

ESTHER

Contents:

[Background](#)

[Author](#)

[Date and Location](#)

[Purpose](#)

[Unique Features](#)

[Comparison with Other Bible Books](#)

[Outline](#)

[Timeline](#)

BACKGROUND

In 486 B.C., 52 years after Cyrus had permitted Zerubbabel to lead the first group of Jewish exiles from Babylon back to Judea ([Ezra 1-2](#)), Xerxes (also called Ahasuerus) became king of the Persian Empire. In about 478, Xerxes married a Jewish exile named Esther. The book bearing her name tells the story of how Esther, because of her marriage to Xerxes, was able to defeat a plan to exterminate all Jews in the Persian Empire (which would have included those who had returned to Judea). More Jews would return to Judea during the reign of Xerxes' son Artaxerxes ([Ezra 6-7](#); [Neh. 2](#)). Many, however, would choose to remain in Babylon and other parts of the Persian Empire.

AUTHOR

Unknown. The author's familiarity with minor details of the story and with Persian customs, in addition to his obvious sympathy with the Jewish exiles, suggests that he was probably a Jew living in Persia at the time the events of the book took place. Mordecai's journal ([Esther 9:20](#)) may have been one of his sources.

DATE AND LOCATION

The familiarity with details (see [Author](#)) suggests Esther was written soon after the events it records, probably c. 450 B.C., and probably in Persia.

PURPOSE

- To encourage the Jews remaining in Babylon and the rest of Persia to remain firm in their faith.
- To show those Jews who had returned to Judah that God was at work among his people outside of Judah as well.
- To demonstrate, to all believers, God's providential care for his people.

UNIQUE FEATURES

- Esther and the Song of Songs are the only two biblical books that do not mention the name of God.
- Esther records the origin of the Festival of Purim ([Esther 9:16-19](#)) and is the only biblical book to mention this festival.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

See [Ruth: Comparison with Other Bible Books](#).

OUTLINE

1. THE RISE OF ESTHER ([Esther 1-2](#))

1. The rejection of Vashti ([Esther 1](#))
2. The selection of Esther ([Esther 2:1-18](#))
- C. Mordecai's detection saves the king ([Esther 2:19-23](#))

II. THE LIES OF HAMAN ([Esther 3-5](#))

- A. Haman's request to exterminate the Jews ([Esther 3](#))
- B. Mordecai's request that Esther intervene ([Esther 4](#))
- C. Esther's request that the king spare the Jews ([Esther 5](#))

III. THE PRIZE OF FAITH ([Esther 6-10](#))

- A. Mordecai honored for his loyalty ([Esther 6](#))
- B. Haman hanged for his treachery ([Esther 7](#))
- C. Mordecai promoted; his people preserved ([Esther 8:1-9:17](#))
- D. Purim: Celebrating the preservation ([Esther 9:18-32](#))
- E. Mordecai remembered ([Esther 10](#))

TIMELINE

538 B.C.:	Exiles return with Zerubbabel
473 B.C.:	Esther saves Jews still in Persia
457 B.C.:	More exiles return with Ezra
445 B.C.:	Nehemiah rebuilds wall

[Esther 1:1-8](#) *A six-month show of his gold and glory.* For 180 days, King Xerxes of Persia hosted the various officials of Persia's 127 provinces in the capital city of Susa, evidently seeking to impress them with his wealth and power. At the end of the six months, he gave a lavish week-long feast ([Esther 1:5-8](#)).

Though the biblical account does not state this, Xerxes may have been trying to build morale for another assault on Greece. His father, Darius the Great, had been soundly defeated by Greece at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. The week-long feast occurred in 482. Xerxes would himself be defeated by Greece in 480 and 479. Despite such defeats, Xerxes controlled a vast empire, stretching from India to Ethiopia ([Esther 1:1](#)).

Esther 1:9-22 *Queen Vashti rejected for her refusal.* On the seventh day of the feast, the half-drunk king summoned Queen Vashti to appear and parade before his intoxicated guests. When she refused to do so, the angry but uncertain king consulted his lawyers, who immediately suggested he divorce her, so that her unsubmitive attitude would not be imitated by women all over Persia. Xerxes agreed and promptly divorced her.

Esther 1:19 is the book's first reference to the fact that a "law of the Persians and Medes" could not be revoked. This feature of Persian law would play a key role in the unfolding story (see exposition on [§]**Esther 2:1-14** and on [§]**Esther 8:1-8**). Some scholars see this finality of laws as an example of the pride of the Medo-Persian civilization: They couldn't face the fact that any of their laws could possibly be wrong!

