

Esther

*This is part of an ongoing series of short articles designed to help us understand what scripture is and what is **in** each book of scripture. Previous articles can be found at www.openarms-communityofchrist.org.*

Esther is perhaps a folk-tale that provides the “historical” basis for a festival not found in the Mosaic Law (the feast of Purim)—a celebration of deliverance from an anti-Semitic pogrom, or attack on the entire Jewish people.

One thing that makes Esther different from the other books in the Hebrew Testament is that there is no mention of the God of Israel, nor of any of the basic Jewish practices such as prayer, dietary regulations, the Law... It also is a book filled with bloodthirsty actions and a spirit of revenge, deceit, and hatred.

However, it is still a religious work. God, although not directly mentioned, is a “player,” arranging everything for a successful resolution of the situation. There is also an emphasis on the importance of fasting and prayer.

The story follows the experiences of Esther, a Jewish girl brought to the harem of the Persian king Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I). She finds favor with the king and replaces Vashti, the original queen. Her guardian, Mordecai, hears of a plot to assassinate the king, sends the information to Esther, who shares it with the king, foiling the plot. Another of the king’s officers, Haman, is promoted to a high station; he becomes angry when Mordecai does not bow down to him, and makes arrangements to have all of the Jews killed. Before that can take place, the king discovers that Mordecai was never honored for foiling the assassination and asks Haman what should be done to honor someone. Thinking that the king is talking about him, Haman devises honors—and again is angry when he has to honor Mordecai with what he expected to receive. Mordecai learns of Haman’s conspiracy, informs Esther of Haman’s plot against the Jews and asks her to go to the king on their behalf. That is a dangerous step to take, but she does and invites the king and Haman to three separate feasts. At the final one, she informs the king of the plot. He orders Haman hung on gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. However, the plot to kill the Jews is still in place and although it cannot be revoked, the king sends word to the Jews that they may fight to protect their lives. They do—and that began the celebration of Purim.