

Esther

Introduction from [The Jewish Study Bible](#):

In Jewish tradition, the Book of Esther is inextricably bound up with the holiday of Purim. The book provides the *raison d'être* for Purim; it supplies the etiology (story of its origin) for the holiday, authorizes its annual observance, and models how it is to be celebrated. Purim, the only biblical festival not mentioned in the Torah, needed a reason and an authorization. It gets its reason in the pseudohistorical tale of how the Jews were saved from their archenemy, and it gets its authorization in the letter of Mordecai (and Esther) that this book includes. The book of Esther is the centerpiece of the observance of Purim; it is traditionally read publicly in the synagogue on Purim eve and the following morning, accompanied by the noisy blotting out of Haman's name by children and adults, many of them dressed in funny costumes. Purim is a carnivalesque holiday, replete with mock reenactments of the Esther story, partying and excessive drinking, carnivals and masquerades, and a general sense of frivolity uncharacteristic of Jewish festivals. The Talmud (*b. Meg. 7b*) encourages one to get so drunk that one cannot distinguish between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordecai." Like Purim, the book is full of boisterous merrymaking—a comic farce for a carnivalesque holiday. The book sets the tone for the holiday, "days of feasting and merrymaking" (9.22). It also initiates the other customs of the holiday: sending (food) gifts to friends and neighbors and presents to the poor (9.22).

Esther is best read as a comedy. Rabbinic midrashim seem to have intuited this, and they add to the fun by their preposterous embellishments of the story and its characters, extending in the most unsubtle ways the farce or burlesque inherent in the book, with its bawdiness and slap-stick humor... The lavishness of the Persian court and the ten drinking banquets in the story add to the aura of comic excess. The misunderstandings between Ahasuerus and Haman in chapters 6 and 7, the climax of the plot, produce belly laughs. All of these attributes are characteristic of low comedy.

The story's plot is structured on improbabilities, exaggerations, misunderstandings, and reversals. Esther keeps her identity hidden although her relationship to Mordecai the Jew was known; an insignificant Jewish minority kills 75,000 of its enemies; Haman erects a seven-story stake for impaling his enemy. The characters are caricatures. Ahasuerus is a buffoon, never sure quite what to do, completely at the mercy of his ministers and servants, giving away his power without a thought. Haman is an erratic egomaniac, with wild mood swings, concerned only for his own honor and his enemy's disgrace. Even the heroes, Mordecai and Esther, seem one-dimensional and unrealistic. In fact, nothing about the events of the story is realistic, and therefore attempts to read history from it are misguided. The setting of the Persian court is authentic, but the events are fictional. There was no known Jewish queen of Persia. Moreover, the Persian empire was tolerant of its ethnic minorities and is an unlikely place for an edict to eradicate the Jewish population.

The story draws on conventional themes of ancient storytelling known from the Bible and from extrabiblical sources from the Persian period (especially Greek sources): a rivalry between courtiers (this one focusing on honor and shame), a woman who uses her charm to save her people, an ancient ethnic feud, hidden identities, and the triumph of the forces of good over the forces of evil. The portrayal of the Persian court is equally conventional, if at times made into a burlesque. Like the many Greek stories about Persia (in Herodotus and other contemporary works), Esther features royal luxury bordering on decadence, concern for protocol and legalities, wine parties, and the renowned communication system. Esther is, then, in tune with contemporary literary works about Persia. At the same time, it draws on

biblical traditions, most significantly those about Saul and Agag, king of the Amalekites, who are reincarnated, as it were, in Mordecai and Haman. The stories of Joseph and Daniel also resemble Esther in that they feature Jewish courtiers in foreign courts. (The stories in Daniel chapters 1-6 are roughly contemporary with Esther.) Finally, Esther echoes the book of Kings in its mention of royal annals, and some scholars have found other similar phraseology in the two books.

