

Esther

BORN FOR HER TIME

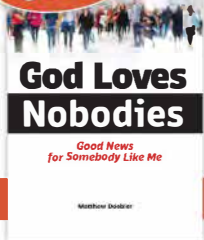


James A. Aderman


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ESTHER

Born for Her Time



James A. Aderman

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

To my parents, through whom the invisible
God has worked in visible ways.

Second edition, 2014

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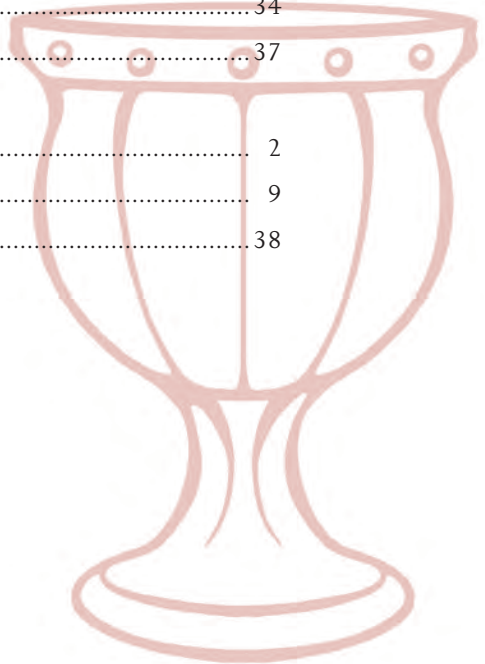
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	iv
BORN FOR HER TIME	v
1. Driven by a Mission.....	1
2. Vashti's Demise	8
3. The Beauty Pageant	12
4. Haman's Treachery	16
5. Finding the Right Moment	23
6. A Tall Gallows.....	27
7. Beyond Coincidence	29
8. Esther's Petition.....	34
9. Persian Law	37
ILLUSTRATIONS	
Persian Kings.....	2
Map of the Persian Empire	9
Purim	38



FOREWORD

They have been referred to as the saints, the Hebrews, the Israelites, a remnant, and the church. They are God's people—his chosen people. They belong to him; so precious that he would go to impossible lengths to overcome the gulf that separates them from himself. You and I are among them.

The books in this series are a recital of the life and times of some of them—Noah, Jacob, Ruth, David, Jonah, Paul, and others. Their stories involve conflict and resolution, pain and tragedy, despondency and renewal. They present disturbing images from the underbelly of human depravity, and visions of untold glory that transport us to the soaring heights of ultimate conquest. The plots and settings are drawn from the living record of the Bible. Series authors and editors were careful to remain faithful to that record. Yet today's sophisticated reading audiences demand background and description. They relate to narrative. In an effort to make the text come alive, each story in this series is presented in a natural framework designed for this audience.

In these stories we see God's people wrestling with their humanity and struggling to find respite for their souls. Each story is unique in its own right. Yet two common threads run through the fabric of their stories and ours. The first is the thread of the bitter curse of sin. The second is the golden thread of salvation in Christ Jesus. We can readily identify with both, for we share these same two themes with all of God's people. Their stories, like ours, rest forever in God's abiding grace.

Kenneth Kremer, Series Editor

The book of Esther remains an enigma in the Bible. In its ten chapters, God is never mentioned. Neither is worship or prayer. Not even the temple or Jerusalem finds its way into the account of this Persian queen of Jewish descent.

When the Spirit inspired this book, he chose to leave many questions unanswered. Why did Esther conceal her nationality for the first five years of her life in the harem? Did Esther and her adopted father, Mordecai, act out of spiritual conviction or selfish consideration?

Obviously, God used Esther and Mordecai to save his people from genocide. And the Eighth Commandment requires that we put the best construction on their motives. But the evidence doesn't allow us to make the case that God chose them because they were spiritual giants.

The truth is that the Spirit never intended for the people in this story to be the focus. The focus is in the shadows, in the blur of activity that we only catch out of the corners of our eyes. The focus of the book of Esther is God's barely detectable breath as it shapes events of history to conform to his promises and grace.

The book of Esther is a story about a woman whom God placed into a specific time and place and into a unique circumstance. Hers is a story of how God usually works: quietly, constantly, inexorably. It's a story of his impeccable timing, his redemptive power, and his grace reaching out to souls beyond his people in unexpected ways.

Since this is the approach the ultimate Author took when he breathed the story of Esther into its holy writer, this retelling,

BORN FOR HER TIME

for the most part, declines to mention God. But we would miss out on the main message if we would fail to sense God in this story. Therefore, we strain to feel the soft draft of God's movement, his divine scurrying from place to place as he keeps his age-old commitment: "'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Nisan, 474 B.C.

As if pushed by the breath of an immense bellows, dust blew down the open hallway, swirled, and settled in a corner. Beyond the hallway, beyond the walls of the palace, beyond the city of Susa's ramparts, the flat, white desert stretched to the horizon. A green stripe, the lush banks of River Ulai, meandered through the landscape. The morning sun blazed its swath across a clear sky.

Footsteps clacked down the stone hallway. The heavy clomp of armed eunuchs strode in syncopation with the more delicate click of a woman's gait.

She was dressed in an ankle-length robe of purple and white, the colors of royalty. Flashes of gold jewelry sparkled in the fresh light. Her clear, olive-toned face and straight, Mid-Eastern nose set her apart from lesser women.

Her gentle brown eyes usually glimmered with warmth and life. Most men were seized by her eyes when they first met her. But today their colors were muted, almost watery.

She walked with resoluteness, determination. Her mission drove her forward. But inside, beneath the regal robes, she felt the queasy, unsettling disruption of a stomach gone sour.

She breathed deeply—and then held her breath for several seconds before breathing deeply again. She noticed the clammy moisture that clung to her palms.

She wondered if she would live to see the noontime sun.

