

The Book of Esther (abridged)

Based on work by M. Segal 1970 and the New Living Translation of the Bible.

These events happened in the days of King Xerxes (known by the Jewish people of Susa as “Ahasuerus”). He reigned over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. At that time, Xerxes ruled his empire from his royal throne at the fortress of Susa.

In those days, the king held a banquet for all the people of Susa, the capital, from the greatest to the smallest. The fortress courtyard was beautifully decorated in white, blue, and purple upon marble pillars. Gold and silver couches stood on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and other costly stones.

In the yard of the king’s gardens, Queen Vashti also threw a party.

On the seventh day of his banquet, when the king had drunk too much alcohol, he asked his servants to bring in Queen Vashti, wearing her crown, to dazzle his guests with her beauty. Queen Vashti refused to come.

The king was furious. So he asked his wise men: “What should I do with Queen Vashti?” One of them told the king: “If she refuses to appear before King Xerxes, then she shall relinquish her title as queen to another woman who is worthy of such a position.” The men all agreed. They were very worried that other wives in Persia might follow Esther’s example and refuse to obey their husbands every wish and command.

The king followed their advice.

The king’s attendants searched the whole empire to find examples of beautiful young women from which the king could choose a new queen.

A Jewish man who lived in the fortress of Susa was known as Mordechai. He had come to Susa with a group of exiles some years before. His young

and beautiful cousin, named Esther, was orphaned, so Mordecai adopted her and raised her as his own daughter.

Esther found favour with all who knew her.

She was among the many young and beautiful looking women of Susa taken by the king's officials to the house of King Xerxes. Mordecai warned Esther that she should be careful not to let it be known that she was of a Jewish background, lest she be treated badly.

The king loved Esther above all other contenders. He placed a royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Mordecai became a palace official around the same time.

Because he loved throwing lavish parties, the king held another large banquet, this time in honour of Esther, his new wife and queen.

One day, near the king's gates, Mordecai overheard two of the king's personal guards plotting to assassinate the king. Mordechai informed Queen Esther of the impending trouble, who then told the king. An investigation by the king's officials found that Mordecai's claims were true. As a result, the conspirators were executed.

The king registered all this in his diary.

After these events, King Xerxes gave one of his noblemen, a man called Haman, a major promotion. Haman became the most powerful official, besides the king, in the land.

All the king's servants would bow and gesture as a sign of their allegiance to Haman; however, Mordechai would neither bow, nor kneel.

Haman saw that Mordechai would not kneel or bow to him and was enraged. Not settling on punishing Mordecai alone, when he learned about Mordecai's family background Haman wanted to destroy all the Jewish people in the land.

So in the month of April, during the twelfth year of King Xerxes' reign, lots were cast in Haman's presence (the lots were called *purim*) to determine the best day and month to take action. And a day in the following year was selected for doing away with all the Jewish people.

Haman then approached King Xerxes and said, "There is a certain race of people scattered through all the provinces of your empire who keep themselves separate from everyone else. Their laws are different from those of any other people, and they refuse to obey the laws of the king. It is not in the king's interest to let them live. If it please the king, issue a decree that they be destroyed. If you do this, I will put a huge stash of money into your royal treasury."

The king agreed, confirming his decision by removing his signet ring from his finger and giving it to Haman. As he did this, the king said, "The money and the people are both yours to do with as you see fit."

The decree was published abroad in the name of King Xerxes and sealed with the king's signet ring that all Jewish people in the land — young and old, including women and children — must be killed, slaughtered, and annihilated on a certain single day.

After this, the king and Haman sat down and celebrated with many glasses of wine, but the city of Susa fell into confusion.

Mordechai heard about all that was going on. He tore his clothes and went about the city wearing sackcloth, symbolizing his grief over the plans of Haman. He went as far as the entrance gates to the king's palace in his mourning clothes.

