

ESTHER



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The book of Esther tells an exciting, fast-paced story, in which the Jewish community, in danger of annihilation from a ruthless enemy, is saved by the heroic action of the young, beautiful Queen Esther. In the Jewish Bible, Esther is part of the Writings, or *Ketûbîm*. It is one of the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) read on festival or commemorative days of the Jewish year. Esther's *raison d'être* in Judaism, therefore, is the festival of Purim, which celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from threatened extermination. Purim occurs sometime in March; in addition to the synagogue services, congregations often hold Purim parties, at which children dress up as their favorite characters from Esther and special desserts are served.

In the Christian Old Testament, Esther is situated among the historical books, although most scholars today would cast grave doubts on the

historicity of the book's events. Some troubling aspects of Esther include the absence of any mention of God or of any religious practice, and the position and treatment of women. As we shall see, God's action "behind the scenes" may be pointed to obliquely in one particular scene, and possibly assumed by the author; however, it is true that the main Jewish characters, Esther and Mordecai, are not practicing or religious Jews by today's standards. They do not pray or follow the dietary laws, and Esther is married to a Gentile. The only possibly religious action in the book, Esther's fast in 4:16, is not directed to God or accompanied by prayer. Judaism in Esther seems to be purely a matter of ethnic identity. The role and status of women in the book is very much a result of the time and place in which it was written; however, within the confines of her gender Esther gains power and acts decisively to save her people.

The book of Esther was written in the late Persian period (mid 4th century B.C.E.), in Hebrew, in the Diaspora community living in the eastern Persian Empire. The book has the form of a novella, written by one author, with one plot continuous throughout. It is likely that the author was familiar with the Persian court, and he may have drawn on older court tales. The author uses irony, humor, and reversal throughout the story to make his central point; the Jews, though seemingly powerless, will eventually triumph over the powerful Persians and their allies. In addition to the Hebrew version found in the Old Testament, Esther also exists in two Greek versions, one located in the Apocrypha.

The Story of Esther

Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage for the main events. King Ahasuerus (usually identified with Xerxes I, 486–465 B.C.E.) is celebrating his accession

to the throne with lavish banquets, described in loving detail. Banquets and the events that happen at them are an important leitmotif in the book. The opulence of the opening banquet, however, disguises an ethical and moral hollowness that will become apparent as the story progresses.

Vashti, Ahasuerus's queen, holds her own banquet for the women. However, a crisis soon develops; Ahasuerus, feeling the effects of the wine, demands that Vashti appear before his guests wearing her royal crown, so that he can show off her beauty. Vashti refuses, sending shock waves through the (male) courtiers. Why Vashti refuses to obey the king's command is unclear, although her reluctance to appear before a party of drunken men is understandable. The rabbis speculated that when Ahasuerus specified that Vashti was to wear her crown, he meant *only* her crown; in other words, she was to appear naked! Whatever the reason for Vashti's

refusal, the consequences swiftly follow. Vashti is banished from the king's presence forever, and a rather silly decree is issued throughout the empire, that every man should be master in his own house. An important motif, the irrevocability of Persian/ Median law, is introduced at 1:19.

Chapter 2 finds the mercurial Ahasuerus regretting his hasty action and missing Vashti. His courtiers come up with a distraction—beautiful young girls will be procured from the whole empire, and from among them the king will choose a new queen! The plan is set in motion, and the girls are scooped up, including Esther, who makes her first appearance (2:7). It is worth noting that no protest seems to be made at the king's procurement methods, but neither is there any choice given. The girls are taken, whether willingly or not. Esther is simply one of many.

Esther is introduced as the ward of Mordecai, a Benjaminite, who holds some position in the court. Like Vashti,

Esther is beautiful; unlike Vashti, she is pliant and pleasing, and, with the help of the eunuchs, she captures the king's heart and becomes queen (2:17). The idea that Esther wins her throne through a sex contest may be distasteful; however, it should be remembered that she has no choice, and, according to marriage and concubinage rules of the period, her behavior is not immoral. A second important motif, that Esther does not reveal that she is a Jew, appears in 2:10. Why her Jewishness is kept secret is not disclosed; was there latent anti-Semitism in the Persian court?

The final bit of scene setting comes at the end of chapter 2, when Mordecai discovers and reports to Esther a eunuch plot against Ahasuerus. The eunuchs are punished, and Mordecai's role is recorded in the royal annals; however, he is not rewarded, which will become important later.

Haman, the great villain of the book, is introduced in chapter 3. He

becomes Ahasuerus's favorite, and demands homage from all the other courtiers. Mordecai, however, refuses to bow to Haman. Mordecai's reason is opaque; he states that it is because he is a Jew (3:4). That in itself is not a reason; Jews throughout the Bible bow down to a variety of human rulers. What is going on? The real reason is buried in Haman's epithet, "Agagite" (3:1). As an Agagite, Haman is descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were hereditary enemies of Israel (Exod 17:8–16, Num 24:20, Deut 25:17–19), and Agag was killed in a war with Saul, the first king of Israel (1 Sam 15). Saul, like Mordecai, was a Benjaminite. So the enmity between Haman and Mordecai was ethnic and hereditary, leading Haman to seek revenge not just on Mordecai, but on all Jews (3:6).

Haman's scheme plays on Ahasuerus's laziness and indifference, and on anti-Semitism in the Persian Empire. His accusation, which never

mentions the Jews by name, is a tissue of truths, half-truths, and outright lies. He must assume that enough people in the empire would be willing to slaughter Jews for his plot to be successful. The casting of lots, or Pur (3:7), gives the festival of Purim its name.

