

EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE

ESTHER

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: The Book of Esther.

**Her name appears 55 times in 10 chapters
of the Old Testament Book bearing her name.**

GENERAL DESCRIPTION: From throngs of virgins, Esther is chosen to be
wife of King Ahasuerus (Atraxerxes II) of Persia.

**She succeeds Queen Vashti, who had been
deposed. She averts a general massacre of her
race planned by wicked Haman, Prime Minister.**

**Her service to her people gives rise to the Feast of
Purim.**

DATE: About 475 B.C.

NAME: Esther [ESS-ter: "star"].

Main

Contribution: As Queen of Persia she thwarted a plot to
exterminate ALL Jews in the Persian
Empire.

ESTHER'S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE: (An Overview):

Esther was the niece of Mordecai, a Jewish official in the royal court. Mordecai aroused the hostility of Haman, a higher official. Haman determined to take revenge, but he was not satisfied with engineering Mordecai's death. Instead Haman determined to wipe out Mordecai's whole race.

Haman was successful in winning permission for this early holocaust from the king, and began to throw dice to determine the best moment to carry out his plan.

In the meantime, Queen Vashti was deposed, and Esther was selected to be queen.

Through a series of God-ordained events, King Ahasuerus discovered that Mordecai had once saved his life. Haman was determined to wipe out Mordecai's whole race. Haman was successful to win permission for this early holocaust from the king, and began to throw dice to determine the propitious moment to carry out his plan.

When Queen Esther exposed Mordecai's plan for Esther's people; Queen Esther told the king:

“If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life-- this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I

would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

(Esther 7:6).

When Queen Esther exposed Haman, the king ordered Haman's execution on the very gallows Haman had erected to hang Mordecai.

Working together Mordecai and Esther created a decree that not only saved the Jewish people, but also rid the Jews of their most virulent enemies.

The setting is Persia, and Esther becomes the first notable woman in the Bible who lived outside Palestine, though she was of a noble Jewish family carried into captivity when Nebuchadnezzar reduced Jerusalem to what Isaiah had called a wilderness of thorns and briers.

Esther is the central figure in what is one of the most controversial books in the Old Testament, because not once does the name of God appear in it. But its significance and importance to Jewish history stems from the fact that it has become a patriotic symbol to a persecuted people of the ultimate triumph of truth and justice. And the courage of Esther becomes the dominating factor in the salvation of her people.

Many authorities agree that the governing purpose of the Book of Esther is to explain and justify the celebration of the Feast of Purim, observed in March by the Jews. Although the author of the book of Esther is unknown, historians confirm the fact that they showed an amazingly accurate knowledge of Persian palaces and customs, and critics place the work among the masterpieces of literature. None of the characters is more skillfully presented than is Esther herself.

Like many great characters in history, Esther makes her first appearance as one of the humblest figures, and orphan Jewess. But in just four years, she rises to the position of a Queen of amazing power, a power which she manages to use wisely.

The setting where she is placed is the magnificent palace of the Persian Empire in the time of Ataxerxes II (404-358 B.C.). The curtains were fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble. The beds were of gold and silver, upon a floor of red, blue, white, and black marble. The wine was served in vessels of gold and flowed in abundance. (See Esther 1:6,7).

The ancient writer's estimation of Esther's importance to this story becomes apparent, for in this short Bible book, her name appears fifty-five times. The name of no other woman in the Bible is recorded so often. Only Sarah, whose name appears as Sarah thirty-five times and as Sarai sixteen, even come near to meeting this record.

The queen who preceded Esther was Vashti, (whom we met last month), respected as a woman of nobility and honor and one who had the courage to refuse an unjust command from her husband. After much feasting and drinking, he had commanded 7 eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti before him so that he might show the princes her beauty. This was during a drunken palace feast. Vashti refused. The king became so angry at the refusal of a woman/wife that he issued an order that her royal position be given to another.

