

## Esther

Esther is an unusual book in the Bible since it's the only one that does not reference God directly (God's presence is strongly inferred, however). There are four main characters in the book of Esther: Mordecai and Esther on one "side;" Haman, the villain of the story, on the other; and Ahasuerus, King of the Persian Empire (and, thus, the "decision maker,") in-between. After King Ahasuerus becomes disenchanted with his first queen and sends her into exile, he selects as his queen the beautiful Esther – who, unbeknown to the King, is Jewish. Mordecai, Esther's uncle, is one of the leaders of the Jewish people in exile.

The scheming Haman becomes powerful as the King's prime minister and issues a decree that all should bow not only to the king, but also to him. Mordecai, however, refuses to bow down to Haman – giving as his only reason that, "I am a Jew." Haman is infuriated and asks King Ahasuerus' permission to destroy all the Jews scattered across the kingdom saying one-sidedly that they "do not observe the king's laws." Believing Haman's half-truth, King Ahasuerus grants Haman's request.

Mordechai gets word to Esther that she must go to the king and find a way to stop the horrible decree. Esther's difficulty, however, is that the law of the land decrees that anyone who approaches the king without being summoned faces death. Esther gathers her courage, however, and after fasting for three days and repenting of her own sins, Esther goes to the king, unsummoned, reveals that she is a Jew, and asks him to nullify his decree against the Jews. It gets complicated, but King Ahasuerus grants her request, and the Jews are spared.

## Jonah

God calls Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh to warn them that the city and all in it will be destroyed unless they repent of their wickedness. Nineveh, however, is an enemy of Israel, and Jonah does not want to go – both because he fears for his own safety there and because he would be perfectly happy for God to destroy Nineveh. So, Jonah tries to escape God. He heads to far-off Tarshish by ship, but there is a terrible storm on the sea. Since Jonah knows that it is his presence on the ship that has caused God to send the storm, Jonah, fully expecting to drown, actually asks the sailors to throw him into the sea. ***[Here's a man who would rather drown than deliver God's message to Nineveh!]*** But Jonah doesn't drown. Instead, Jonah is swallowed whole by a whale (or "large fish"). Knowing that God has saved him from drowning, Jonah, still inside the whale, offers prayers of thanks to God, and the whale deposits Jonah on dry ground.

So, eventually, Jonah reluctantly goes to the city and people of Nineveh. With as little enthusiasm as possible, he warns them that they must confess their evil deeds to God, or God will destroy their city and their nation. Surprisingly (at least to Jonah), the king and the people of Nineveh heed Jonah's warning, repent of their sins and change their ways. And, much to Jonah's dismay, God does forgive the people in Nineveh and does not destroy their nation.

After hanging around for a while to see what will happen to Nineveh, Jonah finally heads home – still angry with God for saving Nineveh.