



The book of Esther is a more real novel than many historical books. Although fictitious events are related, in them we find the anguish, the resentments and the hopes of the dispersed and at times persecuted Jews. Fear of pagans, critical judgment about the foolishness of those who do not know God; a constant effort to win the favor of the authorities; petitions to God who cannot allow his people to disappear; close solidarity with the people of their own race and waiting for the day when they could avenge themselves of their enemies for the greater glory of their God.

In that human context in which the Gospel had not yet entered, the book of Esther emphasizes God's fidelity to his word: the Jewish people had to survive for God's plan to be carried out for human beings.

### *The two versions of Esther*

We do not know much about the origin of this book. The events in question would have occurred exactly in 483, during the reign of the Persian Emperor Xerxes although the fact is that the author is not presenting a historical work. We should consider, however, that in spite of the very tolerant attitude of the Persian authorities, the memory of some difficult moments was preserved.

The Jews had the custom of exchanging gifts and celebrating a feast during the days of Purim. The novel confirms this custom and it justifies this feast by relating the story of a persecution during which the Jews were saved on that day, thanks to the intervention of Esther and Mordecai. Actually, this feast preceded the events narrated here since it was the Persian new year.

Initially, in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther was a profane account and it was so adapted to the popular feast that it did not include any prayers or any reference to the biblical promises: it did not even mention God.

When the book was introduced in the Greek Bible or Septuagint, the translator inserted a few magnificent and profoundly religious pages, along with "Mordecai's dream," at the beginning and at the end of the book, thus situating the importance of the drama in the context of Israel's vocation. In 95 A.D., when the restored Jewish community established the canon of its sacred books, it preserved only the primitive version. On the other hand, the Church recognized the Greek version as an inspired book.

We are putting the paragraphs, only found in the Greek version, in italics. At times, these pages are also found at the end of the Hebrew text and they form chapters 11 to 15. It is also possible, as we have done, to insert these pages in their corresponding place in the body of the text.

**Mordecai's dream**

**11** <sup>1</sup>On the first day of Nissan, in the second year of the reign of Ahasuerus the Great, a dream came to Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup>Mordecai was a Jew residing at Susa who held a prominent position at the king's court. <sup>3</sup>He was one of the captives whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had deported from Jerusalem with Jeconiah, king of Judah.

<sup>4</sup>According to his dream, there were cries and tumult, thunder and earthquake and confusion upon the earth, <sup>5</sup>as two great dragons came, both ready for combat. <sup>6</sup>At the sound of their terrible roar every nation prepared to fight against the holy nation. <sup>7</sup>On earth it was a day of darkness and gloom, tribulation and distress, affliction and great disturbance. <sup>8</sup>The whole nation of the just was troubled because of the fear of evils awaiting them, and were ready to perish. <sup>9</sup>But they cried out to God, and a little spring appeared, from which grew a great river with a flood of water. <sup>10</sup>Light came as the sun rose, and the humble were raised up and they devoured the mighty.

<sup>11</sup>In this dream Mordecai saw what God intended to do. On awakening he thought deeply about the matter and tried all day to understand its meaning.

**12** <sup>1</sup>In those days while Mordecai was resting at the king's gate together with Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs and palace guards, <sup>2</sup>he was aware that they had become irritated and were plotting to kill king Ahasuerus. <sup>3</sup>Mordecai investigated the matter, informed the king who had the two eunuchs questioned. They confessed and were put to death.

<sup>4</sup>By order of the king, these events were recorded by Mordecai <sup>5</sup>who was rewarded and appointed to an office in the court.

<sup>6</sup>In revenge for the king's two eunuchs, Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite who enjoyed the king's favor, sought to harm Mordecai and his people.

**1** <sup>1</sup>In the days of Ahasuerus—the Ahasuerus whose empire stretched from

India to Ethiopia and comprised one hundred twenty-seven provinces—<sup>2</sup>when he occupied the royal throne in the citadel of Susa, <sup>3</sup>in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officers and ministers, the Persian and Median aristocracy, chiefs of the army, the nobles and the governors of the provinces. <sup>4</sup>For a hundred and eighty days, he displayed the riches and splendor of his empire and the wealth and pomp of his royal estate.

<sup>5</sup>At the close of this period, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days at the palace garden for all the people, great and lowly, living in Susa. <sup>6</sup>There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings on marble pillars. On a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and colored stones were gold and silver couches. <sup>7</sup>Drinks were served in a variety of golden goblets, and the royal wine flowed freely, in keeping with the king's generosity. <sup>8</sup>By the king's order, each guest was allowed to drink as he pleased; all the stewards had been instructed to serve each guest according to his own wishes.

<sup>9</sup>Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of king Ahasuerus.

<sup>10</sup>Merry with wine on the seventh day, the king ordered the seven eunuchs who served him as chamberlains—Mahuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas—<sup>11</sup>to bring into his presence Queen Vashti with her royal crown, for she was very lovely and he wished to display her beauty to the people and nobles. <sup>12</sup>Queen Vashti, however, refused to come at the order of the king transmitted by the eunuchs; the king was very displeased and burned with rage.