Vashti's refusal, opened the way for Esther to make her appearance. She had been reared by her cousin Mordecai, a Benjamite official at the palace gate. He had seen the king's royal notice that beautiful young virgins would be assembled to become part of the king's harem in Shushan, if they pleased the king. They would take the place of Vashti. So...Mordecai sent his cousin Esther.

Of all the gathered maidens gathered in Shushan, Hadassah (Esther's Hebrew name) – was probably the only one who worshiped the one true God, (but this is never mentioned.)

She was educated as a daughter in the house of Mordecai, a wise and devout Israelite, she had probably learned from him the glorious truths about God treasured by her people. In that throng of virgins, she may have been the only one who had not worshiped idols or some of the many other heathen gods. From her infancy, devout Jewess that she was, she probably been on her

knees to God, and in this rich Persian kingdom she was in touch with the real power of God, not counted by the

amount of marble or gold or silver one had.

When she was presented to the king, he instantly loved her and announced her as the new Queen and placed the crown upon her head. After she was crowned Queen her name was changed from Hadassah, meaning “myrtle”, to Esther; meaning “star”. The name was very befitting because she soon played a stellar role in the lives of her people, who were threatened with total destruction. Early in her reign, she dedicated herself, not to the pleasures, comforts, and luxuries of a palace, but to the dreams, hopes and ambitions of her people.

When Esther became Queen, King Ahasuerus had no idea that she was a Jewess. He was attracted only to her beauty, and he celebrated her entrance into the court with a great fest, which included her as Queen of one of the most powerful empires in the world.

Use your imagination and picture her moving about this magnificent palace with grace and dignity, wearing robes of gold and purple and beautiful jewels which set off her beautifully garlanded black hair, olive skin, and eyes radiant because of all the wonder and beauty that stretched before her. We can imagine that she felt that she had been placed upon this high pedestal, not by chance, or an accident, but because God had a higher purpose for her and her life.

Queen Esther was not just a “pretty face”. She soon gained favor with the people, because she demonstrated that she had a brain and sound judgment, fine self-control, and she was able to put others first. It was not long that she figured out the plans that Haman, a favorite of her husband, hated her people and was demanding that the Jews bow down to him. Some modern Jewish writers describe him as a typical Hitler, because he had such an intense hatred so strong that it became an evil intent to destroy all of these God-fearing people. Of course Esther was strongly opposed to such ideas, and was ready to defend her people-- even with her own life.

Her maids and eunuchs brought her news that there was a serious feud between Mordecai and Haman, this news deeply disturbed and distressed her. She knew she must act promptly and wisely. Soon she received a message from her cousin placing upon her this great responsibility:

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Her triumphant place in the hearts of her people became assured because she accepted her own Divine destiny. Quietly she issued orders that all Jews in Shushan hold a fast on her behalf, and she joined them in this fast, which demonstrates Esther's strong belief in prayer.

Following the fast, she prepared to go before her husband and intercede for her people. If the king was in a good mood, she might gain her point, if not, she could lose her cause and even her life.

As Esther was getting ready to go to appear before the King, one of the most courageous assertions made by a woman in the Bible is credited to her. Then Esther sent this message to Mordecai:

“Go gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maid will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish I perish.” (Esther 4:16).

This is a woman who had not only high courage, but sincere faith and a devotion to the cause of her people.

Also she had exhibited real loyalty in her co-operation with her cousin Mordecai, who raised her and was largely responsible for the fact she now sat on the throne of Persia. The king's affection was hers totally. As she appeared before him in her most royal appearance, his first words were,:

“What is it Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you.” (Esther 5:3).

Wise as well as fearless, Queen Esther knew that, though she had won her husband's love and confidence, she was dealing with powerful and sinister forces. It was best to move slowly with the king.

She answered him saying that she had one request, and that was that he join Haman with her for dinner. The king ordered that Haman be brought quickly. Haman was elated because he was sure he was not in the good graces of the queen as well as the king. It would be easy to do away with his enemy Mordecai. Haman rushed home and bragged to his wife Zeresh and friends about his invitation from the queen. They told him now was the time for him protest against Mordecai. “Why not,” they asked, “prepare a gallows on which to hang Mordecai?”

