

ESTHER – SHORT VERSION

The Book of Esther, like Tobit and Judith, is regarded by most scholars as a historical fiction about God's providential care for his people, the Israelites, living outside their homeland in an increasingly hostile environment. (See introduction to Tobit.)

The story is set in the Persian Period of Israel's history—the same period as the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah—during the reign of King Ahasuerus, known in most English translations as Xerxes (486-465 BC). The action takes place in Susa, a city in the Babylonian empire. Amongst other things, the Book of Esther shows that the Jews who did *not* return to Jerusalem following Cyrus' decree were still counted as God's people.

Briefly, this book tells the story of how Esther, a Jewish woman, becomes the Persian Queen with the help of her Uncle Mordecai, and intervenes to stop the evil plans of Haman, a royal official of the king, from killing all the Jews in one day.

In its introduction to Esther, *The Catholic Serendipity Bible* reads: “*Mordecai and Esther are examples of the righteous wise who, remaining faithful to their God, are able to reverse the tables on their wicked opponents. Esther is a literary masterpiece that reads like a modern suspense novel, complete with plot twists, irony, intrigue, revenge, and plenty of feasting.*”

Commentators also point out that the book was written to teach Jews how to live a productive life in Diaspora (outside their homeland).

Feast of Purim. Commentators of Esther also note that one reason Esther was written was to explain the origin, significance and date of the Feast of Purim, which celebrated the deliverance of Jews from Haman's pogrom (officially organized massacre).

Two versions of the book. This book has come down to us in two versions: one in Hebrew and another in Greek which has over 100 verses more than the Hebrew. The Greek version is found in Catholic bibles and the Hebrew version in the Jewish and Protestant bibles. A unique and troubling feature of the shorter version is the

distinct omission of the mention of God. This fact nearly caused its exclusion from the Canon of Scripture. Addressing the non-mention of God in the Hebrew and Protestant bibles, Protestant Scripture scholar J.G. McConville writes: “*As for the fact that the name of God does not appear in the book, this does not mean that it is not ‘theological,’ or does not teach about God. The silence about God is quite deliberate, not to make the point that he is inactive in human situations, but on the contrary, that he is hidden behind all events. This is the implication of the numerous coincidental occurrences in the book. The story can become, therefore, a powerful statement about the reality of God in a world from which he appears to be absent*” (The Daily Study Bible Series – Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.153).

As we shall see, the Greek addition which the Catholic Church uses has explicit references to God, and adds a religious dimension to a secular story.

The 100+ verses in the Greek and Catholic bibles could add some confusion to our reading of the text. The additional verses are scattered throughout the ten chapters of the book and are designated by the letters A to F. The regular chapter numbers apply to the Hebrew text.

Division of Chapters

PART 1: Prologue: Mordecai's dream (Chapter A Addition #1)

PART 2: Esther replaces Vashti (Chapters 2-3)

PART 3: Haman's plot against the Jews; Esther and Mordecai's response. (Chapters 3, B, 4, C, D)

PART 4: Haman's downfall (Chapters 5-7)

PART 5: Reversal of Haman's decree (Chapters 8 and E)

PART 6: Feast of Purim (Chapters 9-10)

Suggested texts to read

Chapter 4: Esther is ready to die for people

Chapter C: Prayers of Mordecai and Esther

Chapters 5 & 6: Esther sets up Haman's downfall and the liberation of her people.

CONCLUDING REMARKS. *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* states: “*The presence of the book of Esther in the Christian canon is a statement of the religious importance of the Jewish people as an ethnic group. It makes the sin of anti-Semitism even more shameful than the irrational injustice that most Christians understand it to be today*” (p.159).