

ESTHER OVERVIEW

Historical timeline

Year		
<u>BC</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Reference</u>
740	Israel's captivity to Assyrians begins	1 Chron. 5:26
722	Israel's King Hoshea falls to Shalmaneser of Assyria	2 Kings 17:3-6
612	Babylonians and Medes conquer Assyrians	
605	Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Babylonians	
605	Judah's leaders (including Daniel) taken captive by Babylonians	Dan. 1:1-6
603	Nebuchadnezzar has dream of statue representing 4 kingdoms	Dan. 2
597	Jehoikin & Jehoiachin (Kings of Judah) taken captive by Babylonians	2 Chron. 36:5-10
597	Mordecai's great-grandfather Kish carried into captivity	Esther 2:5-6
586	Babylonians conquer Judah	2 Kings 25
559	Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great) becomes king of Persia	
550	Belshazzar becomes king of Babylon	
550	Belshazzar sees hand writing on wall	Daniel 5
550	Belshazzar dies and Darius the Mede takes over Babylonian kingdom (Darius the Mede's father Xerxes is not to be confused with Xerxes I)	Daniel 5:30-31; 9:1
550	Daniel's prophecy of four beasts	Daniel 7
550	Cyrus II of Persia conquers the Medes	
539	Cyrus II of Persia conquers Babylon	
538	Cyrus II allows Jews to return to Jerusalem	Ezra 1:1-4
536	Jews return to Jerusalem (including Nehemiah and Mordecai)	Ezra 2
529	Cyrus II's reign ends	
530	Cambyes II (son of Cyrus II) becomes king of Persia	
522	Bardiya/Smerdis (younger son of Cyrus II) becomes king of Persia	
522	Darius I (Cambyes II's lance-bearer) becomes king of Persia	
522	Daniel's prophecy of four kingdoms	Daniel 11
516	Ezra completes rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple	Ezra 6:15
490	Greeks defeat Persians (Darius I) in the battle of Marathon	
485	Xerxes I (Hebrew Ahasuerus) (Darius I's son) becomes king of Persia	
479	Greeks defeat Persians (Xerxes I) at Salamis (480) and Plataea (479)	
478	Esther becomes Xerxes I's queen	Esther 2:17
473	Esther saves the Jewish people	Esther 9
465	Artaxerxes I (Xerxes I's son, Esther's step-son) becomes king of Persia	
457	Ezra relocates from Babylon to Jerusalem	Ezra 7:1-5
445	Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes	Nehemiah 1:11-2:1
444	Nehemiah builds the wall around Jerusalem	Nehemiah 6:15
424	Xerxes II becomes king of Persia (Artaxerxes I's son)	
330	Alexander the Great, King of Greece, conquers Persia (Darius III)	

Background

At the time of Rehoboam (Solomon's son), Israel was divided into two kingdoms, the ten tribes of Israel in the north, and the two tribes of Judah in the South. Near the end of the age of the kings, Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians. Over 100 years later, the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians and then the southern kingdom of Judah as well. The Babylonians were consequently conquered by the Persians. Therefore, at the time of Esther, the Jews who had been deported by the Assyrians and Babylonians were ruled by the Persians.

Xerxes/Ahasuerus

Xerxes (NIV, NLT) is the Greek name of “Ahasuerus” (NAS, NKJ, ESV, KJV, NET), which is a Hebrew transliteration of his Persian name (*Khshayarsha*). Xerxes I was the fourth king of Persia (Iran) in the Achaemenid Empire. He reigned from 486-465 BC. Xerxes was the fourth king prophesied in Daniel’s vision of the kings. This prophecy was given about 37 years before Xerxes became king:

Daniel 11:2-3 “Now then, I tell you the truth: Three more kings [after Cyrus] will appear in Persia [Cambyses, Smerdis, Darius], and then a fourth [Xerxes, son of Darius], who will be far richer than all the others. When he has gained power by his wealth, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece.³ Then a mighty king will appear [Alexander the Great], who will rule with great power and do as he pleases.

Xerxes led campaigns against Greece, scoring a costly victory at Thermopylae (480), and conquering Athens, but ultimately facing defeat at Salamis (480) and Plataea (479). These campaigns occurred just prior to taking Esther as his wife.



Rock relief of King Xerxes I of Persia from his tomb at Naqshe Rostam.

Vashti

Vashti was the beautiful first wife of Xerxes/Ahasuerus. She was banished from the presence of the king for refusing to appear at a great banquet before him and all the people. The reason for her refusal is unclear. While a request was made that she wear her crown, ancient tradition suggests that Xerxes’ inebriated request was that she appear wearing *only* her crown,ⁱ but there is no evidence of this. Historically, Vashti may correlate with Amestris. If that is the case, Vashti may have had some of her power restored later and served as queen mother during the reign of Artaxerxes.ⁱⁱ

Esther/Hadassah

Esther’s Hebrew name was Hadassah. She was a beautiful Jewish girl who became queen to Xerxes in place of the ousted Vashti. The fact that Esther was able to conceal her Jewish ancestry may imply that she was not faithfully observing Jewish customs and dietary restrictions (Esther 2:20).

