

## Who was Esther in the Bible?

Esther is the Jewish maiden who became queen of Persia and rescued her people from a murderous plot to annihilate them. Her story is recorded in the Old Testament book bearing her name. The Jewish Feast of Purim celebrates this particular deliverance of the Jews.

The story of Esther begins with a king's banquet. King Ahasuerus (also called Xerxes) was the son of the famed Persian king Darius I, who is mentioned in Ezra 4:24; 5:5-7; 6:1-15; Daniel 6:1, 25; Haggai 1:15; and 2:10. The year of the incident between Esther and King Xerxes was about 483 BC. The empire of King Ahasuerus was enormous; in fact, it was the largest the world had ever seen. Persia covered the area now known as Turkey, as well as Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel; it also encompassed sections of modern-day Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

As with most of the pagan Gentile kings of that day, King Xerxes enjoyed putting on public displays of his wealth and power, which included feasts that sometimes lasted for as long as 180 days. Evidently, during the feast that is mentioned in Esther 1:10-11, the king requested that his wife, Queen Vashti, come before the entire gathering of officials to show them her great beauty wearing her crown. The speculation is that King Xerxes wanted Vashti to appear wearing only the crown. Queen Vashti refused the king's request, and he became enraged. King Xerxes consulted his advisers in the law who declared that Vashti had wronged all the people of the land. They feared that the women of Persia would hear of Vashti's refusal to obey her husband and begin to despise their own husbands. They suggested the king issue a decree throughout the land that Vashti could never again enter his presence. The king did so, proclaiming the edict in all the provincial languages.

With Vashti vanquished, the king was without a queen. Xerxes' attendants suggested he make a search for beautiful virgins throughout the land to find a new queen. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that King Ahasuerus chose a total of 400 women to fill the harem and act as candidates for the new queen (Esther 2:1-4). The women were to undergo a year's worth of beauty treatments before meeting the king (verse 12). Esther, a Jewess whose Hebrew name was Hadassah, was chosen as one of the virgins (verse 8).

Until the time that the virgins were brought to the king, they were kept in the harem under the care of Hegai (Esther 2:8); after their meeting, because they were no longer virgins, they were moved to the area set aside to house the concubines—or mistresses—where they were put under the watchful eye of another eunuch, named Shaashgaz (verse 14).

Esther had been living in the citadel of Susa, where the king also lived. She was the cousin of a Benjamite named Mordecai, who was also her guardian, having adopted her as his own daughter when her parents died. Mordecai held some type of official position within the Persian government (Esther 2:19). When Esther was chosen as a candidate for queen, Mordecai instructed her not to reveal her Jewish background (verse 10). He also visited the king's harem daily to see how Esther was doing (verse 11).

When Esther's turn to be with the king came, "she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her" (Esther 2:15). She also won the king's favor: he "loved Esther more than all the women," and he made her queen (Esther 2:17). It seems that Esther, in addition to having "a lovely figure and [being] beautiful" (verse 7), was

submissive in following the advice of wise counselors and quite winsome in every way. As the story progresses, it also becomes evident that God was at work through the whole process.

Some time later, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate and overheard an assassination plot against Xerxes. He reported it to Queen Esther, who reported it to the king and gave Mordecai the credit. The plot was foiled, but the event was largely forgotten (Esther 2:21-23). We see in this event Esther's continued connection to Mordecai as well as her integrity. Both Mordecai and Esther honored the king and wanted to protect him from his enemies.

After this, the king appointed an evil man over his affairs. His name was Haman, and he despised the Israelite people. Haman was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, a people who were Israel's sworn enemy for generations (Exodus 17:14-16), and bigotry and prejudice against Israel were deeply rooted within Haman's darkened heart. In his hubris, Haman commanded the royal officials at the king's gate to kneel down and honor him, but Mordecai refused. The royal officials spoke to Haman about this, being sure to tell Haman that Mordecai was a Jew. Haman wanted not only to punish Mordecai but "sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus" (Esther 3:6). King Xerxes allowed Haman to do as he pleased in the matter, and a decree went out to all the provinces that on a certain day, which had been chosen by lot (or purim), the people were "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day" (Esther 3:13). The people were bewildered, and there was great mourning among the Jews (Esther 3:15; 4:3).

