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THE HOLY BIBLE **NKJV** REFERENCE GUIDE

OLD TESTAMENT

BOOK 17

ESTHER



Esther Denouncing Haman by Ernest Normand

SUMMARY

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) rules Persia. He holds a feast – it is lavishly described. Queen Vashti holds a parallel feast for the women. When merry with drink, Ahasuerus demands that Vashti come and show off her beauty to his guests.

Queen Vashti refuses, making Xerxes angry. His counsellors express concern that Vashti's insubordination will set a bad precedent for wives everywhere. They advise that she is replaced so the right message is sent out across the land.

Ahasuerus looks for a new queen, with many virgins brought before him. Esther (brought up by Mordecai, her cousin) is prepared, presented, chosen and made queen. Esther conceals her Jewish identity. Mordecai saves Ahasuerus' life by revealing a conspiracy against him by two of his eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh.

Haman is promoted, and gains respect. Mordecai does not bow to Haman. Haman is angry, and seeks to kill not only Mordecai, but all Jews. Haman obtains permission from the king to issue a decree to kill all Jews, on the pretext that they separated themselves from the rest of the land and did not observe the king's laws. The date of the killing is set for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

Mordecai and Jews learn about the decree and mourn with sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai informs Esther of the law and advises her to speak with the king. Esther resolves to do so, despite the fact that she risks death for approaching the king uninvited. (She has been called to the king for thirty days.) The Jews fast for three days.

Esther visits the king. The king welcomes her, holding out his scepter to her, to indicate that she will not be killed. Esther invites the king and Haman to a feast. At the feast, Esther asks that the king and Haman come to another feast on the following day.

Haman is frustrated by Mordecai's continued refusal to bow before him, so his wife Zeresh advises him to build a gallows, and to request the king at the banquet to have Mordecai hung.

One restless night when he asks the chronicles to be read to him, the king discovers that Mordecai was never rewarded for saving his life. The king asks Haman to lead the parade of honor for Mordecai. Haman mourns, is warned by his wife of Mordecai's rising status, and hurries to the banquet.

Esther begs that her life, and the lives of the Jews may be spared. The king is angry. Haman pleads for his life before the queen – when the king enters, Haman trips onto her couch, so the king thinks he is assaulting her. Haman is hung on the very gallows that he made for Mordecai.

Esther is given Haman's property, and Mordecai assumes Haman's place. Esther begs the king to save the Jews. The decree is irrevocable once ratified by the king, but a counter-decree is issued allowing the Jews to protect themselves on the day they were scheduled for annihilation. When the Jews hear the news, they rejoice. Many in the land become Jews, because fear of the Jews fell on them.

Jews defend themselves, killing 75,000 enemies. Mordecai is a very prominent citizen. At Esther's request, Haman's ten sons are hung. Jews celebrate victory, and Purim is declared an annual festival for all Jews.

SUMMARY Continued

'Purim' is derived from 'pur' meaning 'lots', and refers to the lottery that Haman used to choose the date for the massacre. Ahasuerus' empire is strong. Mordecai is a popular and powerful ruler under Ahasuerus, and his story is recorded in official records.

CHARACTER Definitions

ESTHER - Esther, the Jewish maiden, was taken from her familiar surroundings and the care of her beloved uncle, Mordecai, and placed in the palace to become one of the women who would be used to satisfy the sexual desires of the king.

King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) was the son of the famed king, Darius I, who is mentioned in Ezra; Daniel; Haggai. The year of the incident between Esther and King Ahasuerus was about 483 B.C. The empire of King Ahasuerus was enormous; in fact, it was the largest the world had ever seen.

It covered the area now known as Turkey, as well as Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel; it also encompassed sections of modern-day Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

As with most of the pagan Gentile kings of that day, King Ahasuerus enjoyed putting on public displays of his wealth and power, which included feasts that sometimes lasted for as much as 180 days.

