

ESTHER

(All comments by Sidnie White Crawford unless otherwise specified)

(The following notes combine the canonical “Esther” with the non-canonical “The Rest of Esther” of “Addition to Esther.” Found beginning on page 1411 in the NRSV.)

INTRO

There are three versions of the Book of Esther:

- 1) The **Masoretic Text (MT)**: written in Hebrew in early 3rd century BCE – by an unknown writer, but based on long-lost Babylonian mythology, converted to a supposedly historical tale to please the chauvinistic nationalism of his readers. (There is very long, confusing [to me] discussion on pp. 861-866 in the New Interpreter’s Bible [NIB]). **This is what you find in Protestant Bibles and Hebrew Bibles.**
- 2) The **Alpha Text (AT)**: a Greek translation of the MT, written in the 2nd century BCE, but with conspicuous differences (see p. 860 NIB). **This is in no one’s Bible.**
- 3) The **Septuagint (LXX)**: a Greek translation, written in the 2nd century BCE, containing six long passages not found in the MT. This is the **“Rest of Esther”** or **“Additions to Esther,”** **found in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles.** Considered apocryphal by Protestants, but found in the **NRSV.**

Just to confuse the issue, there are three other versions not accepted by anyone as authoritative or canonical but should occasionally be taken into account:

- 1) **Old Latin (OL)**
- 2) **Two Targums** – translations from the MT into Aramaic, with some changes and additions.
- 3) **Josephus** in “Antiquities of the Jews.” He was apparently familiar with all versions.

This entire story is fiction. Artaxerxes is a mis-translation of Ahasuerus (Ah-has-you-air-us). The king at the time of the story was actually Xerxes, who ruled 486-465, so the “second year” would be 485 BCE, on New Year’s day. /// Susa was one of four capitals of the Persian empire, now in NW Iran. There is no historical evidence of a Queen Vashti, or a Queen Esther. According to Herodotus, Xerxes’ queen at this time was Amestris, daughter of a Persian general.

All the names -- except Ahasuerus and the Agagite tribe -- are from Babylonian mythology:

Esther -- from the Babylonians chief goddess Ishtar, which in Aramaic is Esther.

Hadassah -- Esther’s name in her own family, before she became queen and closely related to a Babylonian word meaning “bride,” one of Ishtar’s titles. (Also the women’s auxiliary of the Zionist movement.)

Mordecai -- from Marduk, chief god of the Babylonians, and in Hebrew, Merodach.

Zeresh -- from Marduk’s wife Kirisha, Haman’s wife in the MT of this story.

Haman -- from the chief male deity of the Elamites, Hamman. There is no historical record in Herodotus or the Greek histories of a Haman as a prime minister of Xerxes. Haman in this story is the son of an Agagite, which is also not an historical tribe. But, Agag was the king of the Israelite-hating tribe of Amalekites who was killed by Saul (1 Samuel 15:33). (See note #3.) So it is logical that a descendant of that anti-Jewish tribe would order the destruction of Mordecai (of the tribe of Saul -- Esther 2:5) and the rest of the Jews in the kingdom.

Vashti -- from the chief female deity of the Elamites

Further evidence: Marduk and Ishtar are cousins, as are Mordecai and Esther. In 640 BC, the Babylonians led by Assurbanipal replaced the Elamites in Susa. Their chief god and goddess, in Susa, Marduk and Ishtar replaced Haman and Vashti of the Elamites. In the book of Esther, in Susa, Esther replaces Vashti as queen, and Mordecai replaces Haman as prime minister.

There is no historical evidence of a civil war between the Jewish captives in Babylonia and the Babylonians such as occurred in the book of Esther when Ahasuerus realized he couldn't rescind his order to kill all the Jews, but was able to arm them and allow them to retaliate against those who would kill them.

