

Esther

History

To understand this book we need to look at the history of the Jewish people. The Jews left Egypt about **1450 BC** and entered the Promised Land around **1405 BC**. Then you have the time of the **Judges**. Next, in **1020 BC** you have three kings and after Solomon, the kingdom divides into two separate kingdoms in **930 BC**. One is named Israel and the other Judah. In **722 BC** the northern nation Israel was defeated and deported by the Assyrians.

In 605 BC the Babylonians defeated Egypt and Assyria and Judah came under Babylonian control. In **588 BC** Judah revolted against Babylon and in 587-586 BC the Babylonians **wiped out** Judah and deported the Jews back to Babylon.

In 539 BC Cyrus II, who was the founder of the Persian Empire, captured Babylon and became the new superpower of the day.

Cyrus II or Cyrus the Great was written about by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years before Cyrus even existed (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1).

*who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd,
and he shall fulfill all my purpose';
saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,'
and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"
1 Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed: **Isaiah 44:28-45:1 ESV***

Cyrus II let the Jews go back to Israel and rebuild (Ezra 1:1-2). Also, he gave them cash to rebuild the temple (Ezra 6:8).

Cyrus would die in **530 BC** then there would be two other kings of Persia and then **Xerxes**, the king in the book of Esther, who ruled from 485 to 465 BC.

Background of the Book of Esther

Author: We do not know who wrote the book but whoever did, knew the **culture** and the **people** of the time.

Date: This book was written between 470-465 BC, in the latter years of **Xerxes** or in the reign of his son Artaxerxes.

Purpose: To encourage the returning Jewish exiles in the **faithfulness** of God. Also, the author was explaining the feast of Purim, which celebrates the survival of the Jews marked for death in the 5th century before Christ.

One Note: The Jewish people **love** this book in the Bible because it shows God taking care of His people even when they turn their back on Him.

Chapter 1

Verse 1

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,

This first verse introduces us to one of the main characters in this book, Ahasuerus. This was not his personal name but rather his **kingly** name (like Caesar or Pharaoh). The name means “chief of rulers”.

His real name was **Xerxes**, which means “hero over men” or “he who rules over men”. He was the son of Darius, also the king of the Persians. Xerxes ruled from 485 to 465 BC.

We are also told that he ruled over a large empire. The area mentioned would include modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Arabia.

Xerxes was said to be the **tallest** and the most handsome Persian king. He was also known to be **ruthless**, jealous, ambitious, and have an irrational temper. Xerxes is mentioned in two other places in the Old Testament (Ezra 4:6: Daniel 11:2).

Verse 2

in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel,

Xerxes had several palaces (that is what citadel means). His winter **palace** was in Susa (Nehemiah 1:1).

Verses 3-4

in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, 4while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.

In 483 BC, Xerxes gave a **banquet** for the powerful people in his kingdom. What Xerxes was doing was planning his invasion of **Greece**, which took place in 481 BC. In other words, this was a great war council for that event.

It should be noted that the book of Esther does not mention this war with Greece. But this war does happen during this book.

Xerxes, it is said, wanted to avenge his father Darius' 490 BC defeat at Marathon, near Athens. After 180 days, Xerxes opened the door to the palace and **invited** everyone in.

Verses 5-6

And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. 6There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.

The word "garden" is where we get the English word "**paradise**" from. These gardens were very beautiful, with flowers and ponds. When Christ is crucified, He is crucified between two robbers. He tells one "you will be with me in paradise" (**Luke 23:43**).

And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Verse 9

Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

The banquet that Xerxes gave was only for men. So during the final seven-day banquet Queen Vashti gave a feast for the women.

- Her name means "**desirable**". This might have been an honorary title due to her being the king's favorite wife. Jewish tradition says that she was the great-granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the former king of Babylon, but we don't know if that's true.

Verses 10-11

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha & Abagtha, Zethar & Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.

So after 180 days of feasting and drinking, Xerxes, who was probably drunk, wanted to show off his favorite wife. He had several wives and 360 concubines. So Xerxes sent his eunuchs to go get Vashti because he wanted to **show her off** to his drunken guests. (We don't know for sure what she wore or didn't wear.)

