

# Esther

The story of Esther and Mordecai is set in the Persian period, about 40 years after the temple was rebuilt through the work of Haggai, Zechariah, Joshua and Zerubbabel, in the time frame of the mid 470s BC. We don't know who wrote the account, but it refers to official Persian records as sources (Esther 10:2), and was written some years after the events, explaining the origin of the Jewish celebration of Purim. Most likely it was written in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, about 20 or 25 years after the events took place.

When reading of Esther, consider her circumstances (and Mordecai's) as somewhat analogous to those of Joseph and Daniel, being outsiders who nevertheless were elevated to positions of influence where they could protect their people and give guidance to a pagan ruler.

Esther 1 opens with the grand display of the extravagant wealth and opulence of Persian king Ahasuerus (better known by the Greek name Xerxes) for half a year, climaxed with a great feast for his nobles and all the people of the capitol city of Susa. Besides the proud display of grandeur and bountiful food, the text emphasizes the significant role of plenty wine in the festivities.

Numerous parallels are highlighted in telling the story. Notice the 7 days in 1:10, the 7 eunuchs in 1:10 and the 7 counselors in 1:14. Successive feasts are highlighted as driving the storyline (1:3f; 1:5ff; 1:9; 2:18; 3:15; 5:5f; 7:1ff; 8:17; 9:17; 9:18).

Conflict with the ancient enemies of Israel, the Amalekites, is central to the story. The obsessed enemy of the Jews is an Agagite, which connects him to the royal lineage of Amalek. Amalek first attacked the Israelites in Exodus 17 before they even came to Sinai. God pronounced a judgment of destruction against them. Twice in the prophecies of Balaam the Amalekites are mentioned, once as a mighty nation (Numbers 24:20) and once as the kingdom of Agag (Numbers 24:7). In the days of Saul the king of Amalek was called Agag (1 Samuel 15:32). We are reminded of this conflict not only in the hatred of Haman the Agagite (Esther 3:1) but also in seeing that Saul the son of Kish, a Benjaminite (1 Samuel 20:21) failed to eradicate the Amalekites as God commanded (1 Samuel 15), and hundreds of years later Mordecai the son of Kish, a Benjaminite (Esther 2:5) had to confront a descendant of the Amalekite royal family.

Esther 1 sets the stage for the deliverance of the Jews with the conflict in the royal household and royal attempts to define marital roles for husbands and wives.

Esther 2 introduces Mordecai the Jew and his younger cousin Hadasseh, an orphan he'd taken in. We're reminded of the circumstances of the Jews in Persia, how they came to be there as a result of the deportation of 597 BC, about 120 years earlier.

While Esther's experience as a young virgin was different than that of Daniel and his friends in Daniel 1, the circumstances of Esther 2:7-17 echo those of Daniel in Babylon.

The date in Esther 2:16 would have been the winter of 479-478 BC. The crisis of Haman's plot comes in the spring of 474 BC, 4 and a quarter years later. Deliverance for the Jews came two months after that in the early summer of 474 BC (Esther 8:9) and victory over their enemies at

the close of their year, March 7, 473 BC (Esther 8:12).

God is never mentioned directly in the book of Esther, but the hand of Providence is highlighted repeatedly. Not only in the favor shown to Esther, but in the opportunity for Mordecai, a relatively insignificant bureaucrat to save the king (Esther 2:19-23), the recording of the matter, and its subsequent review at just the right time. Esther's story is loaded with "coincidences" that just happen to be favorable for the deliverance of the Jews.

Haman's hatred of the Jews was inflamed in Esther 3 by Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him, at the king's command. Recall Daniel 3. As with the 3 young men in Daniel 3 the situation was exacerbated by people complaining about the one(s) who did not comply. Haman apparently already had a grudge against the Jews, the historical animosity harking back hundreds of years, and was determined to vent his hubris against all the Jews, not just Mordecai.

Haman, by his plot as told to the king, effectively put a bounty on the life of every Jew in the Persian realms. The lackadaisical governing attitude king Xerxes comes out in his arrogance and celebrations in the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 chapters, but even more so in his blithe acceptance of Haman's plan in 3:8-11. The decree was so absurd it threw the whole city of Susa into confusion, but Haman and the king sat down to drink (3:15).

Mordecai's response to the edict suggests religious faith, along with his fellow Jews (4:1-3), but again nothing is explicitly stated about prayers. Esther only indirectly heard of the edict when Mordecai relayed the news to her through messengers. When Mordecai, through a trusted messenger (a eunuch), informed Esther of what had happened, and urging her to appeal to the king, Esther was more than hesitant. Entering the king's presence uninvited could be a fatal error if the king were in a bad mood for any reason. Mordecai took a hardline approach, suggesting the Esther was not safe in the palace, being Jewish, and that her position of potential influence may have been purposeful (4:14), though again no specific mention of deity is made.

