

The Book of Esther

The Follies of a Despot

¹ These events happened in the time of Ahasuerus, who ruled over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia ² from his royal throne in the fortified palace of Susa.

³ In the third year of his reign, the king gave a feast for all his officers and courtiers. The commanders of the military forces of Persia and Media, the nobles and provincial rulers were present ⁴ while for one hundred and eighty days he showed them the glorious riches of his kingdom and the costliness of his magnificent regalia.

⁵ When these days were ended, the king held a banquet for all the people who were present in the royal palace at Susa, high and low alike. It was a seven days' feast in the enclosed garden of the royal palace. ⁶ There were white and violet cotton curtains fastened to silver rings and pillars of marble with cords of fine purple wool and linen. The couches were of gold and silver placed upon a mosaic pavement of alabaster, white marble, mother-of-pearl, and dark stone. ⁷ Drink was brought in vessels of gold — which were all different — and the king's wine was provided with royal liberality. ⁸ The drinking was unrestricted, for the king had directed all the officers of his household to let each man do as he pleased. ⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the King Ahasuerus' royal palace.

¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha,

Abagtha, Zathar and Carkas, his seven eunuch attendants¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before him with the royal diadem on her head, to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was very beautiful.¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come as the king commanded through the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his fury burnt within him.

¹³ The king turned to the wise men who knew the precedents, for it was his custom to confer with those wise in law.¹⁴ Those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, seven officials of Persia and Media who had access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.¹⁵ “Queen Vashit”, the king said, “has failed to obey my royal command - the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed through the eunuchs! What does the law say should be done to her?”

¹⁶ Memucan replied before the king and the officials, “Queen Vashti has done wrong not only to the king but also to all the officials and to all the peoples in all of the king's provinces.¹⁷ The refusal of the queen will be reported to all the women with the result that it will make them despise their husbands. They will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in before him, but she did not come!’¹⁸ This very day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the refusal of the queen will tell it to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and strife!¹⁹ If it seems best to the king, let him send out a royal edict. Let it be written amongst the laws of Persia and Media, never to be repealed, that Vashti may never again come before King Ahasuerus. Let the king give her place as queen to another who is more worthy than she.²⁰ When the king's decree which he makes is heard throughout his kingdom — great as it

is — the wives of all classes will give honour to their husbands.”

²¹ The proposal pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan advised. ²² He sent letters to all the provinces, to every province in its own system of writing and to every people in their language, that every man should be master in his own house!

2

Choosing a Queen

¹ Some time later, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered what Vashti had done and what had been decreed against her. ² Then the king's servants who waited upon him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king, ³ and let the king appoint commissioners to all the provinces of his kingdom to gather them all to Susa the royal residence. Let them be brought into the women's quarters under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who has charge of the women. Then give them what is needed to make them beautiful, ⁴ and let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” The proposal pleased the king so he put it into action.

⁵ In Susa the royal residence lived a Jew named Mordecai. He was son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjamite. ⁶ (Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem with the exiles who were deported with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon took captive.) ⁷ Mordecai had adopted Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, since she had neither father nor mother. The girl was shapely and beautiful; and after her father and mother died, Mordecai raised her as if she was his own daughter.

⁸ When the king's command and decree were known, many girls were gathered together to Susa the capital under the custody of Hegai. Esther was also taken into the king's palace and placed under the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹ The girl pleased him and gained his favour, so that he quickly gave her the cosmetics she needed to enhance her beauty and her allowance of food and the seven maids selected from the king's household. He also transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem. ¹⁰ Esther had not revealed her people nor her family background because Mordecai had ordered her not to. ¹¹ Every day Mordecai would walk in front of the courtyard of the harem and ask after Esther's health and what was happening to her.