<sup>13</sup>As was his procedure, the king consulted experts in law and justice. <sup>14</sup>He summoned the seven nobles of Persia and Media who were in his personal service and held first rank in the kingdom—Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan. <sup>15</sup>He asked them, "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti for disobeying the king's order issued through the eunuchs?"

<sup>16</sup>In the presence of the king and nobles, Memucan replied, "It is not the king

2K 20:18

Dn 2:27

alone that Queen Vashti has wronged but all the nobles and the whole populace in the provinces of king Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup>All the women will soon know what she did, and so they will despise their husbands and say: 'King Ahasuerus ordered his wife to be brought before him but she refused.' <sup>18</sup>When the Persian and Median ladies hear of that, they will treat the royal officials in the same manner. So there will be no end to this kind of disrespect. <sup>19</sup>If it pleases the king, therefore, let an irrevocable royal decree be issued and included among the laws of Persia and Media, that Vashti is never again to come into the presence of king Ahasuerus, and that the king is authorized to give her royal position to someone else more worthy than she. <sup>20</sup>When this decree of the king is proclaimed throughout his vast kingdom, all wives will honor their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

<sup>21</sup>This proposal pleased the king and his officials; so the king acted on Memucan's advice. <sup>22</sup>He sent letters to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, declaring that every husband should be master in his own household.

**2** <sup>1</sup>Later when his anger had cooled, king Ahasuerus remembered Vashti's disobedience and his decree against her. <sup>2</sup>The king's courtiers proposed, "Let beautiful young girls be chosen for the king. <sup>3</sup>Let him appoint commissioners throughout the provinces of his realm to bring all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa. Let them be put under the care of the royal eunuch Hegai, custodian of women, and let them be given ointments for beauty treatment. <sup>4</sup>Then let the girl who pleases the king take Vashti's place." The king was pleased with the suggestion and he acted on it.

<sup>5</sup>Now there lived in Susa a Jew named Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite <sup>6</sup>who had been exiled from Jerusalem among the captives taken away with king Jeconiah of Judah by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>7</sup>Mordecai was foster father to his cousin Hadassah, that is Esther, who had lost both father and mother. The girl had a lovely face and figure. On the death of

her parents, Mordecai had adopted her as his daughter.

<sup>8</sup>In compliance with the king's edict, a great number of young girls were brought to Susa and entrusted to Hegai. Esther was among them. <sup>9</sup>Esther pleased the custodian of women and won his favor. He not only promptly provided her with cosmetics and good food but assigned to her seven special maids from the king's household and transferred her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

<sup>10</sup>Esther did not reveal her nationality or family, for Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. <sup>11</sup>Each day Mordecai would walk up and down the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was faring.

<sup>12</sup>After a preparation of twelve months decreed for the women, each of them had to appear in turn before king Ahasuerus. This preparatory period was for beautifying treatment: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics. <sup>13</sup>Then when the girl was to present herself to the king, she was allowed to take with her from the harem to the king's palace anything she wanted. <sup>14</sup>She would go there in the evening and return the following morning to another harem under the care of the royal eunuch Shaashgaz, custodian of the concubines. She would not go back to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

<sup>15</sup>When the turn came for Esther—the daughter of Abihail whom Mordecai had adopted from his uncle—to go to the king, she asked for nothing beyond what the eunuch Hegai had given her; and yet she won the admiration of all who saw her. <sup>16</sup>Esther was brought to king Ahasuerus in his palace in the tenth month called Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. <sup>17</sup>The king liked Esther more than any of the other women. Having won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins, she received the royal crown and was made queen in place of Vashti. <sup>18</sup>The king then gave a great banquet in honor of Esther for all his officials and ministers; he proclaimed a holiday for all the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

<sup>19</sup>When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. <sup>20</sup>Up to this time Esther had

Dn 6:  
8-10;  
6:13;  
6:16

Ne 13:24

Dn 1:9

not revealed her family background or nationality, in compliance with Mordecai's instructions. She followed his advice just as she had when she was being brought up by him. <sup>21</sup>It was during the time that Mordecai spent at the king's gate, that Bagathan and Thares, two of the royal eunuchs who guarded the entrance, conspired to assassinate king Ahasuerus. <sup>22</sup>Mordecai learned of the plot and informed Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. <sup>23</sup>The matter was investigated, found to be true, and the two conspirators were hanged on the gallows. The incident was recorded in the Book of Chronicles in the presence of the king.

tion of Mordecai's people. The lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar.

<sup>8</sup>Haman talked to king Ahasuerus, "Scattered throughout the provinces of your kingdom is a certain people, whose customs differ from those of other people. Since they do not obey our laws, it is not in the king's best interests to tolerate them. <sup>9</sup>If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them. I will deposit in the royal treasury ten thousand silver talents for the men who carry out the king's business."

<sup>10</sup>The king took the signet ring off his finger, handed it to Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, enemy of the Jews, and said, <sup>11</sup>"Keep the money, and do with these people as you please."

