

ESTHER

The Book of Esther, like Tobit and Judith, is regarded by most scholars as a historical fiction about God's providential care for his people, the Israelites, living outside their homeland in an increasingly hostile environment. (See introduction to Tobit.)

The story is set in the Persian Period of Israel's history—the same period as the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah—during the reign of King Ahasuerus, known in most English translations as Xerxes (486-465 BC). The action takes place in Susa, a city in the Babylonian empire. Amongst other things, the Book of Esther shows that the Jews who did *not* return to Jerusalem following Cyrus' decree were still counted as God's people.

Briefly, this book tells the story of how Esther, a Jewish woman, becomes the Persian Queen with the help of her Uncle Mordecai, and intervenes to stop the evil plans of Haman, a royal official of the king, from killing all the Jews in one day.

In its introduction to Esther, *The Catholic Serendipity Bible* reads: “*Mordecai and Esther are examples of the righteous wise who, remaining faithful to their God, are able to reverse the tables on their wicked opponents. Esther is a literary masterpiece that reads like a modern suspense novel, complete with plot twists, irony, intrigue, revenge, and plenty of feasting.*”

Commentators also point out that the book was written to teach Jews how to live a productive life in Diaspora (outside their homeland).

Feast of Purim. Commentators of Esther also note that one reason Esther was written was to explain the origin, significance and date of the Feast of Purim, which celebrated the deliverance of Jews from Haman's pogrom (officially organized massacre).

Two versions of the book. This book has come down to us in two versions: one in Hebrew and another in Greek which has over 100 verses more than the Hebrew. The Greek version is found in Catholic bibles and the Hebrew version in the Jewish and Protestant bibles. A unique and troubling feature of the shorter version is the distinct omission of the mention of God. This fact nearly caused its exclusion from the Canon of Scripture. Addressing the non-

mention of God in the Hebrew and Protestant bibles, Protestant Scripture scholar J.G. McConville writes: “*As for the fact that the name of God does not appear in the book, this does not mean that it is not ‘theological,’ or does not teach about God. The silence about God is quite deliberate, not to make the point that he is inactive in human situations, but on the contrary, that he is hidden behind all events. This is the implication of the numerous coincidental occurrences in the book. The story can become, therefore, a powerful statement about the reality of God in a world from which he appears to be absent*” (The Daily Study Bible Series – Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.153).

As we shall see, the Greek addition which the Catholic Church uses has explicit references to God, and adds a religious dimension to a secular story.

The 100+ verses in the Greek and Catholic bibles could add some confusion to our reading of the text. The additional verses are scattered throughout the ten chapters of the book and are designated by the letters A to F. The regular chapter numbers apply to the Hebrew text.

Division of Chapters

- PART 1:** Prologue: Mordecai's dream (Chapter A Addition #1)
- PART 2:** Esther replaces Vashti (Chapters 2-3)
- PART 3:** Haman's plot against the Jews; Esther and Mordecai's response. (Chapters 3, B, 4, C, D)
- PART 4:** Haman's downfall (Chapters 5-7)
- PART 5:** Reversal of Haman's decree (Chapters 8 and E)
- PART 6:** Feast of Purim (Chapters 9-10)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: PROLOGUE – MORDECAI’S DREAM

CHAPTER A: Mordecai’s dream

“Tribulation and distress, evil and great confusion, lay upon the earth. The whole race of the just were dismayed with fear of the evils to come upon them, and were at the point of destruction. Then they cried out to God, and as they cried, there appeared to come forth a great river, a flood of water from a little spring. The light of the sun broke forth; the lowly were exalted and they devoured the nobles.” (vv 7-10)

The designation of the first seventeen verses as Chapter A denotes that these are some of the verses that belong in the longer or Greek version of this book.

The first chapter introduces us to three of the main characters in the story: 1) King Ahasuerus, 2) *Mordecai*, a Jewish exile who holds a prominent position in the king’s court, and 3) Haman, a Persian who also ranks high in the king’s court.