¹² The girls were prepared for meeting King Ahasuerus for twelve months: six months being treated with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics. After the twelve months, ¹³ each girl went in to the king. She was allowed to take with her whatever she wished from the women's quarters, ¹⁴ and would enter the palace in the evening and return the next morning to another part of the harem under the care of the king's eunuch Shaashgaz who was in charge of concubines. She would not go to the king again unless he desired her and summoned her by name. ¹⁵ When it was the turn of Esther (the girl adopted by Mordecai, daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go in to the king, she only took with her those things that Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the women, had advised her to take. Esther was liked by all who saw her. ¹⁶ Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in the royal palace in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. ¹⁷ And the king loved her more than all the other women,

and she became his favourite and won his affection. He placed the royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ Then the king gave a great feast to all his officials and courtiers in honour of Esther, and he remitted the taxes of the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

¹⁹ All the time the virgins were assembled again, Mordecai was sitting as an official at the king's gate. ²⁰ Esther had not revealed her people or family background because she still obeyed him as she had when he was bringing her up.

Hatred without Pity

²¹ In those days while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the royal court attendants, Bigthan and Teresh, who guarded the entrance of the palace, became enraged and attempted to kill King Ahasuerus. ²² But Mordecai learnt of the conspiracy and disclosed it to Queen Esther, and she told the king on Mordecai's behalf. ²³ When the affair was investigated and the facts discovered, the conspirators were both hanged on the gallows. The incident was recorded in the presence of the king in the daily record of events.

3

¹ After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him to a place above all the officials who were with him. ² All the king's courtiers who were in the king's gate used to bow down before Haman, for so the king had commanded, but Mordecai did not bow down nor prostrate himself.

³ Then the king's courtiers, who were in the king's gate, said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" ⁴ When they had spoken to him day after day

without his listening to them, they informed Haman, to see whether Mordecai's acts would be tolerated, for he had told them that he was a Jew. ⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down nor prostrate himself before him, he was furious. ⁶ But it seemed to him beneath his dignity to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him who Mordecai's people were. Instead Haman sought to destroy all the people of Mordecai, all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

⁷ In the first month (the month of Nisan) in the twelfth year of the reign of King Ahasuerus, Haman had 'pur' (which means 'lot') cast before him to determine the best day and best month for his actions. The lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month — the month of Adar.

⁸ So Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered amongst the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, whose laws differ from those of every other and who do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not right for the king to tolerate them. ⁹ If it seems best to the king, let an order be given to destroy them, and I will pay ten thousand silver coins into the royal treasury." ¹⁰ So the king took off his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ "The money is yours," the king said to Haman, "and the people also to do with them as you wish." ¹² And so, on the thirteenth day of the first month, the king's secretaries were summoned and as Haman instructed an edict was issued to the king's satraps and provincial governors and the rulers of each of the peoples in their own script and their own language. The edict was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with his ring. ¹³ Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, saying: Destroy, kill, put an

end to all the Jews, young and old, little children and women, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, and plunder their possessions. ¹⁴ A copy of the edict was to be published as a decree in every province — publicly displayed so that everyone might be ready for that day. ¹⁵ By command of the king the couriers raced off, and the edict was published in Susa itself.

Then the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was in turmoil.

4

A Queen's Efforts to Save Her People

¹ When Mordecai learnt all that had been done, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and strewed ashes on his head, and went out into the city and raised a loud and bitter cry of lamentation. ² He went as far as the king's gate, but no one could enter the gate clothed with sackcloth. ³ In every province, wherever the king's command and decree went, there was great mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing amongst the Jews. Many of them sat in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴ When Esther's maids and attendants told her about Mordecai's behaviour, she was greatly troubled. She sent garments for Mordecai to put on, so that he could take off his sack-cloth, but he would not accept them. ⁵ So Esther called Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs whom he had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what it all meant and the reason for it.

⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the city square in front of the king's gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him all that had happened to him and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Also he gave him a copy of

the decree to destroy them, that had been published in Susa, to show to Esther for her information. He also told her to go to the king and implore his mercy and to plead with him in behalf of her people.