Evidently, during the feast that is mentioned in Esther 1:10-11, the king requested that his wife, Queen Vashti, come before the entire gathering of important men and officials to show them her great beauty wearing her crown. The speculation is that King Ahasuerus wanted Vashti to appear wearing only the crown.

Queen Vashti refused to put her nude body on public display, and so the king—who was not used to being denied anything—became enraged, dethroned her as queen, and banished her from the kingdom.

Afterwards, he made a decision to replace his wife with another woman. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that King Ahasuerus had a total of 400 women selected to fill the harem, from which he would eventually choose his wife and queen.

The time came, after a full year of preparation, for each of the women to spend a night with the king. Until that time, they were kept in the harem, by Hegai, but afterwards, because they were no longer virgins, they were moved to the area set aside to house the concubines – or mistresses – where they were put under the watchful eye of another eunuch, named Shaashgaz.

Eventually, Esther's time came, and because of her humility and acceptance of her position as servant, she went into the king's chamber. She was so extraordinarily beautiful, both inside and out, that the king was immediately smitten with her and made the decision to name her as the replacement for Queen Vashti, so he placed the crown upon her head.

Almost as soon as Esther was confirmed as queen, the king appointed an evil man over his affairs. His name was Haman, and he despised the Israelite people.

CHARACTERS Continued

Haman was a descendant of Agag, who was the king of the Amalekites, a people who were Israel's sworn enemy for generations, and bigotry and prejudice against Israel were deeply rooted within his darkened heart.

Esther's uncle, Mordecai, knew the heart of this wicked man and knew he hated the Israelite people. Haman manipulated and maneuvered until he was able to get into a position of authority from which he would be able to destroy them, so Mordecai enlisted Esther's aid in correcting the situation.

Esther took her life in her hands and decided to intercede with the king on behalf of her beloved people, Israel, no matter the consequences to herself. Anyone approaching the king without being summoned was immediately put to death.

She enlists Mordecai to gather the Israelites together and fast for three days, and by implication pray for her. Esther's fast could have no other object but to obtain God's favor and protection in the dangerous course on which she was about to enter: When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.

Her bravery and faith in God are a testament to the trust this young woman had in the living God. She is a lesson in God's sovereignty over His creation. He maneuvers every aspect of life to position people, governments, and situations for His plan and purpose.

We may never know what God is doing, but a time might come when we realize why we have gone through certain experiences, or met certain people, or lived in certain areas, or shopped in certain stores, or taken certain trips. The time may come when everything comes together, and we look back and see that we, too, were put in that moment of time, just as Esther.

She was put into a harem "for such a time as this." She was given to a king "for such a time as this." She was strengthened and prepared to intercede for her people "for such a time as this". Esther is truly a reminder of God's promise, as written in Romans 8:28: And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

MORDECAI– Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

These verses note the following facts about Mordecai: 1) he was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, 2) he lived in Susa, the capital of Persia, 3) he had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, and 4) he acted as a father to Esther.

When Esther was selected as one of the virgins to possibly be the next queen of King Xerxes (or Ahasuerus), Mordecai advised her not to reveal her Jewish background.

CHARACTERS Continued

Esther was crowned queen.

Mordecai, who worked at the palace gate, hears of an assassination plot against the king. Mordecai reports the plot to Esther, and the queen passes the intelligence on to Xerxes. The would-be assassins are stopped, and Mordecai's name is recorded in the king's chronicles as the one who took action to preserve the king's life.

Mordecai was hated by Haman, an Agagite who held a prominent office in the kingdom. Haman's hatred was due to Mordecai's refusal to bow in honor to him. As a Jew, Mordecai would only bow to the Lord God of Israel.

Haman was not content with simply doing away with Mordecai, however: Having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

Haman spoke to the king and secured the king's permission to annihilate the Jewish people on select date in the future. When Mordecai heard of the decree, he tore his clothing, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Mordecai had been checking on Esther each day. When she discovered he was mourning, she inquired of the cause. Mordecai informed Esther of Haman's plot against the Jews, telling her to go before the king and plead for the Jews' lives. At this, Esther balked—she did not have freedom to enter the king's presence without a summons; to approach the king uninvited was punishable by death.

