

**A LOOK AT THE BOOK  
ESTHER  
GOD KEEPS HIS COVENANT**

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How can an entire book of the Bible leave God out?

How can an entire book of the Bible never mention Him?

This question was the major reason for the historical discussion of the canonicity of Esther.

How can you have a Bible book where God is never mentioned—while He is so “everywhere present?”

How can God’s people, whose history is so dependent on the “everywhere present” God, be so unaware of His presence?

How can they be so driven to “do it themselves” rather than trust Him?

The same problem exists today as existed in Esther’s day!

## **AUTHOR**

The author of Esther is not identified in the book and is difficult to determine.

Tradition is divided, some assigning the book to Mordecai, and others to Ezra or Nehemiah.

Esther describes the life of Mordecai as if it were already concluded (10:2-3).

As for Ezra or Nehemiah, their vocabulary and style are quite distinct.

Therefore, while the author remains unknown, there are some facts concerning him which appear to be demonstrable from the book itself.

The author's evident Jewish nationalism and knowledge of Jewish customs demonstrate that he was a Jew.

His knowledge of Persian conditions and customs indicates that he probably lived in Persia (Iran).

His detailed knowledge of the events indicates either that he was an eyewitness, or that he had access to records from Mordecai and the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.

Chronological indications demonstrate that the book was written after the death of Xerxes (10:1-2) and, perhaps, Mordecai (10:2-3), though not long after.

The author was probably an unidentified Jew, living in Persia shortly after, and perhaps contemporary with, Mordecai.

## **DATE**

The events began during the third year of the reign of Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.).

They cover a period of approximately 10 years (483-73 B.C.).

The record was written after the death of Xerxes (465 B.C.), but probably prior to the burning of the palace at Susa (c. 435 B.C.), since that significant event is not mentioned.

## BACKGROUND

The story of Esther takes place in the midst of the Persian empire.

Cyrus' victories over the Babylonians had taken place more than fifty years before.

Zerubbabel had led the principal expedition of the faithful back to Jerusalem long before (536 B.C.).

The story fits between the two major divisions of Ezra, after Zerubbabel's expedition (536), but previous to that of Ezra (457).

King Xerxes I, son of Darius I, is ruling over the Persian empire.

In the third year of his reign, 483 B.C., Xerxes celebrated a great banquet.

Herodotus says the banquet took place as he was planning for his military campaign against Greece.

As a result of events there, he deposed his queen and left for the battle.

Attack against Greece 483 (1:3)

About three years later, he was defeated by the Greeks at Salamis.

Offensive and defeat at Salamis 480

He returned from the battle to "seek consolation in his harem," according to Herodotus.

This would correspond well with the biblical account which places the selection of Esther at four years following the banquet.

Esther chosen 478 (2:16)

The remainder of events in the book occur during the next five to six years (478-73).

### **Spiritual condition of the participants:**

While little is stated concerning the spiritual condition of the participants in the story, some conclusions may be inferred.

The participants were Jews who had not accompanied the faithful remnant that desired to return to the land God had promised them.

They never refer to God, nor use His Name.

In the midst of crisis and affliction, they never pray; at least, no direct reference to prayer is included.

There is no reference to the law, nor to God's covenants.

No supernatural events, nor hope for such, are mentioned.

No calling out to Him: "*You have to act!*"

These people seem to be typical Jews under discipline, struggling to bring about their own deliverance from a terrifying doom.

*"We are our own Messiah!"*

They rejoice and celebrate a national holiday as a result of their victory.

There's no indication of their acknowledgment that God has delivered His people, nor of a reconfirmation of the covenant or fellowship with Him.

## **THEME AND PURPOSE**

As a book dealing with conditions among God's people in dispersion following the return of the faithful remnant, Esther sheds considerable light on God's dealings with His people.

Although there's no indication that the people have turned to God, He is clearly seen at work behind the scenes, as the faithful husband protecting His unfaithful wife.

Even when they are unaware of His presence—and "independent" of Him— God continues to keep His covenant, and to work on their behalf!

### **1) The unfaithfulness and sin of God's people has not brought His covenant to an end.**

**He will fulfill His promises to His covenant people.**

They may not be restored to full fellowship and blessing, but neither will He permit an enemy to eliminate His people.

The promise of Genesis 12:3, that God will bless those who bless His people and curse those who curse them, is true even when His people are unfaithful.

**Those who plot against them will not prosper.**

**He still loves and watches over them.**

In addition to this basic purpose and message of the book, there are additional purposes:

### **2) Historically, Esther describes what happened to the Jews who stayed behind in Persia when the faithful returned to the land.**

### **3) It demonstrates God's sovereign control over history, even over pagan rulers, hundreds of miles away from God's land.**

### **4) It also demonstrates the origin of the Feast of Purim and exhorts them to continue observing it.**

The faithful remnant will recognize that they are celebrating another great demonstration of God's delivering His people from sure destruction.

Those who see history from God's perspective understand what God has done.

Those who don't, think they saved themselves.

