

ESTHER

STUDY GUIDE

AUTHOR

The text gives no clue as to who authored it, and as a result several ideas have come forth. Augustine believed Ezra to be the author, while the first century Jewish historian Josephus named Mordecai. However, Mordecai is disputed by scholars since he is mentioned in the past tense within the final chapter of the book. Regardless of who wrote the book, it was most likely a Jew who was quite familiar with Persian customs and words.

DATE

Figuring out when Esther was written is far easier than determining its author.

- Ahasuerus = Xerxes I (Xerxes is the Greek name; Ahasuerus is the Persian name)
- Ahasuerus/Xerxes succeeded Darius 1 in 485 B.C.
- The text says the story began in the 3rd year of Ahasuerus/Xerxes 1 rule
- Ahasuerus/Xerxes ruled for 20 years (485 – 465 B.C.)

Therefore, we can safely assume Esther was written approximately **465 B.C.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As a refresher, here is a chart showing the timeframe of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

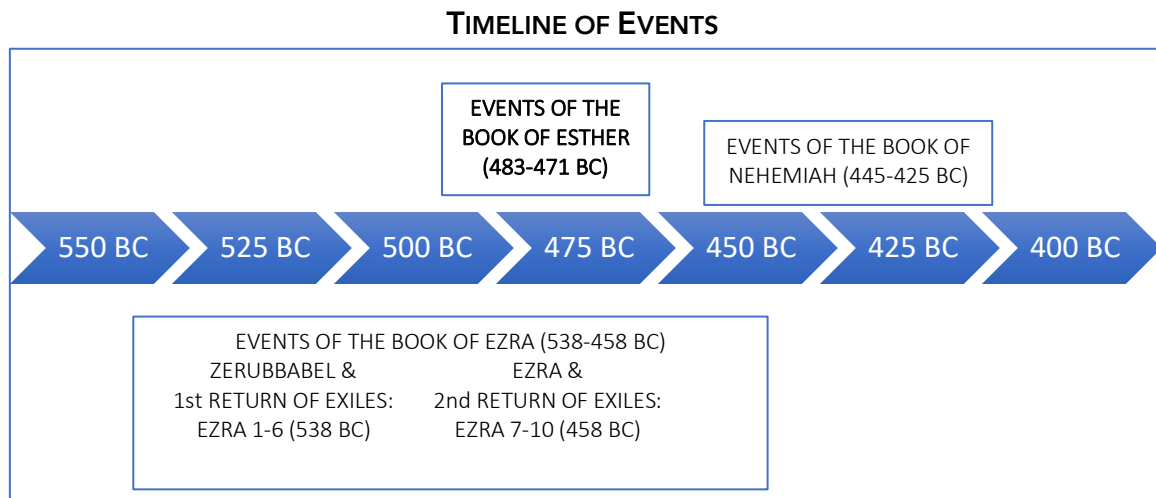


Chart by Dean Niforatos

This book provides insight into God's activity for His people while in exile. Remember, when the Jews were taken into captivity, it was under the Babylonians – roughly 100 years before the Book of Esther was written. Though the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians, and the Persians allowed for Jews to return to Jerusalem, the Jews had spent nearly a century establishing their lives in foreign lands. Not everyone wished to return to their homeland. So, how would God keep His promise of

blessing His Covenant People outside of the Promised Land, especially if given the choice to not live in the Promised Land?

Also, of note is that God’s name is never used in the book. For this reason, some question whether or not it should be included in the biblical canon. They view the book as a patriotic Jewish work which celebrates their victory over enemies and provides reasons for the required festival of Purim, a celebration not commanded in Mosaic Law. Though this book does offer reasons for the festival of Purim, this book offers many spiritual lessons far beyond pride in one’s Jewishness.

In the chart below, notice the final two are not commanded in the Pentateuch (Mosaic Law).

