



Esther (Part 1)

Setting the Scene

The book of Esther takes place in Persia during the reign of King Xerxes. There were multiple Persian Kings named Xerxes, however, so it is unclear *which* Xerxes is referenced. This story centers Jewish experience in the diaspora. The period of Babylonian exile had ended and many Jews had already returned to the land of Israel. Yet the Jewish characters in Esther's narrative appear to be assimilated within Persian culture.

Structure & Themes

The structure of this book is unlike most other biblical short stories. There is a prominent narrator voice, heavy description, and very little dialogue. Yet there are allusions to intertextual images, themes, and tropes (e.g., court tales like Joseph and Daniel). Esther also seems to incorporate and perpetuate "old feuds" referenced elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible through new characters. For example, the story of Saul losing the kingship in 1 Samuel 15 is mirrored in characters like Mordecai (a Benjaminite) and Haman (an Amalakite). "Comeuppance" is also a central theme in this story. Audiences may get a sense of enjoyment from Haman's public humiliation and feel satisfaction when Mordecai takes his place.

Humor in the Book of Esther

Some argue that the book of Esther is a comedy. The narrator satirizes the bureaucratic administration of the Persian government, asking "who is *really* in charge here?" Clerical staff often appear to wield more influence in court than the king himself. For example, King Ahasuerus does not seem to know what is going on in his own kingdom and asks his staff to read the court annals out loud to help him fall asleep (6:1).

Satire flourishes in the midst of political oppression. The comedic aspects of this narrative might point to its purpose. The book of Esther has also inspired plays and theatrical reinterpretations of its narrative throughout diasporic Jewish history—most notably during the holiday of Purim. This is because the story has continued relevance for Jewish communities when coping with political oppression in new contexts. The Purim celebration is often conflated with Esther's narrative, but the story is not *about* the holiday. If anything, the reverse is true. The celebration of Purim is a celebration of survival in the face of oppression. The story of

Esther captures the spirit of this celebration and continues to be meaningful for Jewish communities today.