



STUDIES IN EZRA AND ESTHER LIVING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Lesson 4 (Lesson 1 of Esther)

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

I. THE BENEFITS OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

A. Cured of Idolatry

The Jews were almost completely cured of idolatry, no matter what their faults and downfalls were in later periods of history, they never returned to the idolatry of the nations around them as they had. The Babylonian Captivity had taught them to abhor the worship of idols.

B. The Scribes and Rabbinic Literature

The situation caused them to be separated from Jerusalem and the Temple and thus there came a new order called the "Scribes." In their earliest stages they served the Jewish colonists in a very valuable way, especially in teaching, guarding and preserving the Scriptures. The Scribes produced the rabbinical literature known as the **Mishna** (God's laws allegedly passed down orally and not recorded in Scripture), the **Gemara** (a commentary on the Mishna and a compilation of accepted traditions). These two volumes were later added to and combined to form the **Talmud** (Babylonian Talmud). There was also other important literature and secular writings.

C. The Synagogues

Places for assembly or "synagogues" were instituted in order to conduct formal Jewish worship, and to provide schools for education while they were far from their homeland. It was the difficult circumstances of the Babylonian Captivity that allowed for the synagogues, without these unusual circumstances there might not have been synagogues which kept the national spirit of the Jewish people even after the fall of the Second Temple.

D. The Teaching of the Scriptures

The Jewish people pursued the Scriptures. They compiled the Scriptures and studied them intensely, realizing the reason for the Captivity and teaching this to their children. Later Ezra, the Scribe, taught the Scriptures and gave light to its meaning.

E. Unification of the Jewish People

Similar to the captivity in Egypt, the Babylonian Captivity brought a common hardship and isolation which brought a common sympathy and a closer relationship with each individual of the nation. They returned united and purified. Anyone who would not learn this lesson remained in Babylon only to become lost in history.

[http://www.bible history.](http://www.biblehistory.com)

com/map_babylonian_captivity/map_of_the_deportation_of_judah_the_benefits_of_the_babylonian_captivity.html

II. THE BOOK OF ESTHER - INTRODUCTION

A. Historical/Background

1. Chronology of the Period

The fall of Israel to Assyria-723 BC

Daniel carried to Babylon-605

The fall of Jerusalem--597

The fall of Judah to Babylonia and the exile--586

The Jews returned under Zerubbabel-536

Temple completed--516

Xerxes--486-465

Battle of Salamis in which Persia was defeated-480

Esther becomes Queen - c. 478 (about 60 years after the decree of Cyrus 2 Chronicles 36:22)

Saved her people - 473

Ezra returned to Jerusalem - 455

Nehemiah returned - 445

2. The Persian Empire

At its peak, the Persian Empire reached from India to Greece, and from the Caspian Sea to the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. The Persians are believed to have originated in Media, which today corresponds to western Iran and southern Azerbaijan. They settled in Persia, on the eastern side of the Persian Gulf.

The Persians were Aryans, speaking one of the eastern Indo-European group of languages. Two lines developed from an early leader, Teispes, who had conquered Elam in the time of the decline of the Assyrian Empire - one line in Anzan, the other in Persia. Cyrus II, king of Anzan, united the nation, and conquered Media, Lydia, and Babylonia. His son, Cambyses, took Egypt, which was later ruled by Darius, the son of Hystaspes. Persepolis (see map) was an ancient city of Persia that served as a ceremonial capital for Darius and his successors.

