



ESTHER, BOOK OF

ESTHER, BOOK OF, a short book of the Old Testament, written in Hebrew. It recounts events supposed to have taken place in the court of an Achaemenian king, called in the Hebrew text Aḥašweroš (the usual English form is Ahasuerus, q.v.), a name which has been plausibly interpreted as a transcription of the name Xšayārša (=Xerxes). The date of composition of the book is unknown, but most scholars tend towards a date not much after the fall of the Achaemenid kingdom, during the Parthian era, perhaps in the third or second century B.C.E. The place of its composition is also a matter of conjecture, the most common opinion being that it was composed among the Jewish diaspora in Persia or Babylonia.

The outline of the book's story is as follows: In the court of Ahasuerus, king of Persia and Media, who ruled over 127 provinces, a big feast is held, and Queen Vaštī is invited by the king to show her beauty to the gathering. She refuses, and the king decides, at the advice of his retinue, to depose her and appoint another queen in her place, so as to give an example to women of the kingdom that the husband should be obeyed. A search is conducted in the kingdom for a girl to replace the queen, and good-looking virgin girls are brought to the court to select from. One of these girls is Hadasa, also known as Esther, an orphan girl, descended from the exiles of Judea, and she is selected as the new queen. Following her uncle's instructions, she discloses nothing of her descent. Her uncle, Mordechai, under whose tutelage she was brought up, is at the court, and has acquired a certain merit by disclosing a plot hatched against the king. At the same time Haman, one of the king's courtiers, is elevated above all



other courtiers. He takes a dislike to Mordechai, who does not bow to him in the usual form of respect, and decides to kill him and his people, the Jews, on the thirteenth of Adar, a date established by casting lots, and he announces his decision, with the king's consent, by proclamation to the provinces.

Mordechai appeals to Esther for help against this decree. She is, however, forbidden, on pain of death, to go to the king's presence without being summoned. Nevertheless, she undertakes this risky task, and after a period of prayer and fasting she appears before the king and finds favor in his eyes. The king allows her to utter her wish, and she invites him and Haman to a feast, an invitation which he accepts. At the feast the king declares himself willing to grant her wishes, and she again requests his company together with Haman on the following day for another feast. Haman, meanwhile, prepares to hang Mordechai on a tree which he has set up in his house.

The king, unable to sleep that night, orders the royal chronicles to be read out to him. He finds in the book a reference to the fact that Mordechai has shown loyalty by disclosing a plot against the king. The king decides to reward Mordechai for this, and the task of carrying out the public honor towards Mordechai—making him mount a noble horse, dressing him in fine royal clothes, and proclaiming loudly that he is favored by the king—falls to Haman, who happens to pass by.

In the course of the second private feast, Esther tells the king of Haman's evil designs, and the king rebukes him. At his distress, Haman falls on the couch in front of the queen, asking for mercy, but this is seen by the king as an affront. The news that Haman has erected a tree for hanging Mordechai is brought to the king, and the latter in his anger orders that Haman be hanged from the same tree, and that Mordechai be elevated to the dignity of chief courtier formerly occupied by Haman. The Jews are given permission to kill their enemies. On the day originally appointed for the massacre of the Jews, the latter set out to kill those who would have killed them. Haman's ten sons are also executed by hanging. In commemoration of these events, a public feast is declared for the Jews, the feast of Purim, a word signifying the casting of lots.

There is no corroboration for the events of the book in the available historical sources, and doubts have been expressed as to its veracity. Among the theories propounded to account for the story, some have tried to explain it as an allegory based on mythological stories, Babylonian or Elamite, but such explanations do not carry conviction. It is perhaps best to assume that the



book is based on a popular theme of intrigues at the royal court and a miraculous escape, although it cannot be excluded that it does contain a kernel of historical reality. Another story of events at a royal court, probably composed at about the same time, is contained in the Book of Daniel, where a danger threatening individuals is miraculously averted. A fragment of a story of events in the court of a Persian king is preserved among the Dead Sea scrolls, but the outline of that story is unclear (cf. Milik; Shaked, 1995).

A prominent feature in the book is its skillful use of the narrative art. The story employs various dramatic devices and conventions calculated to create a *novella* full of suspense and leading towards a satisfactory dénouement.

The Book of Esther is based, if not on events that actually took place, at least on a good knowledge of customs at the Achaemenid royal court as perceived by people who lived at a time and place not far removed from it. The Hebrew language of the book displays a fairly late form of the language, and contains a substantial number of loan-words from Persian.

Some of the proper names occurring in the book are clearly Persian. The name of the major negative character of the story, the chief courtier Haman son of Hammedata the Agagite, contains at least a Persian patronymic (see [HAMAN](#)). A list of the names of the ten sons of Haman given in the book, and a list of eunuchs in the court contain several further Iranian names. Attempts at explanations have been made by several scholars (Lagarde, Scheftelowitz, Duchesne-Guillemin, Zadok, Millard, and others). None of the attempts seems entirely satisfactory. The names of the two main heroes of the story, Esther (or Hadasa) and Mordechai, seem to be connected to Babylonian traditions (Ištar and Marduk) rather than to Persia. The name of the deposed queen, Vaštī, has been variously, if not quite conclusively, explained as a Persian name.

Because of the general secular character of the story, there was some hesitation in Jewish and Christian circles about introducing it into the canon of the Holy Scriptures.

The feast which the book was written to explain, Purim (still celebrated among Jews on the 14th and 15th of Adar), is based on a presumed slaughter of large numbers of Persians. This has been compared to the feast of *magophonia*, the killing of the magi, recounted in Herodotus 3.68-79 (cf. Henning). Some scholars have sought to establish a connection between the name of Purim and the Zoroastrian feast of *frawardīgān*, dedicated to the souls of the



departed, but this again is a moot question.

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