

The Book of Esther

The Book of Esther has been placed among the writings in the Old Testament. It, along with four others small books—Song of Solomon, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations, was placed on one scroll called the “Meghilloth” and was used for festival readings. Many scholars feel that the Book of Esther is a short historical novel or short story sprinkled with historical data and names to make its message more urgent and important. Thus it would be comparable to Jesus’ parables. Others think it is an attempt to write history with free interspersions of speeches and conversation following the conventions of history writing of its day. Others insist on the historicity of every detail, pointing to Esther 10:2.

The purpose is not clear from a reading of the book. It considers the question of destruction or survival of the Jews under persecution. Vengeance is more prominent than devotion. An important function of the book is to explain the observance of the festival of Purim. The Purim festival was a Jewish commemoration of deliverance—deliverance of the Jews from the hands of the Babylonians. The book was intended to be read at the Purim festival—a festival of merrymaking, noise, and conviviality. Thus the major theme of the book, persecution returning on the head of those who initiate it, leads through all the details of the story to the final victory which Purim celebrates.

Many feel that the religious concepts taught in the book are sub-Christian. Probably the persons who can understand and appreciate the attitudes of Esther are those who have lived through persecution and occupation by others. In times of peace it is incomprehensible and unforgivable that hard suffering creates such rigidity and callousness. Though the Hebrew portion of the book does not mention the name of God, it has a definite theology. Throughout, the book points to justice and indicates that faithfulness to the covenant people is a duty whether it pays or not. Mordecai’s insistence that Esther must intervene to save her people is based on the idea that a good Jew must worship and be loyal to the covenant God and to Him alone. To be faithful to Him means to be faithful to His people.

The book teaches the axiom that “the Lord helps those who help themselves.” During the days of oppressive persecution the very survival of the people depended upon the Jews doing something. The book shows the sovereignty of God working in a foreign land to preserve His people. It shows God working through people of unpretentious backgrounds as they prove faithful to Him. It shows ultimate punishment for those who oppose God’s people. It calls for celebration of God’s deliverance.

The original Hebrew text did not mention God and contained no prayer, but Greek additions to the text amplified prayers by both Mordecai and Esther. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n 269) quotes a part of Mordecai’s prayer (4:17c NJ; 4:17b NSRV; C:4 NAB): “You are the Master of the universe and no one can resist you, Lord.”

“Hadassah” in Hebrew means “myrtle” which was a common but fragrant wild shrub. “Esther” is a Persian word meaning “star”. One could surmise that God takes a common, lowly person and makes him or her a star in His service.