How out of character for this young woman to take it upon herself to visit her husband. Her name was Esther. It means "star," a derivative of the goddess Ishtar's name. Star described

Persian Kings

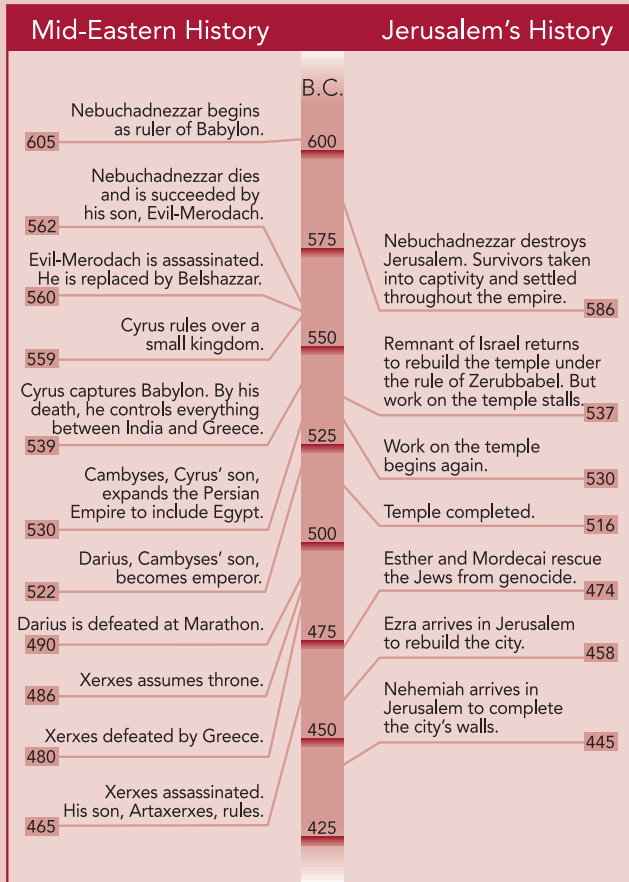
The Persian Empire exploded across the Middle East a half millennium before Jesus' birth. Cyrus the Great assumed the throne of a small city in modern day Iran in 559 B.C. Ten years later he seized control of his overlord's entire kingdom. From there he conquered Lydia in modern Turkey and marched through Assyria (northern Iraq). By 539 B.C. he had sufficient strength to bring down Babylon, the world power of his day. By the time of his death, he had stitched together a nation larger than any other the world had known. It stretched from India to Turkey and south to the borders of Egypt.

Cyrus claimed Zoroastrianism as his religion. He believed spiritual truth could be found in every faith system. Consequently, when prompted by a dream that he attributed to the God of Israel which told him to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, he agreed. The opening chapters of Ezra describe the return.

Cyrus' son Cambyses took over at Cyrus' death in 530 B.C. Cambyses expanded the borders of Persia into Egypt.

His son Darius the Great reigned from 522–486 B.C. He consolidated the empire. He also instituted a form of pony express postal service that brought official communications from one part of his empire to another at unprecedented speed.

Persian Kings History



During Darius' reign, the city-states of Greece became a growing irritant. The battle at Marathon in 490 B.C. ended Darius' plans to bring Greece to its knees.

Xerxes (486–465 B.C.) was Darius' son and successor. Xerxes also attempted to unseat the Greeks, not only in Turkey but on their own peninsula. After a number of successes, his army met defeat at Salamis. Several months later, the Greeks destroyed his navy at Platea. The Persians never again mounted an assault on the Grecian mainland.

Xerxes died by assassination in 465 B.C. His son Artaxerxes (465–424 B.C.) allowed Ezra to return to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. to help with its rebuilding. A few years later, he sent Nehemiah to complete the work.

Esther: a stunning, beautiful woman who sparkled against life's dark sky. But her physical attributes or even her position as the queen, the first wife among her husband's hundreds of wives, did not translate into pride. Some called her reserved, shy, even submissive and overly obliging. They were right.

How different from her was her husband. He was not just any man. He was the "King of All Peoples"—a name he took for himself—the ruler of the largest empire the world had known up to that time. People trembled at his name: Xerxes. His land's borders stretched from the mountains of India in the east to the tree-decked edges of Europe in the west to the trackless deserts of Egypt in the south.

Xerxes came from a family of conquerors. His great grandfather, Cyrus, had launched a campaign of world domination that, by the time of his death, included the whole empire of the Babylonians. Xerxes' grandfather, Cambyses, pushed the edges of the empire further. And Xerxes' father, Darius, continued the tradition. Now, 80 years after Cyrus, Xerxes controlled the far-flung Persian Empire.

A man of such power has many enemies. Limited access to Xerxes protected him from assassination. Audiences with the great king were by invitation, even for his queen. This fit a mighty emperor's perception of his lofty position; he was unapproachable, worthy of worship and groveling respect.

To walk into the king's presence was to put one's life on the line. The king's well-trained, intensely loyal, and heavily armed bodyguards swarmed on the uninvited. And the emperor's near-insane fits of capriciousness made audiences

DRIVEN BY A MISSION

with him even more dangerous. When at war with the Greeks a couple of years earlier, he had his bridge builders beheaded because a storm destroyed a bridge. Then he insisted that the body of water be flogged and chained. He cut a soldier in two after the soldier's father begged Xerxes to allow the young man to stay at his side rather than go off to war. Words like *rash*, *impatient*, *stubborn*, *ruthless*, and *tactless* all describe this king's ruling style. Though a man of immense wealth and power, Xerxes lacked judgment and self-control.

Esther wound her way through the corridors of the huge palace that her husband's father had built and Xerxes had expanded. The next doors opened to the hall where her husband held court. She paused. Death's cool hands caressed her. She shivered and gulped down her heart. She knew that as soon as she attempted to enter, the air would sing with the sound of the guards' swords slicing the air, poised to kill.

Armed guards dressed in long robes flanked either side of the entryway. They were trained to protect their monarch, even if it meant the loss of innocent life. Their eyes darted warily, ever vigilant.

