

UPSIDE THE WORLD TURNED DOWN

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

“This episode from Esther’s life offers great encouragement and comfort when we find ourselves in situations where every choice is an odd mix of right and wrong.” -Karen Jobes

Recap: Off With Her Crown!

In **Esther 1**, King Xerxes is furious that Queen Vashti does not make an appearance at a banquet meant to drum up political support among the military leaders and nobles. Consequently, he removes her from office.

- **Theme Verse: Romans 8:28**, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Questions to Ponder:

- What can we learn about God from a book that never mentions him directly?
- How do we see the truth of **Romans 8:28** (above) play out in this story?
- What do we do with all the morally ambiguous decisions being made by characters in this story?

Esther Timeline:

- Ch. 1 — Banquets, Third Year, 483 B.C.
- Ch 2 — Esther arrives, Seventh Year, 479 B.C.
- Ch. 2 — Esther becomes Queen, Eighth Year, 478 B.C.
- Ch 3 — Haman’s plans, Twelfth Year, 474 B.C.
- Ch 8-9 — “The Big Day” Thirteenth Year, 473 B.C.

Esther 2: Esther Becomes Queen

Background:

There’s a four-year gap between chapters 1 and 2. During that time, Xerxes was off in Greece fighting an unsuccessful war (i.e. battle of Thermopylae, battle of Plataea). Xerxes was soundly defeated, and returned home full of anger and dejection.

Esther 2:1-4: Persia’s Got Talent

- Xerxes’s anger (mentioned in **1:12**) has now finally subsided... four years later!
- His advisors recommend a beauty contest of sorts to find a new queen from among Persia’s “beautiful young women.” (**2:3**)
- Xerxes likes their suggestion and follows it. *Does he ever have any ideas of his own?*

Esther 2:5-7: Introducing Mordecai & Esther

- Here, two main characters are introduced: Mordecai, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, and Esther, his orphan cousin whom he adopted.
- **Why did Mordecai do this?** Israelites were expected to care for orphans (e.g. **Deuteronomy 10:18**), and take care of needy family members.

- Mordecai's family (a few generations removed) was part of the group of Israelites taken captive during the Babylonian Exile.
- **Esther's** name could be the Hebrew spelling of **Ishtar**, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. *Love and War* happen to be two major themes in Esther's life, so this could be significant.

Esther 2:8-11: Esther is Brought to the Palace

- According to Jewish Rabbis, the four most beautiful women in the Bible were Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther (*Megillah* 15a). Perhaps it's no surprise that Esther was among the "beautiful young women" brought to Xerxes.
- Esther finds "favor" (Hebrew *Hesed*, the word for God's unfailing love) in the eyes of the eunuch who oversaw the women.
- **Reflection Question: What similarities do you see between Esther's life in the palace and Joseph's story? Or Moses? Or Bathsheba?**
- We learn that Mordecai is still looking after Esther, and told her to keep her Jewish nationality a secret.

DEBATE QUESTION:

Was it right or wrong for Esther to hide her nationality? (This would make it difficult or even impossible to follow Jewish dietary laws and observe Jewish holidays, including Sabbath). *Compare to Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego.*

Esther 2:12-18: Esther Becomes Queen

- All the women receive a year of beauty treatments before visiting Xerxes. They spend one night with Xerxes and then return to the harem, *where they are required to stay for the rest of their lives.*
- A detail that becomes significant later is that no one was allowed to visit Xerxes without being invited by name (2:14). This helps establish the risk Esther took later when she visited the King uninvited.
- Most translations of **Esther 2:17** say Xerxes "loved" Esther more than any one else, but the NIV translates this as "was attracted to" because they can read between the lines. They know Xerxes didn't really fall in love with Esther after one night together. They can see what is obvious to all of us: this was lust, not love.
- Nevertheless, Esther won Xerxes' "favor and approval," i.e. his *Grace* and *Love* (two words that typically describe God's attitude towards us).

- In addition, Esther "won the favor" of *everyone* she encountered. The word is "grace," one of the words God uses to describe his character in **Exodus 34:6**. Although God is not mentioned by name, we see Esther experiencing two of God's inner qualities.
- Note that by the time Esther is crowned Queen of Persia, **five years have passed** since the first banquets in Esther 1.

Karen Jobes: "The author is skillfully describing a morally ambiguous and complex situation because that is the way real life often is in this fallen world."

DEBATE QUESTION:

Was it right or wrong for Esther to sleep with and marry Xerxes? Other options might have had mortal consequences, but does that excuse her violation of the Torah laws that prohibited marrying Gentiles? What other options were available to her? Compare this to Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Bathsheba and David.

Esther 2:19–23: Mordecai Saves the King

- Esther continues to follow Mordecai's advice (2:20), even though she is now Queen and the wife of Xerxes, which points to the fact that Mordecai is one of the rare male characters in the story who seems to genuinely care about a woman's well-being.
- Mordecai proves his loyalty to King Xerxes by uncovering and preventing a plot to assassinate him. (Outside of the Biblical story, Xerxes is eventually killed by his own nobles).
- **Don't Mess With Xerxes:** The conspirators are swiftly executed, which foreshadows the lethal consequences of getting on Xerxes' bad side.
- **One for the History Books:** This act of service was recorded in the official history books of the Persian Empire, which will resurface later in the story during the ongoing conflict between Mordecai and Haman (introduced in the next chapter).



Arent de Gelder, "Esther and Mordecai", 1685. Public Domain.

Esther 3: Haman's Wrath

Background:

Four more years pass between chapters 2-3. At this point, we are introduced to the final main character of the story: Haman, who immediately becomes the main antagonist.