Esther 2:1-14 *A contest to name a new queen.* After his wrath had subsided, and presumably when he was again sober, Xerxes apparently regretted having divorced Vashti (**Esther 2:1**). Yet even the king was bound by the finality of Persian law (see **Esther 1:19**). Sensing the king's regret, his aides suggested a search be made to find the most beautiful young woman in the empire, who would become the new queen. One of the contestants was a Jewish woman named Esther. Upon the advice of her cousin Mordecai, Esther kept her Jewish nationality secret.

Esther 2:15-18 *The Jewish woman wins the contest and the crown.* After a six-month course in the art of beauty and charm, Esther and the other contestants were taken to the palace. It was love at first sight for the king, and he immediately made Esther his new queen.

Esther 2:19-23 *He saved the king's life: It's in the book!* Mordecai, who had become a government official, overheard and reported a plot to kill the king. The men involved were executed, and the incident was duly recorded in the palace records.

Esther 3:1-11 *"Kill them all, and I'll cover the cost."* About four years later, Xerxes appointed as his prime minister a cruel and arrogant man named Haman. The king demanded that all other officials bow down to Haman, but Mordecai declared that, as a Jew, he could not do so. When Haman noticed that Mordecai refused to bow, and learned of his racial background, he became furious and asked the king to exterminate all Jews in the kingdom, pledging to personally cover any costs incurred. Xerxes agreed, saying that the royal bank would pay for the massacre. Haman decided, by casting lots (**Esther 3:7**), that the massacre should take place in the twelfth month of the year (he cast the lots during the first month). Xerxes apparently signed the decree without even realizing precisely what racial group he had agreed to exterminate (**Esther 3:8-11**)!

Haman claimed that his desire to kill the Jews arose from his concern about the security threat their insubordination might pose for the empire (**Esther 3:8**). But the fact that Haman was an "Agagite" (**Esther 3:1**) may help explain his deep hatred. Many scholars believe this means he was an Amalekite descended from King Agag, who was spared by Saul and then killed by Samuel (see **1 Samuel 15**). The Amalekites had long been bitter enemies of Israel, having attacked them while they journeyed to Canaan (see **Exodus 17:8-16**; **Deut. 25:17-19**).

Although Haman had claimed he was willing to cover the costs of the massacre, his order that the Jews' possessions be plundered (**Esther 3:13**) suggests he was motivated in part by greed.

Esther 3:12-15 *A savage decree and a social drink.* Xerxes signed and sent to all the provinces a decree that, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, every Jew in the empire was to be slaughtered. Having issued this horrendous decree, the king and Haman "sat down to drink." Meanwhile, the people of Susa "fell into confusion" over the barbaric plan.

Esther 4:1-9 *"Plead for your people!"* Upon learning of the decree, Mordecai tore his clothes and stood outside the palace gate in sackcloth, mourning loudly. As Jews throughout the empire heard of the edict, they mourned as well. Hearing that her cousin was mourning, Queen Esther sent a messenger to determine the cause of his sorrow. Mordecai explained about the edict and told the messenger to urge Esther to petition the king on behalf of her people.

Esther 4:10-17 *"It could mean death, but duty demands it!"* By way of her messenger, Esther reminded Mordecai that approaching the king uninvited for any reason could mean instant death. Mordecai in turn reminded her that, even as queen of the empire, she should not expect to escape the approaching holocaust. He urged her to view her royal position as God's provision for saving his people. Convicted by Mordecai's words, Esther agreed to approach the king, soliciting her people's prayers as she did so.

Though God is not specifically mentioned in Esther, Mordecai's belief that Esther had become queen "for just such a time as this" and that "deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place" if she didn't act ([Esther 4:14](#)), shows his firm trust in God's providence.

Esther 5:1-8 *Graciously received, to her great relief!* Much to Esther's relief, Xerxes was not offended by her unexpected visit. To the contrary, he welcomed her warmly. He asked her what she wanted, promising, "I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!" Esther's only response was to invite the king, along with Haman, to a banquet later in the day. At that banquet, she refused to reveal her request unless the two men would attend a second banquet.

Esther 5:9-14 *Only one hitch to Haman's happiness.* Hearing that Esther had invited him to a second banquet, Haman was elated. On his way home, however, he once again encountered Mordecai, who once again refused to bow. At home, Haman bragged about his two banquet invitations but also complained about Mordecai. Upon the suggestion of his wife and friends, Haman had a 75-foot-high gallows built, intending the next day to ask Xerxes to hang Mordecai on it.

Esther 6:1-3 *A big surprise for a sleepless king.* Unable to sleep, Xerxes ordered the historical record to be read. From it he was reminded of how Mordecai had once saved his life (see [Esther 2:19-23](#)). He also learned, to his dismay, that Mordecai had never been rewarded for his bravery.

