

### **Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)**

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिंदी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

## **Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)**

### **Esther**

Esther's story tells how a woman with wisdom, courage, and willingness changed the lives of thousands. With a community of people praying for her and with God working behind the scenes, Esther accepted her role and risked her life to save others.

## Setting

The book of Esther takes place during the rule of King Xerxes of Persia, from 486 to 465 BC. In an earlier time, around 538 BC, about 50,000 people returned to Judea from Babylon ([Ezra 1:1-5; 2:64-67](#)). However, many Jewish families, including Esther's, remained in Babylon.

During Xerxes's rule, the Persian Empire was almost at its most powerful. Xerxes and his army achieved great things, including a major victory over Egypt. Taxes brought wealth into the Persian capital of Susa. Xerxes managed the building of a grand new palace at Persepolis.

However, Xerxes was a harsh ruler. Esther joined Xerxes's royal court and became his queen. She encountered the challenge of serving God and her people during a crisis while being the loyal wife of a non-Jewish king.

## Summary

When King Xerxes hosted a grand feast for important Persian leaders, Queen Vashti refused to display her beauty. As a result, Xerxes removed her from her position and began looking for a new queen ([1:1-2:4](#)). Xerxes chose Mordecai's cousin, Esther, who was Jewish ([2:5-18](#)).

After Mordecai became a palace official, he discovered a plot against the king and reported it through Esther. Later, Mordecai refused to bow in honor to Haman, the highest official of Xerxes. This led Haman to create a plan to kill all the Jews in the empire ([2:19-3:15](#)). As the Jewish community prayed, Esther risked her life by approaching the king without an invitation ([4:16](#)). She asked the king and Haman to attend a feast (chapter [4](#)). Meanwhile, Haman built a gallows to hang Mordecai ([5:14](#)).

After realizing he had not rewarded Mordecai for discovering the assassination plot, the king ordered Haman to lead a parade to honor Mordecai. This was humiliating for Haman (chapter [6](#)). At the feast, Esther revealed that Haman's plot was a personal attack on her people. The executed Haman on his own gallows (chapter [7](#)).

King Xerxes allowed the Jewish people to defend themselves against their enemies ([8:1-14](#)). The Jews celebrated, Mordecai received a promotion, and they executed Haman's sons ([9:1-17](#)). The Jewish people defended themselves successfully and celebrated God's remarkable salvation at the first Feast of Purim.

## **Author and Date**

The text of Esther does not specify its author or the time of writing. Some early church fathers believed Ezra wrote Esther, while Clement of Alexandria suggested it was Mordecai. There are many Persian words and an absence of Greek influence. This suggests the book was probably written between 460 BC (after Xerxes's rule ended) and 331 BC (before Alexander the Great conquered Persia).

## Genre: History or Fiction?

The book of Esther is a biographical narrative similar to the account of Joseph in [Genesis 37–48](#) and [Ruth 1–4](#).

Some question the historical accuracy of this account because they find it difficult to believe that:

- a Persian king would issue a decree ordering the widespread killing of the Jews,
- the Jews could kill seventy-five thousand enemies in one day,
- a non-Persian like Esther could become queen, and
- so many unlikely events could happen in one story.

On the other hand, the historical accuracy of the book is supported for several reasons:

- The book uses authentic Persian names, titles, and customs.
- In other stories, God acts invisibly (works behind the scenes), using unlikely events to accomplish his purposes (for example, [Genesis 37–48](#); [Ruth 1–4](#)).
- Esther hid her identity as a Jew until long after she became queen.
- Kings did not usually oppose the killing of their enemies, especially when it was suggested by their highest officials.

## Additions to the Book of Esther

The Masoretic Hebrew text of the book of Esther has a strong and consistent manuscript tradition.

However, other ancient sources contain additional stories that were written later, including:

- the Targums and the Midrash (Jewish interpretation and commentary on the Hebrew Old Testament),
- the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint),
- the Latin Vulgate, and
- the writings of Josephus, a first-century Roman Jewish historian.

These additions mention God many times, while the Masoretic Hebrew text does not.

None of the additions contain information from the original Hebrew text. Some repeat material already found in the Masoretic Hebrew version of Esther, while others contradict it. A few appear to come from the imagination of later authors.

Instead of placing these additions within the story to make them seem original, Jerome (the translator and editor of the Latin Vulgate) collected them at the end of the Old Testament in the deuterocanonical books. These books are included in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

## Meaning and Message

The Masoretic Hebrew version of the book of Esther never mentions God. Yet the book's main purpose is to show that God acts invisibly (works behind the scenes) to care for his people. God used King Xerxes's pride while drunk to raise Esther to a position of influence (chapters [1-2](#)). Haman's evil plan to destroy the Jews turned against him through a series of unexpected events. The day planned for the Jews' destruction became a day of joy and victory for them. The book of Esther teaches that God directs people and events to accomplish his purposes.