Noticeably absent is any mention of God or of religious observance (prayer, Jewish dietary restrictions, traditional modesty, and endogamous marriage). The Rabbis were troubled by Esther's marriage to a non-Jew, and solved the problem by explaining that she remained completely passive in the king's bed or that she never actually consummated the marriage. They also provide her with kosher food, although the Bible is silent about her diet (unlike Daniel, who became a vegetarian so as to maintain the Jewish dietary laws; see Daniel 1). Mordecai and the Jews mourn and fast, but do not pray—a most striking omission (Daniel also prays). In its omission of God and religion, the Hebrew text is highly unusual, so much so that in the Greek version of Esther there are prayers, the name of God occurs, and Esther desists from eating forbidden food and drinking forbidden wine. (There are other major differences in the Greek Esther as well, especially its tone.) It is not clear whether these religious items were part of the original story and then removed, or added to an original story that lacked them. The best explanation for their absence, especially the absence of God's name, is that, given that the story is so comic, at times bordering on lewd, such reticence about things religious is preferable, lest religion be debauched.

The book does have a serious side, and an important function as a Diaspora story, a story written about and for (and perhaps by) Jews of the Diaspora. As such, it promotes Jewish identity, solidarity within the Jewish community, and a strong connection with Jewish (biblical) tradition. It is more centered on the Diaspora than most Jewish works of its time; it does not refer to the land of Israel (other than the mention of the exile of Jehoiachin) or to the Temple. It addresses the inherent problems of a minority people, their vulnerability to political forces and government edicts, their lack of autonomy, and their dependence on royal favor and on the sagacity of their own leaders. More specifically, Haman's false claim about the Jews is a prototype of anti-Semitism, which must have been familiar enough to resonate with the book's original audience. In the end, though, the message is positive: Good triumphs and evil is eradicated; the threat of Jewish annihilation is averted and the Jewish community is assured of continuity and prosperity. It is no wonder that Haman became the symbol of later enemies of the Jews, and that "minor Purims" were celebrated in medieval and early modern times in communities where great danger was averted. The psychological release that is embodied in a carnivalesque holiday like Purim and in the book of Esther lends itself to similar celebrations of the communal triumph over danger. The book succeeds in putting a serious message in a comic form.

The book was probably written sometime between 400 and 300 BCE, toward the end of the Persian period. It apparently adapted an earlier tale about Mordecai, Esther, and Haman and shaped it into an etiology of Purim, a holiday whose origin is lost in obscurity. The story appears in rather different form in the Greek version of Esther (LXX), where it has six major additions not found in the Masoretic version plus a number of other significant differences throughout the story. The Greek version is less comic and more melodramatic, and in its present form it reflects Hellenistic concerns (Jewish ritual observance, including circumcision) not found in the surviving Hebrew version. An ancient body of midrashic interpretation attaches to Esther, found in the Talmud (b. Meg. 10b-17a), in Josephus's paraphrase (*Antiquity of the Jews*, Book 11, chapter 6), in the two Targumim (Aramaic renderings) to Esther, and in

several midrashic collections. There is no consensus on the date of the book's canonization, partly because there is no consensus on the date of the canonization of the Kethuvim. Some scholars put it as early as the mid-2nd century BCE; others date it to the 1st century CE. Interestingly, Esther is the only biblical book of which no remnant has been found at Qumran; apparently the Dead Sea community did not preserve this book (although they seem to have had stories of the same genre), perhaps because they did not observe Purim, which according to their 364-day calendar would always fall on the Sabbath, creating a conflict of observance (according to the Jewish calendar now in use, Purim can never fall on the Sabbath).¹

Esther 1-3: Esther, the Court of the Persians, and the Plot to Kill the Jewish People

1. Ahasuerus, rules Persia (Esther 1.10).²
2. Wine in abundance (Esther 1.1-8).
3. Vashti's treatment by the king (Esther 1.9-22).
4. Ahasuerus seeks a new queen (Esther 2.1-7).
 - a. "Let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen" (Esther 2.4).³
5. Mordecai, "a certain Jew... who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity" (Esther 2.6). This would put Mordecai at 115 years old! Mordecai means "little man" or "follower of Marduk."⁴
6. Esther is brought forth (Esther 2.8-9).
 - a. She is instructed by her uncle Mordecai to not reveal to the king that she is a Jew (Esther 2.10, 20).
 - b. Esther establishes credibility (Esther 2.15, 17).
7. Esther reveals a plot to assassinate the king (Esther 2.21-23).
 - a. Mordecai tells Esther the plot, and then she explains it to the king (Esther 2.22).
8. Haman plots to kill the Jews (Esther 3.1-15).⁵
 - a. Haman the "Agagite" (Esther 3.1).⁶

¹ Adele Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1623-1625.

