



The book of Esther is set in the Persian capital of Susa.
The author placed it in the 3rd year of the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus.
He was also known as Emperor Xerxes 1 and he ruled between 486 and 465 BCE.

It is *written* literature which means it was meant to be read (not of the oral tradition).
It is a story (like Jonah) written to explain the origin of the Jewish holiday of Purim.
It is one of the festival scrolls that is still read on that Jewish festival day.
It does not contain a single reference to God or the religious practices of Judaism.
It is a work of fiction that happens to contain some historical elements.

Ahasuerus is identified as the 5th century Persian king Xerxes 1.

The author also shows an accurate knowledge of Persian customs and palaces.

Because of its seemingly non-religious character (and because of its nationalistic spirit) various rabbis during the 1st century BCE to 3rd century BCE expressed uncertainties about its right to be included in the canon. It became the last of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible to be recognized. Many scholars believe the author of Esther did not mean for the book to be considered a historical writing but intentionally wrote it to be a fictional short story. This type of writing was common during both the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

Background

There was a significant hostility between Israel and the Amalekites.
It began during the time of Moses (Exodus 17:16, Numbers 24:20, Deuteronomy 25:17-19).
It increased during the time of Saul.

This hostility is embodied in two of the principal figures of the story:

Mordecai the Jew (who is regarded as a descendant of Kish, the father of Saul)

Haman (who is described as a descendant of the Amalekite king conquered by Saul)

Story

Mordecai refused to pay Haman the proper consideration he believed he deserved.
So Haman planned to liquidate the Jews scattered throughout the empire.
Haman pointed out to Xerxes that the Jews refused to be assimilated into their way of life.
Xerxes granted him permission to issue an edict for a wholesale massacre of Jews.
This was to take place on the 13th day of the month Adar (February-March).

Mordecai, however, persuaded Esther (his cousin) to risk her life on behalf of her people. She was to go to the king even though an unsummoned visit was punishable by death. Favored by a remarkable series of coincidences, the tables turned on the enemies of the Jews. Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had constructed for Mordecai. His ten sons were also executed bringing the last of the Amalekites to an end.

By royal decree the 13th of Adar became a day on which the Jews of Susa were permitted to slaughter their persecutors and on another day – the 14th of Adar – the Jews in the provinces of the empire were authorized to continue the bloodshed. In the end a festival of rejoicing was held, which came to be known as *Purim*, in remembrance of the lot that Haman cast to determine the day of vengeance. The story explains the origin of this popular festival and also explains why it is celebrated for two days.

Purim will start the evening of Wednesday, February 28, and ends Thursday evening, March 1. Observances include –

- The reading of the book of *Esther* on the eve of *Purim* and then again on the following day.
- Giving money gifts to at least two poor people.
- Sending gifts of two kinds of food to at least one person.
- A feast which often includes wine or other intoxicating beverages.
- Other customs include wearing masks and costumes.

The story of the origin of Purim came to be very popular during the Maccabean period when the separation of Jews from Gentiles brought about violent persecutions. Throughout the tumultuous Jewish history since then, Haman has been the symbol of a number of wicked leaders who have carried out vicious programs of anti-Semitism (like Adolf Hitler).

From the Holocaust and Humanity Center

Purim has the reputation of being a somewhat foolish holiday. It is devoid of God or faith (and described as a Jewish child's answer to Halloween). The communal mitzvah (law) connected with Purim is the reading of *Esther*. There are records of this mitzvah being written from memory on scraps of paper in Buchenwald. The recitation in camps was accompanied by spontaneous dancing and singing.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg states that *Purim* is the holiday for the post-Holocaust World. He places the human role next to the hidden God. He believes *Purim* accurately describes society and the Jewish people. In addition, the *Purim* includes a willingness to network, lobby, and engage in military action.