<sup>12</sup>On the thirteenth day of the first month, the royal scribes were summoned. As Haman dictated, they wrote orders in the script of each province and in the language of each people to the king's satraps, the governors of every province, and the officials of every people. Written in the name of king Ahasuerus himself and sealed with his own ring, <sup>13</sup>these dispatches were sent by couriers to all the royal provinces with the order to kill, destroy and wipe out all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

• <sup>14</sup>A copy of the edict to be promulgated as law in every province was published for all the people to know so that they would be ready for that day. <sup>15</sup>The couriers, spurred on by the king's command, set out in

Lev  
26:33;  
Dt 4:27;  
Dn 3:8;  
Wis 2:12

Acts  
16:20

Gen  
41:40

**3** <sup>1</sup>After these events, king Ahasuerus promoted Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, to a rank higher than that of all the other officials. <sup>2</sup>On orders of the king, all the royal officials at the king's gate would kneel and bow down to Haman. This Mordecai refused to do.

Gen  
41:44

<sup>3</sup>The royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's order?" <sup>4</sup>They spoke to him day after day, but he refused to comply, explaining that he was a Jew. To find out if this explanation was acceptable, they reported the matter to Haman.

Dn 3:12

<sup>5</sup>Haman was enraged when he saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor. <sup>6</sup>Having learned who Mordecai's people were, he thought it would not be enough to lay hands on him alone, but sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

<sup>7</sup>In the first month, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, the pur or lot was cast in Haman's presence to determine the day and the month for the destruc-

• **3.14** This "letter of Ahasuerus," together with the other in chapter 15, is one of the best pages of the book.

One way of reading it is to see in it a model of what the totalitarian regimes and military dictators in all places and in all times think, say

haste, and the edict was first promulgated in Susa. As the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in bewilderment.

**13** <sup>1</sup>The text of the letter was as follows:

*The Great king Ahasuerus to the rulers of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia and to the governors under them:*

Jdt 2:5;  
2Mac  
11:2

<sup>2</sup>As ruler of many nations and master of the whole world, I have resolved never to be carried away by the arrogance of power but always to rule with fairness and clemency, to provide for my subjects a life free of distress, and to restore the peace that all desire by making my government humane and truly civilized as far as the borders of my kingdom.

<sup>3</sup>When I consulted my advisers on how this might be accomplished, Haman, who excels among us in wisdom, who has earned distinction for trustworthiness and loyalty, and who has attained the second rank in the kingdom, <sup>4</sup>brought to our attention the existence throughout my realm of a people of ill will, whose laws are opposed to those of every nation. Their continuous disregard of the decrees of kings hinders the establishment of unity in the empire.

<sup>5</sup>Considering, therefore, the continuous opposition of this people to

*all humankind, its outlandish system of laws and strange manner of life, its hostility to our interests and the harm it does to the stability of our kingdom, <sup>6</sup>we hereby decree that all the people indicated in the letters of Haman, who is in charge of affairs and a second father to us, be utterly destroyed with women and children, by the sword, without mercy or consideration, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar, of the present year; <sup>7</sup>so that when these people, with their past and present ill will, have gone down into the world of the dead on a single day, they may at last leave our government in complete stability and peace.*

1Mac  
3:42

**4** <sup>1</sup>When Mordecai learned what had happened, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and walked through the city crying bitterly and loudly. <sup>2</sup>But he came only as far as the king's gate, for no one in sackcloth was allowed to enter. <sup>3</sup>In every province where the king's edict was read, there was great mourning among the Jews; fasting and weeping with lamentation, and many of them slept on sackcloth and ashes.

Gen  
27:34;  
Dn 9:3;  
Jdt 4:12

<sup>4</sup>Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs informed her about Mordecai. Overcome with grief, she sent clothes for Mordecai to put on in-

1Mac  
1:25;  
Jdt 4:9;  
Ne 9:1

1Mac  
1:44;  
2Mac  
14:6

and write. Whoever for conscience reasons opposes those in power is a traitor to his country or to his people. The book shows how such totalitarianism turns into idolatry of rulers who are considered infallible. It must always be remembered that nations and their armies are only means of serving the international community and peace which requires that people and consciences be free. This letter targets the liberty of conscience of the Jewish people, a liberty which should not be less in Christians. It shows us why societies in the past with small regard for the rights of the human person—even when claiming to be Christian—could not

tolerate Jews. For the same reasons Christians are persecuted or suffer many constraints today in countries where the majority are of another religion.

This letter can also be read in another way: we can see the tensions existing at that time between the Jews and the non-Jews. They made much of their solidarity with other Jews; the Law kept them apart and did not allow them a real companionship with their neighbor. And the end of the book will reveal the violence hidden under the humble trust of believers in their God.

stead of his sackcloth, but he refused. <sup>5</sup>Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend to her, and ordered him to find out the reason for Mordecai's action.

<sup>6</sup>So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the public square in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup>Mordecai told him all that had happened, as well as the exact amount of money Haman had promised to contribute to the royal treasury. <sup>8</sup>He also gave Hathach a copy of the written decree for their destruction, to show and explain to Esther. He further told him to urge her to go to the king to beg for mercy and intercede for her people: "*Remember the days of your lowly estate when you were brought up in my charge. Haman, who is next to the king, has asked for our death. Pray to the Lord and speak to the king for us. Save us from death.*"

<sup>9</sup>Hathach returned to Esther and told her what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup>In reply, Esther gave Hathach this message for Mordecai, <sup>11</sup>"All the king's servants and the people of his provinces know that any man or woman who goes to the king in the inner court without being summoned suffers the death penalty, unless the king grants them their life by holding out to them his golden scepter. But I have not been called to go to the king for thirty days now."

