

# Triennial Torah Study – 3<sup>rd</sup> Year 08/12/2012



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Num 31	Nahum 1-3	Esther 1-2	1 Cor 12
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## Vengeance on the Midianites—and on Balaam (Numbers 31)

As the last task to perform before Moses' death, God commands him to take vengeance on the Midianites because they, with the Moabites, deliberately set out to destroy the Israelites through their idolatrous religious practices. Furthermore, making a stark example of the Midianites in destroying them would serve as a deterrent to future apostasy. Incredibly, not a single Israelite dies in the war, moving their leaders to make a special offering. The officers over thousands, etc., come to Moses to make a voluntary offering to God to cover everything, an atonement offering (verses 48-50). God is with Israel in this righteous battle—signified by the fact that Phinehas also goes to war with the Ark of the Covenant and the two silver trumpets. It is God who gives them the victory.

Interestingly, verse 8 mentions that one of the men who was slain in the war was Zur. This Zur was apparently one of the instigators of the plot to bring false worship to Israel. Indeed, it was his daughter, Cozbi, that Zimri had brazenly paraded before the congregation of Israel before they were both slain by Phinehas (25:14-15). In verse 9, we see the women of Midian taken captive in the wake of the battle. Moses, however, is incensed at this, as these are the same women who led Israel astray with the Moabites—and he commands that all but the virgins among them be put to death (verses 14-18). Besides their idolatrous practices, it is also possible that the promiscuous Midianites had sexually transmissible diseases that God wanted to keep out of Israel as well.

Verse 16 is the verse that actually explains what happened in the incident of Baal Peor. We learn that it was the “counsel of Balaam” that the Midianite women followed when they caused the children of Israel to sin against God, resulting in the plague that cost 24,000 lives. Without this explanation, readers of chapters 22-24 might give Balaam the benefit of the doubt, assuming him to have been a prophet who was following God's will. But note this: Balaam did not “die the death of the righteous,” as he had so eloquently prayed (23:10). Rather, he died by the edge of the sword—being justly put to death along with the Midianites by the Israelites at God's command (verse 8).

So just what lesson can we learn from Balaam? Notice this from the article on him in *The Complete Who's Who in the Bible*: "2 Pet. 2:15, Jude 11 and Rev. 2:14 warn the NT people of God against allowing a smooth-talking pagan to capitalize on his knowledge in the form of religiosity and twist it to his own deadly end. A veneer of piety disguises the shallow convictions which can be bought for a price (Num. 22:17) and superficial repentance (v. 34) which is short-lived. 2 Pet. 2:15-16 views Balaam as a man of prophetic talent but with a desire to use the gifts of God to further his own ends. So, Peter warned of the danger of 'empty' words because they act as a cover for evil desires. The Christian must appreciate that such emptiness of heart will be exposed on judgment day (Jude 11). For the apostle John writing to the compromising church in Pergamum the worse sin is not actually that of self-deception, because that in the end will be exposed. Rather, Balaam's leading of Balak [and thus Israel] into further spiritual adultery is far worse. And so, the worst of judgments is saved for those who knowingly deceive others. Like Balaam their sin eventually catches up with them (see Num. 31:8; Josh. 13:22)" (Paul D. Gardner, ed., 1995).

### **Introduction to Nahum (Nahum 1)**

Little is known of the prophet Nahum, whose message concerns the coming destruction of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. The time of his prophecy is ascertained from two key facts. The fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes (No Amon), which occurred in 663 B.C., is mentioned as a past event (3:8). And the fall of Nineveh, which occurred in 612 B.C., was yet future. So Nahum must have written between these dates.

The prophet is called an Elkoshite (1:1), apparently after a native city named Elkosh, the location of which is uncertain. Some maintain that, "since Nahum wrote considerably after the destruction of Israel in 722 B.C., we may assume that Elkosh was in Judah" (Nelson Study Bible, introductory notes on Nahum). And Nahum does specifically address Judah in the prophecy (verse 15). Others, however, point out: "His name is in the word 'Capernaum' [modern Kfar Nahum], which means 'village of Nahum.' This may indicate that he was a resident, or founder, of Capernaum.... Elkosh, his birthplace, was probably nearby" (Halley's Bible Handbook, 1965, "Nahum"). This at first glance seems odd since Capernaum was located on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, in the land of the former northern kingdom of Israel. But a period of residence in Capernaum could actually make sense if Nahum preached during the time of Josiah, when Israelites known as Scythians reoccupied the area of the northern kingdom for a decade or so prior to Assyria's fall. Perhaps Nahum lived for a while in the area of Capernaum, preaching to these Israelites. The Nelson Study Bible suggests that his book was written "under the reform of Josiah in 622 B.C." And that would fit the time frame of Scythian occupation.

He could not have been born nearby, however, as that would have been too long before the Scythian occupation. So Elkosh may have been in Judah even if Nahum later lived in Capernaum. Smith's Bible Dictionary, however, places Elkosh much farther away: "This place is located at the modern Alkush, a village on the east bank of the Tigris," the area of ancient Assyria ("Elkosh"). Halley's Bible Handbook comments on this, "There is said to have been an

Elkosh on the Tigris, 20 miles north of Nineveh, and that Nahum may have been among the Israelite captives.” Surprisingly, this is quite possible. Perhaps Nahum was actually among the Scythians who came back to the Promised Land from northern Mesopotamia. He may have given witness to Nineveh itself of its coming destruction before later proclaiming these words to Judah. However, it should be pointed out that there is no indication that Nahum’s words were ever actually communicated to the ancient Assyrians.