² The name is derived from that of the Persian emperor called Xerxes by Herodotus. He reigned from 486 to 465 B.C.E. Beyond the name, there is scarcely any historical connection between the actual emperor and the king of this fantasy world of our text. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, p. 5930 electronic version.

³ A beauty contest is hardly the way real queens of Persia were chosen. In fact, Persian queens had to be from the Persian nobility. *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1628.

⁴ מְרַדְכָּי "Little man" or "follower of Marduk."

⁵ Now there was one Haman, the son of Amadatha, by birth an Amalekite, that used to go in to the king; and the foreigners and Persians worshipped him, as Artaxerxes had commanded that such honor should be paid to him; but Mordecai was so wise, and so observant of his own country's laws, that he would not worship the man. When Haman observed this, he inquired whence he came; and when he understood that he was a Jew, he had indignation at him, and said within himself, that whereas the Persians, who were free men, worshipped him, this man, who was no better than a slave, does not vouchsafe to do so. And when he desired to punish Mordecai, he thought it too small a thing to request of the king that he alone might be punished; he rather determined to abolish the whole nation, for he was naturally an enemy to the Jews, because the nation of the Amalekites, of which he was; had been destroyed by them. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XI, 6:5.

⁶ The Agagite, a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king responsible for Saul's loss of the kingship (1 Sam. 15.8). The ancient enmity between Israel and Amalek informs the relationship between Haman and Mordecai. *The Jewish*

- b. Mordecai “bowed not” unto Haman (Esther 3.5).
- c. “They cast *Pur*” (Esther 3.7).⁷
- d. Haman proposes that the Jews be killed (Esther 3.8-11).⁸
- e. Haman sends letters to the provinces that on the 13th of Adar the Jews are to be slain (Esther 3.13).

Esther 4-8: The Reversal⁹

- 1. Mordecai and Esther plan to save their people (Esther 4.1-17).
 - a. “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4.14).¹⁰
 - b. The meaning of Esther’s name could be tied to Esther 4.14.¹¹

Study Bible, p. 1629. This has reference to Deuteronomy 25.17-19, where the Lord instructs Israel to remember the Amalekites and how they treated Israel and to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

⁷ Pur, from Akkadian; the practice of casting lots by means of a small stone die is known from ancient Mesopotamia. Similar techniques were used in Israel and Greece. *Ibid.*, 1630.

⁸ The heart of Haman’s argument: The Jews do not acknowledge the sovereignty of the king (Esther 3.8).

⁹ From my study of the [Book of Judith](#), I see several similar motifs between Esther and Judith. I outline some of these motifs in the slides for this presentation. I would encourage those interested to read the apocryphal book of Judith and see what parallels are seen between both texts.

¹⁰ Consider Esther’s dilemma: It was against the law to approach the king without being summoned. Such an act was punishable by death. If she were to remain quiet, she would likely enjoy a life of luxury and ease. She could live the life of a queen or risk her life to save her family and her people. She counted the cost and chose to heed the longings of her people and of her heart.

She asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Shushan and fast three days for her, and she and her handmaids would do the same. Then she said, “I [will] go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish” (Esth. 4:16).

Spiritually prepared, Esther approached the king. She was received by him, and she invited the king and Haman to a feast she had arranged. During the feast, Haman’s plot was unveiled, and Mordecai received great honors. Esther, born for such a time, had saved a nation.

Everywhere I have traveled, whether it was Finland; Idaho; Brazil; Washington, D.C.; or Russia, I have witnessed the gospel of Jesus Christ in action and the radiant light of the gospel in the countenances of courageous and faithful sisters. The Spirit has borne witness to me that we each have been born “for such a time as this” (Esth. 4:14).