• <sup>12</sup>When Mordecai received Esther's words, <sup>13</sup>he sent back this answer, "Do not suppose that because you are in the king's palace, you

alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup>If you remain silent now, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another source, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows—perhaps you have come to the throne for just such a time as this."

<sup>15</sup>Esther sent back her reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup>"Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa. Fast for me—all of you; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will also fast. Then I will go to the king, even if it is against the law. If I die for this, let it be."

<sup>17</sup>Mordecai went away and carried out Esther's instructions.

### Mordecai's prayer

**13** <sup>8</sup>Recalling all that the Lord had done, he prayed to him and said:

<sup>9</sup>Lord, King and Master of all, everything is under your power; no one can withstand you in your will to save Israel.

<sup>10</sup>You made heaven and earth and all the marvels under heaven. <sup>11</sup>You are the Lord of all, no one can resist you, Lord.

<sup>12</sup>You know all things, O Lord; you know that no insolence, no vain-glory or arrogance prompted me to act thus, to refuse to bow down before the proud Haman. <sup>13</sup>Readily would I have kissed his feet for Israel's safety.

<sup>14</sup>But what I did, I did so as not to place human glory above the glory of God. I will not bow down to any-

Ezra  
8:21;  
Jon 3:6;  
Mt 17:21

Sir 42:15

Is 42:8

• **4.12** In difficult times, there are always those in better positions who think about saving themselves or their jobs. They prefer to keep quiet instead of being in solidarity with those who are mistreated or deprived of their rights. Moreover, if they have more knowledge of religion, they know how to excuse their si-

lence. That is why Mordecai insists on reminding Esther of her responsibility.

*Fast, pray to God for me.* Esther's great confidence in her people's prayers makes her willing to put her life in danger. Like Mordecai, Esther understands that God will not let his people disappear.

one except to you, O Lord. My refusal has not been out of pride.

<sup>15</sup> And now, Lord God, King, God of Abraham, deliver your people! Our enemies plot our ruin; they are bent upon destroying the inheritance that was yours from the beginning.

<sup>15:13;</sup>  
<sup>Dt 9:26</sup> <sup>16</sup> Do not forsake your own inheritance which you redeemed out of Egypt for yourself.

<sup>Is 38:19;</sup>  
<sup>Ps</sup>  
<sup>115:18</sup> <sup>17</sup> Hear my supplication, have mercy on your inheritance. Turn our mourning into rejoicing that we may live to sing praise to your name, O Lord. Do not silence the mouths of those who give you praise.

<sup>18</sup> And Israel cried out with all their might, for they were faced with death.

### The prayer of Esther

**14** <sup>1</sup> Seized with anguish in her fear of death, Queen Esther likewise had recourse to the Lord.

<sup>2</sup> Taking off her splendid robes, she put on garments of distress and mourning. In place of expensive perfumes, she covered her head with dirt and ashes. Humbling her body severely, she put aside all her festive adornments and left her hair disheveled. <sup>3</sup> Then she prayed to the Lord God of Israel:

<sup>4</sup> My Lord, you who stand alone, come to my help; I am alone and have no help but you. Through my own choice I am endangering my life.

<sup>Dt 4:32;</sup>  
<sup>7:6</sup> <sup>5</sup> As a child I was wont to hear from the people of the land of my forebears that you, O Lord, chose Israel from among all peoples, and our fathers from among their ancestors to be your lasting heritage; that you did for them, all that you have promised.

<sup>6</sup> But we have sinned, and for this you have handed us over to our enemies; <sup>7</sup> we have worshiped their gods, but you, O Lord, are just.

<sup>8</sup> Dissatisfied with our bitter servitude, they made a pact with their idols <sup>9</sup> to abolish what you have decreed, to blot out your heritage, <sup>10</sup> to shut the mouths that give you praise, to quench the glory of your Temple and your altar and instead to let the pagans sing the praise of worthless idols, and idolize forever a king of flesh.

<sup>11</sup> Do not give up your scepter, O Lord, to non-existent beings. Never let them gloat over our ruin, but turn their designs against themselves and make an example of our chief enemy.

<sup>12</sup> Remember us, Lord; reveal yourself in the time of our calamity. Give me courage, King of gods and master of all power. <sup>13</sup> Make my words persuasive when I face the lion; turn his heart against our enemy, that the latter and his like may be brought to their end.

<sup>14</sup> Save us by your hand; help me who am alone and have none but you, O Lord.

<sup>15</sup> You know everything; you know how I hate honor if from the impious, how I loathe the bed of the uncircumcised and of any foreigner.

<sup>16</sup> You know I am here under constraint, that I loathe the diadem about my brow when I appear in public; as a filthy rag I loathe it and do not wear it in private.

<sup>17</sup> Your handmaid has never eaten at Haman's table, nor has taken pleasure in royal banquets, nor drunk the wine offered to their gods.

<sup>18</sup> Neither has your handmaid found pleasure from the day of her promotion till now except in you, Lord God of Abraham.

<sup>19</sup> O God, more powerful than all, hear the voice of those in despair; save us from the evil man's power, and deliver me from my fear.