In any case, we can be confident that these words of Nahum were communicated to the people of Judah—for it is the Jews who preserved his prophecy. The name Nahum means “Comfort,” and his words—foretelling the destruction of Israel and Judah’s terrible enemy— were certainly of great comfort. Assyria, portrayed as a den of ravaging lions feeding on the blood of the nations, was brutal beyond imagination (2:11-13). Though Nineveh had temporarily repented at Jonah’s preaching around 150 years before and had been spared, the capital city of Assyria is now marked for destruction. And God will bring infinitely more power and finality than Assyria had brought upon her enemies.

We should not miss the duality of this warning. There are clear indications that it is also an end-time prophecy. First is the mention of the “day of trouble” (1:7), which signifies the future Day of the Lord. Then there’s the fact that God’s people will be afflicted no more (verse 12), the wicked enemy never again allowed to pass through their land (verse 15)—which has not been true of the Jewish people in the more than 2,600 years since the fall of ancient Nineveh. And finally, the description of Nineveh as the great harlot of sorceries (3:4) ties it directly to other prophecies of end-time Babylon (see Isaiah 47; Revelation 17-18). At the end, modern Assyria will once again arise as the foe of Israel (see Isaiah 10:5-6). As explained in the Bible Reading Program highlights on Isaiah 10, it is the people of Central Europe who are, in large part, descended from the ancient Assyrians. Nineveh may represent the seat of power of a future Central European nation or of the empire this people will come to dominate. For modern Assyria will be the foremost nation of the coming Beast power, end-time Babylon, which will once again enslave Israel and then fight against Christ at His second coming (see Revelation 13; 17; 18). And once again she will be brought to utter destruction!

Thus, the book of Nahum is a book of stern warning—to the peoples of Central Europe yes, but in a larger sense to the entire European empire they will be part of and, in an even larger sense still, to all who will oppose God and His people. However, it is a book of blessing and great comfort to all who will stand with God and put their trust in Him (Nahum 1:7)—including any of Assyrian descent who will forsake the ways of sin and pursue God’s Kingdom and righteousness. Ultimately, under the rule of Christ, the Assyrian nation will repent and serve God alongside the Israelites (Isaiah 19:23-25). But dark times will precede this wonderful future.

### **The Lord Avenges His People (Nahum 1)**

The book opens with a portrait of God as an avenger of His people. The term is used in different forms three times in verse 2. He is further described as jealous and furious. The fact that He is “slow to anger” in verse 3 may be a reminder of Jonah’s visit to Nineveh long before, when God

stayed His hand in response to the citizens' repentance. But now they had devolved into their former conduct. In an end-time setting, we should remember that the peoples of Central Europe and other Europeans have been exposed to Scripture for centuries—with all of its godly instructions and warnings against disobedience such as Jonah gave—and yet a regime to rival the Third Reich is going to eventually arise again among them.

God's all-consuming power is witnessed by His control over all elements of the earth (verses 36)—a common formula in the Minor Prophets. Yet His fierce anger against His enemies is contrasted with His goodness toward those who trust in Him (verse 7). If we remain faithful, we will be preserved through the day of trouble—be it any time of great difficulty or the worst time of trouble ever seen, which is yet to come upon the earth.

In verse 8, the end of Nineveh comes with an overflowing flood. "It is believed that the invaders of Nineveh entered the city through its flooded waterways" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 8). This may well be as the city was guarded by walls 100 feet high. And it seems to be supported by Nahum 2:6. "Archaeologists have found evidence of flood debris that may be associated with the destruction of the city" (note on 2:6). Still, it should be noted that an overwhelming flood can simply signify an invading enemy army in Scripture (see Isaiah 59:19; Jeremiah 46:7-8; 47:2; Psalm 18:16-17; 69:1-2).

In Nahum 1:9-11, the prophet directly addresses Nineveh, seen as conspiring and plotting against God. This could apply in some sense to Assyria's planned invasion of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah—but that was perhaps 80 years before Nahum wrote. Since this doesn't appear to refer to anything that transpired in Nahum's own day, it seems to make more sense to view this in an end-time context—when the peoples of Central Europe, as part of the final Beast power, will destroy the modern Israelite nations and then oppose Christ at His return (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). The "wicked counselor" of verse 11 could be the end-time Beast dictator or his accomplice, the false prophet—or perhaps even Satan the Devil, the dragon who empowers their evil system (see Revelation 16:13-14 and our free booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*).

Verses 12-13 of Nahum 1 contain a message to God's people. Though Assyria feels safe, she will be utterly cut off. No more will God afflict His people with this destructive empire. The bursting of bonds shows that His people will be enslaved by this empire in the last days (compare Jeremiah 30:8). Thankfully, God will free them—and free them for good. In Nahum 1:14, the prophet proclaims to Nineveh the direct warning of God. Its idolatrous religion will be brought to an end. In ancient times, this was centered on the worship of the forefather of the Assyrians, Asshur (see Genesis 10:22; "Assyria, Asshur," *Smith's Bible Dictionary*). Yet he was, it appears, in many respects confused with the ancient founder of Nineveh and Babylon, Nimrod (see Genesis 10:8-12). And the worship of Nimrod has actually persisted to the present day in what the book of Revelation calls "Mystery Babylon," a great false religion masquerading as Christianity that dominates the world. It will come to an end with the return of Christ.

