

## BOOK OF ESTHER

**Five Scrolls (*megillot*)** – Part of the Ketuvim, the third division of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Tanakh) according to the Jewish biblical canon. These books vary widely in literary type and subject matter. Each of them, however, is linked to a commemorative festival in Judaism:

**i. Scrolls associated with events described in the Pentateuch and festivals ordained therein:**

- **Song of Songs** – Read at Passover, festival commemorating Exodus from Egypt
- **Ruth** – Read at Shavuot (Festival of Weeks; Pentecost), festival commemorating the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai
- **Ecclesiastes** – Read at Sukkot (Feast of Booths; Tabernacles), festival commemorating Israel's forty years in the Wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land.

**ii. Scrolls associated with later events in Israelite/Jewish history**

- **Lamentations** – Read on Tisha B'Av, the fast day commemorating the destruction of the first Temple by Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. and the destruction of the Second Temple by Romans in 70 C.E.
- **Esther** – Read at Purim, commemorating the (historical? legendary?) deliverance of the Jewish community of Susa from disaster as described in the Book of Esther.

**Diaspora Stories** – Modern label to describe a genre of stories about crisis of Jewish life in communities outside of the Land of Israel. The parade examples are Esther and Daniel 1-6; Tobit also fits this pattern, and certain features are also shared by Judith. Main plot pattern echoes the Joseph story in Genesis, the first story of a Jew succeeding against odds in a foreign land (i.e., Egypt).

**Some characteristic features:**

- *Setting* = Diaspora, esp. the court of a foreign king (“Diaspora” is the technical term for areas in which Jews live outside of the “Promised Land” of Israel. Especially after the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C.E., sizable Jewish communities formed outside of Israel. Note that, in the context of Jewish history, “Exile” refers to the situation whereby Israelites/Jews cannot live in the Land of Israel and are forced to live elsewhere, whereas “Diaspora” refers to the places where they live when they could live in their own land but choose to dwell among non-Jews in another place.)
- *Basic plot pattern* = Jewish protagonist(s) arrive in positions of the highest consequence in the royal court. The heroes of the tale are endangered (often with threats of death), but eventually they are saved while their enemies are punished. Focus on reversals of fortune recall the Joseph story.
- *Main Characters* = Jewish heroes, anti-Jewish enemies, well-meaning but gullible king or leader
  - Jewish heroes are not only righteous and faithful to Jewish tradition but also loyal to the king, as well as often wise and beautiful. They are depicted as gaining the special favor of kings. Their enemies are fellow court thus depicted as acting, at least in part, out of jealousy.
  - Foreign kings are not hostile to Jews, such that their enemies must try tricks and slander to turn the king against the heroes; even when tricked, kings perceive themselves as acting against disobedience, not against Jews *per se*. Kings are sad when they are tricked into punishing the Jewish hero/heroine, but they are trapped by their own decrees. They too are relieved when, in the end, the trick or slander is uncovered, and the slanderous enemy can be justly punished. \

<b>STRUCTURE OF ESTHER</b>	<b>MOTIF OF FEASTING &amp; FASTING (10 banquets total, which are sites of important events and signal shifts of power)</b>
<b>PART ONE - Setting the Stage (1:1-2:23) – Palace intrigue in Susa</b>	
<p>1:1-22, Queen Vashti deposed</p> <p>2:1-23, Esther becomes queen, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king</p>	<p>1:2-4, the king’s banquet for the nobility  1:5-8, the king’s banquet for all the men in Susa</p> <p>1:9, Vashti’s banquet for the women, <i>which she refuses to leave and is deposed, thereby setting the stage for:</i></p> <p>2:18, Esther’s enthronement banquet</p>
<b>PART TWO - The Narrative Proper (3:1-9:19) – Haman’s scheme and its defeat</b>	
<p>3, Haman’s plot to eliminate the Jews and his decree</p> <p>4, Mordecai sends Esther to the king</p> <p>5, Esther goes to the king(5)</p> <p>6, Haman’s humiliation and Mordechai’s exaltation</p> <p>7, Haman's plot is exposed</p> <p>8:1-8, The grant of authority  8:9-17, The counter-decree  9:1-19, The battles of Adar</p>	<p>3.15, Haman and the king’s banquet</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>4:3, Jews of empire all fast  4:16, Esther and Jews fast in preparation for her own banquet</i></p> <p>5:4-8, Esther’s first banquet, <i>which confirms Haman’s pride in his own eyes, thereby setting him up for his fall</i></p> <p>7.1-9, Esther’s second banquet, <i>which leads to Haman’s downfall and thus to the reversal of the Jewish community’s fortune as well, such that:</i></p> <p>8:17, Jews feast in celebration of Mordecai’s glory and counter-decree</p>
<b>PART THREE – Conclusion (9:20-10:3) – The Establishment of the Feast of Purim</b>	
<p>9:20-32, Purim</p> <p>10:1-3, Epilogue</p>	<p>9:17, 19, First feast of Purim  9:18, Second feast of Purim</p>

**Festival Aetiology & Festival Lection** – A “festival aetiology” is a story that serves to explain how it came to be that a certain festival is celebrated; just as one of the main purposes of Exodus is to explain why Passover is celebrated, so Esther tells the story of Purim. In each case, the stories also serve as “festival lection,” i.e., they are also read and retold during the festival as part of the commemoration.