Verses 4-10—*Mordecai’s dream.* Mordecai dreams of a cosmic battle between good and evil. The dream tells us that the light of the sun defeats the darkness and evil.

Verses 12-16. Mordecai discovers and reports a plot against the king’s life (the same plot will be described again in the Hebrew version 2:21-23).

PART 2: ESTHER REPLACES VASHTI AS QUEEN

“[The king ordered] Queen Vashti into his presence...that he might display her beauty before the populace and the officials, for she was lovely to behold. But the Queen refused to come.... At this the king’s anger flared up....” (1:10-12)

As we shall see, most of the action in this book revolves around banquets or parties. Verses 1-9 speak of three parties: one for the king and his large inner circle (vv 3-4); a garden party for all the people; and a third party hosted by Queen Vashti for her lady friends.

It seems that the purpose of the king’s parties is to display his great power and impress the people.

Verses 10-12—*Queen’s refusal.* On the seventh day of the garden party in which there is no shortage of alcohol, “the king was merry with wine” (v.10). In his drunken stupor, he sends seven servants to tell the queen to come into his presence all dressed up so that he can show everyone how beautiful she is. We might say that the queen, in the king’s eyes, was ‘a trophy bride’ and not someone he loved and honored for her own sake. Queen Vashti refuses to be put on display.

Verses 10-22—*Royal Council.* The queen’s refusal to parade before the people causes “the king’s wrath to flare up” (v.9) and leads him to consult with his legal counsel on how to respond to the queen’s snub. The king, under the influence of too much wine, magnifies a simple, domestic dispute into a state crisis for his lawyers to discuss.

The legal team led by Memucan counsels the king that Vashti’s action has implications for the whole empire. If she gets away with her disobedience to the king, women all over the empire will begin to treat their husbands with contempt (v.17). Then Memucan advises the king to issue a royal decree “forbidding Vashti to come into the presence of the king and exhorts him to replace her with one more worthy than she” (v.19). To Memucan, “more worthy” most likely translates to “more obedient.” As a result of the royal decree, Vashti is demoted from being queen to being one of many women in the king’s harem. Letters are sent to all the provinces “to the effect that every man is to be lord in his own home” (v.22).

Pause: How are women in our day demeaned and not appreciated for their intellect and skills as well as for their physical beauty? How can women today misuse their physical beauty?

CHAPTER 2: Esther is made Queen

“Esther was beautifully formed and lovely to behold. On the death of her father and mother, Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter.” (v.7)

In his commentary on Esther, J.G. McConville writes: “*The story of Esther is a little like the plots of modern novels or films in which the reader/audience is slowly introduced to the characters, who appear at first to bear no relation to each other, but whose lives are ultimately interwoven in a complex way. The scene having been set in chapter 1, events might have*

unfolded in any number of ways. Their actual course is now determined by two coincidental circumstances” (ibid p.161).

Verses 1-4. In the *first scene*, the king’s servants suggest a kind of beauty contest, whose winner—to be chosen by the king—would be queen. Esther, of Jewish background, through the influence of her uncle Mordecai, becomes a contender. Esther immediately impresses Hegai, coordinator of the beauty contest (v.9). We notice Mordecai hangs around the palace watching the comings and goings of Esther.

Verses 21-23. In the *second coincidental scene*, Mordecai becomes aware that two royal eunuchs are plotting to harm the king. He passes along this information to Esther who informs the king. So as chapter two ends and before the deadly Haman arrives on the scene with his plot to destroy the Jews, a Jewess is queen and Mordecai, a Jew, has saved the king’s life.

Before we move on to chapter two, it is worth noting that if Vashti’s issue with the king was her sense of *personal* dignity, for Esther, the issue would be her *identity as a Jewess* which Mordecai told her to conceal.

Pause: How do you feel when you want to speak up on some issue, knowing that doing so could have serious consequences?