God also states that Nineveh will be buried. Concerning ancient Nineveh, “this prophecy came true literally—the city was destroyed so completely that its very existence was questioned until its discovery by archaeologists in the nineteenth century ([Nahum] 3:13-15)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on 1:14). “For all its might, Nineveh fell quickly into ruin, leaving no trace but a mound which is known today as Tell Kuyunjik, ‘the mound of many sheep’” (Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible, note on Nahum 3). Yet that was but a forerunner of the destruction that will ultimately come on the end-time Assyro-Babylonian superpower centered in Europe.

In verse 15 of chapter 1, Nahum repeats a prophecy of Isaiah (see Isaiah 52:7). It applies to God’s servants proclaiming His gospel (meaning “good news”). First and foremost it is a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ, who “came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14). This may even refer here to Christ’s second coming—when He announces to the world His intention to bring peace (see Zechariah 9:10) and then brings world peace at last (following a period of terrible rebellion against Him at the end). “Behold...!” the message says here in Nahum and in Isaiah. And indeed, “every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7).

Also in Nahum 1:15, the Jews are told to keep their appointed feasts. Indeed, the feasts the Jews observe are God’s feasts (see Leviticus 23)—and God is telling them to keep these feasts in an end-time context, as frankly all of mankind should. Yet, before the end, the Jews will apparently be forbidden to observe God’s festivals by the invading European power—a repeat of what occurred when Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes took over the land in the second century B.C. (see “Just What Is the Abomination of Desolation?,” *The Good News*, Jan.-Feb. 2002, pp. 8-9, 24). But God will remove the end-time invader, enabling the Jews to freely observe His festivals again. Indeed, that is the point of this wonderful verse of Nahum.

“Woe to the Bloody City!” (Nahum 2-3)

“Man the fort!” God sarcastically says to Nineveh in verse 1 of chapter 2—as if they could defend themselves against His judgment. It is not clear who is meant in verse 1 by “he who scatters” or “he that dasheth in pieces” (KJV). It could be a reference to God Himself. The returning Jesus Christ at the end time will dash His enemies in pieces (Revelation 2:26-28). Or it could refer to other forces God brings against Assyria. Indeed, the latter seems to be supported somewhat by Nahum 2:2, as we will see.

The King James Version translators rendered verse 2 to say that God “hath turned away” the excellence of Jacob—perhaps seeing this from the emptied and ruined state of Israel at the end of the verse. Yet many other versions, including the New King James and Jewish Tanakh, translate this to say God “will restore” the excellence of Jacob. In this picture, the emptiers (the Assyrians) have emptied and ruined the Israelites. But God will restore them—and He restores “Jacob” (the rejected, physical Israelites) to be like “Israel” (His chosen covenant people).

Thus, verses 1 and 2 appear to be telling Nineveh to defend itself against a restored Israel. It is fascinating to consider that ancient Nineveh was overthrown by a coalition of Chaldean

Babylonians, Medes and Scythians—the latter being Israelites taken into captivity more than a century earlier by the Assyrians (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). This may have been a partial fulfillment of the prophecy. But the ancient Scythians did not represent a truly restored Israel. This would seem to apply more to the latter days. In the future, the European Beast power is going to devastate the countries of modern Israel and empty them of most of their people. But around the time of Christ's return, God will empower a resurgence of His people—and they will be used to help bring down the end-time Beast power, to “break [Babylon] in pieces” (see Jeremiah 51:19-24; compare Isaiah 41:11-16; Micah 4:13; Zechariah 12:6; 14:14). Furthermore, consider that spiritual Israel—the Church of God—will be glorified with divine power at this time and will accompany Jesus Christ as He confronts His enemies. Indeed, the dashing to pieces of enemies will be put in their power (see again Revelation 2:26-28).

Verses 3-4 of Nahum 2 are images of warfare—perhaps even modern warfare, as chariots with flaming torches that run like lightning could signify tanks and the like. In verse 3, the phrase “the spears are brandished” is literally “the fir trees shall be terribly shaken” (KJV).

Verse 6 says the gates of the rivers are opened, as mentioned in the previous reading. This would seem to tie back to 1:8, whether it is a literal flood or a flood of armies. In either case, the result is the same: “The palace is dissolved.” Historian Will Durant writes: “Sennacherib [who came against Judah in the days of Hezekiah] raised at Nineveh a royal mansion called ‘The Incomparable,’ surpassing in size all other palaces of antiquity” (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 1: *Our Oriental Heritage*, 1963 ed., p. 282). Through the reign of Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon, the palace had deteriorated so much that, when the next emperor, Ashurbanipal—the last great ancient Assyrian emperor—came to power, he extravagantly rebuilt it (pp. 282-283). But the great palace was destroyed when Nineveh was invaded. Likewise, in the end time, the palace of the final dictator of the Beast power will be “dissolved.”

Nahum 2:7 in the New King James Version begins with the words “It is decreed.” But this is an attempt to translate a word of uncertain meaning, Huzzab—often perceived as a name. The immediate mention of “she...and her maidservants” would seem to support this. Huzzab comes from a root meaning “stand”—thus the idea of “establish” or “decree.” But some see it as one who “stood by the king”—implying a queen (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary, note on 2:7). This may well be related to the harlot of chapter 3, which is almost certainly to be equated with Babylon the Great, the harlot who sits as queen over the nations (see Isaiah 47; Revelation 17-18), the great ruling false church. She, the great captor, will herself be led away captive.