In chapter 4 we see that Esther is more than just a pretty face—in v. 16 she assumes the role of a national leader. Mordecai, learning of Haman's plot, appears before the palace gate clothed in sackcloth, a typical mourning gesture. He demands that Esther go *at once* to the king to beg for mercy for her people. The normally obedient Esther at first demurs, reminding Mordecai that anyone who appears unsummoned before the king is summarily executed. Mordecai's response contains what many scholars believe is the book's only (veiled) reference to God: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and

deliverance will rise for the Jews *from another quarter*, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:13–14; emphasis mine). The very obliqueness of the reference ("some other quarter") and the poignancy of his "Who knows?" make Esther very contemporary. People today are often called to act while uncertain of what God wants or without a sure sense of God's presence. God remains secret, free, and hidden. Esther and Mordecai, like Jews and Christians today, are called to act faithfully in the face of ambiguity. Esther's response reveals that she understands this: "I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (4:16).

The plot moves rapidly to its denouement in chapters 5–7. Esther, far from being the passive, pretty girl of chapter 3, acts swiftly and decisively, maneuvering among the byzantine court structures to achieve her ends. She risks

death by appearing unsummoned before Ahasuerus (a reversal of what happened with Vashti, who refused to appear when summoned!), but, when the king offers to grant her request, disarms both him and Haman by inviting them to—a banquet! Thus she brings them both into her territory, the women’s quarters, simultaneously lulling Haman into a false sense of security.

Haman is so secure in his exalted position that he can no longer wait for Mordecai’s death, but prepares a huge gallows to hang him on. What happens next is one of the major reversals in the story. The king, unable to sleep, orders the royal annals read to him, and discovers that Mordecai has never been rewarded for the good deed he performed back in chapter 2. Haman, arriving at the crack of dawn for permission to execute Mordecai, is rushed into the king to think of a suitable reward “for the man whom the king wishes to honor” (6:6). Haman, whose arrogance is as great as his

wickedness, thinks that the king refers to him, and concocts a suitably grandiose reward. Imagine his horror when he is ordered to heap these honors on the hated Mordecai. The scene calls to mind the saying in Proverbs: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18).

Haman has no time to ponder this lesson, however, for he is immediately called to Esther’s second banquet. In this scene Esther is repeatedly given her title “Queen,” aligning her with the king and both of them against Haman. Esther now makes her request, pleading dramatically for the life of her people. Everything is now revealed: Esther’s status as a Jew, and Haman’s status as her enemy. The king rushes from the room (in wrath? In bewilderment?), enabling one last piece of burlesque. Haman falls on the queen’s couch to plead for his life, and Ahasuerus, returning, accuses him of *assaulting* Esther. Haman’s doom is sealed, and he

is taken out and hung, ironically on the gallows he built for Mordecai.

This would seem to be the cathartic end of the story, but one problem remains. Since the Persian law is irrevocable according to the story (1:19), Haman's decree against the Jews still stands. Esther, now with Mordecai to help her, gets around this problem by issuing another decree enabling the Jews to defend themselves by attacking their attackers (8:11–12). Mordecai becomes the king's vizier in place of Haman, and there is a festival of both Jews and Gentiles, the final feast in a story that opened with a feast. The Jews are now ascendant; many people are even "professing to be Jews" (8:17) in order to be on the winning side. We seem to have come full circle; all the reversals are accomplished, and this is a good place to end. That chapter 8 may have been the original ending of the story of Esther is indicated by the fact that one of the Greek versions ends here.

Chapters 9 and 10 tell of the destruction of the enemies of the Jews and the origins of the festival of Purim. It may be troubling to imagine that the Jews of Persia could descend to the same level of bloodthirstiness as their enemies, but it may help to remember that this is a *story* whose main literary device is reversal. The events portrayed are not historical; we have no evidence at all that any such massacre occurred. Rather, the structure of the story demands closure; the Jews were threatened with destruction, but a reversal happened and instead the Jews destroyed their enemies. It may also help to recall the position of Jews in the world, especially the Christian world, through the centuries, as an oppressed minority, victims of persecutions and pogroms, culminating in the Holocaust. A story such as Esther serves an important psychological function in the Jewish community, and the festival of Purim enables an oppressed minority to

celebrate deliverance through their heroes, Esther and Mordecai.

The Greek Versions

There are two Greek versions of Esther, both of which in different ways respond to the theological problems presented by the Hebrew version. The older "A" text mentions God at strategic points and ends with chapter 8, thus mitigating the revenge factor. The Septuagint version, found in the Apocrypha, is a reworked version of the Hebrew text, most notably adding in six major blocks of material, called Additions A-F. In the Septuagint version God is the main actor, revealing what will happen and its significance in advance to Mordecai in a dream, moving the king's heart to pity when Esther appears before him unsummoned, and causing the king's sleeplessness in chapter 6. Esther and Mordecai are overtly pious Jews, praying and keeping the dietary laws;

Esther despises, as was proper for a Jewish girl of the period, being married to a Gentile. The Septuagint Esther is canonical among Orthodox and Catholic Christians, but the Jewish community chose the Hebrew version as their canonical text.

Conclusion

Esther is a strange book of the Bible, but one that contemporary Christians should find very appealing. The heroes, Esther and Mordecai, are very believable. Since God is present only “behind the scenes,” Esther and Mordecai have to act faithfully in precarious circumstances, devising their own course of action without direct divine guidance. How often are we as Christians faced with problems to which we must respond faithfully, without being sure of the outcome? In those times, Esther and Mordecai can be helpful role models.



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