PART 3: HAMAN’S PLOT TO DESTROY THE JEWS (Chapters 3, B, 4, C, D)

CHAPTERS 3 & B: Enter ‘Haman the Terrible’

“When Haman observed that Mordecai would not kneel down to him, he was filled with anger.... He sought to kill all Jews....” (vv 5-6)

In this chapter, we meet for the first time the man we could call ‘Haman the Terrible’ because of his hatred for the Jewish people. In verse 1, Haman is made Prime Minister, a position with immense power. All the servants at the Royal Gate are expected to bow down before him. Mordecai refuses to honor Haman because he believes doing so is an insult to God. (See chapter C, vv 6-7.)

When Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman, he gathers together a series of half-truths about the Jewish people. He concocts reasons why the Jews are a real danger to the empire and the only way to deal with them is to destroy all of them. Notice Haman does not identify the Jews by name. They are called ‘a certain people’ (v.8). The king fails to investigate Haman’s assertions and readily grants permission to Haman to issue an edict that will lead to the extermination of the Jewish people.

Chapter B contains the text of the edict drawn up by Haman on behalf of the people, and sent throughout the empire decreeing that all Jews are to be destroyed. Most likely, the king never saw the decree and did not know that the Jews were the people to be destroyed.

Pause: As a fellow Jew, would you have urged Mordecai to bow down before Haman? What are examples of ‘politically correct’ things that we may be pushed to do today but that are contrary to our beliefs?

CHAPTER 4: Esther is ready to die for her people

“[Mordecai said to Esther:] ‘...Who knows but that it was for a time like this that you obtained the royal dignity?’ Esther sends word back to Mordecai... ‘I will go to the king...If I perish, I perish!’” (vv 14-16)

This chapter opens with Mordecai tearing his garments with grief. Then he puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes through the city “wailing with a loud and bitter cry.” One wonders if he now regrets his refusal to bow down before Haman. In verse 3, Mordecai’s grief extends to every province where the king’s plan is revealed.

When Esther hears that Mordecai is outside the palace gate in sackcloth and ashes (hardly a way to conceal his Jewish identity), she runs to Dillard’s (!) to get him some proper clothing. Obviously, Esther has not yet heard of the king’s plan to wipe out her people. After Mordecai reveals to Esther the king’s plan (vv 7-8), he tells her to go to the king and plead on behalf of her people. Esther reminds Mordecai *that any man or woman who goes to the king uninvited is executed* (v.11). Mordecai tells Esther that she is going to die whether or not she remains silent. Then Mordecai comes up with his best argument for Esther to speak up: perhaps the reason she was chosen to be queen is to save her people.

“Who knows but that it was for a time like this that you obtained the royal dignity” (v.14).

Verses 15-16 show that Mordecai’s word persuades Esther to act. She decides to go to the king, and asks her people to fast for three days. Such request shows her humility for she acknowledges her need for the support of others. Esther also demonstrates tremendous courage and willingness to die for her people. *“If I perish, I perish”* (v.16). Mordecai goes and does all that Esther asks of him.

CHAPTER C: Prayers of Mordecai and Esther

“[Mordecai says]: ‘I will not bow down to anyone but you, my Lord.’” (v.7)

“Queen Esther, seized with mortal anguish, likewise had recourse to the Lord.” (v.12)

Mordecai’s prayer shows him to be deeply religious. After recalling that God is the creator of all, he spells out his reason for not bowing down before Haman—he only bows down before God. *“You know, Lord, that it was not out of insolence or pride or desire for fame that I acted thus in not bowing down to the proud Haman.... I acted as I did so as not to place the honor of man above that of God”* (vv 3-7). Then in true prophetic fashion, Mordecai goes on to remind God that it is in God’s best interest to deliver the Jews from their enemy. Verse 11 shows that all the people join Mordecai in crying out to the Lord.

Verses 12-30—Prayer of Esther. The first part of Esther is focused on her people (vv 14-25), while the second part speaks about her displeasure of living in the palace (vv 26-30).