This version (NRSV) contains both the Book of Esther and The Rest of Esther. The "Book" is denoted by numbers, "The Rest" by letters. The Hebrew Book is the only book of the Bible which does not mention God by name, whereas in "The Rest," "Lord" or "God" appears more than 50 times. The only possible direct reference is in 4:13-14, where "quarter" might be a reference to God's reluctance to let the Hebrews be annihilated even if Esther doesn't act. There are other places where "the narrator believed in a hidden causality behind the surface..."(Sandra Berg). /// Note that Mordecai is already "an important man" in contrast to the Hebrew Bible's version. (See 2:5) There are many other differences between the MT (canonical Esther) and the Greek version (LXX). /// The only book of the canonical Bible not found at Qumran.

Note the similarities between the stories of Esther and Joseph: Jews in a foreign court, overcoming obstacles and achieving fabulous success, proximity to royal power saves his/her people, concealed identity. Several times there are word-for-word similarities: E. g. : Genesis 41:42-43 – "And he clothed him (Joseph) and he caused him to ride in his second chariot and they cried out before him..." Esther 6: 11 – "And he clothed Mordecai and he caused him to ride through the open square of the city..."

The following notes follow the combined texts of Esther (EH) and the Rest of Esther (EG), in chronological order .

- 1) (EG)11:4-10 – The battle here is nations against the righteous nation – Israel – not between individuals as in the EH, where the two great dragons are Mordecai and Haman. An "evil" and "good" dragon reflects the Persian influence on the writer. /// Water and light are symbols of salvation in Israelite literature (e.g. Zechariah 14:7-8).
- 2) 12:1-6 – Many contradictions when compared to the MT. ///"Bougean" refers to the successors of Alexander the Great, thus making Haman an enemy infiltrator in the Persian court.
- 3) (EH) 1:1 – Throughout the Hebrew Esther (see p. 707, Hebrew bible), the ruler Artaxerxes is referred to as Ahasuerus. The LXX and Josephus understand Ahasuerus to be Artaxerxes. But the AT, HB, and the NIB assume him to be Xerxes, Artaxerxes' father. (JBD: immaterial) /// The only mention of India (plus that in EG 16:1) in the entire Bible.

- 4) 1:4 – Crawford: “A suspicion of hyperbole is raised.”
- 5) 1:8 – “according to a fixed rule” – normally the court drank only when the king drank. The author is emphasizing the opulence of the court in contrast to Jewish practices.
- 6) 2:2 – The word for “girl” here is actually “betulah,” meaning a “young woman of marriageable age.” (The word for “virgin” is “alma.”)
- 7) 2:4 – The author is clearly drawing on two legendary motifs: King Shekriya and Scheherazade, and David and Abishag (1 Kings 1:1-4).
- 8) 2:5 – Living in the citadel implies an important place in court – made plain in the EG. Jair is Mordecai’s father, but Shimei and Kish are remote ancestors: Shimei was the man who cursed David as David fled from Saul in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 16:5 ff). Kish was Saul’s father. Two connections to Saul important later in story.
- 9) 2:6 – The abduction of Jeconiah took place in 597 BC, so both Mordecai and Esther would have been over 100 years old. The author, writing 3½ centuries later, was unsure of his chronology.
- 10) 2:7 – Esther’s Hebrew name is Hadassah – meaning “myrtle.” Esther means “star,” tying her to Ishtar.
- 11) 2:8 – 400 girls, according to Josephus.
- 12) 2:14 – Persian history “speckled with tales” of harem intrigue. E.g., Xerxes and Xerxes II were killed in a harem coup.
- 13) 2:19 – Insert after “meanwhile”: “when the virgins were being gathered together for a second time,”
- 14) 2:23 – The omission of a reward for Mordecai is exploited later by the author.
- 15) 3:2 – Why not bow? The Targum: Haman wore an idol on his breast. But Haman takes it as racial insult.
- 16) 3:7-13 – The date chosen is ironically that of the Exodus, which was not accidental. Why a year in the future? No answer in the text. Note that the king doesn’t ask who these dangerous people are, and Haman is careful not to tell him because he might balk at killing Mordecai (and maybe Esther?). ///10,000 talents is 375 tons of silver. The king’s annual income was 14,000 talents.
- 17) (EG) 13:1 – Compare this letter with 3 Macabbees 3;12-29, almost identical wording. /// Remember that Haman is writing this!
- 18) (EH) 4:1-3 – The motivation for the sackcloth and ashes (importuning God to interfere) is “glaringly absent.”
- 19) 4:4 – The adverb/verb “deeply distressed” is actually “writhed in anguish,” as in childbirth.
- 20) 4:8 – Note that both Mordecai and Esther are literate, not so unusual for Mordecai but very unusual for Esther.
- 21) 4:9-17 – Concerning the “certain death to anyone who appears before the king unannounced,” Josephus accepts it, Herodotus doubts it. It may be a literary device to equate Vashti’s and Esther’s response, heightening suspense. In v. 14, Mordecai declares help will come from “another quarter,” perhaps from God? Both the Targum and the AT suggest this. /// The fast proposed in v. 14 is the only overt religious act in the entire Hebrew Esther. /// Esther is now acting like a queen, giving, not obeying orders (v. 17); this shows that Esther has faith in some divine intervention. /// This whole passage shows the human dilemma when faced with a choice of doing what is right in the face of opposition.
- 22) (EG) 13:14 – Mordecai’s motivation for not bowing to Haman is made clear – not because of

