



## ESTHER 101

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Like Ruth, the author of the book of Esther is unknown, but some suggest that Mordecai was the author, given verse 9:20 stating that “Mordecai recorded all of these things.” The book shares some stylistic similarities with both Ezra and Nehemiah, so they have also been offered as possible authors.

### ABOUT THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book of Esther is a hyperbolic story of revenge that does not mention God. Protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin were challenged by it, and Esther is the only Old Testament book not included in the Dead Sea Scrolls, showing that such reformers were not the first people to take issue with the book canonically. In fact, a later Greek version of Esther added explicit mentions of God and prayer. These additions are included in the Apocrypha (a collection of books that fall in between the Old and New Testaments in some Bibles, including many used by the Episcopal church) and will be mentioned at some points during this study. Esther is not unique, however, as a biblical story that does not mention God; the biblical book Song of Songs does not mention God either.

The story of Esther is set around 482 BCE after Persians have defeated Babylon, allowing exiles, including those from Jerusalem, to return to their homelands if they wish. Some Jews return to Judah while others, including many born in Persia and have never known any other home, remain. Mordecai and Esther are among the Jewish exiles who remain in Persia.

King Ahasuerus banishes his wife Vashti after she fails to respond to his summons to appear before his friends at a drunken banquet; as a result, virgins throughout his realm are compelled to audition for the role of his new queen by spending a night with him. Esther pleases him the most, so she becomes queen. She does not reveal her Jewish identity to anyone on advice from her cousin Mordecai, who has raised her after her parents died.

Mordecai fails to bow down before Haman, the king’s chief official, so Haman decides to kill not only Mordecai but all Jewish people in the kingdom. Mordecai convinces Esther to ask the king to change this plan and reveal her identity to him, which she does, and Haman is then killed on the same pole from which he intended to hang Mordecai. Mordecai becomes the king’s chief official, and the Jewish people are spared, leading to the annual celebration of Purim.

Our Sunday cycle of readings only features a snippet from the book of Esther once every three years, so even those who attend church religiously won’t get to hear much about Esther from their preachers, making it ideal to explore in Bible study.

## THEMES

**Female empowerment.** This may sound far-fetched for a book set in an ancient patriarchal society where men and women operated in mostly separate worlds. Further, interpreters have sometimes downplayed Esther as a pawn, identifying Mordecai as the real powerbroker. But, this book starts with a queen refusing to acquiesce to a powerful king's demand, and Esther proves her mettle by risking her life to approach the king unsummoned. She also shows savvy in dealing with Haman. Minor character Zeresh also proves wise when she predicts that Haman will not bring down Mordecai.

**Reversal.** The book of Esther appears to delight in reversals. The first queen fails to come when summoned by the king, while the second queen comes to the king unsummoned. Haman plots Mordecai's demise, then ends up having to lead Mordecai around, offering honors that Haman had sought for himself. Haman ends up hanging on the pole he erected for Mordecai. On the day that Jews were supposed to be annihilated in the kingdom, they rise to power.

## SOUNDBITES

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.—Esther 1:12

Every day Mordecai would walk back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared.—Esther 2:11

When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated.—Esther 3:5

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.—Esther 4:14b

As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor, and he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter.—Esther 5:2

When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him."—Esther 6:13

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" Esther said, "A foe and an enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.—Esther 7:5-6

So they hung Haman on the pole that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.—Esther 7:10

Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.—Esther 9:20-22