

Queen Esther

Esther 2-8

During the empire-wide search for a queen, the Persian king Ahasuerus (aha-ZUR-us) chooses Esther, who unknown to the king is Jewish. Soon after, Esther's guardian, Mordecai, learns of a plot to assassinate the king and reports it to Esther, which saves the king's life. Later, king Ahasuerus appoints Haman, an Amalekite, to be his vizier—the highest official under the king. Haman likes his new position of power and demands that everyone bow down to him. However, Mordecai, a Jew like Esther, refuses to bow.

Midrash interpretations suggest that Mordecai refused to bow because it would be idolatry for a Jew to bow to someone who is not God or appointed by God (like the king). Another interpretation is that Haman is an Amalekite, the ethnic enemy of the Jews during the Exodus—when Moses led the Jews out of Egypt—because Amalekites attempted to kill the wandering Israelites. Therefore, Mordecai refused to bow to a descendant of a people who tried to destroy his people.

Haman is furious and when he finds out that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman plots to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom. Mordecai gets a message to queen Esther, asking that she go to the king.

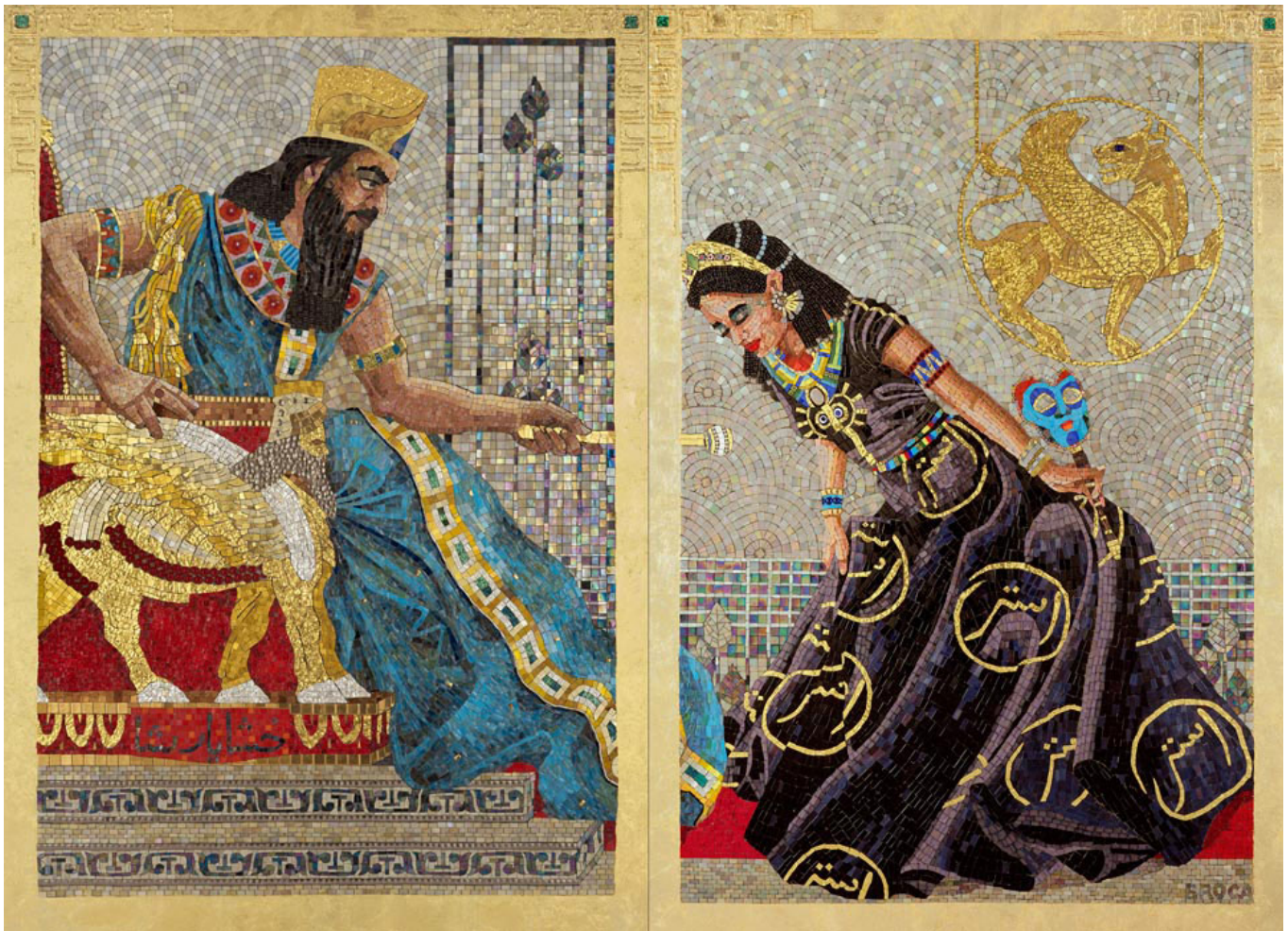
In response to Mordecai, Esther says: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if anyone goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