From a Biblical perspective, the Persians were a link in the chain of human empires that molded Bible History:

- the Egyptians from which the Exodus occurred,
- the Assyrians who conquered the "Lost Ten Tribes,"
- the Babylonians who conquered the southern Kingdom of Judah
- the Persians who permitted the return to Jerusalem,
- the Greeks who covered much of the time between the Old and New Testaments,
- and the Romans who covered the time of Christ and beyond



Persian Kings In Bible History

Common Name	Date	B.C.	Name In Bible	Bible References
Cyrus		539-530	Cyrus	Isaiah 45, Daniel, Ezra 1-3
Cambyses		530-521	Ahasruerus	Ezra 4-6
Pseudo Smerdis		521	Artaxerxes	Ezra 4:7-23
Darius the Great		521-486	Darius	Ezra 5,6
Xerxes		486-465	Ahasruerus	Esther 1-10
Artaxerxes I		464-423	Artaxerxes	Nehemiah 1 - 13, Ezra 7-10

B. Shushan

Susa (*Biblical Shushan*; also Greek: Σέλεύχεια, transliterated as **Seleukeia** or **Seleukheia**; Latin **Seleucia ad Eulaeum**; modern **Shush**, coordinates: 32.18922° N 48.25778° E) was an ancient city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires of Iran, located about 150 miles east of the Tigris River in Khuzestan province of Iran. As well as being an archaeological site, Shush is also a lively village due to the devotion of Shi'a Muslims and the Persian Jewish community for the prophet Daniel.

Susa is one of the oldest-known settlements of the region, probably founded about 4000 BCE. Šuša was invaded by both Babylonian Empires as well as the Assyrian Empire in violent campaigns. After the Babylonian conquest, the name was misunderstood to be connected with the Semitic word Šušan, "lily."

Susa is mentioned in the Ketuvim ["Ketuvim" is the third and final section of the Tanakh¹ (Hebrew Bible), after Torah and Nevi'im. The Hebrew word כתובים (ketuvim) means "writings." In English translations of the Hebrew Bible, this section is usually entitled "The Writings" or "Hagiographa."], mainly in Esther but also once each in Nehemiah and Daniel. Both Daniel and Nehemiah lived in Susa during the Babylonian captivity of Judah of the 6th century BCE. A tomb presumed to be that of Daniel is located in the area, known as

Shush-Daniel. The tomb is marked by an unusual white, stone cone, which is neither regular nor symmetric. -Wikipedia

The Assyrian king Aššurbanipal destroyed the Elamite capital between 645-640 BCE. It is unclear what happened in the next century, but after this, Susa was one of the empires of the Achaemenid Empire. The city was rebuilt by the Persian king Darius the Great (522-486). The **Apadana palace** was clearly his favorite residence. The Greek researcher Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who wrote a lot about the Achaemenid Empire, did not know of another capital. Archaeologists have been able to identify several ruins with buildings mentioned by the author of *Esther*.

C. Author

We do not know who wrote the book. We do know however that he was a Jew by nationality and very personally acquainted with the reign of King Ahasuerus, the Persian Empire and the palace in Shushan.

III. THE CHARACTERS INVOLVED

A. Xerxes

Preceded by: Darius I	<u>Great King of Media and Persia</u> 486–465 BC	Succeeded by: <u>Artaxerxes I</u>
	<u>King of Egypt</u> 486–465 BC	

Ahasuerus was the Hebrew name given to the king. His real Persian name was Khshayarsha and the Greeks called him Xerxes. Bible scholars believe this is the same king referred to in Daniel 11:2 as the 4th and richest of the Persian kings.

Xerxes I was the son of Darius the Great and Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great and sister of Cambyses.

Xerxes was designated heir-apparent by his father and served as satrap of Babylon from 498 B.C. to his accession in 486. He is portrayed with his father on the reliefs at Persepolis, where Darius sits on his throne in his robe of state and behind him stands the crown prince. The winged Ahura-Mazda floats above the scene. This sculpture confirms Xerxes' statement that his father "made me the greatest after himself."

Xerxes lacked the toleration and sensitivity of Cyrus and the foresight of Darius. Soon after his accession he brutally crushed revolts in Egypt and Babylon. Neither did he have the military ability of his predecessors, but urged on by bad advisers he began an assault on Greece in 480 B.C. Herodotus' description of Xerxes' army is a most valuable ethnographic document; although he exaggerated the number of soldiers (1,700,000, excluding naval forces); his figure of 1200 ships is confirmed by Aeschylus.