<sup>Jdt 9:10;</sup>  
<sup>Pro 21:1</sup>

<sup>Is 64:5</sup>

**Esther appears before the king**

**15** <sup>1</sup>Ending her prayer on the third day, Esther took off her penitential garments and put on her royal attire. <sup>2</sup>Radiant in appearance after invoking the all-seeing God and Savior, she took her two maids with her, <sup>3</sup>and leaned gently on one of them for support, <sup>4</sup>while the other followed carrying her train. <sup>5</sup>Although her heart was frozen with fear, she looked radiant in her perfect beauty, her face depicting love and joy.

<sup>6</sup>After passing through all the doors, she found herself face to face with the king seated on his throne, awe-inspiring in the full array of his majesty, his robes all covered with gold and precious stones. <sup>7</sup>As he looked up, his face flushed with majestic anger, the queen faltered, turned pale and leaned weakly upon the shoulder of the maid in front of her.

<sup>8</sup>Then God changed the king's anger to gentleness. Alarmed, he sprang from his throne, took Esther in his arms until she had recovered and comforted her with soothing words. <sup>9</sup>"What is it, Esther?" he said. <sup>10</sup>"I am your brother. Take heart. <sup>11</sup>You will not die, because our decree applies only to ordinary people. <sup>12</sup>Come, speak to me." <sup>13</sup>He raised the golden scepter, touched her neck with it, then embraced her saying, "Speak to me."

<sup>13</sup>Esther spoke: "My lord, I saw you like an angel of God, and I trembled with fear before your majesty. <sup>14</sup>For you are admirable, my Lord, and your appearance is awesome although you are full of kindness." <sup>15</sup>But she fell fainting as she spoke. <sup>16</sup>The king was deeply distressed, and his attendants tried to revive her.

**5** <sup>3</sup>The king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? Tell me what you wish. Even if it is half of my kingdom, I will give it to you." <sup>4</sup>Esther replied, "If it pleases your majesty, come with Haman to a banquet I have prepared today." <sup>5</sup>The king gave the order: "Call Haman at once so that Esther may have her wish."

So the king and Haman went to the banquet prepared by Esther. <sup>6</sup>During the drinking of wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition? Speak up and it will be given. What is your request? Even half of my kingdom is yours for the asking."

<sup>7</sup>Esther replied, "My petition and request is this: <sup>8</sup>if I have found favor with your majesty, if it pleases you to grant my petition and request, come with Haman tomorrow to another banquet I will prepare. Then I will answer your question."

<sup>9</sup>Haman left that day happy and

Mk 6:23

Is 6:1

• **15.1** Note this paragraph where Ahasuerus is described as if he were a divine person. It is the same pagan king about whom Esther spoke with such contempt in the previous chapter.

This is why: the pagans obeyed their kings as if they were gods, and the Jews, instead of opposing them—which would have brought about their own persecution—praised them even more. Doing this was a sort of game for them because they were thinking: what my lips are saying about this king of Persia, I say to my Lord from the heart (see the same in Jdt 12:14).

This dialogue between Esther and Ahasuerus was written as a parable: Ahasuerus personifies the Almighty King who was won over by the sacrificial faith of Esther, and who welcomed her as a sister with a tenderness which she herself could not have foreseen. God is the one who cannot bear to see Esther's anxiety and who grants her the salvation of her people.

With all this, we will more easily understand why the Church, in praising Mary, remembers words from the book of Esther: because, at Christ's side, Mary intercedes for us.



in good spirits, but when he saw Mordecai at the royal gate neither rising nor showing signs of fear of him, he was filled with rage towards the man. <sup>10</sup>He did not show it, however, but went home and summoned his friends and his wife Zeresh.

Ps 49:7

<sup>11</sup>After boasting about his vast wealth, his many sons, and the promotion he received from the king placing him above the officials and royal servants, <sup>12</sup>Haman added, "Besides, Queen Esther invited me alone to go with the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me again tomorrow together with the king. <sup>13</sup>Yet none of this satisfies me, as long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

<sup>14</sup>His wife Zeresh and all his friends said, "Have a fifty-cubit gallops built. In the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go to the banquet merrily together with the king." Satisfied with the suggestion, Haman had the gallops erected.

### Haman is humiliated before Mordecai

**6** <sup>1</sup>As he was sleepless that night, the king asked for the Book of Chronicles and ordered that the record of his reign be read to him. <sup>2</sup>He came across the passage wherein Mordecai exposed a plot to assassinate king Ahasuerus, the plot of two royal eunuchs guarding the gate, Bagathan and Teresh. <sup>3</sup>The king asked, "What reward and honor did Mordecai receive for this?" The king's attendants answered, "None, your majesty."

Gen 40:23;  
Ecl 9:15

<sup>4</sup>Haman had entered the outer court, wanting to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallops he had erected. "Who is there in the court?" the king asked. <sup>5</sup>So

the king's attendants answered, "Haman is there, standing in the court." The king ordered, "Let him come in."

<sup>6</sup>When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done to the man the king wishes to honor?"

Haman thought to himself: whom would the king wish to honor but me? <sup>7</sup>So he replied, "For the man the king wishes to honor, <sup>8</sup>let royal robes be brought which the king has worn, and a horse, which the king has ridden, with a royal diadem on its head. <sup>9</sup>The robes and the horse should be handed to one of the king's noblest officers who should array the man the king wishes to honor and lead him on horseback through the city street, proclaiming before him: 'This is what is done for the man the king is pleased to honor!'"