Esther 3:1-4: Mordecai Refuses to Honor Haman

- Haman is an Agagite (i.e. a descendent of the Amalekite King Agag from **1 Samuel 15**) who is promoted to the equivalent of Prime Minister in Persia.
- Xerxes orders everyone to bow down to Haman, but Mordecai refuses. Haman's men bring this to his attention and ask what he will do about that.
- This calls to mind **Vasthi's** refusal to obey the King's command, and the consequences she faced in **ch. 1**.

Bad Blood Between Haman and Mordecai

The conflict between Mordecai and Haman is an extension of an ongoing feud between Israel and the Amalekites that goes back to the time of King Saul (a Benjamin, just like Mordecai) and even before.

- The Amalekites were the first foreign nation to attack Israel after they were freed from slavery (**Exodus 17**)
- God told Israel to never forget what Amalek did to them (**Deuteronomy 25:17-19**), and to consequently "blot out their name." Show no mercy!
- This explains God's promise and command to King Saul in **1 Samuel 15:2-3**, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."
- Agag was the Amalekite King that Saul was supposed to kill (see above), but Saul decided to spare his life and keep the best of Agag's livestock for himself as the spoils of war.

What Does this have to do with Esther?

Karen Jobes: "The author implies that the perennial relationship of enmity between the Jews and the Agagites is mirrored in the personal relationship between Mordecai and Haman. The original readers would expect the relationship to be characterized by conflict and aggression."



"Haman Convinces Ahasuerus", Anonymous, 15th c.
Public Domain

Esther 3:5-11: Haman is Enraged

- Haman reacts to Mordecai's insubordination the same way Xerxes did when Vashti slighted him: Haman becomes enraged. This word describes a burning anger that is *hot, hot hot!* This continues a pattern of fragile male egos and anger management issues.
- Xerxes deposed Vashti when he was angry, but Haman's response is exponentially worse: he plans to murder every Jew in the entire empire!
- Haman shares his plan with the King, keeping a few key details vague (i.e. the identity of the people he wanted murdered), and Xerxes agrees to the plan.
- Haman is given the full authority of the Persian crown in the form of the king's signet ring.
- Haman casts lots (Hebrew *pur*, a form of dice that was used to discern the will of the Persian gods), and the date of this murderous plan is set for the end of the year.
- Haman's description of the Jews (**3:8**) paints a picture of life for God's people in exile. In some significant ways, they remained separate from the culture around them.

DEBATE QUESTION:

Was it right or wrong for Mordecai to refuse to bow down to Haman? We know that in general Jews did bow down to other Persian officials since it was basically a common courtesy, and not a religious gesture. Was he putting his people in too grave a danger because of a personal issue of bowing down to someone he perhaps didn't like?

Esther 3:12-15: The Edict is Issued

- Haman uses the King's signet ring (which carried royal authority) to officially declare that the Jews were to be exterminated on the 13th day of the 12th month of the year. The edict was issued on the 13th day of the 1st month, meaning there was nearly an entire year in-between.
- The edict went out the day before Passover, the major Jewish holiday that celebrated God delivering his people from their oppressors in Egypt, sparing their lives and bringing them to safety in the Promised Land. **This was a terribly ironic time to receive an edict that spelled out their certain death.**
- **Karen Jobes:** "The joy of this holiday is turned to sorrow in Persia when the decree is delivered on Passover, calling for their annihilation simply because they are Jews. The coincidence of the decree with Passover is tragically ironic, but serves to heighten the glory of the subsequent deliverance and links it to the ancient covenant of Sinai."
- The people of Susa was completely confused about this edict, but Xerxes and Haman were quite pleased with themselves and celebrated over drinks.

John M. Wiebe, "HAMAN (PERSON)," from the Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, 3:33.

A nobleman, promoted to the rank of vizier by King Ahasuerus, and mortal enemy of the Jews in the book of Esther. After being made vizier by the king, Haman became enraged at Mordecai, who ministered at the king's gate, for not obeying a royal command to bow down and show proper respect to Haman (Esth 3:2–5). Haman decided therefore not only to eradicate Mordecai but also every Jew in the realm (3:6). He convinced the king that the Jews were disobedient to his rule and deserved to be eliminated (3:7–11). He received the authority to send out a decree ordering the elimination of all Jews and the confiscation of their property (3:12–14). In the meantime he built a gallows especially for Mordecai and was planning to ask the king's permission to hang him from it (5:9–14). This plan, however, was foiled when Queen Esther turned Ahasuerus against Haman at the second of two feasts she had prepared for the two men. When Haman accidentally fell on Esther's couch pleading for mercy, Ahasuerus thought he was trying to assault her. Thus he had him hanged from the same gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai (7:5–10).

This story portrays Haman as the adversary par excellence of the Jews. The MT tradition links him with AGAG, the ancient king of the Amalekites, who were enemies of the Hebrews (Esth 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:10, 24; cf. 1 Samuel 15; Num 24:7; Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19). Moreover, Mordecai is portrayed as a relative of King Saul, who was in turn the enemy of Agag, Haman's ancestor (Esth 2:5; 1 Sam 9:1–2). Thus the ancient conflict between Israel and Amalek is portrayed as continuing in the contest between Mordecai and Haman (McKane 1961; Clines 1984: 14–15; Berg 1979: 66–67). This interpretation of the person of Haman is continued by Josephus, the Targums of Esther, as well as the Talmud. These sources consistently describe Haman as a descendant of Amalek (Paton Esther ICC, 194–95; Thornton 1986; Moore Esther AB, 35).



Arent de Gelder, "Ahasuerus and Haman," 1682. Public Domain.