Mordecai responded with logic: if she did not go before the king, she was dead anyway, for she herself was endangered by the king's edict. Mordecai ends his message to the queen with this famous statement: Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Esther agreed that she must break the Persian law that forbade access to the king, saying, "If I perish, I perish". She fasted for three days and then entered the king's presence uninvited.

Xerxes received her graciously, however, and Esther took the opportunity to invite the king and Haman to a banquet. At the meal, the king asked Esther if she had a request, and Esther asked for their presence at another banquet the next night.

Haman, who was ignorant of the queen's ethnicity, was pleased to be honored with not one banquet but two. On the way home, he was happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Once he arrived home, he issued an order to build a 75-foot-high gallows upon which to hang Mordecai.

That night after Esther's first meal, King Xerxes couldn't sleep. As a sleep-aid, he had his chronicles read to him. It just so happened that the account of Mordecai's thwarting the assassination was read. The king then discovered that nothing had been done to repay Mordecai for his good deed.

CHARACTERS Continued

At that moment, Haman entered the palace in order to obtain the king's permission to hang Mordecai—he never got the chance to ask, though, because the king ordered Haman to immediately take Mordecai through the streets of Susa to pay him homage. Haman was thus humbled before his enemy, and Mordecai received due honor.

After his humiliating experience of honoring Mordecai, Haman returned to the palace for Esther's second banquet. During the meal, the king again asked Esther if she had a request. This time, she pleaded for the king to rescue her and her people from destruction, and she pointed out Haman as the one wanting to kill her.

Haman was summarily put to death on the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai, and the Jews were given permission to defend themselves. The Jews successfully overcame Haman's evil plot, and Mordecai was rewarded with a promotion.

The final verse of Esther notes, Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

HAMAN – Haman is introduced as an enemy of Mordecai and the Jewish people: When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai.

Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. Haman's goal was the genocide of the Jews, becoming the opponent of Esther and her people in the book of Esther.

Haman was an Agagite and the son of Hammedatha. Haman was likely a descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites, long-time enemies of the Jewish people. God had told King Saul to destroy the Amalekites centuries earlier, but Saul failed to obey the command. His disobedience led to the loss of his kingdom and, in Esther's time, the threat of annihilation for all Jews.

Haman was married to a woman named Zeresh, and they had ten sons. Haman was a close confidant of King Xerxes (or Ahasuerus). Haman took personally the fact that Mordecai would not bow down to him, and his personal slight grew into a murderous hatred of all Jews.

Using his connection with the king, Haman was able to pass a law commanding the genocide of the Jews: Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

Haman had selected the day for the slaughter by casting lots (in Hebrew, purim). Wanting to make an example of Mordecai, Haman built a special gallows about 75 feet high, to hang his enemy on.

CHARACTERS Continued

God has a way of turning the tables, though. Much to Haman's chagrin, King Xerxes (who was unaware of Haman's vendetta against Mordecai) commanded that Mordecai be honored for thwarting an assassination attempt against the king.

To Haman's utter mortification, the king commanded that Haman do the honors—Haman had the task of walking Mordecai through the city on horseback and proclaiming the king's admiration for him. Zeresh and Haman's advisors saw this turn of events as an ill omen that presaged Haman's downfall.

Queen Esther, a Jewess herself, used her position to intercede for her people. She did this by inviting the king and Haman to two banquets—which Haman (who was unaware of the queen's ancestry) took as a great honor. At the second banquet, Esther confronted the king regarding Haman's plot against her people. The king was furious and left the room.

Seeing he had incurred the wrath of Xerxes, Haman fell before Esther to plead for his life. The king re-entered the room, saw Haman on the couch with the queen, and said, Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house? One of the king's eunuchs then informed the king that Haman had prepared gallows for Mordecai.

