

Esther

Esther is a fictional story set in the Persian Empire between approximately 486-465 BC, the years of King Xerxes' reign. A curious feature of this book that many readers quickly notice is that God is not mentioned. Esther reads more like a story of political intrigue, with human valor and cunning winning the day and Jewish ethnicity rather than religious observance being emphasized. The Greek version of Esther adds numerous elements to the story, thereby giving it an overtly religious character. Many scholars understand Esther as a story written to provide an explanation for the Jewish festival of Purim (see 9:18-32, especially verse 26), a festival that seems to have Babylonian roots. The Hebrew word *pur* means "lots" and refers to evil Haman's plot to determine—through the casting of lots - when the Israelites would be exterminated.

Esther, the main character of the book, is an Israelite woman who finds favor in the eyes of Xerxes and is thus made queen. She is careful not to reveal her nationality, having been forbidden to do so by her uncle Mordecai. When Mordecai overhears two guards conspiring to assassinate Xerxes, he tells Esther, who is able to intervene. It is precisely this intervention that drives the plot forward, slowly raising the stakes on Esther's place as queen while also elevating the villain, Haman the Agagite (who is a descendent of Israel's ancient enemies, the Amalekites), to a position of high honor within the kingdom. It is specifically when Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman that Haman becomes infuriated, leading him to plot the extermination of all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. This menacing plot provides much of the literary tension within the book, contrasting Esther's plan to save her people with Haman's plan to destroy them.

It is Mordecai who tells Esther of Haman's heinous plot. Despite the potential consequences of her interference with a royal official, Esther springs a plan into action to save her people. Esther enters the presence of King Xerxes, asking him to hold a banquet that Esther knows Haman would attend. Haman is thrilled at the prospect of dinner with the king, but he finds no satisfaction until his enemy Mordecai is dead, leading him to build a gallows before his dinner. At the banquet, however, things go poorly for Haman when Esther reveals that Mordecai was the one who thwarted the assassination attempt on King Xerxes. In dramatic fashion, Esther then reveals Haman's murderous intentions against Mordecai, the king's rescuer. In response to hearing this news, Xerxes has Haman hung on his own gallows. Xerxes then passes an edict giving the Jews the right to assemble and protect themselves. Finally, Haman's sons are hanged and Mordecai is elevated to second in command under Xerxes.