Dn 5:29

Gen 41:43

<sup>10</sup>The king ordered Haman, "Hurry! Take the robes and the horse and do as you have said for the Jew Mordecai sitting at the royal gate. Do not leave out anything you have recommended."

<sup>11</sup>So Haman took the robes and the horse, arrayed Mordecai and led him on horseback through the streets, proclaiming, "This is what is done for the man the king is pleased to honor!"

<sup>12</sup>After this Mordecai returned to the king's gate, while Haman hurried home greatly dejected and with his head veiled. <sup>13</sup>He told his wife and all his friends everything that had happened, and they said to him, "If Mordecai, who started your downfall, is of Jewish origin, you will not win against him. You will surely be ruined." <sup>14</sup>While they were still talking, the king's eunuchs arrived and escorted Haman to the banquet Esther had prepared.

Dn 4:34;  
Lk 1:51

### The banquet

**7**<sup>1</sup> So the king and Haman went to the banquet that Esther had prepared. <sup>2</sup>And again, on that second day, while they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther “Whatever your petition is, Queen Esther, it shall be granted. Whatever request you make shall be fulfilled, even if it were half of my kingdom.”

<sup>3</sup>Queen Esther replied, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life; and spare also the lives of my people. This is my petition and request for myself and for my people. <sup>4</sup>For my people and I have been delivered to destruction, slaughter and extinction. Had we been sold merely as male and female slaves, I would have said nothing, for our calamity would not be as great a loss to the king.”

<sup>5</sup>King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, “Who and where is the man who dared do such a thing?” <sup>6</sup>Esther answered, “He is no other than this wicked Haman—an enemy and a foe!”

At this, Haman was seized with terror. <sup>7</sup>The king left the banquet in anger and went to the garden. Haman stayed to beg Queen Esther for his life, realizing that the king had decided on his doom.

<sup>8</sup>When the king returned from the garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the bed where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, “Is he going to molest the queen even before my eyes in my own house?” No sooner had the king

spoken than his assistants covered Haman’s face. <sup>9</sup>Harbona, one of the king’s eunuchs, said, “This man built a fifty-cubit gallows for Mordecai who gave the report that saved the king. It is standing there at his house.”

The king said, “Very well, hang him on it.” <sup>10</sup>So Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king’s anger subsided.

**8**<sup>1</sup> That same day king Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther the house of Haman, enemy of the Jews. Mordecai was admitted into the king’s presence, for Esther had revealed how he was related to her. <sup>2</sup>The king took off his signet ring, which he had recovered from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai, whom Esther appointed in charge of Haman’s house.

<sup>3</sup>Once more Esther had an opportunity of being heard by the king. Weeping and falling before him, she begged him to frustrate the evil plot of Haman the Agagite against the Jews. <sup>4</sup>The king held out the golden scepter to her, and she rose and stood before him, saying,

<sup>5</sup>“If it pleases your majesty, if I am pleasing to your eyes and have found favor with you, and if you think it proper to do so, let an order be issued revoking the letters which Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, wrote to destroy the Jews in all the royal provinces. <sup>6</sup>For how can I bear to see the destruction of my people, the extermination of my race?”

<sup>7</sup>King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “I have given Haman’s house to Esther and had Haman hanged on the gallows for plotting to destroy the Jews. <sup>8</sup>Now you can write a decree as you please concerning the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the royal signet ring; for any document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring cannot be revoked.”

Dt 21:23;  
Gal 3:13

Pro 5:22;  
Ecl 10:8

• **7.1** God helps those who ask, but we must always use human resources. Esther trusts God, but she uses prudence and the necessary tactics so as not to prevent what God is about to achieve.

History has demonstrated that those who

persecute God’s people never come out victorious.

We have no trouble seeing with what irony the author of this book depicts the great kings, with their whims and vanity.

<sup>9</sup>The royal scribes were summoned that very day, the twenty-third of the third month of Sivan, and as Mordecai dictated they wrote an order to the Jews, to the satraps, governors and officials of the one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, to each province in its own script, to each people in its own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language. <sup>10</sup>These letters written in the name of king Ahasuerus and sealed with the royal signet ring were carried by couriers mounted on the king's thoroughbred steeds.

<sup>11</sup>The king's edict granted the Jews in each city the right to assemble and defend themselves, to kill, destroy and wipe out any armed group of any nation or province that might attack them and their women and children, and to seize their goods as spoil. <sup>12</sup>This edict took effect throughout the provinces of king Ahasuerus on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar.

**16** <sup>1</sup>The text of the letter read as follows: "The great king Ahasuerus to the satraps, governors and all our loyal subjects in the one hundred twenty-seven provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia: Greetings!

<sup>2</sup>The more some men are honored through the generosity of their patrons, the prouder they become. <sup>3</sup>Gloating in their power and incapable of responsibility, they seek to injure our subjects and even plot against their own benefactors. <sup>4</sup>They drive out gratitude from the human heart. Carried away by the arrogant boasts of men who know nothing of goodness, they think they will escape the justice of the all-seeing God.

