

Esther, The Jewish Queen Of Persia

The last of the historical books is **Esther**, the story of a young Israelite girl who married **Xerxes**, a famous king of Persia. Her time period fits into the middle of the book of Ezra – around 486 BC. Xerxes is best known in history for his prodigious wealth, and for a disastrous expedition to subdue the growing menace of Greece. The opening chapter describes a six-month long festival in his palace at **Shushan** to entertain the governors of his 120 provinces (possibly to prepare for the military tour). At the end of this time he fell out with his wife and was advised to divorce her and find a replacement. It was during a nation-wide search for suitable young ladies that Esther came to his attention, and was chosen to be queen. She was an orphan, brought up by her older cousin **Mordecai**, who worked in the king's service. He warned her not to reveal her nationality.

The story progresses with delicious ironies. Mordecai rescues the king from an assassination attempt, but then falls out with the king's favourite, **Haman**. Haman is descended from Israel's enemies the Edomites (descendants of Esau). In revenge, Haman persuades the king to annihilate 'a group of awkward subjects' (he fails to mention they were the Jews!).

Mordecai calls on Esther to use her influence with the king to save her nation. Fearful, she asks the king to a private banquet where she can pop the question to him. Haman comes too, bragging to his family of this great honour. Procrastinating, Esther invites them to return the next evening, when she promises to tell the king her request. Overnight, the king discovers that Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving his life, and turns to Haman to ask him how to reward a good friend of the king. Haman, mistakenly thinking he was the man in mind, now finds himself leading his greatest enemy on the king's horse round the city, with people bowing before Mordecai. That night Esther reveals she herself and her people had been condemned to death by – yes, Haman! Furious, Xerxes has him executed, and promotes Mordecai to be his second-in-command. The decree of Haman cannot be revoked under Persian law. But by a second decree, Mordecai and Esther effectively countermand the first by giving the Jews, normally a subject people, the right to take arms to defend themselves against any enemies on precisely the day chosen for Haman's holocaust. You may know that Jews celebrate the victory over wicked Haman to this day all over the world, in the annual **Feast of Purim**.

MORE HISTORY MILESTONES

Here are some more landmarks for the Bible story:

1000 BC	586 BC	539 BC	522 BC	486 BC	458 BC	444 BC
KING DAVID	FALL OF JERUSALEM	FALL OF BABYLON AND CYRUS' RETURN	TEMPLE COMPLETED	ESTHER	EZRA RETURNS	NEHEMIAH RETURNS