Xerxes' preparations included digging a canal near Athos and having a bridge over the waters of the Hellespont. When the bridge broke, Xerxes ordered the engineers' heads cut off and the sea given three hundred lashes (!). A new double bridge was built, and the army crossed over.

After being delayed by the Greeks at Thermopylae, the Persians pushed on to Athens and burned the city. Later that year the Persian fleet suffered a disastrous defeat at Salamis, and Xerxes ordered the execution of the Phoenician admiral; after this both the Phoenician and Egyptian fleets deserted him.

Xerxes withdrew from Greece, leaving the army in the hands of his general Mardonius. In 479 the Greeks defeated the Persian army at Plataea and, on the same day, the Persian fleet at Mycale.

In 466 the Persians were defeated again and forced to give up all the territory that Darius had gained outside of Asia Minor. Xerxes returned home and concentrated on building at Persepolis and Susa. Construction attributed to him at Persepolis includes the completion of the Apadana, his own palace, and the harem.

Xerxes inherited an empire that was basically sound, but he was not equal to the task of maintaining its vitality. The description of his character in Esther (Where he is called King Ahasuerus) agrees with evidence from other sources. His undisciplined temper and moral weakness cost him everything he had gained. He died by the hand of an assassin in 465 B.C.

The book of Esther opens by describing what an imposing figure King Ahasuerus was. He was emperor of 127 provinces extending all the way from India to Ethiopia. He was wealthy enough to hold a drinking party that lasted six months, and powerful enough to command the presence of everyone who was anyone in the land.

Lists dominate the first chapter; lists not only of the king's many exotic belongings, but also of his guests, his servants and his wise men. When the king says "drink," his subjects drink; when he says "fetch," they fetch. This is why Vashti's refusal to appear becomes such a big issue.

B. Esther

The name "Esther" means "Star." According to the Book of Esther she was a Jewish woman originally named Hadassah. When she entered the royal harem she received the name "Esther" by which she was henceforth known. *Hadassah* means "myrtle" in Hebrew and the name *Esther* is most likely related to the Median word for myrtle, *astara*, and the Persian word *setareh* meaning star - the myrtle blossom resembles a twinkling star.

"Esther" can also be understood to mean "hidden" in Hebrew, and her name is interpreted thus in Midrash (a Hebrew word referring to a method of exegesis of a Biblical text.) where it is told that Esther hid her nationality and lineage as Mordecai had advised. In addition God's workings are hidden in the events of the Book of Esther even though He is never mentioned explicitly. Therefore, in Hebrew, "The Book of Esther" can be understood as "The Book of Hiddenness," representing God's hiddenness in the story.

The Targumⁱⁱ provides another Midrashic explanation claiming that she was as beautiful as the Evening Star, which is *astara* in Greek. Critics of the historicity of the Book of Esther attempt to derive the name from Ishtar, the pagan goddess associated with the Evening Star, although the usual Hebrew rendition of the latter name is the phonetically unrelated Ashtoreth. (Although the Semitic name *Ishtar* resembles Indo-European words for *star*, the words are not related, the Semitic root beginning with a guttural ayin and the *sh* sound deriving from an earlier *th* sound.)

"HADASSAH", the Women's Zionist Organization of America takes its name from Hadassah. It is a volunteer women's organization, whose members are moti-

vated and inspired to strengthen their partnership with Israel, ensure Jewish continuity, and realize their potential as a dynamic force in American society.

C. Hamaan

Hamaan was a descendant of Agag. Agag was the king of the Amalekites, mentioned by Balaam in Numbers 24: 7 in a way that gives probability to the conjecture that the name was a standing title of the kings of Amalek. The name or title may mean "flame" in ancient Western Semitic.

Another Amalekite ruler named Agag was taken by King Saul after a successful expedition against him (1 Samuel 15). His life was spared by Saul; but the prophet Samuel, who regarded this clemency as a defiance of the will of YHWH, put him to death at Gilgal in retributive justice (Numbers 14:45). He was to be brought out and cut in pieces (1 Samuel 15:8-33). This disobedience had nearly had disastrous results for Israel. Evidently the children of Agag were spared which in later generations brought about Hamaan.