<sup>5</sup>It often happens also that those in authority, through the influence of friends entrusted with the administration

of public affairs, become partly responsible for the shedding of innocent blood and are involved in causing irremediable misfortune. <sup>6</sup>Even well-intentioned rulers are led astray by the trickery of the corrupt.

<sup>7</sup>These evil practices of past times, as attested by the records, have been carried over to the present in the crimes perpetrated by unworthy officials. <sup>8</sup>For the future, however, we will strive to make our kingdom a realm of peace for all <sup>9</sup>by starting now to adopt new policies and by treating with the utmost justice all matters that come to our attention.

<sup>10</sup>To give an example, Haman, son of Hammedatha, a Macedonian who is alien to Persian blood and devoid of our kindness, was treated hospitably by us. <sup>11</sup>Enjoying the goodwill that we have towards every nation, he was even proclaimed our "father," before whom, as second in rank to the king, everyone bowed down. <sup>12</sup>But his arrogance turned his head, and he schemed to deprive us of our kingdom and our life. <sup>13</sup>He plotted for the destruction of Mordecai, our savior and constant benefactor, of Esther, our blameless royal partner, and of their entire race. <sup>14</sup>In that way he hoped to make us defenseless and facilitate the transfer of rule by the Persians to the Macedonians.

<sup>15</sup>We find, however, that the Jews consigned to extinction by this accursed man are not evildoers but are governed by the most just of laws. <sup>16</sup>They are, in fact, children of the Most High, the great living God, who has made our kingdom prosperous for us and for our ancestors.

<sup>17</sup>You will, therefore, do well to ignore the letter sent by Haman, son of Hammedatha, <sup>18</sup>for the man himself, together with his entire family, has been hanged at the gate of Susa. Thus speedily has

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• **16.1** In some way, this letter completes the first one we read in chapter 13. The king favors the Jews in the same irresponsible way he had earlier commanded that they be killed. But, naturally, it was not his fault: Haman was the one who had deceived the king. He finds no problem in decreeing the opposite of what he had decided shortly before. For him, this change is proof that he acts with much wisdom to correct errors of others.

Again, the author of Esther captures the stupidity and vanity of these great men who always try to convince their people that they are indispensable and that, without them, people would live in chaos. If the book of Esther aspires to show God's providence for his people, it also undermines personality worship and the official image created by the services of a dictatorship.

*God, who rules over all, given him the punishment he deserved.*

<sup>19</sup> *Post a copy of this letter in every public place, give the Jews freedom to live by their own laws, <sup>20</sup> and come to their aid in time of trial against those who plan to attack them on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar. <sup>21</sup> For God, who rules over all, has turned this day from one of destruction into one of joy for his chosen people.*

<sup>22</sup> *You should, therefore, celebrate this memorable day among your designated feasts with all rejoicing, <sup>23</sup> so that both now and hereafter it may be for us and the loyal Persians a celebration of salvation, and for those who plot against us a reminder of destruction.*

<sup>24</sup> *Every city and country, without exception, that fails to observe this decree shall be ruthlessly destroyed with sword and fire. It will then be ever left untrod-den not only by people but by the beasts and birds as well.*

**8** <sup>13</sup> A copy of the text of the edict to be promulgated as law in every province was published among all the peoples so that the Jews might be prepared on the day stated to avenge themselves on their enemies.

<sup>14</sup> Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers, mounted on the king's steeds, rode out in haste, and the edict was promulgated in the citadel of Susa.

<sup>15</sup> In royal garments of blue and white, with a large golden crown and a cloak of purple and fine linen, Mordecai left the

king's presence. There was a joyful celebration in the city of Susa. <sup>16</sup> For the Jews it was a time of splendor and merriment, honor and triumph. <sup>17</sup> Wherever the king's edict was read in every province and in each city, there was rejoicing and feasting among the Jews. Many people of other nationalities were seized with fear of the Jews, and they embraced Judaism.

**9** <sup>1</sup> When the day came for the order of the king to be carried out—the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar, on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to crush them—the reverse happened, for it was the Jews who got the upper hand over those who sought their harm. <sup>2</sup> In their towns throughout the provinces of king Ahasuerus, the Jews gathered to strike at those who planned their destruction. But no one dared resist them, for they were feared by all the other nations. <sup>3</sup> In fact, all the officials of the provinces, the satraps, governors and the king's administrators supported the Jews out of fear of Mordecai, <sup>4</sup> who had become more and more powerful and prominent not only in the palace but throughout the provinces.

<sup>5</sup> The Jews struck down their enemies, killing them by the sword, doing as they pleased to those who hated them. <sup>6</sup> In Susa alone, they killed five hundred men. <sup>7</sup> They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha <sup>8</sup> Porathai, Adalia, Aridatha, <sup>9</sup> Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha, <sup>10</sup> the ten sons of Haman, who

Ps 18:41

Pro 29:2

• **9.1** It is hard for us to understand that the awful things related in this chapter were done in the name of God and at the request of Esther, who seems to have been a pious woman.