And the king said, Hang him on that. So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated. Haman's hostility toward the Jewish people resulted in his own death.

On the fateful day appointed for the destruction of the Jews, it was the Jews' enemies who were destroyed instead. The ten sons of Haman were also hanged.

The Jewish Feast of Purim, a celebration of the deliverance detailed in the book of Esther, is named after the lots that Haman cast. On Purim, the book of Esther is read in the synagogue, and every time the name "Haman" is read, the audience drowns out the sound with ratchet-type noisemakers called graggers (or groggers) or by anything loud and annoying: alarm clocks, toy xylophones, balloons popped with pins, dolls that cry, toy police sirens, whistles, etc.

AHASUERUS - The name Xerxes does not appear in the Hebrew text of Scripture. In the Hebrew text, the king's name is Ahasuerus. Nothing is known of a king named Ahasuerus from secular sources, and the names of all the Persian kings from this time period are known.

Most commentators equate Esther's king with Xerxes I (485–465 BC), son of Darius I, the fourth emperor of the Achaemenid Empire—thus the translation in some modern versions. (There is some evidence to show that the Hebrew name Ahasuerus can be easily derived from the Persian name.)

The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the name Artaxerxes, which further complicates the issue, for there were two Persian rulers by that name: Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC) and Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC).

What we know of the character of Xerxes I fits with what we see in the book of Esther. Xerxes had a summer palace in Susa. He was known for his drinking, lavish banquets, harsh temper, and sexual appetite.

CHARACTERS Continued

Esther mentions a foiled plot against his life, and we know from secular history that, later, in 465, Xerxes was assassinated by the head of his bodyguard.

The most likely scenario is that the episode of Xerxes' life involving Esther took place after Xerxes' disastrous invasion of Greece in 480 BC. Xerxes' forces paid a heavy toll at the pass of Thermopylae at the hands of the fabled 300 Spartans and were defeated at Salamis. Returning home, Xerxes turned to domestic affairs.

King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) plays a prominent role in the book of Esther. In chapter 1 he gives a great banquet for his nobles and, after several days of eating and drinking, orders that the queen Vashti appear at the banquet so the men there might see her great beauty. Vashti refuses to attend, so the king deposes her.

Xerxes begins to regret his decision to oust the queen, and he decides to find a new queen. The queen of Persia was not simply the wife of the king. The queenship was an honorary/political position.

The king was a polygamist with many wives and concubines in his harem, but the queen was a special wife occupying a favored position. A call is sent out throughout the kingdom for all beautiful virgins to be gathered into the harem so that the king could choose a new queen from among them.

As a member of the harem, a woman would technically be the property of the king—either a wife or a concubine. Each of the women would spend a night with the king. After their night together, each woman would be moved to the “other side” of the harem and would never see the king again, unless he called for her.

When he found the “right one,” Xerxes would name her queen, although she would not be his exclusive wife or sexual partner. A woman whom Xerxes never called again would live her life in the harem as a pampered prisoner with no possibility for a real marriage or family of her own.

A Jewess named Esther, who was raised by her cousin Mordecai, was one of the women rounded up for Xerxes. She was eventually named queen, but she kept her nationality a secret. Mordecai is anxious for Esther and loiters day after day near the harem quarters to monitor how she is doing. In so doing, he overhears a plot to kill the king. He reports it to Esther, who reports it to the king, and the plot is foiled.

One of Xerxes' chief advisors, Haman, is angered that Mordecai will not bow down to him, so he hatches a plot to kill not only Mordecai but all of the Jews. Haman convinces King Xerxes to authorize the extermination; however, it appears that the king does not know the identity of the people that Haman plans to wipe out—only that they are enemies of the state.

He trusts Haman to handle the details. Mordecai informs Esther of the danger the Jews are in and convinces her to intercede with the king. The problem Esther faces is that Xerxes has not called for her for some time and, if she approaches him without being summoned, she risks death.