Their training forbade them to care about the queen's reasons for approaching the emperor. Palace policy allowed none of the king's wives, not even the queen, to wander the corridors on her own. Their entire world existed within the walls of the harem. But beyond the regal comfort of the rooms where they made their lives, their privileges were few. The bustle of the market with its crowds, cloths, and cuisine was little more than a memory.

Queen Esther had more influence inside the harem than all the other wives. Yet the unusual circumstances of her coronation emphasized her subservient position. She replaced a woman who had become too assertive. The bodyguards would view Esther's appearance at the doorway to the king's throne as strange, out of character, beyond palace norms, perhaps even as a threat to the king's well-being.

Esther hesitated. Was the risk worth the possible outcome?

"He hasn't called for me to spend any time with him in a month," she worried to herself. Perhaps she had displeased him in some way. Perhaps some other woman in the harem had caught his eye and his heart. This wouldn't have been the first time his mongrel lust had captured his loins and distracted his head.

Five years before, Esther became queen because of this lust. She won a contest. She better satisfied the king's cravings than hundreds of other beautiful women.

"Is this worth dying for?" she wondered. How ironic that this queen was in danger of losing her life for visiting the king when Vashti, his former queen, had lost her position for refusing to visit him.

483–482 B.C.



“Queen Vashti, the emperor insists that you join him at his banquet. He commands that you dress in all your royal finery. Do not fail to wear your crown.”

The king’s banquet. Had any empire ever seen the likes of it? For 180 days—half a year—this celebration wore on. Actually, it wasn’t so much a celebration as an exhibition of Xerxes’ might. It was a six-month-long pep rally designed to convince the allies of the empire to join Xerxes in extending his empire into Europe. He brought the leaders of his land to Susa. He wooed and cajoled them. He twisted their arms. He bribed them into coming with him to defeat the Greek menace on their western border—finally and forever.

Subduing Greece raised a number of difficulties, for example, the political framework of the peninsula. A loose (sometimes factious) federation of city-states controlled the country. Chief among them were Athens, Corinth, and Sparta. To conquer Greece, Persia could not simply capture a single capital city.

Xerxes’ father, Darius, had tried to add Greece to his empire. His surprising defeat at Marathon, north of Athens, ended the campaign for Darius. Circumstances had changed in the intervening seven years. Now Xerxes would attempt to accomplish what his father had failed to do.

The feast climaxed with a seven-day extravaganza of awesome proportions. The king not only welcomed the highest-ranking officials of the empire but every citizen of Susa (about 500,000 people) into his royal gardens for all the food and

The Persian Empire



VASHTI'S DEMISE

wine they could consume. The trappings of the emperor's vast wealth were displayed for all to see: couches of gold and silver, mosaic pavements, and regal tapestries. Everyone drank from golden goblets.

Then on the final day of Xerxes' banquet, the emperor decided to share one final, crowning piece of his wealth. Locked away in his harem, generally kept secret from all male eyes but his own and those of his eunuchs, was his queen, Queen Vashti—the name that means “beautiful woman.”

Seven days of drinking had impaired his judgment about putting his queen on display. “But never mind,” he reasoned. “I am the king of the world. I do as I please.”

Vashti did not agree. She would not allow herself to be treated like a golden couch or a common showgirl. The queen of Persia demanded more respect, even from the king of Persia. So, breaking all cultural mores, she refused to attend her husband's banquet. She would not submit to the lewd remarks or crude leers of drunken men.

Xerxes, especially in his inebriation, was beside himself. How dare anyone, even his queen, not submit to his every whim! Before this crowd he had to appear strong, in control, the epitome of machismo. Vashti had emasculated that image. Just as bad, if word were ever to circulate that the emperor had allowed his wife to show him such disrespect, wives throughout his empire would feel they could do the same to their husbands.

Egged on by his advisors, Xerxes deposed Vashti. He forbade her ever to step into his presence again. A fitting punishment: she had refused to appear before him. But from there Xerxes' handling

of the situation boiled over. He published his decree throughout the realm. The reason? To ensure that no woman would shrug off obedience to her husband.



Before Esther became queen, Persia suffered a disastrous year. At first the Persian army had all the indications of giving Xerxes another series of stunning victories. His huge army had forded the Hellespont and entered Greece. It had secured victories at Thermopoli and burned Athens. But at Salamis the Persian army had acted on poor advice. A battlefield of Persian soldiers paid the ultimate price. Xerxes was routed. Several months later the Greeks sank and burned the mighty Persian navy at Platea. Never again was Greece in danger of Persian conquest.

Somehow, almost inexplicitly, the combined military might of Greece had demolished Xerxes' massive war machine. Like his father a decade before, the emperor returned home beaten and embarrassed by a nation of much weaker city-states.

In his political and personal pain, Xerxes regretted having dismissed Vashti for her refusal to attend his drunken banquet. He probably would have found a way to take her back except for the intervention of his closest advisors. They had a better plan—certainly much better for them. These advisors had previously urged the king to dispose of Vashti; they could now lose their lives if they didn't scuttle every thought of Vashti returning as queen.

"Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king," they urged him. "Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, chief of the king's eunuchs. He is the one in charge

of all the women. Let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.”

The thought of hundreds of young women—teenagers—clamoring to please him dispelled any thought of restoring his relationship with Vashti. The king issued the decree. Persian leaders were pushed to comply. A queen from their province would mean a significant political advantage. They greedily gathered up all the beauties they could find. The harem at Susa swelled with potential queens.

So when Esther came to the attention of Susa’s bureaucrats, she too found herself a resident of the king’s harem and a contestant in the king’s bawdy pageant. She had no choice but to participate.

Life in a harem had a number of advantages for Persian women. It could be safer than marriages to many ordinary Persian men, and it certainly would not be as demanding. Though bored and secluded, harem wives enjoyed a quiet, well-provisioned, and comparatively secure existence.