In Nahum 2:8, Nineveh's soldiers flee away in spite of the efforts of military leaders to rally them. Nineveh possesses enormous wealth from its plunder of other nations and the invaders are urged to take the spoil of victory (verse 9). Amazingly, the city is finally emptied (verse 10). The powerful ravenous beast is itself devoured because God has brought stronger forces against her

(verses 10-13). (The symbolism of lions is appropriate for Assyria here, as its ancient emperors often compared themselves to lions in power.)

Chapter 3 recaps the whole scene in a “woe oracle,” pronounced over those doomed by God. Nineveh is described as a bloody city, constantly at war, deceitful in foreign policy and plundering her neighbors (verses 1-3). We have seen the like in the Third Reich. Yet that was but a forerunner of the end-time European empire yet to appear on the world scene. But as this prophecy shows, in the end Assyria (ancient and future) will itself be bloodied and plundered.

Verse 4 describes the “seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries”—again, clearly a reference to end-time Babylon, dominated by the Babylonian mystery religion, as described in Isaiah 47 and Revelation 17-18. Nineveh would in this sense seem to represent the spiritual capital of the coming European empire—Rome—or at least the great religion centered there. In Isaiah 47 God tells this “Lady of Kingdoms” (verse 5) that she will be punished, mentioning “the multitude of your sorceries” and “the great abundance of your enchantments” (verse 9). In Nahum 3:4 she is said to have sold entire nations. This has happened and will happen in a spiritual sense—as this system has given peoples over to the ruler of this world and His evil doctrines for her increased power and wealth. But it has also happened literally, as the Roman bishops of the Middle Ages gave peoples over to various despots to ensure the dominions of the church. There will also be a literal fulfillment when the end-time harlot participates in the selling of conquered peoples prior to Christ’s return (Revelation 18:9-13). For her abominations God will cause her to be shamed, defiled and destroyed (Nahum 3:5-7; see Revelation 17:16).

In Nahum 3:8, God refers to No-Amon—the city of Thebes in Egypt. Thebes had itself sat on a great river, the mighty Nile. It had been the seat of many pharaohs and a major center of religious worship and sprawling temples. Her neighbors were allied with her, yet she fell in ignominy to the Assyrians in 663 B.C., her children slaughtered and her mighty ones taken captive (verses 9-10). Here, God announces that Nineveh will fare just as badly before His coming onslaught. Nineveh will be taken as easily as ripe figs are shaken from a tree. The soldiers of Assyria will be as drunken or as women in the coming battle and her fortresses useless (verses 11-13). Her leaders will disappear when the need for them is greatest (verse 17). They will sleep in the dust and be forgotten (verse 18). The peoples who are left will at last rejoice—relieved at the removal of the empire’s continual oppression and harsh treatment of them (verse 19). All this surely came to pass in 612 B.C. as a type of what is yet to occur in the last days.

Notice historian Will Durant’s account of what happened to ancient Nineveh: “Ashurbanipal died in 626 B.C. Fourteen years later an army of Babylonians under Nabopolassar united with an army of Medes under Cyaxares and a horde of Scythians from the Caucasus, and with amazing ease and swiftness captured the citadels of the north. Nineveh was laid waste as ruthlessly and completely as her kings had once ravaged Susa and Babylon; the city was put to the torch, the population was slaughtered or enslaved, and the palace so recently built by Ashurbanipal was sacked and destroyed. At one blow Assyria disappeared from history. Nothing remained of her

except certain tactics and weapons of war, certain voluted capitals of semi-'Ionic' columns, and certain methods of provincial administration that passed down to Persia, Macedon and Rome. The Near East remembered her for a while as a merciless unifier of a dozen lesser states; and the Jews recalled Nineveh vengefully as 'the bloody city, full of lies and robbery.' In a little while all but the mightiest of the Great Kings were forgotten, and all their royal palaces were in ruins under the drifting sands. Two hundred years after its capture, Xenophon's Ten Thousand marched over the mounds that had been Nineveh, and never suspected that these were the site of the ancient metropolis that had ruled half the world. Not a stone remained visible of all the temples with which Assyria's pious warriors had sought to beautify their greatest capital. Even Ashur, the everlasting god, was dead" (pp. 283-284).

Let this serve as a warning to the coming Europe superpower soon to dominate the globe—as the book of Nahum is surely meant to be.

### **Introduction to Esther (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)**

The second Jerusalem temple was completed in response to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah early in the reign of the Persian king Darius the Great (also known as Darius II or Darius Hystaspes). Darius expanded the reach of the Persian Empire. By 516 B.C., around the time of the temple's completion, "he had pressed east as far as India and then returned to deal with the Libyans. His northward penetrations were not so successful, however, for he met stiff resistance from the Scythians and was forced to retreat. Still unsatisfied he set his sights on Europe. His first attempt to bring the independent Aegean [Greek] states under his control failed when the Ionian states [between Greece and southern Italy] which were already under Persian suzerainty broke free to assist their harassed kinfolk. He eventually prevailed, however, and incorporated all of western Asia into his realm. Flushed with success Darius made an ill-advised sweep across the Aegean Sea in the year 490 with the intent of conquering Athens and the other city-states of the Greek peninsula.... The Athenians met Darius head-on. In the decisive battle of Marathon the Persians underwent a humiliating defeat and were forced to retreat to the Asian mainland. Convinced that victory had eluded him only because of insufficient manpower, Darius resolved to return once more to Greece to finish what he had begun. A revolt in Egypt preempted this action, however.