⁹ When Hathach came and told Esther what Mordecai had said, ¹⁰ she instructed Hathach to go and say to Mordecai, ¹¹ “All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that for every man or woman who goes to the king into the inner court without being called there is one penalty, death, unless the king holds out the golden sceptre signifying that they may live. It has been thirty days since I have been called to go in to the king.”

¹² When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, ¹³ he sent back this reply to Esther, “Don't imagine that you alone of all the Jews will escape because you belong to the king's household. ¹⁴ If you persist in remaining silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, but you and your family will perish. Who knows? Maybe you have been raised to the throne for a time like this!”

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this message to Mordecai: ¹⁶ “Go, gather all the Jews in Susa and fast for me. Don't eat nor drink anything for three days and nights. My maids and I will fast as well. Then I will go in to the king, although it is contrary to the law, and if I die, I die.” ¹⁷ Mordecai did everything Esther had directed.

5

¹ On the third day, Esther put on her regalia and stood in the inner court of the royal palace opposite the king's house. The king was sitting on his throne in the palace, opposite the entrance. ² When he saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she won his favour, and he held out to her the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther

approached and touched the top of the sceptre. ³ Then the king said to her, “What is it, Queen Esther? Whatever your request is, it will be granted, even if it is the half of the kingdom.”

⁴ “If it seems best to the king,” Esther said, “let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him.” ⁵ Then the king ordered, “Bring Haman quickly, so that Esther's wish may be gratified.”

So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared. ⁶ While they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, “Whatever your petition is, it will be granted. Your request, it will be done — even if it takes half of my kingdom.” ⁷ Esther answered, ⁸ “If I have won the king's favour and if it seems best to the king to grant my petition and to accede to my request, my petition and my request are that the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them. Tomorrow I will answer the king's question as he wishes.”

⁹ Haman went out that day joyful and elated, but when he saw Mordecai in the king's gate and noticed that he neither stood up nor moved for him, he was furiously angry with Mordecai. ¹⁰ Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home. He called together his friends and Zeresh his wife ¹¹ and recounted to them the greatness of his wealth, how many children he had, and all the ways in which the king had honoured him, and how he had promoted him above the officials and the royal courtiers. ¹² “What is more,” Haman said, “Queen Esther brought no one in with the king to the banquet which she had prepared except me, and tomorrow also I am invited by her along with the king. ¹³ Yet all this does not satisfy me as long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.”

¹⁴ Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, “Let a gallows seventy-five feet high be erected, and in the morning speak to the king and let Mordecai be hanged on it. Then go merrily with the king to the banquet.” The advice pleased Haman, and so he had the gallows erected.

6

Downfall of a Conspirator

¹ On that night the king was unable to sleep, so he gave orders to bring the books that recorded memorable deeds, and they were read before the king. ² It was found recorded how Mordecai had furnished information regarding Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's attendants who guarded the entrance of the palace, who had attempted to kill King Ahasuerus. ³ “What honour and dignity have been conferred on Mordecai for this?” the king asked. When the king's pages who waited on him replied “Nothing has been done for him,” ⁴ the king said, “Who is in the court?” Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's house to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. ⁵ So the king's pages said to him, “Haman is standing there; in the court.” The king said, “Let him enter.” ⁶ So Haman entered, and the king said to him, “What should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour?” Haman said to himself, “Whom besides me could the king wish to honour?” ⁷ So he said to the king, “For the man whom the king wishes to honour ⁸ let a royal garment be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden and on whose head a royal diadem has been placed. ⁹ Then let the garment and the horse be placed in charge of one of the king's noble officials. Let him clothe the man whom the king wishes to honour

and let him lead that man on the horse through the city square, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man whom the king wishes to honour.' "

¹⁰ Then the king said to Haman, "Make haste and take the garment and the horse, as you have said, and do this to Mordecai the Jew, who sits in the king's gate. Omit nothing of all you have said." ¹¹ So Haman took the garment and the horse and clothed Mordecai, and made him ride through the city square and proclaimed before him, "This is what is done for the man whom the king wishes to honour."