- pride but because he will bow only to God.
- 23) 13:15-17 – Mordecai reminds God that the Jews are the chosen people – he has made a covenant through Abraham and Moses. All this sadly lacking in the MT.
 - 24) 14:2 – See Malachi 2:3 for precedence.
 - 25) 14:7-9 – Esther blames the Jews’ idolatry, perhaps referring to the Babylonian captivity in a deuteronomic formula by the author because there is no mention of this in Hebrew Esther.
 - 26) (EH) 5:13 – How can Haman not know that Esther is Jewish when he knows that Mordecai is? (See also EH 6:10)
 - 27) 5:14 – The author indulges in extreme irony here. The weak Haman relies on his wife to tell him what to do, contrasting with 1:22 where the story starts with the decree that “every man should be master in his own house.”
 - 28) 6:1 – The LXX and AT both attribute the king’s insomnia to God. (See the Book of Esther where the king merely couldn’t sleep.)
 - 29) 6:8-9 – Parallels Joseph’s treatment in Genesis 41:42-43. The crown on the horse is a tall pointed head-dress, worn for royalty riders.
 - 30) 6:11 – The AT adds: And Haman said to Mordecai, “Take off the sackcloth!” And Mordecai was troubled, like one who is dying, and in distress he took off the sackcloth. But then he put on the splendid garments, and he thought he beheld an omen, and his heart was to the Lord, and he was speechless. /// Josephus adds: Haman’s daughter, seeing Haman and Mordecai from her roof and supposing that Haman was riding and Mordecai leading him, emptied her chamber pot on Haman’s head. When she discovered what she had done, she killed herself by jumping from the roof.
 - 31) 7:3 – The AT adds: Esther was uneasy about speaking because the enemy was right in front of her, but God gave her the courage for the challenge.
 - 32) 7:4 – The reference to being sold reminds the king that he received 10,000 talents of silver from Haman.
 - 33) 7:10 – Josephus comments that he marvels at the Deity’s wisdom in “turning the tables” on Haman with the punishment Haman had in store for Mordecai. /// **Question:** was Esther being cruel or sensible in not showing pity for a fallen foe? (See “Reflectons” on p. 920 NIB.)
 - 34) 8:9-14 – Why the delay of over two months, from the 13th of Nisan (3:7) to the 23rd of Sivan? It is basically inexplicable, but David Clines believes that those 70 days mirror the 70 years that the Israelites were held in Babylon. Crawford points out that this would be more subtle than this author usually is. /// The decree is basically the same as that of Haman to the 127 provinces, but the instructions differ in that each province is written to in its own language and the Jews are specifically included in the distribution.
 - 35) (EG) 16:1 – A key difference from Addition B (Haman’s letter) – the implication that there are those not loyal to the government – in this case, Haman – so it must be remembered that the letter is actually written by Mordecai, not the king.
 - 36) 16:12-14 – The term “savior” as applied to Mordecai is consistent with the title of Hellenistic emperors. /// The accusation that Haman would have turned over the kingdom to the Greeks does in fact happen when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire in 333 BCE.
 - 37) 16:17-18 – This annuls Haman’s edict, contrary to what happens in EH, where the Jews are given permission to defend themselves. The author handles this in v. 20 where there is a