Still proud of himself, Haman proceeded with a happy heart to Queen Esther's banquet. After the banquet the king could not sleep. He called for the book of memorable deeds. There he found written the story that Mordecai had saved his life earlier from two palace eunuch who had plotted to destroy him and that Mordecai had never been rewarded for the deed.

The next morning Haman was waiting in the court for an audience with the king, and his mission was to request the king to hang Mordecai. Haman had a surprise awaiting him. He learned that the king desired to pay honor to Mordecai.

At the second banquet to which Haman had been invited by Queen Esther, again she was asked by her husband what he could do for her. And she fell at his feet with tear in her eyes, telling him,

“We are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain and to perish.” (Esther 7:4).

Then turning she said:

“This adversary and enemy is the vile Haman.” (Esther 7:6).

And at that moment he sat in the banquet room as their guest, but now he humbled himself before Esther, begging for his life. It was too late. The king was indignant. He ordered that Haman be hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Esther's cousin, Mordecai.

After that Esther won even greater confidence from the king. He turned over to her the “golden scepter.” Again exhibiting solicitude for the permanent protection of her people, she was instrumental in having it written into the law that the Jews not only could defend themselves but could slay their enemies.

The Jews, then in Persia, celebrated their deliverance for the wholesale massacre that had been planned by Haman. And they called the celebration a Purim Festival, because Haman had cast *pur* (a lot) to ascertain a favorable day for carrying out his plot to destroy the Jews.

To this day the Purim Festival is celebrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth of March when the Roll of Esther is read in Jewish synagogues all over the world. Queen Esther's last decree was that this feast be held annually, “and it was written in the book” (Esther 9:32). It became a law that stands even today.

Esther herself lives on in the hearts of her people and is still commemorated at the Purim Festival as a woman who rose up as a savior of those Jew who were refugees in Persia about 24 centuries ago. She has become one of the greatest heroines because she served with fearlessness, intelligence, deep insight, and prudence.

Her name has been immortalized in art, in literature, in plays based on her life, in music by Handel. There are also four Gobelin tapestries depicting Esther's dramatic story in Windsor Castle

EXPLORING ESTHER'S RELATIONSHIPS:

Esther's relationship with God: One of the unique features of the Book of Esther is that it contains no mention of God. Yet it is clear that Esther and her uncle had a deep and abiding faith in Him.

Esther's faith expressed in fasting: (Esther 4:16): Esther asked Mordecai to “gather all the Jews” and fast for three days and nights. She and her maids would do the same. In the *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (1985), Larry Richards identifies four reasons given in the Old Testament for fasting. The fast Esther requested was that “undertaken in times of deep trouble and underlined the seriousness of personal and national appeals to God” (p. 265). Without doubt prayer accompanied such fasting.

Mordecai urged Esther's faith-response: Mordecai warned Esther: “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

(Esther 4:14). This confident assertion could only be made by one who was fully aware of God's covenant commitment to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12: 1-3): The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Esther's relationship with Mordecai: Mordecai was a surrogate father to Esther, and Esther showed him the respect that Scripture teaches a child should show to a parent. Esther looked to Mordecai for advice, and so respected his opinion that she overcame her fear and took the initiative to approach the king.

It would be wrong, however, to see Esther as a person unable to make decisions. Rather, in a time of crisis Esther relied on a wise parent who had proved his love for her over the years and whose judgment she had come to respect.

Esther stepped out in faith (4:16): Esther determined to do as Mordecai asked, and she approached her husband. Her statement, “If I perish, I perish”, is not a fatalistic abandonment but a conscious trusting of herself into God's hands. Whatever happened, God would be with her, and He would welcome her into His presence. Her faith was not unlike that of Abraham who

trusted God with the life of his son Isaac. Her choice prefigures Jesus' remark to His disciples, "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Esther honored Mordecai by accepting his guidance: Mordecai saw the call for beautiful young virgins to vie to become queen as an opportunity for Esther. She did as Mordecai suggested and ultimately became queen.