¹² Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house, mourning, with his head covered.

¹³ Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and to all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai before whom you have already been humiliated is of the Jewish people, you can do nothing against him but will surely fall before him."

¹⁴ While they were still talking with him, the king's attendants came and quickly took Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

7

¹ So the king and Haman went to drink with Queen Esther. ² As they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again said to Esther, "Whatever your petition is, Queen Esther, it will be granted to you. Whatever you request it will be done, even if it takes half of the kingdom." ³ Then Queen Esther answered, "Your Majesty, if I have won your favour, and if it seems best to Your Majesty, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request, ⁴ for I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and completely annihilated!

If we had been merely sold into slavery I would not have disturbed your peace, because such a fate would not have affected the interests of the king.”

⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he and where is he whose heart has impelled him to do this?”

⁶ “A foe, an enemy: this wicked Haman.” Esther answered. Haman shrank in terror before the king and the queen. ⁷ In his wrath the king rose from the place where he was drinking wine and went into the palace garden. Haman stayed to beg Queen Esther for his life, for he saw that the king was fully determined to bring calamity upon him. ⁸ As the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had flung himself on Esther's couch. The king cried, “Is he going to rape my queen while I am present in my own house?”

As the king spoke these words, the attendants covered Haman's face ⁹ and Harbonah, one of those who waited on the king, said, “There are the gallows, seventy-five feet high, which Hainan erected for Mordecai, who spoke a good word in behalf of the king, standing in the house of Haman!” The king said “Hang him on them.” ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king was pacified.

8

Deliverance of the Jews

¹ At that time King Ahasuerus gave the property of Haman the Jews' enemy to Queen Esther. Mordecai was made one of the king's personal advisers, for Esther had disclosed his relationship to her. ² The king also drew off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman. He gave

it to Mordecai, and Esther placed Mordecai in charge of Haman's property.

³ Then Esther sought another audience with the king and fell at his feet and with tears begged him to avert the evil planned by Haman the Agagite and to frustrate his designs against the Jews. ⁴ The king held out to her the golden sceptre, and she arose and stood before him. ⁵ "If it seems best to the king," she said, "and if I have won his favour and he thinks it right, and if I please him, let written orders be given to revoke the dispatches devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote ordering the destruction of the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. ⁶ For how can I bear to look upon the evil that will come to my people? How can I bear to see their destruction?" ⁷ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "See, I have given Esther the property of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he laid hands upon the Jews. ⁸ Now you write on behalf of the Jews, as seems best to you, in the king's name and seal it with the king's signet ring. For a document that is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring cannot be revoked."

⁹ On the twenty-third day of the third month (that is the month of Sivan), the king's secretaries were summoned and as Mordecai instructed an edict was issued to the Jews, to the satraps and provincial governors and the rulers of each of the one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia in their own script and their own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language.

¹⁰ Mordecai wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus. He sealed it with the king's signet ring. Dispatches were sent by mounted couriers who rode the swift, noble

steeds, bred of the royal studs. ¹¹ In this way the king permitted the Jews who were in every city to gather together and make a stand for their life, to destroy, to kill, and annihilate all the armed forces of any people or province that might be hostile to them, including their children and women, and to take their goods as plunder ¹² throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus on that thirteenth day of the twelfth month (which is called Adar). ¹³ A copy of the edict was to be published as a decree in every province — publicly displayed so that the Jews might be ready for that day and avenge themselves. ¹⁴ So the couriers who rode the swift, noble steeds went out, hastened and impelled by the king's commands!

