

ESTHER

A beautiful queen, a powerful king, intrigue and danger, big egos, and humble people, evil plots foiled and parties to celebrate God's deliverance. If you have never read Esther, you have a treat in store. These ten chapters are worthy of big movie screen action-suspense treatment.

Our heroine, Queen Esther, risks her life and position to reveal the evil plot of the prime minister Haman. He is intent on killing her cousin (who raised her) and all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. Mordecai's offense is that he will not bow down before Haman. This is an essential religious issue: to bow down is an act of worship, but Mordecai worships God, not the King or his second-in-command.

However, Mordecai and Esther demonstrate true loyalty to the king by risking their own safety to reveal plots against the king and his loyal subjects. The King Ahasuerus learns Haman's plan, he has Haman killed on the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai, and gives the Jews public permission to defend themselves against the planned persecution. This book is the basis for the Jewish festival of Purim. (The dates for the planned destruction were chosen by casting lots, which was called "Pur.")

As you read this exciting story, the faith question you will encounter is "What does God want me to do – what risk does God want me to take – in the position he has placed me now?"

I find the first two chapters a little slow, but essential to set up the situation and the characters. The book of Esther is set in the Persian court of Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.), who is called by the name Ahasuerus in Esther, Ezra, and Daniel. In 538 B.C., the Persians overthrew the Babylonians who had conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Both empires recruited and trained talented leaders from all the ethnic groups they conquered. Chapters 1 and 2 convey the

absolute power of the king, how members of a conquered people could have a place in the royal court, and the context of power and powerlessness in this story. Susa, the Persian city where the action takes place, was not the capital, but a city with a royal palace, probably used on a seasonal basis.

Esther is a unique book in that God is never mentioned, although religious behavior is essential to the story, such as Mordecai's refusal to bow down and the days of fasting (which accompany prayer) before Esther approaches the King. Later Greek and Latin additions, which are found in the Apocrypha, include Esther's and Mordecai's prayers and other devout behavior and language, perhaps to make up for perceived deficiencies.

Cast of Characters

AHASUERUS – King of Persia. His Greek name is XERXES or Artaxerxes.

ESTHER – beautiful Jewish orphan who becomes Queen of Persia and prevents destruction of Jews. Also called HADASSAH.

VASHTI – queen who refuses to come to the king's banquet; Esther replaces her.

MORDECAI – cousin and guardian of Esther; royal official serving King Ahasuerus; son (or descendant) of Jair who was among the leaders in Jerusalem brought to Babylon as captives; a descendant of King Saul (family of Kish).

HAMAN – Persian official, Amalekite by ethnic group, referred to as an Agagite which means that he is a descendant of King Agag (see I Samuel 3).

EUNUCHS – castrated servants of the King.

If you keep silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter. ... Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this? Esther 4:14