

Esther and Ruth hold a unique distinction as the only two books in the Holy Scriptures named after women. While their backgrounds differ significantly—Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew, and Esther was a Jewess who married a Gentile—both were women of immense faith and courage. Each played a pivotal role in the preservation of the nation of Israel: Ruth through the birth of a son who would continue the messianic lineage, and Esther through the defeat of a genocidal enemy.

The events of the Book of Esther take place in Susa (Shushan; Esther 1:2; cf. Nehemiah 1:1), the site of the Persian king's winter palace, following the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BC. Chronologically, these events fit between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra.

The monarch in the narrative is Xerxes I (the name "Ahasuerus" being a royal title similar to "Pharaoh"). The account spans approximately ten years, beginning in the third year of his reign (1:3) and continuing through his twelfth year (3:7).

The Silent Hand of God

One of the most striking features of the Book of Esther is that the name of God is never explicitly mentioned. However, His hand is clearly visible throughout the narrative. Rather than focusing on theological debates regarding human will versus divine decree, the book serves as a practical demonstration of Divine Providence. It illustrates that God is actively involved in the affairs of nations and that His people find their purpose when they submit to His guidance.

For the Jews struggling to rebuild in Jerusalem and Judah, this account served as a vital reminder that God faithfully keeps His covenant promises:

"I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3, NKJV)

While the book is technically anonymous, Esther 9:20 notes that Mordecai "recorded these things," suggesting he authored at least a significant portion of the text. The omission of God's name may have been a strategic choice; if the author intended for the account to be included in the official Persian court records, avoiding specific religious terminology would have ensured its preservation.

The author demonstrates an intimate knowledge of Persian customs. Interestingly, historical records from the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes mention a court official named Morduka, who many scholars identify as the biblical Mordecai.

The Historical Setting: Xerxes and the Empire

The Book of Esther explains the origin of the **Feast of Purim** (Esther 9:16–28). It portrays an empire of staggering scale, stretching from India to Ethiopia (1:1).

The character of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in the Bible aligns with historical secular accounts. He is often described as a man easily swayed by the flattery of his courtiers in domestic life, yet a fierce leader on the battlefield. Historical highlights include:

17-Bible Reading Study Notes

Introduction to Esther

- The Navy and Greece: After suppressing revolts in Egypt, Xerxes launched a massive naval assault on Athens, only to be thwarted by the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC).
- Religious Shift: After his defeat in Greece, he retired to his palaces at Persepolis and Susa, eventually turning away from traditional Babylonian gods to follow Ahuramazda, the Persian "spirit of good."

The drama unfolds when Queen Vashti is removed from her position for refusing the king’s command. A search for a new queen leads to the selection of Hadassah (Esther), an orphaned Jewish woman raised by her kinsman Mordecai.

The plot thickens with the rise of Haman, an influential official who sought to annihilate the Jewish people due to his personal vendetta against Mordecai. Through a series of "providential coincidences"—including the king’s insomnia and his discovery of Mordecai’s past loyalty—the tide turned:

1. The Fast: Esther called the Jews of Susa to fast and seek help before she approached the king.
2. The Reversal: Haman was forced to honor the man he intended to hang.
3. The Victory: Haman’s plot was exposed, leading to his execution.

King Ahasuerus subsequently issued a decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Their victory is still celebrated today through the Festival of Purim, a time of feasting, joy, and giving to the poor.

Timeline of Esther and the Persian Empire (5th Century BC)

To help visualize how the Book of Esther fits into world history, here is a chronological comparison of the biblical narrative alongside the documented milestones of the Persian Empire.

Year (BC)	Persian History & Secular Events	Biblical Events in Esther
522–486	Reign of Darius I (the Great).	Pre-Esther; Jewish exiles return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel.
486	Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) ascends the throne.	Xerxes begins his reign in Susa.
483	Xerxes plans his invasion of Greece.	Esther 1: The great 180-day feast; Queen Vashti is deposed.
482–480	Xerxes invades Greece; Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis.	The search for a new queen begins while the King is at war.
479	Xerxes returns to Persia after the defeat at Salamis.	Esther 2: Esther is chosen and crowned Queen of Persia.

Year (BC)	Persian History & Secular Events	Biblical Events in Esther
474	Haman rises to power as Prime Minister.	Esther 3: Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews is formed.
473	The "Turning Point" (Nisan to Adar).	Esther 4–9: Esther's intervention, Haman's fall, and the Jews' victory.
473 (March)	First celebration of Purim.	The Feast of Purim is established as an annual tradition.
465	Xerxes I is assassinated by his court officials.	Esther 10: Mordecai remains second only to the King.

Geography of the Empire

The events took place in the citadel of Susa, which served as the administrative heart of an empire that spanned approximately 2 million square miles.

Key Cultural Observations

- **The Royal Records:** The mention of the "book of the records of the chronicles" (Esther 6:1) matches the Persian custom of keeping meticulous diaries of the King's life.
- **The Laws of the Medes and Persians:** As seen in Esther 1:19, once a Persian decree was signed with the King's signet ring, it was considered unchangeable—a legal detail that created the central conflict of the book.
- **The Unseen Presence:** While human decisions (like Esther's courage and Mordecai's loyalty) are central, the timing of the King's insomnia (6:1) and the "coincidence" of Haman entering the court at that exact moment point to a higher providence orchestrating the outcome.