Esther honored Mordecai by following his advice: Esther did not reveal her race before or after she became queen. In those times as well as throughout much of history, significant anti-Jewish prejudice existed.

Esther honored Mordecai by remaining in contact with him: Even as queen, Esther's maids passed messages between Esther and Mordecai. This enabled Esther to warn the king of a plot that Mordecai uncovered against the king's life.

When her maids reported that Mordecai was seated in sackcloth and ashes-- a sign of mourning – Esther immediately sent to find out what was wrong. The messages sent between the two show that they were quite close and that Esther deeply respected her uncle and his advice.

Esther's relationship with King Ahasuerus (Xerxes II). Esther's husband was an absolute ruler, but there is good reason to believe that he was also slightly mad. He launched a number of campaigns against the Greeks suffering successive defeats. On one occasion when a storm destroyed a pontoon bridge over which he expected his troops to pass, he ordered soldiers into the water to beat the waves with ships.

Xerxes' erratic decision-making was illustrated in his treatment of Vashti (1:10-17). When his beautiful queen refused to be put on display for the king's drunken guests, he quickly deposed her. It did not pay to embarrass the king!

Xerxes' brutality is illustrated in his ready agreement to Haman's plan to wipe out an entire race of people in his empire (3:8-11). While he called on his counsel to advise him concerning Vashti, he felt no need to consult with them concerning the planned holocaust.

Xerxes' unpredictability was illustrated by his inaccessibility (4:11). People were not allowed to approach the king unless he sent for them. Anyone who did so was to be put to death – unless the king raised his golden scepter and pointed to that person. Even Esther, who had not been called by the king for thirty days, was terrified at all the thought going to him.

If ever a woman had a difficult marriage – it was Esther!

ESTHER: A CLOSE-UP.

When we first meet Esther she is a young girl of marriageable age living in Mordecai's household. She is selected as one of the empire's beauties, to be considered by the king as a possible queen. It is significant that when Esther was chosen and placed in the royal women's quarters to undergo a year of training and beauty treatments she quickly won the allegiance of Hegai, the custodian of the women. Esther's sweet spirit and personality matched her physical attractiveness.

Even when Esther had been selected by the king to become his queen, Esther maintained contact with Mordecai and sought his advice. When Mordecai uncovered a plot to murder the king, Esther passed the information on to Ahasuerus, giving credit to her source.

When Mordecai informed Esther of the danger Haman posed to the Jewish people and urged her to intercede with the king Esther was afraid. The king had not called for her in over a month, and if she should go to him uninvited, he might be angered and have her executed. After consideration Esther asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews in the capital city to fast for three days. The implication is that the fasting was intended to enable the Jews to concentrate in their prayers, asking God to act for them. Esther and her maids fasted also. Only when Esther was sure that God's help had been sought earnestly did she risk approaching the king.

In the end Esther found in her faith the courage to approach the king and appeal to him. And her appeal was successful. Because of the great deliverance she won for the Jewish people, her courage is commemorated in an annual celebration called the Feast of Purim, and Jewish women's groups everywhere have adopted Esther's Jewish name Hadassah.

ESTHER: AN EXAMPLE FOR TODAY:

- Mordecai reminded Esther that perhaps God had made her queen to meet the challenge that Haman posed to her people. Perhaps, we have come to our own "kingdom" for God's special purpose through us.
- Esther showed wisdom and patience in a terrible situation while dealing with a difficult husband. She operated within God's will in the situation, and used every gift He had given her. We too are to do what is right. But let's do it wisely, using our God-given gifts.
- Esther was a model adult daughter. While she was free to act as she chose, she carefully weighed Mordecai's advice.
- Mordecai is a good example of a wise parent of an adult child. He gave wise advice but let the child make up her own mind.

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