To each of you, no matter your nationality, race, social status, or individual talents, whether you are married, single, or widowed, whether you were born into the Church or are a new convert and the only member of your family, I say, “Welcome home!” The Relief Society is your home, and you are an integral part of a worldwide sisterhood with a divine mission. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the Church was not fully organized until the Relief Society had been organized—the priesthood for the men and the Relief Society for the women. He stated, “I now turn the key in your behalf in the name of the Lord, and this Society shall rejoice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.” He stated further, “If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates.” Mary Ellen Smoot, [“For Such a Time as This,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 86.](#)

¹¹ Esther means a “star” in the Persian tongue. How fitting a title for a woman who may have been there “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons [and daughters] of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). Though the text does not mention any foreordination or calling for Esther, Mordecai’s question, “Who knoweth whether thou

- c. "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4.16).¹²
2. Esther's audience with the king (Esther 5.1-8).
3. Haman's misunderstanding of what is at stake (Esther 5.9-14).
4. Haman designs a ceremony to honor himself, but instead Mordecai receives honor (Esther 6.1-11).
5. Haman is devastated at the honors received by Mordecai (Esther 6.12-14).
6. Haman's true character as the enemy of the Jews is revealed by Esther (Esther 7.1-10).
 - a. Haman is hanged on the gallows he prepared for the Jews (Esther 7.9-10).¹³
7. Haman's edict is reversed (Esther 8.1-17).
 - a. Esther receives "a house" as "the king did give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen" (Esther 8.1).
 - b. Mordecai proceeds from the royal house wearing apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple" (Esther 8.15).¹⁴
 - c. "Many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them" (Esther 8.17).¹⁵

art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14) suggests that Esther came into the world to save God's covenant people.

¹² This is similar to the statement by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, when they state that they will not bow down to the image put forth and are told they will die in a fiery furnace. They state, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O King, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image with thou hast set up" (Daniel 3.17-18). See also: [Elder Dennis Simmons, "But if not" Ensign, April 2004.](#)

¹³ Joseph Smith offered this warning as it relates to the fate of Haman:

We want you to remember Haman and Mordecai: you know Haman could not be satisfied so long as he saw Mordecai at the king's gate, and he sought the life of Mordecai and the people of the Jews. But the Lord so ordered it, that Haman was hanged upon his own gallows.

So shall it come to pass with poor Haman in the last days. Those who have sought by unbelief and wickedness, and by the principle of mobocracy, **to destroy us and the people of God, by killing them and scattering them** abroad, and wilfully and maliciously delivering us into the hands of murderers, desiring us to be put to death, thereby having us dragged about in chains and cast into prison, and for what cause? It is because we were honest men, and were determined to save the lives of the Saints at the expense of our own. **I say unto you, that those who have thus vilely treated us like Haman, shall be hanged on their own gallows; or in other words, shall fall into their own gin and snare, and ditch and trap, which they have prepared for us,** and shall go backwards and stumble and fall, and their names shall be blotted out, and God shall reward them according to all their abominations. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 3: 227, emphasis added.

¹⁴ This is an obvious realization of Haman's fantasy that he should be dressed in royal garb, and now, in Mordecai's case, it is going to be his habitual attire as vice-regent, not merely the finery worn for a ceremony to honor him. In chapter 6, the king quietly deleted Haman's inclusion of the crown in his list of royal accoutrements. Here Mordecai is said to wear an *'atarah*, "diadem," which is nearly a crown but perhaps a bit less than *keter*, the word Haman used. **Behind Mordecai's being clothed in regal garments (earlier he was in sackcloth) lies the Joseph story, in which the former Hebrew prisoner is dressed by Pharaoh in regal clothing after he is invested with power as vice-regent.** Alter, p. 5971, electronic version, emphasis added.

¹⁵ It is unlikely that it means conversion to Judaism, as it would in later Hebrew, because there was no procedure of religious conversion in the fifth century B.C.E. and also because the Book of Esther shows not the least concern with religion. What the verb seems to imply in context is that the sundry peoples pretended to be Jews, or perhaps aligned themselves with the Jews, in order to avoid attack. Ibid., p. 5971.

Esther 9-10: Conclusion

1. The Jews triumph over their enemies (Esther 9.1-19).
 - a. Collective punishment: the sons of Haman are hanged! (Esther 9.12-14).
2. A festival is established (Esther 9.20-28).
3. The accomplishments of Ahasuerus and his servant Mordecai (Esther 10.1-3).