Queen Esther was unaware of the plot against the Jews, but she found out when her maids

and eunuchs told her that Mordecai was in distress. Esther sent a messenger to Mordecai to find out what was wrong. Mordecai sent his cousin a copy of the edict and asked her "to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people" (Esther 4:8). Now, there was a law against entering the king's presence uninvited, and Esther had not been invited by the king for the past thirty days. Through her intermediary, Esther reported to Mordecai her seeming inability to help. He responded, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14). In a great display of faith, Esther agreed. She asked the Jews to fast for her for three days while she and her maids also fasted. "Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law," she said, "and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

When Esther approached the king, she was literally risking her life. But Xerxes "was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand," a sign that he accepted her presence (Esther 5:2). She invited Xerxes and Haman to a banquet that day. The king called for Haman and came to the meal where he asked what she would like, "even up to half the kingdom" (verse 6). Esther invited the two men to attend another banquet the following day where she would present her request (verse 8). The men agreed.

Xerxes had difficulty sleeping that night and ordered the record of his reign to be read to him. Amazingly, the account he heard was that of Mordecai uncovering the assassination plot and saving the king's life. Meanwhile, Haman went home, gathered his friends and wife, and told them how honored he had been. But he had seen Mordecai on the

way home, which had dampened his spirits. His wife and friends suggested Haman build a gallows on which to hang Mordecai (Esther 5:9-14). Haman followed their advice and built the gallows.

Just as King Xerxes was mulling over the fact that he had not honored Mordecai for his life-saving act, Haman came in to talk to the king about hanging Mordecai. The king asked for Haman's opinion about how to honor a man whom "the king delights to honor" (Esther 6:6). Haman, thinking Xerxes was referring to him, suggested parading the man through town wearing a royal robe and riding on a horse the king had ridden while proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!" (Esther 6:9). Xerxes ordered Haman to do this immediately for Mordecai.

Haman obeyed the king and honored the man he hated the most. He then told the events to his wife and friends. With more foresight than they probably realized, "his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him'" (Esther 6:13). The king's eunuchs arrived and took Haman to Esther's banquet (verse 14). There, Esther told the king that her people had been sold to be annihilated. Showing great respect and humility, Esther said that had they only been sold into slavery, she would have held her peace, "because no such distress would justify disturbing the king" (Esther 7:4). The king was aghast that someone would dare to do such a thing to his queen's people (verse 5). Esther revealed the man behind the plot to "this vile Haman" (verse 7). Xerxes exited the banquet enraged. Haman stayed behind to plead with Esther for his life. When the king reentered the room and saw this, he thought Haman was molesting Esther and ordered Haman to be killed on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai (verses 8-10).

After Haman was dead, Xerxes gave Esther all of Haman's estate and gave Mordecai his signet ring, essentially giving Mordecai the same authority in the kingdom Haman previously had. The decree that had gone out from Haman, however, was irrevocable. Esther again pleaded with the king to intervene. Xerxes ordered another decree to be written to counter the first: this one gave the Jews the right to defend themselves against any who would attack them. Now there was joy throughout the provinces. Many even became Jews out of fear. Some enemies did attack on the previously appointed day, but the Jews were victorious over them (Esther 8).

Esther's bravery and faith in God are a testament to the trust this young woman had in the living God. Her life is a lesson in God's sovereignty over His creation. God maneuvers every aspect of life to position people, governments, and situations for His plan and purpose. We may not know what God is doing at a particular moment, but a time might come when we realize why we have gone through certain experiences or met certain people or lived in certain areas or shopped in certain stores or taken certain trips. The time may come when everything comes together, and we look back and see that we, too, were in the right place at the right time, just as Esther was. She was in the harem "for such a time as this." She was made queen "for such a time as this." She was strengthened and prepared to intercede for her people "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). And she was faithful to obey. Esther trusted in God and humbly served, no matter what it might cost. Esther is truly a reminder of God's promise, as written in Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."