Meantime the decree had been given out in the royal palace at Susa; ¹⁵ and Mordecai had gone out from the presence of the king in royal garments of violet and white and with a great crown of gold and with a robe of fine linen and purple. The people of Susa shouted and were glad. ¹⁶ To the Jews there came light and gladness and joy and honour. ¹⁷ And in every province and city, wherever the king's command and decree came, there was gladness and joy amongst the Jews and a holiday. Many of the peoples of the earth professed to be Jews, for fear of the Jews took possession of them.

9

¹ Now in the twelfth month (that is the month of Adar), on the thirteenth day, when the king's command and his decree was about to put into execution, on the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, then the tables were turned so that the Jews had the mastery over those who hated them. ² The Jews gathered together in the cities throughout all the provinces of King

Ahasuerus, to attack anyone who tried to harm them. No one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen on all the peoples. ³ All the princes of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and they who attended to the king's business, helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. ⁴ For Mordecai was great in the king's palace, and as his power increased his fame spread throughout all the provinces. ⁵ The Jews put all their enemies to the sword and, with slaughter and destruction, they did what they wanted to those who hated them. ⁶ In Susa the capital the Jews killed five hundred people. ⁷ They killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, ⁸ Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, ⁹ Parmashta, Arisia, Aridai, and Vaizatha, ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy; but they did not take any plunder.

¹¹ On that day the number of those who were slain in Susa was brought before the king, ¹² and the king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have slain five hundred people in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It will be granted to you. What is your request? It will be done."

¹³ "If it please the king," Esther said, "let it be granted to the Jews who are in Susa to do tomorrow also according to this day's decree. Let the bodies of Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows." ¹⁴ And the king commanded it to be done. A decree was given out in Susa and they hung the bodies of Haman's ten sons on the gallows. ¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered themselves together again on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar. They killed three hundred people in Susa. But they did not take any plunder. ¹⁶ And the other Jews who were in

the king's provinces gathered themselves together and fought for their lives and overcame their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand who hated them. But they did not take any plunder. ¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of Adar.

On the fourteenth day of the month Adar the Jews rested and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing. ¹⁸ (But the Jews in Susa gathered on both the thirteenth and fourteenth day — and rested on the fifteenth day of the same month and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.)

¹⁹ This is why the Jews who live in the country villages keep the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day of rejoicing and feasting and a holiday, and a day in which they send gifts of food to each other.

The Establishment of Purim

²⁰ Mordecai had these things recorded. He sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus, both near and far. ²¹ He told them to keep the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and also the fifteenth day every year, ²² as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned from sorrow to gladness and from mourning into a feast day. They should make them days of feasting and gladness and of sending gifts of food to each other and of gifts to the poor.

²³ So what the Jews had begun to do they adopted as a custom, just as Mordecai had written to them. ²⁴ For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted to destroy them. He had cast 'Pur', that is the lot, intending to consume them and to destroy them. ²⁵ But when the matter came before the king, he gave written orders that his wicked plot,

which he had planned against the Jews, should come upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. ²⁶ This is why these days are called Purim, after the word Pur. Therefore because of all the words of this letter, as well as all they had seen, and all they had experienced, ²⁷ the Jews established and made it a custom for them, for their descendants, and for all who should join them, so that it might not be repealed, that they should continue to observe these two days as feasts each year, ²⁸ and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim should not pass away from amongst the Jews nor the remembrance of them disappear amongst their descendants.

²⁹ Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, gave Mordecai the Jew all authority in writing to confirm this second letter of Purim. ³⁰ He sent letters to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, wishing them peace and security, ³¹ to confirm these days of Purim in their proper times, to be observed as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had directed and as the Jews had proscribed for themselves and their descendants, in the matter of the fastings and their cry of lamentation. ³² And the commands of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the records.

10

¹ King Ahasuerus imposed a tribute on the land and the coasts. ² All the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him, are they not recorded in the book

of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and great amongst the Jews, and loved by them all. He sought the good of his people and promoted the welfare of their descendants.

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