D. Mordecai

Mordecai was a Benjamite, like Esther, descending from the same line as King Saul of Israel.

Esther 2:5-6 states: *"There was a Jewish man in Susa the capital, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the exile that was exiled with Jeconiah, king of Judah, which Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had exiled."*

Some interpret this verse to mean that Mordecai himself was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, which would make him very old. Others interpret it to mean that his great-grandfather Kish was exiled making Mordecai three generations removed from the time of Jeconiah's exile.

Mordecai resided at Susa, the metropolis of Persia. He adopted his cousin Hadassah (Esther), an orphan child, whom he tenderly brought up as his own daughter. When she was brought into the king's harem and made queen in the room of the deposed queen Vashti, he was promoted to some office in the court of Ahasuerus, and was one of those who "sat in the king's gate". While holding this office, he discovered a plot of the eunuchs to put the king to death, which, by his vigilance, was defeated. His services to the king in this matter were duly recorded in the royal chronicles.

The name "*Mordecai*" is of uncertain origin. It is most commonly understood to mean "[servant] of Marduk" in Aramaic, identical to the name *Marduka* attested in the Persian period. Mordecai may have been a Persian or Babylonian name given to him. (The Book of Daniel contains similar accounts of Jews living in exile in Babylonia being assigned names relating to Babylonian gods.)

Some suggest that as Marduk was a war god, the expression "[servant] of Marduk" may simply denote a warrior - the popular translation of "warrior" is commonly found in naming dictionaries. Others note that Marduk was the creator in Babylonian mythology whence the term might have been understood by Jews to mean simply "[servant] of God".

Another interpretation of the name is that it is of Persian origin meaning "little boy". Some think this indicated that Mordecai was short of stature. Other suggested meanings of "contrition", "bitter" or "bruising" are listed in Hitchcock's Bible Names Dictionary of the late 19th century.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE

The biblical book of Esther is filled with these same themes: vengeance, violence, power, racial and gender conflicts, even anti-Judaism. All these ever-so-contemporary themes make the story read like a modern parable. Set in the ancient empire of Persia, and opening as exotically as A Thousand and One Arabian Nights, the book of Esther quickly draws us into its extravagantly dangerous, darkly funny, sharply satirical, and yet breathtakingly poignant world of intrigue in the palace of King **Ahasuerus**. There, failure to heed the call of drunken kings spells banishment, and refusal to bow before arrogance means death. Yet Esther, a young heroine who is at once foreign, female, and orphaned, takes courage alone and, aided by a providential chain of circumstances and an excellent wine list, rescues the Jewish nation from **genocide**.

Esther is unusual among books of the Bible in that, throughout the story as it appears in the Hebrew text and is best known to Protestants, God never appears, nor is even mentioned. Prayer, worship, sacrifice, and the law never come into play. The story takes place outside the promised land, in the Persian capital city of **Susa** (see map), where Jews were living as a result of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem over a hundred years before. Unlike most of the Old Testament, the book of Esther takes no interest in the Jewish homeland. Rather, as in later periods in Christian Europe, the Jews were a minority scattered throughout an empire, making their lives among Gentiles while surviving as a distinct people. Esther could well be the only biblical story emerging from Jews of this Eastern world, people who had reconciled themselves to the **diaspora** and could describe it authentically.