Mordecai responds: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Hearing the truth of his words, Esther directs Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the kingdom and fast for three days and nights. On the third day, even though her life is at stake, Esther goes to the king. "If I perish, I perish," she says. Luckily, the king is pleased to see her, offers her the golden scepter, and says, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given to you, even to the half of my kingdom." Esther cleverly requests two nights of feasting with the king and Haman before making her real request.

Meanwhile, Haman sends orders to destroy all the Jews and plots to hang Mordecai in the gallows. At the same time, however, the king plans to honor Mordecai for previously saving his life. After the second feast, Esther tells the king that there is a plot to destroy all the Jews. The king demands, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" Esther declares Haman the enemy to her and her people. Haman tries to deny the claims and begs for his life, but a guard shares Haman's plan to hang Mordecai. The king is furious and sentences Haman to death instead. He gives Esther all of Haman's land and riches, honors Mordecai, and reverses the order to destroy all the Jews. There are still battles, but the Jews, who are in the minority, end up victorious. In celebration, they hold the festival of Purim, which is still celebrated today.

Queen Esther—an ethnic minority as a Jew and, even as a queen, relatively powerless as a woman—was able to overcome these structures of power and attain protection, resources, and status for her people and their God.



Top: *Queen Esther Seeking Permission to Speak*, Lilian Broca, gems, gold, vitreous Glass on Honeycomb Panel, 2009.
 Bottom: *Queen Esther's Banquet*, Lilian Broca, vitreous glass, gold tessera, gold leaf on wood panel, 2003.

David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

David, the son of Jesse, was the youngest of eight brothers. His three oldest brothers went off to fight the Philistines, the enemies of Israel. The other four were needed to help tend the sheep and make the cheese. David got to be the errand boy, taking food to his brothers who were fighting.

One day, while delivering food at the battlefield, David heard the Philistine, Goliath, say: "Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together." David saw the men of Israel flee in fear before this giant of a man. But David asked: "What shall be done for the man who will kill Goliath and remove this reproach from Israel? For who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" The soldiers answered that the king would offer riches and the king's own daughter in marriage to anyone who could kill Goliath.

David's brother, Eliab, heard him talking to the men and became angry at David for asking such presumptuous questions. He told David to go back to tending sheep. But David's bold words reached the ears of king Saul, who sent for the young man.

"You are just a boy," king Saul said in disbelief when he saw David. "Goliath has been a warrior from his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep, and whenever a lion or a bear came to take a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth. God, who saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."

"Then go," said king Saul, "and may God be with you!" And king Saul put armor, a bronze helmet, a coat of mail, and a sword on David. But these things were so heavy David could not move. So David removed them, picked up his shepherd's staff, chose five smooth stones for his slingshot, and went forth to meet the Philistine.

When Goliath saw the youth before him, he mocked, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks? Come to me and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the wild animals of the field."

But David answered back, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied. This very day, the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

At this Goliath drew nearer to meet David, and David ran toward the battle line to meet Goliath. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it from his slingshot, and struck Goliath on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and Goliath fell face down on the ground, dead.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled in fear as the army of Israel chased after them. And so David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and stone. David went on to live with king Saul and marry his daughter. And when he grew older, David became the greatest king Israel ever had.



Statue of David, Andrea del Verrocchio, The Bargello, Florence, 1473-1475 CE.