Esther 6:4-14 *A bigger surprise for a humiliated Haman.* At that moment Haman arrived at the palace, seeking permission to hang Mordecai. Knowing nothing of Haman's intentions, the king innocently asked his advice on how to give special honor to a deserving person. Assuming the king was referring to him, Haman recommended a lavish public procession.

Much to Haman's chagrin, the king put him in charge of the proposed procession and informed him that the honoree was Mordecai! Haman dutifully led the procession for Mordecai and returned home in humiliation. Learning of his humiliation, Haman's friends advised him to give up his vendetta against Mordecai. At that moment Haman was summoned to attend Esther's second banquet.

Even Haman's pagan friends evidently recognized a special divine blessing on the Jewish people ([Esther 6:13](#)).

[Esther 7:1-10](#) *Esther's request and Haman's hanging.* Finally, at her second banquet for Xerxes and Haman, Esther told the king of the plot against her people and asked that the king do something to save them. When she revealed that Haman had instigated the plot, Xerxes became furious. The king's anger was further fueled by a misinterpreted coincidence ([Esther 7:7-8](#)) and by the news that Haman had built a gallows to hang Mordecai. He immediately ordered that Haman, instead, be hanged.

Xerxes' anger upon learning that Haman had instigated the plot against the Jews ([Esther 7:6-7](#)) contrasts sharply with his earlier casual attitude toward Haman's plans ([Esther 3:8-15](#)). The king may have wrongly assumed that Haman knew that Esther was a Jew and that the proposed massacre was a plot against her.

[Esther 8:1-8](#) *"Write another decree, and I'll sign it."* When Xerxes learned of Mordecai's relationship to Esther, he appointed him to the office vacated by Haman's death. Esther then asked the king to write a second decree to annul the extermination decree. The king instructed Esther and Mordecai to write the decree themselves, indicating he would authorize whatever they wrote.

[Esther 8:8](#) mentions once again the fact that Persian laws could not be changed (see [Esther 1:19](#); exposition on [Esther 2:1-14](#)). Esther and Mordecai faced the challenge of writing a second decree that would nullify the effects of the first one. The massacre would still be carried out; it would be up to their second decree to minimize its severity!

[Esther 8:9-17](#) *Their new decree: "Defend yourselves!"* Under Mordecai's direction, the king's scribes drew up a new decree that permitted the Jews to defend themselves against the planned massacre. Understandably, this new decree produced great joy in Jewish communities throughout the empire. The joy in the capital city was enhanced when Mordecai appeared in public in the "royal robe" of his new office ([Esther 8:15](#)).

The decree also led many non-Jews to adopt the Jewish faith ([Esther 8:17](#)). Some of these may have been sincere proselytes, convinced by one more sign of God's providence ([Esther 6:13](#)). Others may have been motivated by fear of being on the losing side ([Esther 8:17](#)).

[Esther 9:1-17](#) *Instead of genocide, "the opposite happened."* When the day of the planned massacre arrived, rather than the enemies of the Jews overpowering them, "quite the opposite happened" ([Esther 9:1](#)), and the Jews defeated their enemies. The cause of the Jews was helped by the decision of government officials throughout the empire to side with them ([Esther 9:3](#)). This official support was due to Mordecai's rising stature in the empire ([Esther 9:4](#)). In all, the Jews killed 75,000 of their enemies, including Haman's 10 sons.

While the Jews in Susa extended the battle against their enemies to a second day ([Esther 9:11-15](#)), the Jews throughout the rest of the empire celebrated their victory ([Esther 9:16-17](#)).

The account of the massacre shows that the Jews had many enemies in the empire besides Haman (see especially [Esther 9:1, 16](#)). Haman's prejudice ([Esther 3:8](#)) was apparently widely shared.

[Esther 9:18-32](#) *A special festival, lest they forget.* Having completed their two days of fighting, the Jews in Susa, the capital, held their own celebration. Mordecai then decreed that his people should establish the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as a yearly festival to celebrate their victory. They called the festival Purim ([Esther 9:26](#)) to commemorate the fact that Haman had tried to decide their fate by the casting of lots ("purim," see [Esther 3:7](#)). Esther wrote a letter confirming Mordecai's decree ([Esther 9:29-32](#)). Purim is still an important celebration among Jews and still includes feasting and gift-giving ([Esther 9:18-19](#)).

In addition to saving the Jews from extermination under Xerxes, Esther no doubt exercised a great influence upon her stepson Artaxerxes, who later allowed more Jews to return to Judea under Ezra and Nehemiah.