The fact is that we are accustomed to think of religion in Christian terms and for us it implies love, even of enemies: but that is far beyond people who have not yet been touched directly or indirectly by the Gospel. Whenever people are convinced of being the unique people of God, let them be Jews, Christians or Muslims it is very difficult to refrain them from imposing their God—and themselves—on others. When someone has been chosen by God, it is very difficult for him not to believe he has rights that others do not have.

Thus it was that our ancestors in the faith were fanatical and violent. God's pedagogy is

seen all throughout the Old Testament, but it seems that even God was not able to conquer violence at that time. The prophets themselves did very little to suppress the violence within their hearts in spite of their close relationship with God.

Solidarity and justice only counted inside the group, like everywhere in the world: regarding this point Jesus' words in Matthew 5:46 are totally new. See Genesis 34 and the scandal when Jacob's daughter was raped; but there is no condemnation for the massacre that followed in which women and children were part of the spoils. The acknowledgment of universal love, of a neighbor who could be any person near me, and the non-violent religion where God himself accepts rejection are secrets that only the Son of God could teach us.

was Hammedatha's son and enemy of the Jews. But they laid no hand on the spoils.

<sup>11</sup>That same day the number of the slain in Susa was reported to the king, <sup>12</sup>who in turn told Esther: "The Jews have killed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in Susa alone. Imagine what more they have done in the rest of my provinces! But you shall again be granted whatever you ask; whatever you request shall be fulfilled."

<sup>13</sup>Esther replied, "If it pleases the king, let the Jews in Susa be permitted again tomorrow to carry out today's edict, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows."

<sup>14</sup>The king then ordered that this be done. The edict was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. <sup>15</sup>On the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, the Jews in Susa gathered again and put to death three hundred men. But again they laid no hand on the spoils.

<sup>16</sup>The other Jews in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and rid themselves of their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of their foes, but did not lay hands on the spoils. <sup>17</sup>This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and the Jews rested on the fourteenth, making it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

<sup>18</sup>The Jews in Susa, however, assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth and rested on the fifteenth, making this a day of feasting and rejoicing. <sup>19</sup>That is why the rural Jews have a different day of rest and celebration: the fourteenth of the month of Adar on which they send presents to each other.

<sup>20</sup>Mordecai recorded these events and sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of king Ahasuerus, both near and far, <sup>21</sup>directing them to celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth of the month of Adar <sup>22</sup>as the days when the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into feasting. They were to observe these as days of festivity and rejoicing, days for giving food presents to one another and gifts to the poor.

<sup>23</sup>The Jews agreed to observe annually this celebration instituted on Mordecai's written order. <sup>24</sup>For Haman, son of

Hammedatha the Agagite, enemy of the Jews, had plotted to destroy them and had cast the pur or lot for their ruin. <sup>25</sup>Yet through Esther's intervention, the king ordered in writing that the wicked plan against the Jews should instead be turned against Haman, whom he ordered to be hanged as well as his sons. <sup>26</sup>These days, therefore, have been called Purim after the word pur. Because of this written order and of what they had seen and experienced, <sup>27</sup>the Jews took upon themselves, their descendants and all who would join them, to celebrate these two days every year without fail, in the manner prescribed and at the time appointed. <sup>28</sup>Commemorated and celebrated thus, in every family, province and city, through all generations, these days of Purim were never to fall into disuse among the Jews nor into oblivion among their descendants.

<sup>29</sup>Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with the Jew Mordecai, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter concerning Purim. <sup>30</sup>Letters were sent to all the Jews in the one hundred twenty-seven provinces of Ahasuerus' kingdom, in words conveying goodwill and assurance, <sup>31</sup>enjoining them to observe these days of Purim at the designated time, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed and just as the Jews had prescribed for themselves and their descendants, with respect to their duty of fasting and lamentation. <sup>32</sup>Esther's decree fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in the book.

**10** <sup>1</sup>King Ahasuerus levied tribute throughout the empire including the distant islands. <sup>2</sup>All his acts of power and valor, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai who was raised by the king to high honor, are recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. <sup>3</sup>The Jew Mordecai was second in rank to king Ahasuerus; he was great among the Jews and esteemed by many of his brothers as the harbinger of peace and welfare for all his people.

<sup>4</sup>And Mordecai said, "This is God's work. <sup>5</sup>I remember the dream I had about this, nothing of which has failed to be fulfilled—<sup>6</sup>the little spring that became a river, the light, the sun and the flood of

water. Esther is the river, whom the king married and made queen. <sup>7</sup> Haman and I are the two dragons. <sup>8</sup> Those who assembled to destroy the Jews are the nations. <sup>9</sup> And my nation is Israel, my people, who cried to God and were saved. Yes, the Lord has saved his people and delivered us from all these evils. God has worked such signs and great wonders as have never occurred among the nations.

<sup>10</sup> For this purpose, God prepared two destinies—one for his people and the other for all the nations. <sup>11</sup> These two destinies were fulfilled at the moment, the hour and the day laid down by God

among the nations. <sup>12</sup> He remembered his people and rendered justice to his inheritance. <sup>13</sup> Thus, gathering together with joy before God on the fourteenth and fifteenth of the month of Adar, Israel will celebrate these days from generation to generation.

In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who affirmed he was a priest and a Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the foregoing letter concerning the Purim, maintaining that it was genuine and had been translated by Lysimachus, Ptolemy's son and a resident of Jerusalem.