CHAPTER D: Esther faints in the king’s presence

“God changed the king’s anger into gentleness.” (v.8)

Chapter D begins with another change of clothes, i.e., Esther’s clothes of mourning are exchanged for ‘royal attire.’ *“Her countenance was a joy to behold.”* When Esther enters the king’s court with her two maids, the king is very angry and we are led to believe that this is the end of Esther. But suddenly God intervenes and *“changes the king’s anger into gentleness”* (v.8).

Then the king speaks reassuring words to Esther: *“Take courage! You shall not die because of this decree of ours. Come near.”* Then Esther ‘blarneys’

the king with kind words: *“I saw you, as an angel of God.”* In C:26 Esther says she “hated the bed of the uncircumcised or of any foreigner.”

CHAPTERS 5-6: Esther sets up Haman’s downfall and the liberation of her people

“Whatever you ask shall be granted, and whatever request you make shall be honored, even if it is half of my kingdom.” (5:7)

Esther places herself in the royal palace in a position where the king can see her. (Remember that no one, including the queen, could approach the king without following proper protocol.) The king welcomes her and offers to give her anything she asks. One would imagine she would use this generous offer to talk to the king about the edict to destroy her and her people. Instead, she simply asks the king and Haman to join her for dinner. Why this move on Esther’s part? Perhaps she wants to set up a situation in which she is the hostess and has a stronger advantage. Also, it is important that Haman be present when Esther condemns him.

In the meantime, Haman plots the execution of Mordecai. He has no inkling that in a little while, he will hang on the gibbet he proposed to hang Mordecai on.

Mordecai is rewarded by the king (6:1-13). When the king is unable to sleep, he asks that some court records of ‘notable events’ be read to him. During the reading session, the king discovers that Mordecai had saved his life but has gone unrewarded for his good deed.

Suddenly, Haman appears in the king’s court to suggest to the king that Mordecai should be hanged. Before he gets a chance to speak, the king asks Haman: *“What should be done for a man whom the king wishes to reward?”*(v.6). Haman, with his delusions of grandeur, believes that *he* must surely be the one the king is planning to honor, so he suggests all kinds of grandiose ideas to the king. We can imagine how Haman’s face drops when the king reveals to him that the one he intends to reward is Mordecai. After Haman carries out the king’s orders, he hurries home with his “head covered with grief” (v.12). When Haman tells his family and ‘fan club’ all that has transpired, they immediately distance themselves from him. They somehow know that Mordecai, the Jew, will be victorious over Haman.

Chapter 6 ends with the eunuchs arriving to bring Haman to the banquet Esther has prepared. We know that her preparations involved more than food.

CHAPTER 7: Haman is condemned to die

During the banquet, the king repeats his generous offer to Esther: *“Whatever you request shall be honored”* (v.2). With Haman present, Esther is now ready to take advantage of the king’s offer. Esther reveals to the king the plot against her people and discloses for the first time that she is a Jew: *“I ask that my life be spared, and I beg that you spare the lives of my people. For my people and I have been delivered from destruction...”* (vv 3-4). The king asks: Who has done this terrible deed? Esther answers: *“The enemy oppressing us is the wicked Haman”* (v.6). When the king discovers that Haman had planned to execute his benefactor Mordecai on a gibbet, he orders that the same gibbet be used to execute Haman.

Pause: What is the moral of the above story? Speaking up can pay off? No guts, no glory? What goes around comes around? What helps you to speak up when you are fearful of doing so?

CHAPTERS 8 & E: Reversing Haman’s decree

“You will do well to ignore the letter sent by Haman for he who composed it has been hanged....” (vv 17-18)

The focus of chapters 8 and E is how to obtain a reversal of the decree against the Jews—drawn up by Haman (ch. 3).

Esther is given Haman’s estate and Mordecai is given the signet ring, making him Prime Minister. When it comes to the writing of a decree reversing Haman’s edict to destroy the Jews, the king says: *“You may write in the king’s name what you see fit concerning the Jews and seal the letter with the royal signet ring ...”* (v.8).

