

DIANA WALLIS TAYLOR

Hadassah

QUEEN ESTHER OF PERSIA



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of historical fiction and is based on the biblical record. References to real people, events, organizations, and places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblance to actual living persons is entirely coincidental.

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HADASSAH, QUEEN ESTHER OF PERSIA

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ISBN: 978-1-64123-213-5
eBook ISBN: 978-1-64123-214-2

Printed in the United States of America
© 2019 by Diana Wallis Taylor

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Taylor, Diana Wallis, 1938- author.
Title: Hadassah, Queen Esther of Persia / Diana Wallis Taylor.
Description: New Kensington, PA : Whitaker House, 2019. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2019013245 (print) | LCCN 2019015562 (ebook) | ISBN
9781641232142 (e-book) | ISBN 9781641232135 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Esther, Queen of Persia—Fiction. | Xerxes I, King of Persia,
519 B.C.-465 B.C. or 464 B.C.—Fiction. | Bible. Old Testament—History of
Biblical events—Fiction. | Iran—History—To 640—Fiction. | BISAC:
FICTION / Christian / Historical. | FICTION / Contemporary Women. | GSAFD:
Bible fiction. | Biographical fiction.
Classification: LCC PS3620.A942 (ebook) | LCC PS3620.A942 H33 2019 (print) |
DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019013245>

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DEDICATION

To women everywhere, who though faced with
overwhelming odds, draw on their strength and their God
to accomplish great and mighty things.



PROLOGUE

*H*adassah woke with a start and slowly looked around. She was in her own bed, but the dream puzzled her. In it, she had been alone, walking down a long hall with pillars on every side. She had called out for Mordecai, her guardian, but he did not answer her. She kept walking until the shadows enveloped her.

What could it mean?

Her people believed in dreams and visions. *Was it a portent of something to come?* Perhaps Adonai would reveal its meaning, in time. She shook off the lingering effects of the dream and concentrated on saying her morning prayers.



Hadassah watched the medicine woman, Bardia, put a hand on her mother's brow for a moment and listen to her labored breathing. Shaking her head, Bardia looked down at Hadassah and crouched by her mother's side. The look on her face was grave. Hadassah's mother slowly opened her eyes and motioned for Bardia to come closer.

"She has a cousin... only relative... Mordecai... in Susa." Her mother closed her eyes, her breathing becoming hoarser, then opened her eyes again. "Send for him... he... will come... for her."

She turned glazed eyes to Hadassah. "Mordecai will come. He... is family... will...take care... of you." She slowly reached up and put a hand on Hadassah's tear-streaked face.

"Imah! Don't leave me!" Hadassah frantically clutched her mother's hand, but it became limp and her arm dropped lifelessly on the bed.

First, her papa got sick and died. And now her mama! She threw herself on her mama's body, her grief-stricken cries echoing

in the house and outside. The healer quickly lifted her away from her mother's bedside and placed her further away, on the dirt floor.

"You must come away from her. Do you want to catch the fever also? She must be buried immediately."

Bardia stepped to the doorway and nodded to some of the men waiting there. Hadassah could only watch helplessly as her mama was quickly wrapped in a blanket and taken away. Her heart pounded as the healer took her by the hand. "You cannot stay here alone. You will have to stay with a neighbor until this cousin of yours comes."

Their neighbors were Tarig and his wife, Yara. He was not a kind man. He was always angry and Hadassah had heard them fighting many times. When he was drunk, he beat Yara and Hadassah could hear her cries. Fear coursed through her body. *Did this woman mean to take her there?* She cowered back from Bardia, but the healer grasped her hand tightly and pulled her out of the house and through the small courtyard to the home of Tarig and Yara.

"Come—you do not have a choice. If I were you, I'd pray to your God that your cousin comes soon."

Yara came to her doorway. Upon seeing Bardia and Hadassah, she sighed. "So the child's mother is dead?"

"Yes. Before she died, she said there is a relative in Susa. A cousin named Mordecai who works in the King's Treasury. He must be sent for."

Yara's brow creased and she sighed. "It will take days for a message to reach him." She looked down at Hadassah. "You expect me to care for her? She's a Jewish child."

The woman released Hadassah's hand. "I have work to do and others to care for. I cannot take her."

"Are there none of her people here?"

Bardia snorted. "They fled the city when the fever began."

Yara shook her head. "Then they were wiser than us." She studied Hadassah a moment. "You will do as I tell you and stay out of Tarig's way until your cousin comes for you."

Yara looked furtively toward the street. "My husband doesn't like children. I don't know.... What if she has the fever?"

Bardia waved a hand impatiently. "She is well. That is why I took her from the house. Her cousin is well off. You would be compensated for your trouble."

"What if this cousin does not come? Then what?"

"The Jews are fond of their children. I have seen this. He will come for her."

Yara sighed again and stepped back as Bardia almost pushed Hadassah into the house.

Yara waved a hand at Hadassah. "Go, sit over there in the corner until I can think what to do with you."

Bardia hurried away, calling over her shoulder. "I have others to tend to. Send for the cousin."

Yara watched her go and then reluctantly shut the door. She put her hands on her hips. "I do not know what Tarig will say. You better pray that your cousin comes." As she turned away, Hadassah heard her mutter, "If he comes ..."



Mordecai stood in the small courtyard of his home reading the papyrus scroll he'd just been handed. Sorrow filled his heart. His father's youngest brother, Abihail, and his wife had died of the fever. His arm dropped to his side.

He knew many of the Jews had chosen to remain in the city of Kish after the dispersal, even when King Darius put out an edict that they could return to Jerusalem. He'd just had news that fever was sweeping in Kish and he'd prayed the danger would pass his uncle's family. Now it was too late.

"I pray there are enough Jews to sit Kiddush for him," he murmured. It was too great a distance for him to go and it would be difficult to leave his work in the treasury for any length of time. As he read the rest of the scroll, the final words sent a jolt through him. His niece, Hadassah, had survived and was being kept by a neighbor until he could come for her. He stroked his beard, frowning as he considered the request. How old was Hadassah now? As well as he could remember, she should be around eight years old.

His wife, Jerusha was nearby, preparing their supper. He called to her and the urgency in his voice caused her to hurry to his side.

"What is wrong, Mordecai? Is it bad news?"

"My uncle Abihail and his wife are dead. The fever. That is grievous news, but there is more." He related the last part of the scroll.

"Oh, husband. A young girl? Are there no relatives to take her in?"

"My uncle was the last of our family. I am Hadassah's only living relative. I must go at once and bring her here." He paused. "I only saw her once, three years ago. A beautiful child."

Jerusha touched his arm. "Oh, my husband. We are to have a child in our home! What a blessing Adonai has bestowed on us."

"Perhaps, but we are still well past the age of child-rearing."

She smiled up at him. "Was not our Father Abraham almost one hundred and Sarai ninety? If Adonai has given us this blessing, surely He has a purpose in it."

Mordecai laughed. "That is true. Adonai has a purpose in everything He does. Leave it to you to see what I did not see."

He pulled on his beard thoughtfully. "I must go to my overseer and tell him what we have to do. He is a good man. I believe he will understand the urgency of the matter. And I must secure passage on a ship. It is the only way, since Kish is on an island."

As he hurried to the treasury, a word entered his mind. *Hurry.*