Esther was an orphan. Her older cousin, Mordecai, had become her surrogate father. It saddened her to leave the man who had raised her after her parents died. His doting care had been her security blanket. His advice had given direction to her life. His love provided joy. She relied upon his resourcefulness, his self-reliance, his tenacity.

Twelve decades earlier their family had arrived in Susa with tens of thousands of other Jews who had been deported following Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem. Seventy years later, when Babylon fell, Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews

THE BEAUTY PAGEANT

to return to Jerusalem. But Mordecai and Esther's family, along with a majority of Jews, chose to remain in their adopted land. They did this despite the distrust and hatred their culture and faith often generated in Persia.

Though separated from Mordecai, Esther was permitted occasional contact with him—never in person, only by messenger. Mordecai worked as an official in the Persian government at an entrance to the palace complex not far from the harem. He did not rank among the top-level bureaucrats, but he served the king in a capacity that opened many doors to him, including the opportunity to communicate with his adopted daughter. That rare circumstance set Esther apart from most of the other beauty contestants. Most of them would never again see their families.

Each girl in the harem went through a rigorous, yearlong period of preparation before she was chosen to spend her first night with the king. For the first six months, the girls were immersed in treatments of oil of myrrh. The second six months introduced them to perfumes and cosmetics.

When a girl's turn came to audition as queen, she took anything she thought would help her attract the king's attention and help her stand out in the king's memory. The next morning she would not return to the area of the harem for virgins. A eunuch would take her to live with the other concubines. If she pleased the king enough to make an impression, he may have invited her to spend more time with him. If he found her unremarkable, she could spend the rest of her life forgotten in oblivion and locked away in the gilded cage of his harem.

Harem life favored Esther from the start. She made an impression on Hegai, the chief eunuch. He recognized that Esther was the kind of woman the emperor sought. So he provided her with special food, lavish beauty treatments, and seven maids to care for her every need. Since eunuchs were castrated as boys, they were of no sexual danger to a king's harem. Eunuchs often rose to prominence in government because of their political shrewdness and access to the ruler. Hegai realized that, should Esther become queen, his lavish care for her now would provide him with special benefits later on. He did everything he could so she would become his queen. Like other eunuchs, Hegai showed himself as a master in the high-stakes game of politics. However, a power much wiser and more powerful was caring for Esther by keeping her father near and bringing her to the attention of the chief eunuch.

When Esther's night with Xerxes arrived, she only took what Hegai suggested. She went dressed in her natural beauty and humble grace—characteristics the king and his advisors were looking for in a queen, especially given the upheaval that the headstrong Vashti had inflicted on the palace.

Hegai's perception of the emperor was on target. Xerxes could not resist Esther's exceptional beauty. Even before he had finished meeting all the young virgins in his harem, he made his decision. Esther was his queen. Of all Persian women, Esther—a Jewess—became the most influential, the most powerful in the land.



The click of Esther's heels on the stone pavement halted. She hesitated. "What if I barge in on Xerxes when he's in one of his foul moods?" she worried. "He's probably found someone else he likes better. I'm not the one to do this. There's got to be another way."

But Mordecai's words gnawed at her thoughts. They had eaten away at her conscience for three days now. "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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."

"Do not think you will escape. You will perish. Your father's family will perish." Perish. Die. Like a looped soundtrack, the words kept echoing in her mind.

"I won't escape. Mordecai won't escape. My childhood friends and their families won't escape. Millions more will lie dead." Maybe Mordecai was right. Somehow a remnant of the Jews would escape, even if she did nothing. It had happened before. The Scriptures were filled with examples of divine rescue and delivery, usually in the face of overwhelming odds and certain disaster. The Israelites had been freed from Egyptian slavery in the aftermath of ten terrible plagues. Time and again the strong right arm of deliverance had come to reclaim Esther's favored people from the Philistines, Assyrians, Canaanites, and Amorites. But there was also a reality to face: as close as she and Mordecai would be to the slaughter, it was unlikely they would escape.

“So what do I have to lose?” Esther reasoned. “Either I die today or I die 11 months from now. At least today I have a chance to make a difference.” Then Esther half-giggled at the irony: “Who would have thought that shy, timid, eager-to-please me might someday be the salvation of my people? Mordecai had said, ‘Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?’ Indeed, who knows?”

Esther understood the peril she and her people were facing. Three days earlier word had come to her through the palace rumor mill that Mordecai was parading in the public square draped in sackcloth and covered in ashes. He had attracted the city’s attention as he staggered through the streets, wailing as if crushed with despair.

Social norms insulated the harem from outside life. So did its location: tucked deep inside the two-and-a-half acres over which Xerxes’ palace sprawled. Usually harem women were oblivious to local events and street-level issues. So when Esther received word that her father had grieved so publicly, she buckled with fear. Mordecai’s self-confidence and determination had never before permitted such public humiliation. What unthinkable circumstances could have driven him to this?

But she could not leave the harem. So she did what she could. She sent proper clothes for Mordecai to put on. But he refused them. That’s when she sent one of the eunuchs assigned to attend her to find out what was troubling Mordecai.

Mordecai gave the eunuch a copy of an edict the emperor had signed. It commanded the annihilation of every Jew in the empire.

HAMAN'S TREACHERY

The royal decree had come at the instigation of Xerxes' top official, Haman. Haman's well-known bravery in battle, political astuteness, immense wealth, and longtime friendship with the king made him a celebrity. Xerxes had appointed him chief of staff shortly after Esther became queen.

But Haman had a dark side.

His haughtiness towered above his lofty position. And when anyone assaulted his pride, he retaliated with vicious vindictiveness. His friends knew him to be headstrong, domineering, stubborn, and short-tempered. They were careful not to become his enemies.

Mordecai, however, was unable to avoid that fate. In his arrogance, Haman had insisted that everyone bow to him. "Obeisance is due to the godlike Xerxes," he reasoned. "It should also be due to me, his representative." But Mordecai resisted. For Mordecai, bowing to Haman came close to worshiping a god other than his own. Mordecai refused to adore Haman or any other human in that way.