"Before Darius could completely resolve his new problem and resume his European operations, he died, leaving his grand design to his son Xerxes....the Old Testament Ahasuerus. He had for some years been designated heir by his father, so the change in leadership was without contention. By virtue of his governorship of Babylon, Xerxes was admirably prepared to undertake the formidable responsibilities of his new office. Xerxes' first interest lay in the completion of the royal palace at Susa [the biblical Shushan] and further aggrandizement of Persepolis, the latter project occupying him on and off for the twenty-one years of his reign (486-465). A more pressing concern, however, was with Egypt, which rebelled at once upon his accession. In less than two years he was able to resolve this problem...." (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, pp. 490-491, 498). Ezra 4:6, which

we earlier read in arrangement order of Ezra, tells us that the Samaritans wrote an accusation against the Jews of Judea in the beginning of his reign—to which he apparently paid no heed, perhaps because he was occupied with these other concerns at the time during his first two years as king. This brings us then to the third year of Xerxes' reign, 484-483 B.C., which is when the book of Esther begins (see Esther 1:1-3).

The book of Esther is about a beautiful young Jewish woman—raised by her older cousin Mordecai—who becomes Xerxes' queen and later bravely acts to thwart an evil adversary's plot to exterminate the whole Jewish race. The remarkable deliverance from this genocidal plot is still celebrated in the Jewish festival of Purim, the institution of which is explained near the end of the book.

Esther is one of five books among the Writings division of the Old Testament that are read during holy festivals. These are collectively known as the Megilloth ("Scrolls"). The book of Esther is called the Megillah (Scroll) because of its great popularity among Jewish readers. "Against a background of centuries of persecution, it is understandable why the Feast of Purim became such a favorite of the Jews. It recalls a time when they were able to turn the tables on those who wanted to destroy them. Purim is celebrated today amid a carnival-like atmosphere, with masquerade parties, noisemaking, and revelry. The story is reenacted in synagogues with the audience hissing Haman and cheering Mordecai. The Book of Esther is a profound statement about the heroic resistance necessary for survival in the face of violent anti-Semitism that continues to the present day" (The Expositor's Bible Commentary, introductory notes on Esther).

However, Esther has long been a controversial book because of what many have reckoned as indefensible moral conduct on the part of Esther and Mordecai and the absence of any mention of God. On the first matter, we will examine the issues in that regard as we come to them in the account. But we may note up front that none of the Bible's human heroes are perfect except for Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the second matter of objection. It is certainly true that God is not named or directly referred to in a surface reading of the book (as is also the case with the Song of Solomon). Some have postulated that the reason God is not directly mentioned is that the book was intended as a Persian state chronicle explaining to the Persians the Jewish celebration of Purim. And that is certainly possible, though we still might expect a reference to "the God of the Jews" or something similar. The absence of a direct reference to God seems quite deliberate.

Some have proposed that God's name is hidden in four separate verses in Esther in acrostic style (1:20; 5:4, 13; 7:7), i.e. spelled out by the first or last letters of each word in the verse. This is supported by the fact that carefully structured acrostic spellings appear in several books of the Old Testament. In these four examples in Esther, the divine name Yhwh is spelled out from the first or last letters of the words in these verses. This may point to the nature in which God is revealed in the book. God is hidden in the story, but His presence is evident beyond measure. Certain important circumstances in the story contributing to the amazing outcome are clearly

beyond mere time and chance. Furthermore, the reliance on fasting and Mordecai's certainty of "deliverance...from another place" if Esther failed to act (see Esther 4:3, 13-16) are veiled references to beseeching God and trusting in His providence. Indeed, the main theme of Esther is God's miraculous intervention and preservation of His people. Jews the world over consider the story of this book to be one of the greatest evidences of God's hand in the course of human history to preserve them as a people. (While the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament dating back to Christ's time—adds a number of explicit references to God, these are generally understood to have been added by people seeking to correct perceived spiritual inadequacy in the book.)

As for who wrote the book, no explicit statement is given. "A strong Jewish spirit pervades the book.... Moreover, the author was acquainted with Persian culture, as the extensive descriptions of the palace complex at Shushan (also called Susa) and the domestic details about the reign of King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] indicate. For these reasons, some [such as the third-century church father Clement of Alexandria and the medieval Jewish sage Ibn Ezra] have ascribed the authorship of the book to Mordecai, one of its principal characters" (Nelson Study Bible, introductory notes on Esther). Yet others object to this because of the book's concluding statements praising Mordecai (see 10:2-3)—though these could easily have been added by a later editor such as Ezra. In fact, Ezra has also been suggested as the book's author. Whoever the author was, one commentator says that he must have used "sources, such as some of the writings of Mordecai (9:20), books of the annals of the Median and Persian kings (2:23; 6:1; 10:2), and certain familiar oral traditions" (Expositor's, introductory notes on Esther).