JEWISH FEASTS

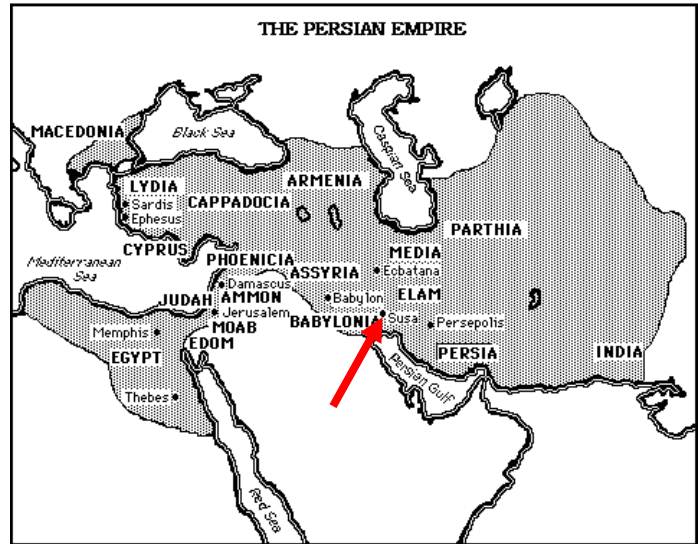
Chart by Dean Niforatos

Feast	Month on Jewish Calendar	Day of Jewish Month	Corresponding Month	References
Passover	Nisan	14	March–April	Ex. 12:1-14; Matt. 26:17–20
* Unleavened Bread	Nisan	15–21	March–April	Ex. 12:15-20
Firstfruits	Nisan or Sivan	16 6	March–April May–June	Lev. 23:9–14; Num. 28:26
* Pentecost (Harvest or Weeks)	Sivan	6 (50 days after barley harvest)	May-June	Deut. 16:9–12; Acts 2:1
Trumpets, Rosh Hashanah	Tishri	1, 2	September- October	Num. 29:1–6
Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur	Tishri	10	September- October	Lev. 23:26-32; Heb. 9:7
* Tabernacle (Booths or Ingathering)	Tishri	15–22	September– October	Neh. 8:13-18; John 7:2
Dedication (Lights), Hanukkah	Chislev	25 (8 days)	November– December	John 10:22
Purim (Lots)	Adar	14, 15	February-March	Esth. 9:18–32
* The three major feasts for which all males of Israel were required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem (Ex. 23:14–19).				

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

The Persian Empire was quite expansive, extending from western India to Libya. The Book of Esther takes place in the administrative capital of Susa.

This book also offers insight into Xerxes I and what may be the beginning of the Persian Empire's political decline. Outside sources confirm his military strength against Egypt and an additional rebellion in Babylon, but lacked moral qualities compared to Persian leaders before him. Xerxes was described as having tyrannical character and "a love of opulent display which progressively sapped his moral fiber" (G. Ricciotti, *The History of Israel*, vol. 2). His son, Artaxerxes I (king during Ezra 7 through Nehemiah) ruled following Xerxes' assassination. Here are a few other Persian customs mentioned in Esther:



- Royal Persian feasts were notorious for their lavishness. Feasting occurred from reclining couches, with utensils made of gold, and surrounded by the finest decor (Esther 1:4-9).
- Special laws of access protected the king. A reduced number of select advisors could visit the king, and only when summoned by the king himself or the king extended his royal scepter. This was partially a display of royal authority, but also a means of protecting the king from potential danger. (Esther 1:14; 4:11)
- The Persian postal system was well-established and included authentication of documents by seal of the king's signet ring (Esther 8:8) or a cylinder seal. Proof of these objects owned by Ahasuerus/Xerxes have been discovered in archaeological digs within the royal city of Persepolis. Documents were distributed via couriers riding horses, covering territory from India to Ethiopia! (Esther 8:9-11)
- Laws of the Persians and Medes (Esther 1:9) were unchangeable, even by the ruling king. This caused layers of laws to compensate for past laws (Esther 8:11-13).

LITERARY STRUCTURE

This book is a prime example of historical narrative, a combination of: 1) religious perspective, 2) use of historical events and people, and 3) persuasion of the reader. Truly, this book reads as a movie script and wraps the reader up into the storyline! This book's primary purpose though is theological – to teach about God and His relationship to His people.

As Dean Niforatos points out, this book can be outlined in two simple parts:

- The Threat to the Jews (1:1-4:17)
- The Triumph of the Jews (5:1-10:3)

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However, a common Hebrew writing technique called chiasm is also present. Simply put, chiasm is a structure which looks somewhat like an arrow, pointing the reader to the climax point of the story. In the Book of Esther, chiasm presents itself through a series of comparisons and contrasts. For example, compare the following verses:

- 3:10 and 8:2a
- 3:12-13 with 8:9-11
- 3:14 with 8:13

The chiasm for the whole book of Esther looks like this (Source: M. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*)

- A Opening and background (chap. 1)
- B The king's first decree (chaps. 2–3)
- C The clash between Haman and Mordecai (chaps. 4–5)
- D **“On that night the king could not sleep”** (6:1) → **TURNING POINT FOR STORYLINE**
- C' Mordecai's triumph over Haman (chaps. 6–7)
- B' The king's second decree (chaps. 8–9)
- A' Epilogue (chap. 10)

OBSERVATION WORDS

- Representation of God, Jesus, & the Holy Spirit
- King Ahasuerus (King Xerxes)
- Esther (Hadassah)
- Mordecai
- Haman
- Jew/Jews

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- What did the **Lord teach YOU** through what you read & how will you apply it in your life?
- Where/how is **Jesus** & the **Holy Spirit** represented?
- What do you learn about the **character of God**?

- What qualities do you see in the following individuals – good and bad?
 - **King Ahasuerus (Xerxes)**
 - **Esther (Hadassah)**

 - **Mordecai**
 - **Haman**

- What do you learn about racial tensions through this book? What racial or societal biases might you be harboring?

- What did this book teach you about prayer and intercession? How can you apply what you learned to your own prayers?

- How does this book display God’s protection of His people? What does this mean for you today?

KEY WORD – How would you summarize what you’ve read into one word or very short phrase? Why did you choose that?

KEY VERSE(S) & CHAPTER – May reflect something which stood out to you or helps summarize the book. So, what are they and why?