

The book of Esther is viewed today by a majority of scholars as non-historical. Yet the story itself is recounted candidly, and there is nothing within it to suggest that it is fictional. Miracles or other “impossible” occurrences are totally absent. Critical scholars are bothered, however, by seeming exaggerations, perceived inaccuracies, and certain omissions, such as:



Is the book of Esther history or fiction?

- The length of the 180-day feast ([Esther 1:1-4](#)) seems excessive.
- The six months of perfuming with oil, and the additional six months of beautifying with spices ([Esther 2:12](#)) seem extreme.
- The book claims that there were 127 Persian provinces ([Esther 1:1](#)), while the historian Herodotus speaks of only 20.
- The notion of a Persian decree being irrevocable ([Esther 1:19](#); [Esther 8:8](#)) is regarded as doubtful—but see [Daniel 6](#).
- Planning for a massacre of Jews almost a year in advance ([Esther 3:8-15](#)) strikes critical scholars as unlikely.
- It seems too coincidental that Haman would turn out to be a descendant of Agag the Amalekite, the enemy of Israel, whom Saul failed to execute in obedience to Yahweh’s direction through Samuel ([Esther 3:1](#); see [1 Samuel 15](#)).
- Contrary to the Biblical account, Herodotus identified Xerxes’ queen as Amestris, not Vashti.
- Although the names Mordecai and that of Haman’s son Parshandatha ([Esther 9:7](#)) are attested elsewhere during the Persian period, Xerxes is the only indisputable historical figure in the book.
- Archaeological data from the Persian period has not specifically confirmed the story’s historicity.

- It is the only Old Testament book: (1) in which neither **“God,”** nor his name **“Yahweh,”** are specifically mentioned; (2) no manuscript copies have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Another factor is that the book is not quoted in the New Testament.
- Things important to the ancient Jews, such as the Law, sacrifice, and the Temple in Jerusalem are not mentioned.
- Esther is often read as a satire addressing the needs of Jews outside of the Holy Land. Yet these challenges, though not insignificant, are not, in fact, as overwhelming as they might first appear:
- The apparent exaggerations may be a result of narrative technique. The 180-day banquet may have been primarily a gathering of leaders to strategize the Greek invasion. Similarly, the six-month preparation periods for the women were probably also intended for training in court decorum and protocol. The author apparently wished to highlight the splendor of the Persian court, but this does not signify that the events were manufactured.
- The claimed historical inaccuracies are cleared up when we examine the historical situation in Persia during this time, which is known to be very similar to the events recorded in Esther. From a compilation of historical records from Herodotus and Ctesias, and Persian records discovered from archaeology, a reliable history has been reconstructed without any reference to the Bible. Revolts in the empire toward the end of Darius reign (Egypt, 486-484 BCE; and Babylon, 484 BCE) required a strong response from his son Ahasuerus in 484 BCE. After these victories, Ahasuerus held a banquet in Susa for the leading people of his kingdom in preparation for his planned invasion of Greece, which may coincide with the banquet in [Esther 1:5](#). Ahasuerus’ naval defeat at Salamis in 480 BCE assured his failure in his attempt to defeat Greece. He returned to Persia and engaged in a series of harem intrigues. The search for a new queen in Esther chapter 2 coincides well with this time period.
- The seeming discrepancy in the number of provinces in the empire is founded on the assumption that the Greek *satrapeia* (in Herodotus) and the Hebrew *medinah* (in

Esther) mean the same thing, but this has not been established. The higher figure in Esther may refer to smaller subdivisions.

- The idea that a royal decree was irrevocable is not documented outside the Bible, but this is not conclusive. The Bible has proven true in other instances, once further discoveries were made, although it possible this was a matter of royal etiquette and/or tradition—not formal law (*Esther 1:19; Esther 8:8*). However, Herodotus gives an example of a similar type of policy **“of the Persians and the Medes” (Esther 1:19 NLT)**. He records that at the Royal Supper, the annual celebration of the king’s birthday, no one who made a request of the king could be denied. It was called **“the law of the Supper” (Herodotus 9:109)**. Similar to the allowance made in Esther to overcome the effects of an irrevocable decree (*Esther 3:10-12; 8:8-10*), Herodotus relates that the king attempted to prevent the fulfillment of the request by circumventing it rather than canceling it.
- Regarding the length of time needed to plan a pogrom, two facts stand out. First, such a matter would require time and planning, given the size and makeup of the empire. Second, it is entirely credible that a man of the ancient world would cast lots to determine an auspicious day for following through with such determination.
- The text does not state that Haman was descended from the Agag of 1 Samuel 15. The meaning of “Agagite” in Esther is actually unknown. On the other hand, it is likely that Haman did descend from Agag, the Amalekite king executed by Samuel during the reign of Israelite king Saul in 1 Samuel 15. “Agag” was apparently the title-name of Amalekite kings, similar to “Pharaoh” of Egypt (Numbers 24:7,17). The Amalekites were long-standing enemies of Israel, and Yahweh decreed that he would be at war with them for generations, and would eventually exterminate them (**Exodus 17:18-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19**). This is likely the reason why Mordecai would not bow down to Haman.
- It is possible, although not likely, that the queen Herodotus called Amestris was in fact Esther, since the two names appear to be linguistically related. More likely, however, is what others suggest that Amestris is to be equated with Vashti. The character of Amestris is known to be cruel and self-willed, very similar to Vashti.

- There are remarkable similarities between the book’s statements about fifth-century Persia and what is known about that country and society from archaeology. That the author had more than a casual knowledge of Persian life during this period is displayed in his references to Persian vocabulary and customs as well as in his awareness that the king had seven advisors (Esther 1:14), and that eating was undertaken while reclining on couches (Esther 7:8), and that royal horses could wear crowns (Esther 6:8).
- While neither “**God**” or “**Yahweh**” are specifically mentioned, the reality of his existence is strongly implied throughout the book. Throughout the book, the hand of Almighty God is everywhere apparent. The strange twists and turns of the events recorded imply God’s maneuvering things to accomplish his purpose to deliver his people from powerful enemies and unwitting people.
- The omission of the Law, sacrifice and the Temple can be understood when we keep in mind that the Jews in the book were living in Persia after the exile, far from Jerusalem and the rebuilt Temple, and the priesthood serving at the sacrificial altar there. The Jews’ familiarity with God and his laws and principles is highlighted by their belief in, and practice of, communal fasting (**Esther 4:16; Jeremiah 36:9; compare 2 Chronicles 20:3**).
- The theme of divine providence underlies the entire book. To Jews living under oppression prior to the Christian era, and to Christians living in the present age, the book of **Esther** demonstrates God’s care for and action on behalf of his people. The book reinforces the truth that all human affairs are ultimately under his control.

It is rare for archaeology to provide direct evidence for a historical event. More often, reconstructing ancient history is a matter of combining the stories found in texts with the artifacts discovered in archaeology, though such work always requires a measure of confidence in the reliability of the texts. If every narrative from the ancient world had to be specifically confirmed by archaeology, we would have very little ancient history.

The book of Esther makes strong implicit claims to being historical. It is precisely as *history* that Esther is most significant, and it marks the beginning of the long, sad saga of pogroms

and holocausts against the Jews.

ONE SOURCE: NIV Archaeological Study Bible