Verse 12

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Queen Vashti **refused** to come. The author of Esther does not tell us why. Some have thought that she might have been pregnant with the next king, Artaxerxes, who would be born around this time and would play a role in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Or it might have been her believing that her beauty was hers and her husband's and did not want to appear before a bunch of drunken men.

The guests were shocked. Here was the most powerful man in the world at this time and had been planning the invasion of Greece and his wife **disobeyed** him! Let me say it another way. Vashti stood up to a man who was known for his **brutality**. Vashti sacrificed her crown to keep her character.

Anyway, the king went berserk. Here was the queen disobeying her husband **in front** of all these generals and princes and commanders, all of whom the king wanted to follow him into war.

Verses 13-15

Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, 14the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): 15"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"

Xerxes then gets his **wise men** together to find out what he should do. This was not just a marital issue but more a **legal** matter that had to be addressed.

Wisemen- Wisemen like this were very common in the Ancient Near Eastern courts. These wise men played a very important role in these courts. We see this with Daniel in the book of Daniel. It should be noted that **Matthew** writes about them visiting Christ in Matthew 2.

Verses 16-18

Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17For the queen’s behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ 18This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s behavior will say the same to all the king’s officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

One of these wise men states that what Vashti did was a big problem because when this gets out, women all over the kingdom will **disrespect** their husbands.

In Verse 19-22 the wise men of kings Xerxes came up with a plan and the plan was to **depose** Vashti as an example to other women to respect their husbands. A decree was sent out all over the kingdom that the man was the master of the household.

Chapter 2

When we look at this chapter we see God bringing everything together to save his people.

In between chapters one and two a great **war** happened. The book of Esther starts out with a big bash Xerxes was having which was the planning meeting for invading Greece and from other sources, we know Xerxes was planning on invading the rest of Europe.

Xerxes is **defeated** and comes back home, and this is where the story picks up.

Verse 1

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Xerxes remembers Vashti. But there was nothing he could do, he had **banished** her and the laws of the Persians and Medes could not be altered.

Verses 2-4 tell us that Xerxes’ counselors come to him and say “let’s have an empire-wide beauty contest and then the king can decide who will be his new queen.”

This was an outside-the-box idea because normally the queen had to be related to the seven noble families. So this had never been done in Persian history. We see **God working**- getting everything set up to again save His people.

Verses 5-6

Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.

Mordecai was a Jewish man from the **tribe** of Benjamin. This verse does not mean Mordecai was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC- that would make Mordecai 115. It means that Kish, Mordecai's great grandfather was the one carried away.

Other things we notice:

1. Mordecai did not go back with the other Jewish folks.
2. His name refers to **Marduk**- the chief Babylonian god.
3. Mordecai did not want **anyone** to know that he was Jewish.

It would **appear** that Mordecai was "Persianized" and did not want anyone to know he was a Jew.

Verse 7

He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Mordecai was bringing up his **cousin** Esther, also a Benjaminite, who was an orphan. Her Jewish name means "myrtle" and Esther, her pagan name is probably a transliteration of **Ishtar**, the Babylonian goddess of love.

Verse 8

So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.

The king's order goes out and we are not told what Mordecai's nor Esther's response was. Esther, because of her beauty, was **taken** along with many other women.

There are probably three reasons why Esther would not win this contest:

1. She was an **orphan** and had no family connections.
2. She was against tough competition. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus who lived during the first century, there were **1000** ladies involved in this contest.
3. She was a **Jew**. Esther might have been picked for her beauty to be in the harem but never to be queen.

In this verse, we are told of a man named Hegai who was a eunuch of Xerxes and was in charge of these women.

Verse 9

And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.

Esther gained **favor** with Hegai. The word that is used for *favor* is the same **word** used for God's covenant favor and kindness toward His people. The gifts that Esther received were ones all the contestants received but she got hers **faster** than anyone else. She was also promoted to the best place in the harem.

In this story, the favor Esther received is mentioned several times. There is no explanation for it other than God is **working**.

Verses 10-11

Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Mordecai did not want Esther to reveal that she was Jewish. Mordecai was probably afraid of prejudice against Jewish folks.

Mordecai does not **abandon** Esther but tries to keep close to her.