Esther complied with Mordecai's suggestions, but with the caveat that she wanted the congregation of Jews to join her in 3 days and nights of fasting. Note the 3 days. Esther wasn't fatalistic, but she resigned herself to be an ambassador for her people and "if I perish, I perish."

Esther 5 sets the stage for Haman's defeat with another feast, this one initiated by Esther. The king's grace (favor, 5:2) welcomed her into his presence (consider Hebrews 10:19-22) on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day.

There is not stated reason for Esther's strategy of inviting the king and Haman to a feast, and then inviting the same two to another feast the next day, rather than broaching the subject immediately. However, again by unstated providence, all of this worked to make the situation right, both with the erection of a high "gallows" and the overnight direction of the king's attention to Mordecai in chapter 6.

The word for "gallows" in Esther 5:14 and elsewhere is really the Hebrew word for tree or wood or stick. The translators chose "gallows" based on context, but it's most likely referencing a pointed pole in this instance. The same word "tree" described the piece of wood Moses threw

into the bad water in Exodus 15:25 to make it good, and the curse stated in Deuteronomy 21:22-23, “cursed is a man who is hanged on a tree,” uses the same word. That curse is of course quoted in the New Testament in reference to Jesus going to the cross/tree for our sake.

## Esther 6-10

Chapter 5 had Haman the enemy of the Jews intermittently gleeful and depressed as he contemplated his achievements, and the fact that someone didn't toadie to him, and the idea of destroying the man he considered his enemy.

Chapter 6 opens with that providential coincidence that the king's insomnia happened to result in him hearing a recounting of the time Mordecai saved the king from assassination. The king learned that Mordecai had not been rewarded for his service, and promptly learned that Haman had come in early. Knowing nothing of Haman's mission (to seek the death of Mordecai) the king summoned him to ask for suggestions of how to honor Mordecai. Haman, being arrogant, assumed the man the king would honor was himself, and described a scene of prestigiously parading the honored hero through the city, only to learn the hero was Mordecai and that he himself would be serving Mordecai and announcing his greatness. While we think of this as Esther's story, Mordecai here plays the foreshadowing role of the triumphant Son of Man whose enemies bow before him. Haman was humiliated by what he was compelled to do, and his family and friends were horrified that the object of his enmity was a Jew. The writer understood that the Jewish people had a unique position in the world.

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> feast Esther prepared the king again offered her all that he could give, up to half of the kingdom. What she asked for, to the king's astonishment, was her life, and that of her people. “We have been sold,” she said (7:4). Not merely sold into slavery, but sold into death and extermination. The king had no idea what he himself had facilitated, and responded incredulously, “who has dared to do this?” At that moment he was like the king in Daniel 6 who had allowed himself to be manipulated, condemning Daniel to death by lion, only this king's folly was magnified beyond measure in his former absurd willingness to trust Haman to condemn a nation of his subjects to destruction without personal review.

Haman's final error in begging for mercy from Esther (not that he was in any way sorry for his avarice) resulted in his condemnation to die on the very stake of execution he had just erected for Mordecai the Jew. This is justice for the enemies of God's people, pouring out their own designs on their own heads.

Meanwhile in chapter 8, the desolation of the Jews had already been codified in Persian law under the king's seal by Haman. There was no way to revoke that law, so the option was to entrust Esther and Mordecai with the authority to compose an opposing law, effectively cancelling the sellout of the Jews by enabling them to seize the initiative against their enemies. The enemies of the Jews would receive at the hands of the Jews what they had intended to mete out. This shift of royal support resulted in joyous celebration by Jews, and the conversion of others who declared themselves Jews out of fear (8:17).

Once again in 8:17 and 9:2 the unstated affirmation of divine providence for the Jewish people.

The wrath of the Jews fell heavily upon their enemies, including the 10 sons of Haman (9:10), the last word on Amalekites in or out of the Bible.

The explanation of the double celebration of the feast of Purim follows in the latter part of Esther 9. There is no claim of divine decree in establishing the celebration of Purim, no prophetic edict, but the affirmation that the Jews bound this holiday upon themselves (9:27-28).

The account of Esther closes with the accomplishments of Mordecai the Jew. We don't know with certainty whether it is the same man or not, but Persian records on clay tablets found in the 1930s include mention of one or more court officials from the days of Xerxes with that name. The epilogue for Mordecai, affirming that he "sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people," could be said of the Lord himself.