It's all "*in the eye of the beholder!*"

### **5) Although not expressed in the book, awareness of God's faithfulness should always work as a call to His people.**

**If God loves them and protects them as He does, in spite of their sinful condition, they ought to reciprocate by following Him and submitting to His authority over them. *They can trust Him!***

## ORGANIZATION

The book begins by describing **the origin of a conflict which results in a crisis for all of God's people in the Persian empire** (1-4).

Presentation of the instruments God will use to accomplish His purpose 1-2  
Threat posed by the opposition's plot 3-4

God begins to work quietly behind the scenes to eliminate those who dare to oppose His covenant people and, thereby, eliminate the crisis (5-10).

God's protection provided 5-9:19  
National celebration established 9:20-32  
Individual participation in God's plan rewarded 10:1-3

## ARGUMENT

***God keeps His covenant***

## CONFLICT DEVELOPED 1-4

### DIVINE INSTRUMENTS PRESENTED 1-2

#### **Queen Vashti deposed** 1:1-22

Feasts celebrated 1:1-9

After an introductory description of the historical situation in which the story took place (1:1-2), the book begins at a time of great celebration.

Xerxes has called together the military and political leaders for important consultations, accompanied by celebrations (1:3-22).

Officials 1-4  
Common people 5-8  
Women 9

Vashti's refusal 10-12

The significant event of this part of the story was the result of the queen's refusal to present herself at the king's party, wearing the royal crown, for all those present to enjoy looking at her beauty.

Vashti's rejection 13-22

He is afraid that all the women will do the same! 13-18

As a result of her refusal, she was deposed.

#### **Queen Esther chosen** 2:1-20

Contest recommended 1-4

4 years later, after he returned from battle with the Greeks, the king had second thoughts about what he had done, but he could not reverse the action.

His attendants proposed that a beauty contest be held to select a new queen.

Preparations were made for the contest.

Esther proposed 5-8

Among the candidates was Esther, a beautiful young Jewish girl.

Esther preferred 9-15

While among other contestants in the harem, Esther became the preferred candidate of Hegai who was responsible for contestants.

He helped her prepare herself for the contest.

Esther was taken before the king and won his favor also.

Esther selected 16-18

Therefore, a Jewish exile became the queen of the Persian empire.

Esther counselled 19-20

On Mordecai's instructions, she did not reveal that she was Jewish.

Seems parallel to parent telling a child to marry someone, *"but don't tell them you're a Christian!"*

Should she have been marrying him at all? *-IF she had a choice!*

#### **King Xerxes protected by Mordecai 2:21-23**

Mordecai stayed near the king's gate in order to protect Esther and counsel her as needed.

While sitting at the gate, he overheard two of the king's officers conspire to assassinate Xerxes.

Mordecai informed Esther of the plot.

She told the king about the plot and gave the credit to Mordecai.

When the king confirmed the account, he had the two officials hanged and official note was taken of Mordecai's role in saving his life.

However, no recognition nor reward was given.

#### **OPPOSITION PLOT THREATENED 3-4 Plot to destroy the Jews**

After presenting the participants God used to deliver His people (1-2), the author describes the way the conflict developed (3-4).

#### **Opposition presented 3:1-2a**

The source of the opposition was Haman the Agagite.

Xerxes had elevated him above all the other officials and they all knelt down to honor him.

#### **Insubordination produced 3:2b-5**

The conflict developed when Mordecai refused to kneel before him.

When Haman found out about it, he was enraged.

#### **Destruction planned 3:6-15**

When he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to make the whole nation pay for his insubordination.

He would have them all destroyed.

### Contemplated 6-11

After selecting the proper day for their destruction, . . . .

### Confirmed 12-15

. . . , he went to the king for his approval.

When he presented the situation to the king, he described the Jews as separatists, with different customs from the rest of the people of the empire (non-conformists).

Without naming them, he describes them as disobedient to the king's laws.

On the basis of Haman's description of them as a rebellious people, the king demonstrates his confidence in Haman by approving the plan to destroy them.

### Deliverance sought 4:1-17

When Mordecai and the other Jews learned of the decree, they all mourned.

Mordecai decided that the only hope the nation had rested in Esther.

### Mordecai's mourning 1-5

He went to the king's gate dressed in sackcloth and ashes to consult her.

### Mordecai's appeal 6-14

When she found out about his condition, she sent a trusted attendant to discover the problem.

He explained the situation and requested her to appeal to the king.

### Esther's decision 15-17

Recognizing the risk involved, Esther questioned the advisability of taking such a great risk.

Mordecai answered that *this was the only hope*.  
*Couldn't God handle it another way?!!*

The risk of national destruction was assured if she not accept the personal risk of going to the king. (?)

Aware of what her attempt could accomplish, she decided to attempt to see the king.

She instructs him to have all the Jews fast for 3 days and then she would go to the king.

*What's the significance of this fast?*  
*Was it a synonym for prayer?*  
*Is this a ritual (for "good luck")?*

## **OPPOSITION DEFEATED 5-10**

Following Esther's decision to risk her life for her people, the direction of events begins to turn away from the opposition and toward God's people.