Haman's response did not match Mordecai's offense. He could have had Mordecai imprisoned, tortured, or even executed. Instead he chose to retaliate against all Jewish people. Genocide: his ultimate revenge. Anti-Jewish sentiment seethed throughout the empire. Haman knew how to seize the political winds. He would appeal to Xerxes to legalize hatred for the Jews in an edict. The hatred would then be unleashed in its insufferable fury across all of Persia on a set day. Protected by the emperor's law, citizens would execute Jews everywhere.

Haman knew no better way to ensure success for his plan than to seek the help of his gods. And Haman's gods most certainly included himself. In wanting to determine the most propitious time to wage this genocide, Haman had his magi cast lots—*pur* in Persian—to see what month and day the gods would choose. By his calculation, the answer that was conjured set the unholy date at 11 months later. What Haman did not understand was that a force much more powerful than his idea of a god was setting the cosmic calendar to a date far enough in advance to allow the Jewish people to defend themselves when the day arrived.

When everything seemed to be in place, Haman came to Xerxes with his request. Haman carefully crafted a story to enflame the king's anger and to enhance the king's view of his loyalty. "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people," he told the king. (Haman thought it best to neglect to name the nation he sought to destroy.) "These people do not obey the king's laws," he lied.

Haman looked into the king's eyes with every ounce of sincerity his evil heart could muster. "Since you know how rebellion breeds rebellion, it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them." The chief of staff read Xerxes' face. The king had fallen for the tale. The moment to close the deal had arrived. "If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them."

Haman realized that Xerxes' next question would have to do with the loss of tax revenue the empire would suffer

HAMAN'S TREACHERY

when the population was whittled away. Haman had that issue covered. He would personally make up the difference. The annual tax revenue for the entire empire totaled 15,000 talents. Haman promised, "I will put 10,000 talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business." Haman had amassed a fortune during his years in government. His hatred for Jews now added a bounty on every Jewish head.

"The silver is yours," the king said to Haman. "If you want to use it to enhance the treasury, that's up to you." It had been an easy decision for Xerxes to make. He had the promise of even greater wealth. He had no reason to mistrust his friend and advisor. With the nonchalant flick of his royal wrist, Xerxes condemned the unnamed nation. "Do with the people as you please."

Haman immediately set his plot in motion. Written orders were sent to all the provinces of Persia under the seal of the king's signet ring. The postal system that Xerxes' father had established made quick work of dispatching the royal edict. Within a few days, the order to "destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and little children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month" reached every corner of the empire. The royal bounty on Jewish life encouraged everyone to take part in the slaughter: the belongings of the two to three million Jews to be killed on that day would become the property of their murderers.

Mordecai's words haunted Esther: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews

will escape. . . . You and your father's family will perish." But no one knew about Esther's Jewish family line. When she left home to live in the harem, she obeyed Mordecai: "Do not reveal your nationality and family background." That meant more than not speaking about her ethnicity. She had to cloak her religion as well. She ate unclean foods. She failed to observe holy days.

But the threat of Jewish extermination demanded that Esther throw off the disguise that Mordecai had crafted to protect her from anti-Jewish bigotry. In the face of such a holocaust, how could Esther keep her nationality a secret? The threatened annihilation of the Jews would not only end a race of people but it would void the age-old promise for a Savior. Esther understood the implication. Perhaps Mordecai was right; perhaps she had been placed into this moment in history for a very important purpose. The most sound strategy required her to reveal her lineage herself—at the most opportune time.

"Tell Mordecai," the queen commanded her eunuch, "to go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa and fast with me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king." Then she added, "Even though it is against the law."

The queen squared her shoulders with dignified resolve and sighed quietly because of the weight of her decision. "And if I perish, I perish."

Mordecai's profound words echoed in her heart once again: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"



Esther steadied herself with a deep breath. Then, regal dignity intact, she launched herself the remaining yards down the glazed-brick corridor, through the huge open doors, and into her husband's throne room.

Bodyguards sprang into action. A phalanx of swords and axes flashed in the morning light.

The emperor's throne—a wooden chair carved by the finest craftsmen in the realm—stood across the room, in a direct line of sight. Its legs lifted it above the main floor so the king remained at eye level to anyone who stood before him. Xerxes' feet rested on a stool that matched his throne. His golden crown sparkled atop his long, curly black hair and beard. A six-foot-long, delicate staff rested in his right hand; in his left he held a golden scepter. From his perch the emperor appeared august, imposing, majestic. No wonder Persian kings were always pictured seated on a throne—even when overseeing a battle or on a journey.

When the king recognized that it was his queen who was attempting to enter the court, he instantly flashed the sign for his men to stand down. He held out his gold scepter toward Esther. The bodyguards relaxed their weapons. The human shield lowered. The phalanx bowed and parted. Esther approached the emperor and kissed the tip of his scepter.

His month away from Esther hadn't been a signal of displeasure—only preoccupation with other affairs. But now, to see Esther in his court raised his curiosity. What could possibly have brought her from the harem? What could have upset her so?

FINDING THE RIGHT MOMENT

Whatever it was, Xerxes wanted it settled. “What is it, Queen Esther?” he asked with uncharacteristic gentleness. Her calm and simple beauty brought out the better side of Xerxes’ unpredictable personality. He was in a magnanimous mood. “What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.”

Esther reconsidered her plan: *The king is in such a good mood, why not just fall at his feet in tears and pour out my heart?* But a grave danger was hidden in taking such a direct approach. If Xerxes were to choose her side, it would be necessary for him to reject Haman, his closest advisor and friend. Esther needed more information before she could adequately plead her case.

“If it pleases the king,” replied Esther, “let the king, together with Haman . . .” (The name came out with regal grace though the queen almost choked on it.) “Let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him.”

Say yes. Say yes, Esther thought to herself. *I need to make sure you are in a proper mood. I need to have you alone, not among all your advisors. Just you and Haman. Say yes.*

A broad smile filled the king’s face. Is there anything more compelling for a man than to be adored by a beautiful woman? “Bring Haman at once,” the king said, “so that we may do what Esther asks.”