Because of the way the book begins—"now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned...)"—it must have been written after the king's reign, and thus no earlier than 465 B.C. This is confirmed by the mention of the deeds of Mordecai in the past tense (10:2). "Yet the fact that Greek words do not appear in the book rules out a date after about 300 B.C. when [because of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors] the Greek language became more prominent in the ancient Middle East. On the other hand, the numerous words of Persian origin in the book point to its being composed during the latter half of the fifth century B.C. For example, the book calls Xerxes by the Hebrew name [Akhshurosh, Anglicized as] Ahasuerus, a spelling derived from the Persian Khshayarsha. If it had been written after 300 B.C. a spelling closer to the Greek form Xerxes would be expected" (Nelson, introductory notes on Esther).

"While the historicity of the Book of Esther has been challenged, it meets every reasonable test. Descriptions of the Persian court and the customs of the times, the provision of precise dates, and the use of Persian names current in the era, as well as the characterization of Xerxes, are completely accurate. Independent confirmation of Mordecai's rise to power comes from a cuneiform tablet found in Borsippa, which identifies Marduka (Mordecai) as an official in the royal court at Susa in the early years of Xerxes' reign!" (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, introductory notes on Esther).

The story of the miraculous salvation of the Jews was inspiring in the fourth century B.C., and this book became one of the most important literary pieces of Jewish history. Its inspiration continues for God's people today. Even as God protected the people of ancient Judah, though scattered from their homeland, from an enemy bent on destroying them, so will God protect His spiritual people today, scattered throughout the present evil world, from the great enemy who would destroy them. In the end, ultimate victory will belong to God and all His people— followed by triumphant joy and celebration.

### **The Deposing of Vashti (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)**

The account begins with a reference to Ahasuerus or Xerxes reigning over 127 provinces or districts. Some have argued that this is a mistake, since there were only 20 satrapies in the empire of Xerxes' father Darius. But the Hebrew word used here, *medinah*, referred to a subdivision of a satrapy, and it is reasonable that there would be 127 of these. (Another Hebrew-Aramaic word meaning satrapy could have been used if that was intended.)

Next we see the mention of two feasts—one for all the officials, royal servants, nobles and provincial governors lasting for six months (verses 3-4) and the other, at the end of the six months to cap it all off, a week-long celebration for all the people in Shushan (or Susa), both great and small (verse 5). Some have objected to a feast lasting six months, questioning how all the officials of the realm, particularly the provincial ones, could be away from their duties for so long. Yet it could well be that the officials came by groups in rotation. Xerxes' display of wealth and regalia over this period may have been to recruit needed support from all the regions of his realm, both near and far-flung, for his soon-coming resumption of his father's plan to conquer Greece.

The remainder of the chapter concerns the refusal of Xerxes' queen Vashti to answer the king's summons so he might show off her beauty. A major objection "raised against the historicity of Esther is that the only known wife of Xerxes was called Amestris, the daughter of a Persian general Otanes. Persian records do not mention a queen by the name of Vashti who was deposed, nor do they mention the name of Esther as Xerxes' wife [as the following chapters of the book of Esther show her to have become]. Amestris was known for her cruelty; [the Greek historian] Herodotus says she had the mother of her husband's paramour brutally mutilated and had fourteen noble Persian young men buried alive in an act of religious devotion.... A number of answers have been proposed: (1) in a polygamous society a king may have had more than one wife... (2) Esther may have [become] a subordinate wife or chief concubine... (3) the most persuasive explanation is one...which shows the similarity of the names 'Vashti' and 'Amestris' and concludes that they were one and the same person" (Expositor's Bible Commentary, introductory notes on Esther).

No specific reason is given as to why Vashti would not come. Perhaps she did not want to be degraded by being paraded before the king's drunken guests.

For counsel the infuriated ruler turned to the “wise men who understood the times” (verse 13). “Like their Babylonian counterparts, these wise men were astrologers and magicians who gave counsel according to their reading of celestial phenomena (cf. 1 Chronicles 12:32; Isa 44:25; 47:13; Jer 50:35-36; Dan 2:27; 5:15). It was the king’s custom to consult experts in matters of law and justice and to hear their opinions before he acted on any matter. There were seven of these wise men, all with Persian names, called ‘the seven nobles’ [NIV] (‘the seven princes,’ KJV, RSV) of Persia and Media.... They were probably the Council of Seven mentioned in Ezra 7:14 and Herodotus 3.1.... ‘Seven advisers’ corresponds with the Persian tradition (Herodotus 1.31; 3.84; 7.8; 8.67; Xenophon Anabasis 1.6.4f)” (notes on Esther 1:13-14 and Ezra 7:14).

Speaking for the others, Memucan says that the queen’s behavior, if tolerated, would lead to the wives of officials throughout the realm rebelling against their husbands—thus elevating the issue beyond a royal domestic dispute to that of a state concern, as the increase of ruling officials experiencing such trouble at home would weaken the empire. Perhaps these men were also thinking of their own personal domestic situations.

The proposal, to which the king agrees, is that Vashti be stripped of her position of chief wife and that this honor be given to another. It does not say that the king would divorce Vashti, though her complete removal from royal favor and from right to the king’s presence effectively amounted to that.

## **Esther Becomes Queen (Esther 2)**

Chapter 2 begins with a search for a replacement for Vashti as chief wife. The king’s harem is said to be under the custody of Hegai (verse 3). “The eunuch’s name [in Hebrew] is spelled... Hege...in v. 3 but...Hegay...in vv. 8, 15. Herodotus (9.33) mentioned a eunuch of Xerxes with a similar name” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, footnote on verse 3).

