

BIBLICAL WOMEN: ESTHER

The Book of Esther tells about a Jewish woman who heroically saved her people from the wrath of the king's chief official. This fictional story is set in the 5th Century B.C., when Xerxes ruled Persia. The plot has two principal elements – first, Esther (or Hadassah, her Hebrew name) became queen, then her uncle Mordecai sought her help to foil a planned pogrom to exterminate the Jews.

First, the king (called Ahasuerus in the book) deposed Queen Vashti after she refused his order to come to him. His officials feared that if she were allowed to get away with this, women throughout the kingdom would rebel against their husbands as well as all royal officials. Then the most beautiful women were gathered for the king to choose a new queen, with Esther winning this position.

Later, the king made Haman his chief official, and ordered all to kneel and bow before him. Mordecai refused because he was a Jew. Enraged, Haman decided to destroy all of Mordecai's people (the Jews) throughout the kingdom. A lot (*pur*) was cast to determine the date for this slaughter, and the 13th day of the month of Adar was chosen. Then Haman told the king that the Jewish people refused to obey his royal decrees and should be slaughtered, and the king ordered this to be done on that day.

When Mordecai heard about this, he put on sackcloth and ashes and fasted and wept at the royal gates, as did Jews throughout the provinces. He implored Esther to intercede with the king, and after she and her court joined in fasting, Esther gave two banquets for the king. At the second, after he promised her anything, she asked that the Jewish people be spared and said that Haman was responsible. The king had Haman hanged, gave Mordecai Haman's former position, and let him reverse the previous decree. Mordecai wrote an edict that spared the Jews and instead authorized them to kill those who might attack them. The bloodshed occurred on the day previously chosen for the Jewish extermination, and continued the following day. The Jewish people celebrated on the days after their victory, which became the Feast of Purim (Lots), the 14th and 15th of Adar, as a perpetual celebration of their reversal of fortune.

The Book of Esther exists in both Hebrew – the original composition – and Greek, which freely translates the Hebrew and blends six considerable additions into the book. The Hebrew text presents the exploits of Mordecai and Esther as Jewish champions, with no reference to God or divine actions. The later Greek additions weave in the elements of prayer, fasting and divine intervention, and provide a religious basis for the annual Feast of Purim. Only the Hebrew text is included in the Jewish Bible; the Greek additions are part of the Apocrypha in Protestant Bibles. The full text is considered canonical by the Catholic Church, which interweaves the two, listing the Hebrew chapters by numbers 1-10 and the Greek chapters by letters A-F.

In the Hebrew text, the book's message is that the Jewish people must retain their identity even when living among pagans. Establishing Jewish enclaves was one defensive measure. Jews can participate in the good elements of a non-Jewish society while remaining true to their traditions. They must be responsible for their survival as a people, as were Mordecai and Esther, and not wait for some miraculous solution from God. Even if it takes some time, they must be patient and persistent in being true to their heritage. There are parallels between Mordecai and Esther gaining the king's favor and the patriarch Joseph gaining esteem in the pharaoh's court. The vindictive bloodshed by the Jews against those who would have slaughtered them, along with the absence of any religious references, made it problematic for Judaism to include the Book of Esther in their Sacred Scriptures, but, after considerable hesitation, they did.

In the Greek text, the book's message is that the Lord delivers his people, the Jews, and they must turn to him in their need. God is the Lord of history and can reverse the fortunes of his people when they are endangered by worldly powers. The days of supplication and fasting when they were threatened with death were replaced with days of celebration and feasting when they were spared through God's help. To the story's elements of fasting and wailing were added lengthy prayers by Mordecai and Esther, earnestly pleading with God to use his almighty power to save his endangered people. In this narrative, the king was moved by God to do Esther's bidding, rather than by her wiles. The text also added a prophetic dream for Mordecai in a prologue, interpreting its fulfillment in an epilogue. God casts two lots (*purim*), the first to render justice for his people, and the second lot for the fate of all other nations. Thus the Feast of Purim gained religious significance as a commemoration of God's choices for the Jews and for all others..

The core of the Hebrew narrative may date to the 5th Century B.C., although it is not known when it was written down. The Greek translation and additions were written to precede the introduction of the Feast of Purim to the Jewish community in Egypt. A postscript says the work was brought to Egypt in the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, but there were three such royal pairs – Ptolemy VIII, Ptolemy XII, and Ptolemy XIV. Scholars think the earliest date (114 B.C.) is the most likely.