Esther would have skipped back to the harem had it not been improper for a queen to do so. She did come close to running, however. Preparations for Xerxes’ arrival demanded

swift and thorough attention. Everything had to be perfect. The meal. The dining couches. The lighting. The wine. Yes, the wine had to be exquisite.

The entire harem exploded in frenzy. Concubines and cooks, maids and mistresses bustled. Tempers bristled. Tableware banged. Servants bounced.

The king and Haman lay back on their pillow-covered couches. Food in the palace always tasted excellent, but Esther's surprise banquet ranked among the best. As the meal settled during the wine course, the king's curiosity about the reason for the banquet returned.

"What is your petition?" Xerxes cajoled. "It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Esther calculated again. *Is this the proper time to ask? Can I be sure he will listen to me rather than to Haman? Say something, Esther! You need to say something!*

"My petition and my request is this," she said with coy hesitation. Esther had never involved herself in affairs of state. But her life screamed for protection. As did the life of her beloved Mordecai. And her people.

"If the king regards me with favor . . ."

Remember your place, Esther told herself. You are only a woman.

" . . . And if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request . . ."

Esther stalled for time, time to think about the words she should choose. Should she ask now? Would it be better to ask later?

FINDING THE RIGHT MOMENT

“ . . . Let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. There I will answer the king’s question.”

Later. It will be better to ask later.

And with that the king agrees.



Haman couldn't wait to get home that evening. He rehearsed his "You'll never believe whom I had dinner with today" speech all the way to his front door.

But his ecstasy evaporated every time he thought of Mordecai. The persistent Jew had been at the king's gate again—even on this day, the day of Haman's political triumph. Everyone in the king's offices bowed low to acknowledge Haman's presence and position, except for Mordecai—Jewish Mordecai. He did not get up from his desk nor did he demonstrate any other sign of respect.

"How dare he, a common civil servant, not treat me with the reverence due my office? Especially now. Especially after today. Waiting for 11 months to see Mordecai dead is far too long," Haman seethed. But he kept his anger to himself. He did not want other members of the court to know how Mordecai infuriated him.

Once home, he called his friends together, along with his wife, Zeresh. "You know how vast my wealth," he bragged. "You know my many sons. Outside of a man's great military exploits there is no better evidence of his extraordinary virility. But let me tell you . . ."

Haman paused for effect. He surveyed faces to ensure all eyes were focused on him.

"I thought I had come a long way in achieving the honor due me when mighty Xerxes, son of Darius the Great, made me his chief of staff and put me in charge of his empire. But today, on this day, this glorious day . . ."

A TALL GALLOWS

Haman stopped again, gathered himself, and proclaimed, “I was the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave.”

Haman waited to let the news settle in. Then he added, “And she has invited me along with the king to another banquet tomorrow.”

Applause exploded in the room. But Haman felt underappreciated. The adoration failed to please him. One man’s brazen insolence robbed the moment of the joy Haman had anticipated. “All this gives me no satisfaction,” he growled to himself, “as long as I see that Jew, Mordecai, sitting at the king’s gate.”

The solution seemed simple enough to Haman’s wife and friends: “Have a gallows built, 75-feet high.” That would be high enough so people from all over the city would be able to see what would happen to those with the audacity to disrespect the great Haman. “Then tomorrow morning ask your friend, the king, to have Mordecai impaled on it.”

“Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy,” someone suggested.

Of course. How simple the solution! Mordecai would die a horrible, slow death impaled on a pole. Haman had already thought of it, but his friends confirmed it. How delightful! Certainly the king wouldn’t refuse Haman, not the man who eats next to him at the queen’s table.

Haman had the gallows built that day.



Perhaps it was the affairs of state or the heat or cold of the evening or too much wine at his wife's table. It may have been the desert breeze. Whatever the cause, Xerxes had a sleepless night. So he resorted to one of the best sedatives he knew: listening to a staff member read from the records. At least then if sleep did not come, he could bask in the accomplishments of his reign.

It was not coincidence that made Xerxes so restless that night. It was also more than coincidence that caused the scribe to open the royal annals to a time five years prior. When dawn was just about to break across the landscape, the chronicles reminded Xerxes of a specific event five years earlier. Two of his most trusted officers—men from his personal bodyguard—had conspired to kill him. But a government administrator who worked in the king's palace had gotten wind of the plot and had reported it to Queen Esther. She then reported it to the king. The administrator's name was Mordecai, son of Jair, the chronicles said. This man, Mordecai, had saved the king's life.

"What honor has this man been given? What recognition has Mordecai received?" the king demanded.

The answer would not please him. "Nothing has been done for him."

Nothing? A man saves the emperor from assassination and nothing is done for him? How can this be? This has to be corrected. It has to be corrected now.

"Who is in the court? Who is here to handle this?"

BEYOND COINCIDENCE

Haman rose before dawn. He couldn't sleep either. His life had taken such a positive turn. He had thought himself on a fast track to power before, but now the possibilities were endless. And the only annoyance in his life was about to go away for good as well. All it would take was the approval of the king. And after yesterday, how could Xerxes not give his approval? This would be the kind of day musicians write songs about!

Not coincidentally, Haman came to the palace at first light early that same morning. Before making his way to the palace, he dressed in his finest clothes. On this day of ultimate political triumph, he had to look the part. A morning breeze pushed him through the azure darkness all the way to the king's castle. He intended to speak with the king as soon as Xerxes started the new day.

Haman had barely entered the outer court of the palace when the king's attendants hustled him into the emperor's quarters.

"What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" the king asked.

"He's talking about me," Haman wrongly assumed. "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me? He's giving me an opportunity to choose how I would want to be honored. This day is going to be even better than I imagined!"

Haman said to the king: "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the

king's most noble princes. Let the prince robe the man the king delights to honor and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

Could there be any greater honor than to have all the people of the city see me dressed in a robe the emperor has worn? Haman thought. Imagine how people will bow when I pass by them riding one of the king's personal horses with a well-known prince shouting, "This is the man the king delights to honor!"