[Esther 10:1-3](#) *Praised by his people and the Persians.* Mordecai was second in command to King Xerxes, and his wise leadership brought him great respect both among his own people and among non-Jewish Persians.

People to remember from Esther

- [Esther](#)
- [Haman](#)
- [Mordecai](#)
- [Xerxes](#)

ESTHER

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM ESTHER)

Key Facts: Israelite exile, became queen of Persian Empire, saved her people from attempted holocaust ([Esther 2:17](#); [Esther 7:3-6](#); [Esther 8:3-8](#))

Father: Abihail ([Esther 2:15](#))

Husband: Xerxes ([Esther 2:16-17](#))

Total Bible References: 55

Key References: [Esther 2](#); [Esther 4-9](#)

Esther Speaks

"Who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?" That's the secret message Mordecai sent me during those dark hours. Looking back, I can see just how right he was! God had allowed a pagan king to select me as his queen so that I might be used to help save my people from their enemies. ([Esther 4:14](#); [Esther 8:3-8](#))

That wicked and cruel Haman! I can understand how Moses must have felt when he withstood the onslaughts of that evil Egyptian king. Probably the turning point in all this came after that three-day fast when I risked death by entering the king's room uninvited. The relief was indescribable when he held out his golden scepter. I'll never forget the astonishment on his face when he learned I had endangered my life just to invite him to dinner! He probably didn't even think I could cook! ([Exodus 5-12](#); [Exodus 4:16-5:4](#))

What a wondrous series of events then took place. Who could possibly have imagined that a case of royal insomnia would help save a life and eventually a nation! Mordecai and I now join in this happy celebration here in Susa. It is the 14th of Adar, and we are calling it the festival of Purim. May this glad day always be remembered by future generations! ([Esther 6:1-6](#); [Esther 9:18-19](#), [26](#))

Spiritual Lessons from Esther

- God had brought Esther to her place of influence in the kingdom of Persia "for just such a time as this" ([Esther 4:14](#)). Likewise, believers today have been placed in their "palaces"—their spheres of influence—in order to do "the good things [God] planned for us long ago" ([Ephes. 2:10](#)).
- Truly serving others on God's behalf may mean risking our own peace and security ([Esther 4:10-16](#)).

Key Verse

"Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I am willing to die" ([Esther 4:16](#)).

HAMAN

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM ESTHER)

Key Facts: Prime minister under Xerxes, tried to exterminate the Jews ([Esther 3:1-9](#))

Father: Hammedatha ([Esther 3:1](#))

Wife: Zeresh ([Esther 5:14](#))

Sons: Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha ([Esther 9:7-10](#))

Death: Recorded in [Esther 7:10](#)

Total Bible References: 52

Key References: [Esther 3-7](#)

Haman Speaks

That stupid wife of mine! I'm in this terrible situation because of her wrong advice! Then, when it is too late to help, she comes up with the correct conclusion! A thousand curses on the God of Abraham! What a mess. How was I to know the king's miserable wife was Jewish or that he had that worthless Mordecai in mind when he asked my advice about honoring someone? ([Esther 2:10](#); [Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 6:6-7](#), [13](#))

Or maybe it was the way I had thrown myself across the couch where Esther sat. Of course he totally misunderstood my intentions. I was merely pleading for my life, as any rational person would have done. ([Esther 7:7-8](#))

Well, whatever the case, my doom is sealed. The guards have stopped now. We've arrived. I mean, who could miss it, a 75-foot-high gallows! ([Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 7:10](#))

Spiritual Lessons from Haman

- God protects his people (see [Genesis 12:3](#); [Isaiah 54:17](#)):
 - Pharaoh learned that God's people could not be drowned ([Exodus 14](#)).
 - Nebuchadnezzar learned that they could not be burned ([Daniel 3](#)).
 - Darius learned that they could not be eaten by lions ([Daniel 6](#)).
 - Haman learned that they could not be hanged ([Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 7:10](#)).
- "Human opposition only enhances [God's] glory" ([Psalm 76:10](#)). Haman was one of several biblical people who proved the psalmist right (see exposition on ^s[Ezra 6:1-12](#)). God can use even the opposition of his enemies to his glory ([Esther 3:1-11](#); [Esther 9:16](#)).
- Envy is like a cancer as it eats away at its victim ([Esther 5:9-13](#)).
- We always reap what we sow ([Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 7:10](#); see [Proverbs 26:27](#); [Hosea 8:7](#); [Galatians 6:7](#)).

Key Verses

"When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down or show him respect, he was filled with rage. So he decided it was not enough to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Since he had learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire empire of Xerxes" ([Esther 3:5-6](#)).

