

Esther

1. Introduction – Without ever mentioning God’s name, Esther tells us how God demonstrated his sovereign care over his people while living among a pagan people under pagan rule. Through the faithful action of Esther and her cousin Mordecai, God delivers his people while they triumph over their enemies.
2. Author, date, historical setting – The author of Esther is unnamed. The events take place during the reign of Xerxes (486-465 B.C.), also known as Ahasuerus. The northern kingdom of Israel had been exiled during the Assyrian period, and many of the Jews of the southern kingdom (Judah) had been exiled during the Babylonian period. After the Persians conquered Babylon, Cyrus had instituted a program of restitution to the land during his reign (550-530). However, many of the Jews had been unwilling or unable to return and still lived among the surrounding nations. Esther and her cousin and guardian Mordecai lived in the region of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire.
3. Literary character – While Esther appears to be an unadorned historical narrative, the book actually has much in common with wisdom literature: 1) The book focuses on man’s duty, while little attention is paid to concerns such as worship and sacrifice; 2) The themes relate to practical, ethical action and also instruct us about pride and about respect for authority; 3) Little attention is paid to the great redemptive acts of the past or the promises of the future; 4) Little emphasis is placed on the covenant promises of the land and the specifics of Jewish law. The author is a master of irony. Nearly every significant conflict results in an outcome completely backward from what is expected. The king of the empire cannot control his own wife. Haman inadvertently plans a parade for the man he despises, thinking that it is in honor of himself. Haman builds a gallows for Mordecai and is ultimately hanged on it himself. And the Jews are threatened with annihilation by their enemies but ultimately attack and subdue their enemies with government sanction.
4. Structure (modified from Dillard and Longman):
 - a. Feasts of Xerxes (1-2:18)
 - i. Vashti is deposed (1)
 - ii. Esther is made queen (2:1-18)
 - b. Feasts of Esther (2:19-7:10)
 - i. Mordecai foils a plot (2:19-23)
 - ii. Haman plots (3)
 - iii. Mordecai persuades Esther to help (4)
 - iv. Esther holds a banquet (5:1-8)
 - v. The king chooses to reward Mordecai (5:9-6:14)
 - vi. Esther holds a second banquet (7)
 - c. Feasts of Purim (8-10)
 - i. The king issues an edict on behalf of the Jews (8)
 - ii. Purim is instituted (9)
 - iii. Mordecai is promoted (10)
5. Message:
 - a. Historically, Esther has a clear purpose to explain the origin of Purim, which commemorates God’s deliverance of the Jews from Haman’s plot. This reminds us of the importance of gathered worship on the Lord’s Day and the need to be intentional in commemorating God’s mighty works on our behalf.
 - b. Although God may not appear bodily on the scene, he is working behind the scenes even in the seemingly trivial events of life. Every detail of Esther comes together to produce an outcome that could not possibly have been planned or predicted by man. All that transpires is meaningful and in the hands of a loving, sovereign God.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.