Esther's attendants came to inform her of Mordechai's actions. The queen was very disturbed. She sent for one of her royal attendants to speak with Mordecai. She ordered the attendant to go to Mordecai with some new clothes for him to put on so he would avoid the king's anger. She wanted to know what was troubling Mordecai so and why he was in mourning clothes.

The attendant met with Mordecai in the square in front of the palace gate. Mordecai told him the whole story, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jewish people. Mordecai even gave the king's servant a copy of the decree issued in Susa that called for the death of all Jewish people.

Mordecai asked the attendant to show it to Esther and explain the situation to her. Mordecai also insisted that the attendant should urge Esther to approach the king and plead with him to spare her own people.

Then Esther sent the servant back to Mordecai with this message: "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold sceptre. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days."

Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all the other people of your nation are killed. If you keep quiet in **times like these**, deliverance and relief for your people will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go and gather together all the Jewish people of Susa and have them make a 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 perish, so be it."

Mordecai went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold sceptre in his hand. At this sign, Esther approached the king and touched the tip of the sceptre.

Then the king asked: “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.”

“If it pleases the king”, replied Esther, “let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.”

Then the king said to his servant, “Bring Haman at once, so that we may do what Esther asks.” So, the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, “And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.”

Esther replied: “If the king regards me with favour and if it pleases the king to fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them.

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordechai at the king’s gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordechai. He thought to himself, “As long as I see Mordechai in mourning like this, I will not rest till he and his people are wiped out.”

Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Calling together his friends and his wife, Haman boasted about all the ways the king had honoured him and how he had elevated him above all other officials.

Haman added: “I am also the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow.”

His wife and all his friends said to him: “Have a high tree set up and tell the king in the morning to have Mordechai killed upon it. Then go with the king and enjoy yourself.”

That night the king could not sleep. He ordered one of his servants to bring the book of chronicles, the record of his reign (his diary), into his chamber and to read to him.

As the stories of his kingly reign were told to him, they included the record of when Mordechai had revealed the conspiracy of two of the king's guardsmen to assassinate the king.

The king interrupted his servant's reading and asked: "What honour and recognition has Mordechai received for this?" The king's servant replied: "Nothing has been done for him."

With urgency, the king said: "Who is in the court right now?"

Now it so happens that Haman had just entered the court of the palace to speak to the king about killing Mordechai upon the tree he had prepared for him. The king's servant said: "Haman is standing in the court right now." The king said: "Bring him to me."

When Haman entered, the king asked him: "What should be done for any man the king wants to honour?" Haman thought to himself: "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?"

Haman said to the king: "For the man the king wishes to honour, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden. Let them robe the man the king wants to honour and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him: "This is what is done for the man the king wishes to honour!"

So, the king said: "Go at once and get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordechai, the Jewish man who sits at the gate day by day."

Haman got the robe and the horse and did as the king commanded. He robed Mordechai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him: "This is what is done for the man the king wishes to honour!"

Afterward Mordechai returned to the king's gate.

But Haman hurried home dejected and completely humiliated and told his wife and all his friends what had happened.

Haman's wise advisers and his wife said, "Since Mordecai—this man who has humiliated you—is of Jewish origin, you will never succeed in your plans against him. It will be fatal to continue opposing him."

While they were still talking with him, the king's messengers arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared. So, the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet as planned.

On the second day of the banquet, the king again asked: "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Then Queen Esther answered: "If I have found favour with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request; for I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated."

King Xerxes asked Queen Esther: "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

Esther said: "It is Haman - that evil man."

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

One of the king's ministers told the king: "There is the tree that Haman prepared for Mordechai to be killed upon, standing by Haman's house."

"Execute Haman upon that tree," declared the king. And so, it was that the tree prepared for Mordecai's death became the very instrument of Haman's own death.

The city of Susa held a joyous celebration at the good news that they had been spared. The Jewish people were glad and were from that time treated with respect by all.

Therefore, these days were called *Purim*. Jewish people everywhere were told that they should remember these times and observe a Purim

ceremony in every generation, in every family, in every province, and in every city.