## **DIVINE INTERVENTION PROTECTED 5-9:19**

God is at work behind the scenes preparing the destruction of those who wished to destroy His people.

### **Destruction prevented 5-7**

Esther's intervention before the king is successful and prevents the destruction of the Jews.

#### Esther's acceptance 5:1-3

When she stands in the inner court, the king extends the golden scepter to her, and thus spares her life and allows her to address him.

#### Esther's first banquet 5:4-8

Rather than make an immediate appeal, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet.

At the conclusion of the banquet, her only request is that they return to a second banquet the next day.

#### Haman's arrogance 5:9-14

In the interlude between banquets, the author begins to trace Haman's downfall.

His arrogance, which will cause his destruction, is demonstrated by the events that night.

Haman left the palace that day feeling great because the queen had honored him along with the king at her special banquet.

His joy was cut short by anger as he crossed paths with Mordecai who again refused to rise before him.

Arriving home, he called together his friends and bragged about his wealth and glory.

However, he confessed, Mordecai was still there to annoy him.

His friends suggested that he get permission to hang Mordecai and then he could enjoy the banquet.

Haman was pleased with the idea and set out to have the gallows built.

#### Haman's humiliation 6:1-14

The next day, however, was full of surprises for Haman, that would finally lead to his death.

During the night, the king couldn't sleep so he ordered that the chronicles of his reign be read to him.

As they were reading, he realized that Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving his life (6:1-3).

The next morning, when Haman arrived early to request Mordecai's death, Xerxes asked Haman to help him plan a special honor for a man who has pleased him.

Haman assumed it must be for him, since he was the most likely one to please the king!

He suggested an honor he would enjoy, being taken around the town as the ideal man the king wants to honor (6:4-9).

It was a humiliating shock, and the first sign of his own doom, when he had to proclaim Mordecai's exaltation to the city (6:10-11)

Upon his return home, his friends understood the implications of what had happened.

They correctly predicted his defeat (6:12-14).

Before he could consider what he might do about this problem, the king's eunuchs came to escort him to the banquet.

Esther's second banquet 7:1-4

At the banquet, Esther made her request known to Xerxes.

She appealed to him to save her people and her from annihilation.

Haman's hanging 7:5-10

Xerxes, unaware of her relationship to the Jews, nor, apparently, that the decree of Haman involved the Jews, didn't realize to what she was referring.

When she explained that this is what Haman was plotting, the king became furious and left.

When he returned, Haman, who was pleading for his life before Esther, had fallen onto the couch where she was.

The king misunderstood his intentions and decreed his death on the gallows that he had made for Mordecai.

Haman received the same day the fate which he had desired for Mordecai.

### **Protection decreed 8**

With the elimination of Haman, the opposition to the Jews lost its driving power.

The problem still remained as to how they could reverse the decree already issued that the Jews were to be destroyed.

Mordecai exalted 1-2

Xerxes began by placing in Jewish hands that which had belonged to their opposition.

Haman's estate was given to Esther.

His position was given to Mordecai.



Edict issued 3-17

Mordecai was authorized to issue a new decree in Xerxes' name, authorizing the Jews to organize to defend themselves on the day they were to have been annihilated.

### **Triumph achieved 9:1-19**

On that day all the tables were reversed.

All the people were afraid to oppose the Jewish defense league.

The king's armies supported the Jews because they feared the new power of Mordecai.

As a result, the Jews were easily able to triumph over their enemies.

### **NATIONAL CELEBRATION ESTABLISHED 9:20-32**

Following such a great victory, in the face of what would have been a certain defeat, a national day of celebration was established.

The feast of Purim was to be perpetually observed as a day of national celebration because of the great victory won.

“Pur” (= “lot”) –refers to the lot used by Haman to decide the date.

**Just as the story does not mention God's intervention, so also the call to celebrate the day presents a notable contrast to Israel's other great memorial celebrations.**

They established *their own* celebration! 9:27

**The day was set apart to remember their victory, not God's deliverance.**

No call is issued to remember what *GOD* has done!

However, the faithful of future generations would recognize that it was God who gave them the victory.

### **INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION REWARDED 10:1-3**

The part played by the participants in the preservation of God's people is rewarded by God.

#### **Xerxes' success 10:1-2**

The remainder of Xerxes' reign is pictured as successful.

#### **Mordecai's preeminence 10:3**

Special note is taken of the preeminence Mordecai received during Xerxes' reign.

His prominence in the kingdom results in blessings for all of God's people as well.

**God, though not consciously present in the thought of His people, has given them victory over the enemy who wished to annihilate them.**

**Their continued existence, then, as well as now, demonstrates that God is still watching over them.**

**He is faithful.**

**In His time, He will fulfill His covenants which He has given to His people.**

**WHAT LESSONS DO WE LEARN FROM THIS BOOK THAT SHOULD AFFECT OUR LIVES TODAY?**