The whole process of finding and adding women, including Esther, to the harem evidently took a few years, as the later elevation of Esther in verse 16 to the position of chief wife does not occur until the winter of the seventh year of the king’s reign (479 B.C.)—around four years after the deposing of Vashti in 483 or 482. There is most likely a historical reason for the delay. Indeed, this skip forward in the time frame actually helps to confirm the identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes. For it was during this very period, from 481-479, that Xerxes the Great launched his monumental campaign against Greece—as had been prophesied in Daniel 11:2.

“Like his father, Xerxes seemed irresistibly drawn to the west and the conquest of Greece, so after reorganizing his armies and navies he moved west in 481 [with one of the largest assembled forces in ancient history—a million or more men]. The badly divided Greek states were unable to achieve an effective coalition and at first were badly mauled by the superior Persian forces. Even the redoubtable Spartans were defeated at [the famous battle of] Thermopylae though they fought to the last man. At [the naval battle of] Salamis [in 480],

however, Xerxes underestimated their almost fanatical courage and as a result lost more than two hundred Persian ships.... Xerxes then left for Persia, having placed his general Mardonius in command of the Persian troops still remaining in Greece.... Mardonius suffered one setback after another until he lost his life in the battle of Plataea [in 479]. The final blow ending Xerxes' aspirations to conquer Greece was administered at Mycale in 479. The Greeks had now destroyed two of the Persian armies and forced a third to return to Asia" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 498-499). After Xerxes' return to Susa, Herodotus says that he consoled himself over his defeat by sensual indulgences with his harem. This fits exactly with the time that he went and selected Esther from his harem to replace Vashti.

In verses 5-7 of chapter 2 we are first introduced to Mordecai and Esther. Their presence at Susa "suggests both the wide distribution of the Jewish Diaspora a century after the fall of Jerusalem and the fact...that the majority of the exiled Jews remained in lands of their captivity even when they had opportunity to leave [and return to the Promised Land]. Their assimilation into their new world is also clear from the very names of the principal protagonists in the story. 'Mordecai' is a Hebrew transliteration of the Babylonian divine name Marduk.... His cousin's name is similarly pagan in its overtones. 'Esther' is a form of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war" (p. 501). Some explain the name Esther as coming from the word for "star," but it should be realized that the name Ishtar shares the same derivation—referring specifically to the planet Venus (the goddess Venus and the goddess Ishtar in fact being one and the same).

Esther also bore a Hebrew name, Hadassah, meaning "Myrtle." This is the name by which she was probably known to the Jewish community. If Mordecai had a Jewish name, it is not recorded. "Jewish people in antiquity customarily had two names when they lived in regions distant from Israel. One would be their secular name, a name understandable in their adopted culture, and the other would be their sacred name given in Hebrew" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 7). Yet why the secular names borne in the case of Mordecai and Esther are overtly pagan has been a source of controversy. Some fault the protagonists themselves in this matter. Yet it could have been their parents who chose these names. Moreover, the names may have been viewed as merely common or secular and not really considered as pagan. Consider that parents today may name a daughter Diana without any thought to that being the name of a pagan goddess—though that would seem to be less likely in a society more seriously attentive to such deities. Another possibility is that the king is the one who later gave the protagonists the particular names at issue—and that they are referred to by these names where they are introduced in the account even though they did not actually come by them until later. Recall that Daniel and his three friends were given pagan names by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the case of Esther, though, some have pointed out that the Jews would have understood this name as sounding like the Hebrew for "Hidden." It is possible that this was a clever subterfuge—bearing a name familiar among the Babylonians yet having a Jewish meaning, indeed one that pointed to her "hiding" her identity. Still, this would not have been a typical Jewish name—particularly as it was the name of the chief Babylonian goddess, which the Jews would have well known.

Whatever the reason for bearing them, we might wonder why the gentile names are the ones used almost exclusively throughout the account. Here again is a reason some fault Mordecai and Esther and view the book of Esther negatively. Yet as noted in the Bible Reading Program's introductory comments on Esther, it could well be that the book was written as a Persian state chronicle. This would adequately explain the use of the non-Hebrew names. Still, we should bear in mind the stated fact that Mordecai charged Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity (verse 10). That instruction, however, was specifically for her life in the harem and at court rather than in interaction with the Jewish people. Mordecai may have felt that with revelation of Esther's true identity she would risk discrimination and possibly physical harm. Nevertheless, this has also been a source of criticism—along with Esther's consent to marry a pagan gentile king. It seems apparent that Esther was somewhat neutral about the possibility of being the king's wife, being resigned to leave matters in God's hands. She neither tried to escape the process nor aggressively sought extra measures to impress the king. We should consider that women in that age and culture of arranged marriages rarely had much of a say as to whom they married. And in this case Esther was under compulsion to marry the absolute ruler of the Persian Empire.

Of course, it is not necessary to justify everything that Mordecai and Esther decided or did. Having lived so long in a foreign culture, more than a century at this point, it is likely that the Jewish people had lost some of their moorings with regard to the Mosaic religion. Mordecai and Esther's understanding of the truth, along with that of most of the exiles, was probably somewhat deficient. We can look to the right choices that they later made as giving us more of the lessons of the story. Interestingly, Mordecai would later openly declare himself as a Jew. And in acting to save her people, it was necessary for Esther (Hadassah) to at last reveal herself as a Jewess, as we will later see. Both of them will grow in a spiritual sense over the course of the story.