Is the book of Esther historical? The setting is genuine, and many details reflect knowledge of Persian customs. King Ahasuerus (identified in Greek literature as Xerxes I) indeed reigned over the Persian Empire in the early fifth century B.C.E. But the Ahasuerus of history was married neither to a **Vashti** nor to an Esther, but to an **Amestris**. Many of the events, descriptions, and numbers in the story fit hyperbole more than fact. Strong currents of coincidence and "blind luck"-or divine providence-lend the story's plot with more ethical satisfaction than historical realism. Powerless people often survive on the edge of the whims of spoiled rulers, as Esther and her people do, but rarely overturn the intents of a great empire. Yet a narrative in which such an overthrow is portrayed, step by ironic step, not only brings hope to refugees but also lends insight into the deep structures of God's realm. – from Horizons, the magazine for Presbyterian women. - <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/horizons/biblestudies/bsEIntro.htm>

The significance of the Book of Esther is that it testifies to the secret watch care of Jehovah over His own, in this instance dispersed Israel, even when they are out of His will. A mere remnant returned to Jerusalem. The mass of the nation preferred the easy and lucrative life under the Persian rule. But God did not forsake them. What He here does for Judah, He is surely doing for all of His people.

*Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne
But that scaffold sways the future
And beyond the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows
Keeping watch upon His own.*

V. MODERN RETELLING

The story of Esther has been retold many times in song, play and movie.

In 1718 Handel wrote an oratorio *Esther* based on a play by Jean Racine.

The play entitled "Esther" (1960) written by Welsh dramatist Saunders Lewis is a retelling of the story in the Welsh language.

A movie about the story was entitled "Esther and the King."

There is a fictional book by Rebecca Kohn called "The Gilded Chamber" that retells the story of Queen Esther.

A 1978 miniseries entitled "The Greatest Heroes of the Bible" starred Victoria Principal as Esther, Robert Mandan as Xerxes, and Michael Ansara as Haman.

A movie that reflects the exact words from the bible was entitled, "Esther"

In 2001, VeggieTales, a company that uses CGI vegetables to teach children lessons from the Bible in a comical way, released "*Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen*," which retells the story of Esther.

A movie about Esther and Ahasuerus, entitled One Night with the King: The Call of Destiny, is rescheduled for a 2006 release.

In late 2004, the pop singer, Madonna, changed her name to "Esther."

VI. PROVIDENCE

The name of God does not once occur, but in no other book of the Bible is His providence more conspicuous.

VIII. SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT ESTHER:

A. Are the Actions of Esther and Mordecai Morally Right?

B. Why Is There No Mention of God in the Book?

C. Are There Exaggerations?

IX. OUTLINE

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|--|---------------------------|
| I. The Rejection of Vashti | 1:1-22 |
| II. The Selection of Esther (Hadasah) | 2:1-23 |
| Esther wins the beauty contest and is made queen | |
| III. The Conspiracy of Haman | 3:1-15 |
| IV. The Courage of Esther | 4:1-7:10 |
| V. The Vengeance, 8:1-9:19 | February 23-Execution Day |
| VI. The Feast of Purim | 9:20-32 |
| VII. Epilogue | 10:1-3 |

The events recorded in Esther cover a period of 12 years.

Tanakh [תנ"ך] (also **Tanach**, IPA: [ta'nax] or [tə'nax]), is an acronym that identifies the Hebrew Bible. The acronym is based on the initial Hebrew letters of each of the text's three parts:

Torah [תורה] meaning "Instruction." Also called the *Chumash* [חומש] meaning: "The five;" "The five books of Moses." Also called the "Pentateuch."

Nevi'im [נביאים] meaning: "Prophets."

Ketuvim [כתובים] meaning "Writings" or "Hagiographa."

– Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia.

ⁱⁱThe Targum (A **targum** (plural: *targumim*) is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)ⁱⁱ written or compiled in the Land of Israel or in Babylonia from the Second Temple period until the early Middle Ages (late first millennium). (Targum is also the name used for the dialects of Aramaic spoken by Jews in Kurdistan.)

As translations, the *targumim* largely reflect rabbinic (i.e. midrashic) interpretation of the Tanakh. This is true both for those *targumim* that are fairly literal, as well as for those which contain a great many midrashic expansions.

Aramaic was the dominant language or lingua franca for hundreds of years in major Jewish communities in the Land of Israel and Babylonia. In order to facilitate the study of Tanakh and make its public reading understood, authoritative translations were required.

- Wikipedia