

Esther

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The **Book of Esther** (also called the Megillah) is the basis for the Jewish Feast of Purim, held every year in March. Purim is one of the most joyous and fun holidays on the Jewish calendar. It commemorates a time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extermination. As a result of Esther's intervention and influence, Jews lived in Persia (modern Iran) for another 2400 years. The Book of Esther is read aloud twice during the celebration.

Esther was originally called Hadassah (2:7) which means *myrtle*. She was also known as Esther which means *star* (because the myrtle flower resembles a twinkling star). In Jewish literature Esther is described as being as beautiful as the Evening Star.

The book of Esther is one of only two books of the Bible that do not directly mention God. (The other is the Song of Songs). The name Esther can also mean *hidden* in Hebrew, and The Book of Esther is sometimes called *The Book of Hiddenness*, because God is hidden in the story.

Date Esther is set in the reign of Ahasuerus (also translated Artaxerxes), King of Persia (Xerxes I). Ahasuerus came to the throne in 369 BC; Esther became Queen in 362 BC; and the Feast of Purim was instituted in 355 BC. This is in the early years of the Medo-Persian Empire, a little after the fall of Babylon.

Author Generally thought to be Mordecai, Esther's uncle. There are some additions written at a later date by an unknown author.

Outline

King Ahasuerus held a 7 day banquet for his nobles and officials. At the same time Queen Vashti also held a banquet for the women. King Ahasuerus asked to *bring before him Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.* 1:11. She refused.

The King was angry and consulted with his advisers. They said Queen Vashti's actions brought disrespect on the King and set a bad example for other women in the kingdom. She should be replaced by someone else so that *all the women will respect their husbands.* 1:20 This pleased the king and a search was conducted throughout the kingdom for a suitable replacement wife.

Mordecai was a Jew whose family had been deported to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. His cousin Hadassah, also called Esther, was selected from the candidates to be Ahasuerus's new wife. *Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.* 2:17 But *Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background.* 2:10 Mordecai, Esther's uncle, uncovered a plot to assassinate the King and told Esther, who then told the King, giving credit to Mordecai.



Mordecai, as a Jew, would not bow down to the King's prime minister, Haman, so Haman got King Ahasuerus to sign a decree to destroy the Jews because *their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the King's laws; so it is not in the King's best interest to tolerate them.* 3:8 He cast lots (pur) to identify the day this would happen (hence the Feast of Purim).

Mordecai told Esther about the decree and asked her to tell the King, saying *Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this.* 4:14. Esther asked all Jews to fast and pray as she risked her own life by approaching King Ahasuerus uninvited. *If I perish, I perish.* 4:16. The King received Esther and said he would grant her wishes, even to half of the kingdom. She would announce her request at a banquet the following day.

That night the king could not sleep and had his servants read the historical records to him. He read of Mordecai's goodness, and asked Haman *what should be done for the man the King wishes to honour?* 6:6. Thinking it was for himself Haman said he should be dressed in fine robes and presented to the people. The King told Haman to do this for Mordecai! Haman was horrified and his advisers told him that *Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him - you will surely come to ruin.* 6:13

At the banquet Esther asked the King to spare her people and told him what Haman had done. Haman pleaded with Esther for his life, and it appeared that he was molesting her. Haman was hanged on gallows that he had built for Mordecai.



Mordecai became prime minister in Haman's place. He was given Haman's ring and Esther was given Haman's house and estate. Ahasuerus's edict decreeing the destruction of the Jews could not be rescinded, so Mordecai wrote another edict allowing the Jews to assemble and defend themselves against any enemy. As a result the Jews were exalted in the land and *For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honour. There was joy and gladness among the Jews and feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.* 8:16,17 There was also great fear of Mordecai when Haman's family and other enemies of the Jews were slain. Mordecai sent out a decree that Jews should remember annually how they had been delivered, thus instituting the Feast of Purim. *He wrote to them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.* 9:22

Mordecai became second only to the King in Persia, and continued to seek the prosperity of the Jews and peace for all.

Lessons from the Book of Esther

Esther is a woman of deep faith, courage and patriotism, who was willing to risk her life for her adopted father, Mordecai, and her people. She was raised up by God to prevent the destruction of the Jewish people, so they could be protected and prosper while in a foreign land. Esther came from a most unlikely background, yet she became the Queen. This is an example of the wonderful sovereignty of God. At other times in history God has protected the Jews in similar ways e.g. when Israel was attacked by Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Rome, the Church (during the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition), and Hitler (during the holocaust).

Kings (and other leaders) must set a good example in their personal relationships. Actions they take can lead to respect or disrespect, so they must be wise in how they conduct their affairs. This is why King Xerxes consulted his advisers about what he should do when Queen Vashti refused to show herself at his banquet.

Queen Vashti refused to obey her husband when he ordered her to show her beauty at his banquet. This was because the order he gave was not a right thing to do. Ephesians 5:22 says *Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord*. This does not mean that wives should do whatever their husbands tell them to! Rather they should submit *as to the Lord*. If a request is immoral or wrong they should not submit because it would not be *as to the Lord* (just as Queen Vashti did). This also means that husbands should make sure that all they do towards their wives is *as to the Lord!*

Esther asked for others to fast and pray as she approached the King. It's always good to have others praying for you when you engage in significant actions.

God is not mentioned in Esther but the Hebrew text has His name (YHWH) hidden in acrostics. These letters were sometimes larger than the rest of the text so they stand out. The places where this occurs are:

- 1:20 All the women will respect.
- 5:4 Let the King, together with Haman, come today.
- 5:13 But all this gives me no satisfaction.
- 7:5 Who is he? Where is the man?
- 7:7 That the king had already decided his fate.

These form the pivots around which the story in Esther turns.

God raises up leaders and removes others. Part of the motivation for this is the protection of His people.

It is good to celebrate God's goodness (as the Jews did way back then, and still do today).

Discussion questions

Find out all you can about the way that the Feast of Purim is celebrated by Jews today.

What aspects of Esther's character stand out for you? Why? How can she be an example for women today?

What aspects of Mordecai's character stand out for you? Why? How can he be an example for men today?

An important principle in the Bible is that of submission. Identify parts of the Bible where this is taught, and describe situations when we are to be submissive. Are there situations where we are not to be submissive (like Esther)? How do we determine whether we are to be submissive in any given situation?

The Book of Esther does not have God's name in it (except in acrostics). Why do you think the Book was accepted as part of the Canon of Scripture (both Jewish and Christian)?

What have you learned from your study of the Book of Esther? How will you apply this in your life?