

Ezra deals primarily with the restoration of the Jewish people after the Exile, Nehemiah deals with their physical and spiritual reconstruction, and Esther deals with their preservation. Esther is more like a drama than any other portion of Scripture with its unexpected and ironic plot twists. Because of its unusual nature, Esther hopped from place to place in the canon of Scripture. It was found in the "*Writings*" section of the Hebrew Bible as one of the five rolls (Megilloth). The other four are Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. These books are read on Jewish holidays, and Esther is still read on the Feast of Purim.

Esther's Hebrew name was *Hadassah*, "myrtle" (2:7), but her Persian name *Ester* was derived from the Persian word for "star". The Greek title for this book is *Esther*, and the Latin title is *Hester*.

AUTHOR

While the author's identity is not indicated in the text, the evident knowledge of Persian etiquette and customs, the palace in Susa, and details of the events in the reign of Ahasuerus indicate that the author lived in Persia during this period. The obvious Jewish nationalism and knowledge of Jewish customs further suggest that the author was Jewish. If this Persian Jew was not an eyewitness, he probably knew people who were. The book must have been written soon after the death of King Ahasuerus (464 b.c.), because chapter 10, verses 2–3 speak of his reign in the past tense. Some writers suggest that Mordecai himself wrote the book; this seems unlikely, for although Mordecai did keep records (9:20), the chapter 10 citation implies that his career was already over. Nevertheless, the author certainly made use of Mordecai's records and may have had access to the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia (see 2:23; 10:2). Ezra and Nehemiah have also been suggested for authorship, but the vocabulary and style of Esther are dissimilar to that found in their books. It seems likely that a younger contemporary of Mordecai composed the book.

DATE & SETTING

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name and Xerxes the Greek name of Khshayarsh, king of Persia from 486–464 b.c. According to chapter 1, verse 3, the feast of Xerxes took place in his third year, or 483 b.c. The historian Herodotus refers to this banquet as the occasion of Xerxes' planning for a military campaign against Greece. But in 479 b.c. he was defeated by the Greeks at Salamis, and Herodotus tells us that he sought consolation in his harem. This corresponds to the time when he held a "contest" and crowned Esther queen of Persia (2:16-17). Since the events of the rest of the book took place in 473 b.c. (3:7–12), the chronological span is ten years (483–473 b.c.). The probable time of authorship was between 464 b.c. (the end of Xerxes' reign; see 10:2-3) and about 435 b.c. The palace at Susa was destroyed by fire during that period, and such an event would probably have been mentioned. The historical and linguistic features of Esther do not support a date later than 400 b.c., as there is no trace of Greek influence.

Esther was addressed to the many Jews who did not return to their homeland. Not all the godly people left - some did not return for legitimate reasons. Most were disobedient in staying in Persia. Nevertheless, God continued to care for His people in voluntary exile.