MORDECAI

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM ESTHER)

Key Facts: Israelite exile, Esther's cousin, helped her save Jews from extermination, became prime minister of Persia ([Esther 2:7](#); [Esther 4:1-14](#); [Esther 10:3](#))

Father: Jair ([Esther 2:5](#))

Total Bible References: 56

Key References: [Esther 2-10](#)

Mordecai Speaks

Just think of it! As a boy I was carried from Jerusalem into captivity by a cruel empire. Now, as an old man, I serve as prime minister of the empire that defeated that first empire! ([Esther 2:5-6](#); [Esther 8:2](#); [Esther 10:2](#); [Daniel 5:30-31](#))

And there was that other amazing turn of events: My bitterest enemy, who tried to hang me, wound up honoring me instead—and then was hanged himself on the gallows he had built for me! ([Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 6:6-11](#); [Esther 7:10](#))

My rise to the top began when the king—with a little help from Haman!—honored me for my courage. But it was Esther's courage that inspired us all and spurred us on to defeat our many enemies throughout the empire. ([Esther 2:19-23](#); [Esther 4:16-5:8](#); [Esther 6:1-11](#); [Esther 7:1-4](#))

Still, the king seems to think I've done a good enough job both for my own people and for the rest of his constituency. He says I'll have a place in his written family history. Though I said it concerning her, perhaps both Esther and I came to the palace "for just such a time as this." ([Esther 4:14](#); [Esther 10:1-3](#))

Spiritual Lessons from Mordecai

- Right actions will be rewarded, even though the reward may be delayed ([Esther 2:21-23](#); [Esther 6:1-11](#)).
- We should not hesitate to speak up for a worthwhile cause. Mordecai publicized his people's peril ([Esther 4:1-3](#)); solicited Esther's help ([Esther 4:7-8](#)); and, when she did not take action immediately, exhorted her to do so ([Esther 4:13-14](#)). His willingness "to say the right thing at the right time" ([Proverbs 15:23](#)) helped save the nation.

Key Verses

"Mordecai sent back this reply to Esther: 'Don't think for a moment that you will escape there in the palace when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. What's more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this?' " ([Esther 4:13-14](#))

XERXES

(PEOPLE TO REMEMBER FROM ESTHER)

Key Facts: King of Persian Empire, married Esther ([Esther 1:1-3](#); [Esther 2:15-18](#))

Wives: Vashti, Esther ([Esther 1:9](#); [Esther 2:15-18](#))

Total Bible References: 28

Key References: [Esther 1-10](#); [Ezra 4:6](#)

Xerxes Speaks

What an incredible turn of events: My former prime minister was hanged from the same 75-foot-high gallows he had prepared for my present prime minister! Was all this a mere coincidence, or could it be that invisible Hebrew God working quietly behind the scenes? ([Esther 4:14](#); [Esther 5:14](#); [Esther 7:10](#))

Well, whatever the case, Haman got just what he deserved! His prejudice, greed, and pride were bad enough, but he crossed the line by plotting against my wife! The nerve of that shifty-eyed Agagite! ([Esther 3:1, 8-13](#); [Esther 6:6, 13](#); [Esther 7:6](#))

Apparently the Jews have survived the attempted purge. I'm glad it worked out that way. I was tricked into signing that death warrant in the first place. ([Esther 3:8](#); [Esther 9:16](#))

Esther's courage continues to impress me. She is indeed what her name suggests, a bright star! I'll show my respect for her by supporting the new festival of Purim she helped institute. ([Esther 2:7](#); [Esther 4:15-5:5](#); [Esther 9:26](#))

Mordecai has demonstrated real leadership capacity. He's been a great prime minister. Of course, had it not been for him, I'd probably be in my grave today! It will be an honor to have his name mentioned along with mine in that book they're writing about my family. ([Esther 2:21-23](#); [Esther 3:8](#); [Esther 10:2](#))

Spiritual Lessons from Xerxes

- Careless actions can have long-term consequences. The abrupt and thoughtless actions of Xerxes cost him one wife ([Esther 1:10-22](#)) and nearly resulted in the death of his beloved second wife ([Esther 2:10](#); [Esther 3:8-15](#)). Act in haste; repent at leisure!
- Love is the foundation of marriage. While Xerxes was obviously not a believer, he did nevertheless love and honor Esther ([Esther 2:17](#); [Esther 5:1-3](#); see [Ephes. 5:25](#); [1 Peter 3:7](#)).

Key Verse

"Then [Xerxes] asked her, 'What do you want, Queen Esther? What is your request? I will give it to you, even if it is half the kingdom!' " ([Esther 5:3](#))