"Go at once," the king commanded Haman.

"Yes, your highness. Yes. Right away."

"Get the robe and the horse. . . ."

Yes. No one will believe what's happening to me. Not my friends. Not my wife. Not my ten sons. The king's clothes . . . dressed in the symbols of his power . . . covered with his honor . . . sharing his stature.

". . . And do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate."

Mordecai? It can't be the same Mordecai! "Mordecai the Jew," he said, the Mordecai "who sits at the king's gate." Mordecai? The man I planned to impale? Impertinent, insolent, impudent Mordecai? Mordecai!

Haman's silent exasperation trailed off into a tirade of Persian coarseness.

"Do not neglect anything you have recommended," the king commanded.

The words thrashed in Haman's mind. They snickered at him. "You have recommended . . . Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

BEYOND COINCIDENCE

Still they taunted: “You have recommended. You, Haman.” He shrieked to himself. *Mordecai will be honored as I should have been honored. And I am the one who will honor him.*

Though staggered, Haman retrieved one of the king’s robes and saddled one of his fine horses.

He found Mordecai at work near the gate to the palace. There, in front of all his coworkers, including those who had complained to Haman that Mordecai continued to dishonor him, Haman dressed Mordecai, helped him into the saddle, and led his horse through the city streets. “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” Haman shouted. “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!”

After completing his job, Haman rushed home. He could not go back to work. He convulsed with grief, anger, and shame. But one hope still blazed across the darkness of his day: Queen Esther considered him a friend.

When his wife and friends found out what happened, they were beside themselves. This could only mean that the gods were not able to protect Haman.

“Mordecai is of Jewish origin,” they reminded him—as though he needed reminding. “You cannot stand against him. You know the history of the Jews. You know they always find rescue. You will surely come to ruin!”

“Where were you and your advice yesterday?” Haman thought. “‘Have a gallows built,’ you said.” The words mocked in his mind. “‘Ask the king to execute Mordecai. Then go to dinner

with the king and be happy.' Those were your exact words!"

Just then the eunuchs arrived. The queen's banquet was waiting. They escorted Haman to her table.



The rich smell of Persian foods and spices lingered long after the meal had been eaten. Tumeric, onions, garlic, saffron, lemon, curry. The king, his queen, and Haman reclined next to the table. With the meal eaten, only a couple of the servants remained, discretely positioned at the edges of the room.

Esther watched as Xerxes drank a full swallow from his golden wine goblet, sighed in satisfaction, and then asked the question that had lingered in his mind for more than a day. “Queen Esther, what is your petition?” His question stressed the word *is*. “There is no reason to be afraid to ask. Whatever you want, it will be given you. Ask for anything, even up to half my kingdom. It is yours.”

The moment had arrived. *Speak now*, Esther thought as she sought a voice that was sweet and demure. But the voice she heard herself use was quivering. The affect was a voice filled with fear and crying for pity.

“If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life. . . .” Her voice failed with the last few words, so she repeated her thought: “Grant me my life. And spare my people. This is my petition.” Then Esther quietly sobbed.

Xerxes’ mind raced. His queen in danger? From whom? For what? Why? “Who would dare bring harm to the woman I love?” Xerxes asked himself. “Or to her people?”

“I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation,” Esther explained. Then she added, “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. As slaves we could still serve you and benefit your kingdom. But if we are all killed . . .”

“Who is he?” Xerxes thundered in his regal wrath. “Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

“My adversary, our enemy,” Esther turned to face him, “is this vile Haman.”

Terror shook Haman right down to his dark and murderous heart. Color faded from his face. He choked on the wine in his mouth. This day had now lost all promise. The king honored Mordecai instead of him. Haman’s own mouth had been forced to utter the words of honor. And now . . . the truth stunned and stung. Now he realized his queen was part of the very people he had conspired to murder.

The king stormed from the room and in a rage burst upon the palace garden. The shock of Esther’s information destroyed all royal tranquility. Xerxes’ most trusted advisor, a man he judged as a friend—a friend in a world of so many false friends—had betrayed him. Manipulated him. Deceived him. What else had this wicked man done?

Haman, too agile a politician to remain stunned into inaction, roused himself. He knew Xerxes well enough to realize that the king had already decided his fate. Death stalked only moments away. Queen Esther alone could save him. Groveling and in tears, the haughty Haman jumped from his couch to beg Esther for his life. But in his haste, he lost his balance, staggered, reeled in an ungainly pirouette, and fell awkwardly atop his queen.

ESTHER'S PETITION

At that moment the king returned to the banquet hall.

“Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?” he bellowed.

The room quaked—first with the sound of the king’s voice, then with the sound of military sandals against the marble floor. Bodyguards rushed the room. They wrestled Haman to the floor and subdued him. They immediately hooded his face. No one should look on the countenance of such an evil man.

“A gallows 75-feet high stands by Haman’s house,” one of the eunuch’s offered. Then he added, “He had it made for Mordecai, the man who once spoke up to help the king.”

“Haman. Traitor. Betrayer. Intended murderer of my queen—and her people. The man who would execute the loyal citizen who saved my life.” Angry and bewildering thoughts cascaded through the king’s mind like a roaring Niagara.

“Hang him on it!” Xerxes roared.

The evening zephyr helped the executioners lift him. Within minutes, Haman’s body hung impaled on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Its limbs nervously twitched and writhed as it continued to struggle for life. And there, 75-feet aloft, Haman’s contorted and lifeless body became a billboard, a warning that this was what would be done with the man the king delights to curse.

Adar, 475 B.C.



Footsteps clacked across the stone-paved hall. Each step struck with regal resolve. As the palace staff bowed, Queen Esther—wife of Xerxes, the ruler of the world—paced before them. Through the ages other leaders would face similar national horrors. Some would cower. Some would flower.