Chapter E. This fourth addition of the Hebrew version of Esther gives us the text of Mordecai’s edict which was sent to all the provinces of the empire. Since the edict, Haman issued praised him to the skies; this one grinds his reputation into the ground (vv 1-17). The edict of Mordecai turned the Jews’ mourning into joy.

Pause: What does the story of Haman teach us about the misuse of authority and power?

CHAPTER 9: Feast of Purim

“[Mordecai] ordered them to celebrate every year both the fourteenth and the fifteenth of the month of Adar as the day on which the Jews obtained rest from their enemies and as the month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy, from mourning into festivity. They were to observe these days with feasting and gladness, sending food to one another and gifts to the poor. Then Jews took upon themselves for the future this observance which they instituted at the written direction of Mordecai.” (vv 21-23).

Verses 1-19—Jews successfully defend themselves.

Even though Mordecai has issued a decree urging the people to ignore Haman’s edict against the Jews, the edict remains in effect, so that on the “thirteenth day of the twelfth month,” the Jews expect their enemies to attack them. The Jews brace themselves for the attack, and implement the terms of the *second* decree by gathering to fight. The fact that no plunder takes place shows that the Jews are only doing what they need to do to defend themselves. The hostility against the sons of Haman (v.13) is, in all likelihood, an act to suppress the anti-Jewish cause, rather than motivated by revenge.

Verses 20-32—Feast of Purim. The rest of chapter 9 describes Mordecai’s role in establishing and perpetuating the Feast of Purim, a festival intended to commemorate *“the day on which the Jews obtained rest from their enemies and as a month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy, from mourning into festivity”* (v.22). The feast is also to include sharing food with the poor. The term Purim is from the Hebrew Pur (lot) (v.24). Haman had determined that ‘the lot’ of the Jews would be extinguished. God had decided otherwise. Purim is celebrated on the 14th and 15th day of Adar (around the first of March), commemorating the Jews’ deliverance from Haman’s pogrom (an officially organized massacre). Connecting the Feast of Purim to our Christian story, Fr. Oscar Lukefahr writes: *“Jews celebrate their survival and God’s providential care with the story of Esther and the Feast of Purim. We who are Christian may read Esther as a reminder of the protection we have received from God. We can see the story as a*

foreshadowing of Christ's victory over the devil. We can rejoice at how Christ has turned the tables on Satan by overcoming evil on the gibbet of the cross. We can celebrate Christ's victory over the powers of sin and death and the downfall of all those demons allied with Satan. This interpretation was not intended by the author, of course, but it is one we may add to give us a reason to party!" (A Catholic Guide to the Bible, p.78).

CHAPTER 10: Praise for the king and Mordecai

The short chapter 10 praises the king for all his 'acts of power and valor' and for the way he promoted Mordecai, a Jew in a pagan empire. Mordecai, far from exploiting his power, was motivated only by love for his people and the desire to do good. He was "a promoter of his people's welfare and a herald of peace for his whole race" (v.3).

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER F: Interpretation of Mordecai's dream

Most of chapter F is devoted to decoding Mordecai's dream. Mordecai reflects on all that has transpired and attempts to interpret the events as a fulfillment of the vision God had given him before the events took place. Esther is identified as the "little spring" that became a "great river." The two dragons who spar and roar are Haman and Mordecai. The terrified "righteous nation" that cries out to God for deliverance is, of course, the Jewish people, who are eventually exalted in both the story and the dream.

CONCLUDING REMARKS. *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* states: "The presence of the book of Esther in the Christian canon is a statement of the religious importance of the Jewish people as an ethnic group. It makes the sin of anti-Semitism even more shameful than the irrational injustice that most Christians understand it to be today" (p.159).

Pause: In the Book of Esther, Haman practices anti-Semitism. Why do we have in our world today anti-Semitism and anti-Muslimism?