

# *The Book of* ESTHER

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4. **Theme.** The Babylonian captivity marks a distinct break in Jewish national life. For a time the stream of Jewish history disappeared and ran underground, and when it reappeared its whole character was changed. The Jews were no longer so much a nation as they were a people and a church. The Bible contains no history of the Exile and of postexilic times, as history is usually defined, but the spirit of the period is admirably conveyed in the narratives of Daniel and Esther. The book of Esther is one of the five rolls that have been, from ancient times, read in every synagogue on the five festal occasions of the year. It seems to have been this annual cycle of readings that determined the location of Esther in the Hebrew canon. The order of the five is: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. The book of Esther comes fifth because it is read at the final festival of the year, the days of Purim (see on chs. 3:7; 9:26).

Considered as literature the book of Esther is at once both an idyl and an epic. It depicts a crisis in the fortunes of God's people that threatened them with annihilation. The instrument of deliverance is a Jewess, elevated from a quiet

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life with her cousin and foster father, Mordecai, to be queen of a world empire. The narrative displays Esther as a woman of clear judgment, remarkable self-control, and noble self-sacrifice. The challenge of Mordecai, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (ch. 4:14), projected the youthful queen to the heights of heroic action. In solemn dignity her spirit rose to answer the demand of the hour in the courageous and thrilling words, "If I perish, I perish." When at the critical moment the scepter was held out to her she did not immediately identify the villain, but with remarkable restraint and deliberate care guided the king and Haman into a situation calculated to be most favorable to her purpose. Fiction could not conceive of a more dramatic and surprising series of coincidences than those that led up to the exposure and death of Haman. In Purim, the Feast of Lots, the Jews ever commemorate Heaven's disposal of Haman's evil plan, which a "lot" had presumably indicated would succeed (see ch. 3:7).

The religious character and moral teaching of the book of Esther may be summarized thus:

1. Though God's name does not appear in the entire book, His providence is manifest throughout. No disbeliever in God could possibly have written the book; no believer can read it without finding his faith strengthened. Deliverance is presented by the writer as the result of a living faith in God.

2. The book of Esther provides an account of the origin of an important Jewish national festival, the Feast of Purim, which is still observed with rejoicing each year.

3. A vital moral lesson pervades the narrative. With the passing of Haman's brief day of popularity the transitory nature of earthly power and prosperity becomes painfully evident. God humbles the proud and exalts those who trust in Him.

4. The providence of God is strikingly displayed. Divine power is united with human effort. The means used are human, but the deliverance itself is divine.