The Jewish child's most profound memory of the reading is the *wiping out* of Haman. One is taught to recognize evil but not to fear it. Jewish sites and curriculum could learn from the *Purim* story to de-emphasize Nazi leaders. Instead, they should know and honor the names of Mordecai and Esther. By invoking and giving attention to Haman and his followers, they neglect the many heroes. This might redirect their attention to the prevention of evil and identification of role models. It would also drown out the names of the perpetrators.

Purim is a day of laughter and fun, the day that disaster was averted.
The word *Purim* means lottery (a game of chance that Haman picked to slaughter all the Jews).

In Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl and another medical doctor trained themselves to survive.
They decided to daily invent a funny story about what will happen after liberation.
Many others joined to create a compilation of fictional stories.
This activity was empowering, created solidarity, eased oppression, and reinforced hope.

Humor has kept the Jewish people resilient for centuries.
We do not question the holiday that commemorates the first edict for genocide.
It is a moment that the Jewish people found the power of laughter stronger than tears.
The Talmud states that in the name of Elijah there will be rewards in the world to come for those who brought laughter into this one.

Movie – *Life is Beautiful* (1997)

Other Important Features in Esther

The author makes a point of avoiding direct mention of God. In Esther 4:14 the reference is to a deliverance coming *from another place*. This could be motivated by the fear that the name of God might be profaned in connection with the carefree festival of *Purim* when it was permissible to drink wine freely. It does not change the fact that beneath the worldliness of the book of Esther is the conviction that God has called this people to be separate from the world (3:8) and to demonstrate an exclusive covenant loyalty.

Feasting is a prominent theme in Esther. There are ten banquets mentioned with three pairs of banquets marking the beginning, middle and end of the story (two banquets of Xerxes, two prepared by Esther, and the double celebration of Purim).

1. Xerxes' banquet for the nobility (1:2-4)
2. Xerxes' banquet for all the men in Susa (1:5-8)
3. Vashti's banquet for the women (1:9)
4. Esther's enthronement banquet (2:18)
5. Haman and Xerxes' banquet (3:15)
6. Esther's first banquet (5:4-8)
7. Esther's second banquet (7:1-9)
8. The Jews feasting in celebration of Mordecai's glory and the counter-decree (8:17)
9. The first feast of Purim (9:17,19)
10. The second feast of Purim (9:18)

Redemption is the thread that runs through God's Word.
In Esther we begin to see the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption.
Haman (the personification of evil in this story) is crushed and he and his ten sons are all killed.
God reveals through this story that in the fullness of time the head of Satan will also be crushed through the work of Jesus Christ.

The Jews are an instrument of deliverance but obedience is necessary.
God is in control and God has not abandoned the Jews.
God is actively at work in Jewish history.
Satan plots our destruction at every turn.
God is always providing for, directing, and leading his people.

Martin Luther on Esther: *I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much, and has too much heathen naughtiness.*

It is particularly difficult to reconcile the events of these verses with Christian notions of forgiveness and universalism.

This is a case of do unto others as they would have done to you.
But this is not a historical event but wishful thinking of an oppressed minority.
The focus is on the victory, not the slaughter.
The Jews did not seek violence but it found them. They meet it or will be destroyed.
Those who wished to destroy the Jews are instead themselves destroyed.
The Jews become the image of Esther, who changes from a silent, pliable girl into a strong and decisive woman.

- * There are three forms of ecclesiastical excommunication pronounced by a rabbi –
Herem is the highest ecclesiastical censure in the Jewish community.
It is the total exclusion of a person and is a form of shunning.
The most famous case of a herem is that of Spinoza (the 17th century philosopher).
He questioned the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible and the nature of the divine.
He was shunned by the Jewish community at the age of 23.

Niddui was a temporary excommunication.

The Talmud speaks of 24 offenses that (in theory) were punishable in some form.

Nezifah is a one-day ban from the community.

The one banned retires to his house, speaks little, and feels remorse.

The Additions to Esther – Apocrypha

Assignment for February 7

Complete the Exercises on Pages 75-78

Read Job (or the portions outlined on Page 78)