More important, though, is to realize that God is able to use circumstances to bring about His intended outcome. Esther was certainly a beautiful young woman (verse 7). But that alone did not make her queen of the realm. We are probably quite safe in assuming that it was God who guided the king to select her as his principal wife. Interestingly, some who maintain that Esther means "Hidden" point to this name, being the biblical book's title, as denoting how God is present throughout the story though not explicitly mentioned.

Mordecai remained constantly concerned over Esther's welfare—and she continued to follow his instructions and may have given him an official position. Expositor's notes on verses 19-20: "Mordecai's position at the gate was not that of an 'idler' but represented some kind of duty or official position he occupied. He may have been appointed to this position by Esther to give him easier access to the royal quarters.... Men who 'sat at the gate' were frequently elders and leading, respected citizens who settled disputes that were brought to them."

While he was going about his duties, Mordecai either overheard or was informed of a plot to assassinate Xerxes. The conspirators "were eunuchs, guards of the door—i.e., men who protected the king's private apartment—who had become angry with Xerxes. The cause of their anger with the king is not stated. Mordecai got word to Esther about the plot; and she relayed the

information to the king, giving credit to Mordecai, without mentioning their relationship. Plots against Persian monarchs were not uncommon. Xerxes was in fact assassinated [years later] in his bedroom in a similar situation in 465 B.C. in a conspiracy” (note on verses 21-22).

The plotters of chapter 2 were put to death and the whole account written in the imperial annals in the presence of the king (verse 23). It is remarkable that Mordecai was not rewarded for his actions at this time. Perhaps the king was distracted. In any event, it appears that divine providence was setting the stage for the king to realize the need to reward Mordecai at a more opportune moment, as we will later see

## **1 Corinthians 12**

The variety of use of spiritual gifts are shown. (1-11) In the human body every member has its place and use. (12-26) This is applied to the church of Christ. (27-30) And there is something more excellent than spiritual gifts. (31)

Spiritual gifts were extraordinary powers bestowed in the first ages, to convince unbelievers, and to spread the gospel. Gifts and graces greatly differ. Both were freely given of God. But where grace is given, it is for the salvation of those who have it. Gifts are for the advantage and salvation of others; and there may be great gifts where there is no grace. The extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit were chiefly exercised in the public assemblies, where the Corinthians seem to have made displays of them, wanting in the spirit of piety, and of Christian love. While heathens, they had not been influenced by the Spirit of Christ. No man can call Christ Lord, with believing dependence upon him, unless that faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit. No man could believe with his heart, or prove by a miracle, that Jesus was Christ, unless by the Holy Spirit. There are various gifts, and various offices to perform, but all proceed from one God, the origin of all spiritual blessings. No man has them merely for himself. The more he profits others, the more will they turn to his own account. The gifts mentioned appear to mean exact understanding, and uttering the doctrines of the Faith; the knowledge of mysteries, and skill to give advice and counsel. Also the gift of healing the sick, the working of miracles, and to explain Scripture by a peculiar gift of the Spirit, and ability to speak and interpret languages. If we have any knowledge of the truth, or any power to make it known, we must give all the glory of God. The greater the gifts are, the more the possessor is exposed to temptations, and the larger is the measure of grace needed to keep him humble and spiritual; and he will meet with more painful experiences and humbling dispensations. We have little cause to glory in any gifts bestowed on us, or to despise those who have them not.

Christ and his church form one body, as Head and members. Men and women become members of this body by faith. The outward rite is of Divine institution; it is a sign of the new birth, and is called therefore the washing of regeneration, Titus 3:5, and the crossing of the Red Seas. But it is by the Spirit, only by the renewing of the Holy Spirit, that we are made members of Christ's body. And by communion with Christ at the Lord's supper, we are strengthened, not by drinking the wine, but by drinking into one Spirit. Each member has its form, place, and use.

There must be a distinction of members in the body. So Christ's members have different powers and different places. We should do the duties of our own place, and not murmur, or quarrel with others. All the members of the body are useful and necessary to each other. Nor is there a member of the body of Christ, but may and ought to be useful to fellow-members. As in the natural body of man, the members should be closely united by the strongest bonds of love; the good of the whole should be the object of all. All believers are dependent one upon another; each is to expect and receive help from the rest.

Let us then have more of the spirit of union in our faith.

Contempt, hatred, envy, and strife, are very unnatural in true believers. It is like the members of the same body being without concern for one another, or quarrelling with each other. The proud, contentious spirit that prevailed, as to spiritual gifts, was thus condemned. The offices and gifts, or favors, dispensed by the Holy Spirit, are noticed. Chief ministers; persons enabled to interpret Scripture; those who labored in word and doctrine; those who had power to heal diseases; such as helped the sick and weak; such as disposed of the money given in charity by the assembly, and managed the affairs of the assembly; and such as could speak divers languages. What holds the last and lowest rank in this list, is the power to speak languages; how vain, if a man does so merely to amuse or to exalt himself! See the distribution of these gifts, not to every one alike, verses 29,30. This were to make the assembly all one, as if the body were all ear, or all eye. The Spirit distributes to everyone as he will. We must be content though we are lower and less than others. We must not despise others, if we have greater gifts. How blessed the faithful assembly, if all the members did their duty! Instead of coveting the highest stations, or the most splendid gifts, let us leave the appointment of his instruments to God, and those in whom he works by his providence. Remember, those will not be approved hereafter who seek the chief places, but those who are most faithful to the trust placed in them, and most diligent in their Master's work.