Esther had been transformed by the threat of her people's genocide. She had blossomed in her moment of crisis.

Couriers from throughout the empire were delivering their reports. The 13th day of Adar, the day Haman had timed his bigotry to explode, now arrived.

Esther and Mordecai had done everything they could to minimize the day's intended slaughter, beginning on the day of Haman's execution 11 months earlier. As the gallows stripped Haman's body of life, Xerxes stripped Haman's estate of its immense wealth and property, giving it all to Esther. And when Xerxes learned of his queen's relationship with Mordecai, Xerxes appointed Mordecai as Haman's successor. What could have been more comforting to the queen than knowing that both the emperor and his chief of staff loved her?

But the threat of Jewish annihilation did not die as easily as Haman. According to Persian law, once the emperor's signet ring signed a royal decree into life, it could not be revoked. But another law could be passed that would make the original unprofitable to obey.

"Let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman devised," Esther pleaded with the king. "How can I bear to see such a tragedy fall on my people? How can I bear to

Purim

The Feast of Purim is named for the lots Haman cast to determine the right time to murder the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. Many ancient people cast lots to decide something by chance or to give a god an opportunity to provide a solution to a problem. But Old Testament believers, as well as New Testament Christians, recognized that it was the immutable will of a loving God, not the dumb luck in the roll of a pair of dice, that rescued his people during the reign of Esther.



Jews have celebrated Purim for 2,500 years. It takes place in February or March. On the first day of Purim, somber worshipers relive the fast in which all the Jews of Susa participated before Esther appeared before Xerxes. The next day is one of joyous celebration of God's deliverance. Children dress in costumes. Gifts are given, especially to the poor. Food is sent to friends, new and old. Extravagant banquets are held. The entire book of Esther (also called the Megillah) is read aloud, complete with audience participation to make the story memorable for young children. When Haman's name is

read, listeners boo. Mordecai's name brings on a chorus of cheers. Four verses from Esther are read by everyone: 2:5, 8:15, 8:16, and 10:3. Esther 6:1, the story's turning point, is also read in unison: "That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him." And when the reader gets to the part that tells of Haman's ten sons being killed (9:6-10), all the names are read in one breath to signify that they all died at the same time.



PERSIAN LAW

witness the destruction of my family?"

A doting Xerxes agreed. He gave his new chief of staff his first assignment. "Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring."

But developing this decree required careful thought and intense preparation. Bad wording or inaccurate language could make the Jewish situation worse. About 9 weeks passed before the royal messengers galloped out of Susa to the 127 provinces with the emperor's carefully crafted decree. The emperor granted the Jews the right to assemble and protect themselves from annihilation on the 13th day of Adar. Esther's people were allowed to "destroy, kill, and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children." The new law would not stop anyone from exercising his or her legal right to kill Jews on that day, but it would deter all but the Jews' most vicious enemies. It also gave the Jews the right to plunder the property of their enemies, the ancient principle of an eye for an eye. The punishment must fit the crime.

Now as Esther waited to hear how Mordecai's law had worked, she remembered the reports couriers delivered nine months before, reports about how the provinces of Persia had responded when Xerxes first published that edict. She smiled. City after city, province upon province related the same reaction: exuberant celebration. And something quite unexpected also happened. Many citizens of Persia clamored to take up the Jewish faith. The miracle deliverance that saved that nation served as the

convincing evidence of the power and love their true God had for his people.

When the time came to finally tally the results, all reports were consistent. The day Haman had envisioned evaporated. Few dared lift a sword against the Jews. The Jewish people were armed, ready, and willing to fight for their lives. The fear of harming anyone related to Xerxes' queen and his chief of staff made obeying Haman's law too great a risk. Governmental leaders fully backed the Jewish cause. Obeying the current regime appeared more savvy than following the dictates of a discredited and dead Haman.

The communiqués described how the Jews had launched their assaults against those hateful enough to attack them. In Susa five hundred men were killed. Haman's ten sons also joined their father in death. From India to Egypt, 75,000 died at Jewish hands. Fearing there would be repercussions the following day, the king granted the Jews in Susa an additional day to defend themselves. He was right. On the next day, another three hundred were killed trying to attack the Jews.

In spite of the carnage, Esther's people demonstrated that they were only interested in defending themselves and were not murdering people for financial gain. No one took plunder, although each had a legal right to do so.

Esther's pacing turned to prancing. The day was filled with the promise of victory, peace, and future security. The future could not have been any brighter. This day dare not be forgotten.

Queen Esther and Mordecai instituted an annual empire-wide celebration. They named it for the lots (*pur*) Haman cast,

PERSIAN LAW

calling it Purim (Hebrew for more than one pur). It was a two-day festival. Day 1 was a time for somber fasting that recalled the death-dealing danger of Haman's decree. Day 2 ended the celebration with joyous merrymaking to commemorate the remarkable deliverance.

"These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family and in every province and in every city," Esther commanded. "And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants."

A warm desert wind tugged at Esther's purple and white robes. A memory worked its way once again through her thoughts: Mordecai's observation. Truly she had become queen of Persia for such a time as this.

The story of Esther abounds with tension and dramatic reversals. Here are character, setting, and plot at their very best. Its swirling themes of sensual beauty, political conspiracy, and the threat of catastrophic events hold great appeal for contemporary audiences. Yet, in the final analysis, this is not the record of an epic love affair, a heroic faith, or human intrigue, but rather the account of a loving God who graciously intervenes in human history to carry out his redemptive will for all people.

The books in this series are the stories of God's chosen people. The plots and settings have been carefully drawn from the living record of Scripture. The authors show us that God's people, both then and now, find respite for their souls in God's abiding grace.

Author James Aderman acknowledges that God is continuously fitting us into his picture to bring the gospel to the world: "Sometimes we are eager to fit into God's plan. Sometimes we are oblivious." But the author is also careful not to make Esther the focus of her own story. Instead, the focus is in the shadows, on God's barely detectable breath as it shapes events of history so that they conform to his promises and grace.



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