- possibility of assault by the Persians despite the new edict.
- 38) (EH) 8:15-17 – Most scholars believe that the original story ended here (the AT actually does end at v. 12) but the author of the MT added chapters 9 and 10 to explain the Feast of Purim. /// Again, the parallelism between the appearance of Mordecai and Joseph cannot be accidental (Genesis 41:46).
- 39) 9:1-5 – Nine months have passed since the decree by Mordecai was sent out. It is the exact date on which Haman had decreed the destruction of the Jews. /// It was this passage that prompted Martin Luther to say, “I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist.” /// “The modern Christian reader must emphasize the victory over evil, rather than the slaughter.”
- 40) 9:10b – In contrast to Saul’s battle with Agag (1 Samuel 15), but consistent with Abraham’s battle with the four kings (Genesis 14:22-24).
- 41) 9:13-14 – Not only redundant but “reflecting a malignant spirit of revenge (Lewis Paton).” The ten sons were not hung, but were impaled on stakes to defile them by public exposure since they were already dead, the ultimate degradation in Hebrew tradition.
- 42) 9:16 – 75,000 (in the canonical Esther) is a hyperbolic number, which the LXX reduces to 15,000 and the AT to 10,000.
- 43) **9:17-32 – The historical basis for the celebration of Purim. “Respite from fighting is celebrated, not victory; safety, not slaughter.” The origin of the celebration refers to Haman’s casting lots with the Purim to decide the fate of the Jews, to crush and destroy them.** (A *pur* was a large rectangular prism of stone with the numbers 1,2,5,6 on them; plural Purim.) This is overturned by Mordecai and Esther. The edict was necessary to legitimize the following generations of Jews because it was not legislated in the Torah.
- 44) 9:29-32 – Scholars are uncertain about the meaning of the “second letter about Purim.” It is probably this letter of Esther’s, a gloss by an author with the “she” mistakenly changed to “he.” But this letter definitely “fixed these practices of Purim, as it was recorded in writing.” /// The fasts and lamentations” were other Mosaic celebrations; this letter gives the non-Mosaic celebrations authenticity.
- 45) 10:1-3 The Masoretic Text ends with the greatness of Mordecai (note the absence of Esther), and the resulting beneficent rule for all the people, with no one suffering because they are Jews (another similarity to Joseph’s story). Jon Levenson: a scene “for which the Jews of the Diaspora have always longed: Jews living in harmony and mutual good will with the Gentile majority.” These verses bring to a closure the major themes of the book: reversal, power, and escape from persecution.
- 46) (GE) Addition F:1-10 (NIV), 10:4-13 (NRSV), 10:1-10 (NAB) – A much later addition, it interprets Mordecai’s dream in Addition A, and was originally composed in Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. Neither the dream nor its interpretation fit very well into the Esther story. But God is given the credit for everything, the main point of the LXX. Salvation comes from God, not human action, which could be argued in the MT. Also, when conflict comes between Jew and Gentile God is on the Jew’s side. /// Not clear why Esther is the river, not the spring (in the AT, she is).
- 47) **11:1 – Today various groups again would like to reject Esther. Why is this book so hard for the faithful to accept as part of the Bible? It may be because Esther offers no easy answers. The world according to Esther is not a comfortable and easy place. In MT Esther, God is hidden, and humans must live with theological**

ambiguity. In LXX Esther, hostility between people is an accepted fact, and life is a constant struggle. Just for these reasons, however, the book of Esther speaks most profoundly to the twenty-first century. Life is difficult; people are trapped in hostile situations; God often seems hidden. Faithful people are called to live in ambiguity, hoping, like Esther and Mordecai, that they have come to the situation “for such a time as this.” Ultimately we must believe that “relief and deliverance...will arise” from God. This is the fundamental message of hope that the book of Esther contains.