At this point, neither the king nor Haman knows Esther's nationality or her relationship to Mordecai.

CHARACTERS Continued

Mordecai encourages Esther to take the risk, saying that perhaps she has been made queen “for such a time as this”.

The queen approaches Xerxes, and he extends his scepter to her, signifying that he welcomes her into his presence. Instead of explaining her predicament, however, Esther invites the king and Haman to a private banquet.

At the banquet Esther again puts off addressing the issue; instead, she asks the king and Haman to come to another banquet the next day, which they agree to do. Haman is so overjoyed and emboldened by the special attention he’s receiving from the queen that he decides to have Mordecai hanged in advance of the general slaughter of the Jews.

The king cannot sleep, so he has the royal annals read to him. When the account of the foiled plot against his life is recounted, Xerxes asks if Mordecai has ever been honored for saving him. When he finds that Mordecai has never been rewarded, Xerxes decides to remedy the oversight.

At that moment, Haman enters, and the king asks him, What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor? Haman thinks the king is referring to him, so he proposes a lavish public display: For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set.

And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

The king thinks it is a splendid idea to be carried out immediately and tells Haman, Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.

So, in what some would call a strange “twist of fate,” Haman has to publicly honor Mordecai. After his humiliation, Haman hurriedly prepares for the banquet with Esther and the king, as Haman’s family laments that certainly fate is against him now.

At the second banquet, Xerxes asks Esther, What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled. Esther begs for the life of herself and her people.

The king is enraged and asks who would dare plot such a thing. Esther answers, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman! The king rushes from the room in a rage, and Haman throws himself upon the couch where Esther is reclining to plead for his life.

At that moment, the king returns and misinterprets Haman’s actions: Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house? Haman is whisked away and hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

The house of Haman is given to Esther, and his position in the court is given to Mordecai.

CHARACTERS Continued

Even though Haman is out of the way, the plot to kill all the Jews is still afoot. It appears that the king's edict called for citizens of Persia to kill Jews on a certain day and confiscate their property.

The edict, which could not be rescinded, is modified to allow the Jews to defend themselves, and in chapter 9 they are able to withstand the attack, and many of their enemies are killed.

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, but He is conspicuous by His absence. In Esther we do not see any miracles or divine intervention. However, we do see an abundance of providence, which is God's control and provision through "natural" means.

It is clear that the writer of the book intends us to see God's unseen hand behind every detail and ironic twist of "fate." Although Xerxes is the king, he is not ultimately in charge. The king of Persia is little more than a bit player in God's all-encompassing drama.

BIBLE TIMELINE

483 BC	Queen Vashti Deposed	Esther 1
478 BC	Esther Becomes Queen	Esther 2
478 BC	Mordecai Thwarts a Conspiracy	Esther 2:21
474 BC	Haman Seeks Revenge on the Jews	Esther 3
473 BC	Mordecai Informs Esther of Haman's Plot	Esther 4
473 BC	Esther Prepares a Banquet	Esther 5
473 BC	The King Honors Mordecai	Esther 6
473 BC	Haman Is Hanged	Esther 7
473 BC	Xerxes' Edict on Behalf of Esther and Jews	Esther 8
472 BC	Purim Instituted	Esther 9
472 BC	Xerxes' Tribute to Mordecai	Esther 10

MAP REFERENCES



Kings of Persia

The Persian Empire fell in 330 BC to Alexander the Great's much smaller Greek army (Daniel 7; 8:3, 20-21).

- Achaemenes (700-675 BC)
- Cyrus I (640-600 BC)
- Cyrus II (559-530 BC)*+
- Cambyses II (530-522 BC)
- Darius I (522-486 BC)*+
- Xerxes I (486-465 BC)*+
- Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC)*+
- Darius II (424-404 BC)
- Darius III (336-330 BC)



Limestone Wall Relief of Darius I and Xerxes (Persepolis, Iran)

*Those named in the Bible who are mentioned in extra biblical history or archaeology
 +Mentioned by name in the Bible