



On your marks

The story of Esther is set in the time of the Jewish exile. Esther is a Jewish orphan girl who was the adopted daughter of Mordecai. She caught the eye of the King of Persia, King Xerxes, and became his new Queen. She kept quiet about her nationality and as Queen earned the King's respect when she and her adopted father warned him of plots against his life. Haman now became Prime Minister, second in power to him. Haman demanded that everyone should bow to him but Mordecai refused to bow to an earthly ruler. As result Haman saw Xerxes and bought the right to have all Jews killed. Esther intervened on the behalf of her people, first reminding the King at a party of how she and Mordecai had saved his life and later at a subsequent party exposing Haman's plan. He was hanged but the edict to kill the Jews could not be revoked. The King gave Jews permission to defend themselves against the attacks on their lives. The festival of Purim is celebrated annually to commemorate this event.

Get set

You can read the story Esther in the Old Testament. It has ten chapters and is unique in the Bible as a book that doesn't ever directly mention God! However it is clear that at every stage of the story God is watching over all that happens and God uses Esther's favoured position so that she is the right person in the right place at the right time to save God's people from destruction. Importantly though she has to have the courage to speak out to save her people. God didn't force her to speak. It was a brave move, for in those days no woman, not even one as highly placed as Esther, could talk to the King unless he talked to her first.

Go!

1 Choose children to play different people from the Esther story. There are six main characters but scope for many others as maids, courtiers, servants and ordinary citizens. Divide up the action into a number of different scenes for the children to improvise. These scenes could be:

- The King is angry because his Queen will not obey him. He decides to look for a new Queen
- Esther gets herself ready and Mordecai advises Esther to keep her nationality secret
- The King chooses Esther to be his new Queen
- Esther and Mordecai warn the King of plots against his life
- Haman becomes the new Prime Minister
- Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman
- Haman speaks to the King and gains the right to have the Jews eliminated
- Esther hears news of the edict from her maids
- Mordecai urges Esther to play her part and speak up for the Jews
- Esther organises a party to speak to the King and eventually challenges Haman about what he is doing.
- Esther tells the King everything and he allows the Jews to defend themselves when attacked

- Mordecai declares that this event should be remembered annually at a special festival

You may find it easier to ask the group to produce a series of [freeze frames](#) of these different scenes rather than expect the group to come up with improvised dialogue. As you put the freeze frames together add in some simple narration based on the scene descriptions above to help present the whole story.

Taking this a stage further, a leader or one of the older children could try stepping into the freeze frame with a pretend microphone as a reporter from Persian Press to interview some of the characters and discover what they are thinking at each stage of the story.

2 Here are some questions to get the group talking about this story:

- When Esther hears that the King is looking for a new wife, what do you think are her hopes and fears?
- Why did Mordecai advise Esther to keep quiet about her nationality?
- Why did Mordecai not bow to Haman when he became Prime Minister?
- Why was Haman so angry about this?
- Why do you think the King agreed to Haman's plan to wipe out all Jews?
- What were Esther's concerns about speaking up about all this before the King?
- What was Mordecai's advice?
- Why did Esther throw two parties and handle the matter the way she did?
- God's name is not mentioned throughout this story but in what ways do you think people would say that God was at work?
- Why do you think this event is so important to Jews today and is still celebrated every year at Purim?

3 Here is a further idea for handling this story creatively:

Use the drama technique of a *conscience alley*. Arrange the children in two long lines opposite each other. Set up the dilemma that Esther found herself in when she has just heard about what is going to happen to the Jews and after she has talked with Mordecai (see the summary of the story earlier). What should she do? Choose someone to be Esther. As she walks down the alley slowly, the other children on either side of the alley become the voices of her conscience, suggesting what she should do next.e.g.

Why not ignore the danger... after all, you are comfortably off and you won't be in danger as the Queen?

But... you owe it to Mordecai, who adopted you, to do something to help...

But... what if the King refuses to see you or listen to what you say etc...

You could try this same technique with other characters in the story to explore their feelings and motivations. It helps bring the story alive and connect it to issues of conscience facing the children today.



4 Here are some other ways in which you can develop this session with craft.

- Whenever Haman's name is read out in the Esther story, it is traditional to blot it out by making as loud a noise as possible, both by booing and hissing as well as shaking greggers (noise makers). Make some greggers from a variety of plastic containers filled with dried peas or pebbles or lentils etc. Decorate these with coloured paper and ribbons
- Eating *Hamantaschen* one of the treats at Purim. They are triangular pastries with sweet fillings. You will need some homemade or frozen sweet short crust pastry and assorted fillings.
- Roll the pastry thinly and cut out circles. Pour a spoonful of filling in the centre and lift the sides to make three-cornered shape. Seal the edges with more pastry. Bake for about 10 minutes at Gas Mark 5/190 degrees centigrade. Traditional fillings include honey, poppy seeds and plum jam. You could use mincemeat too.
Make sure you leave enough time for the pastries to cool before eating them, as the filling will be very hot.

5 Find out more about the Jewish festival of Purim. When does it take place? What does Purim mean? Why not invite someone from the Jewish tradition to your group and ask her/him about the festival?