Mordecai

Mordecai was an older Jewish man from the tribe of Benjamin. Mordecai was Esther’s foster parent and older cousin. Esther’s father, Abihai, was the brother of one of Mordecai’s parents. A “Mordecai” is mentioned in the list of Jews who returned from captivity to Jerusalem in Ezra 2:1-2 and Nehemiah 7:6-7. It may be that Mordecai went to Jerusalem and later returned to the Babylonian region to help with the raising of his cousin, Esther. The fact that Mordecai was at the king’s gate (2:19; 5:13; 6:10) implies that he served in the capacity of a royal official (3:2-3).

Haman

During the events in the book of Esther, Haman was given the highest seat of honor among the nobles. No reason is given for Haman’s rise, but it stands in contradistinction to Mordecai’s failure to rise to prominence after thwarting an assassination attempt. Haman’s father was Hammedatha, of whom nothing is known other than that he was an Agagite (3:1). “Agag” is the title of Amalekite kings (like “Pharaoh” is the title of Egyptian kings). The Amalekites were enemies of Israel dating back to some particular incidents including Joshua and Moses (Exodus 17:8-16) and later Saul (1 Samuel 15:8). If Haman was an Amalekite, it would explain Mordechai’s extreme disrespect for him.

Locations and Archeology

- **Susa/Sushan** – One of several Persian capitalsⁱⁱⁱ. It was excavated extensively starting in 1852. Since the ruins cover around 4,900 acres, they will never be thoroughly studied.
- **Royal palace** (citadel of Susa) was raised well above the city. Discoveries include the throne room (Esther 1:2; 5:1)(which measured nearly an acre), king's gate (4:1), inner court (5:1), outer court (6:4), palace garden (7:7), and dice (pur) (3:7) (which was a quadrangular prism.)^{iv}
- **Mordechai** – A cuneiform tablet was found which names "Marduka" as a finance officer in the Persian court at Susa during Xerxes I's reign.^v It is possible if not probable that Mordechai and Marduka are the same individual.
- **Tombs of Esther and Mordechai** – In Hamadan Iran there is a shrine type of tomb that is called the Tomb of Esther and Mordechai, but its authenticity is questionable.



The ruins at ancient Susa



Tomb of Esther and Mordechai



Persian palace at Susa

Interesting notes:

- **Name of God** - The book of Esther does not mention God, the Lord, prayer, or worship. However, the hand of God is evident throughout.
- **Chronological order** - Although the book of Esther appears after Ezra and Nehemiah the events of Esther happen midway through Ezra: after the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:15), before Ezra's final return to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1-5), and before Nehemiah rebuilt the wall.
- **Jew** - The word "Jew" was first used to represent the Hebrew people during the time of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah. It is derived from the word "Judah."
- **Esther 3:2** - The Jews customarily bowed before their kings (1 Sam. 24:8, 2 Sam. 14:4; 18:26, 1 Kings 1:16) so it is not a given that Mordecai felt that bowing down to Haman would have violated the second commandment. If Mordecai did feel that bowing down would violate the Law, it would explain why he revealed to them that he was a Jew (Esther 3:4). However, his refusal to bow down may have also been due to an ongoing feud between the Benjamites and Agagites/Amalekites.^{vi}
- **Esther 3:9** - The 10,000 talents Haman offered Xerxes amounted to 375 tons and would be the equivalent of about 70% of the king's annual revenue.^{vii} This would imply that Haman was extraordinarily rich (which might explain his sudden rise to power), or it may be that Haman intended to pay Xerxes from the spoils of the destruction of the Jewish people.
- **Esther 5:3, 7:2** – Xerxes' promise to Esther of whatever she wanted "up to half of the kingdom" was likely understood as hyperbole, an extreme exaggeration likely understood by Esther. A similar promise was made by Herod to Herodias, who in turn asked for the head of John the Baptist.
- **Esther 5:14** - The gallows mentioned in Esther may have been a long pole on which a victim was impaled. The 75 foot length constructed by Haman may have included the height of a hill or building upon which the gallows sat. Here is an example from the same time period:
 - **Ezra 6:11-12** *Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble. NIV*
- **Esther 8:8** - The Persian decrees of the time were not allowed to be changed (Esther 8:8, Daniel 6:15). Therefore, instead of repealing the first decree, a second was issued that allowed the Jews to defend themselves. (Esther 8:11)
- **Purim** – The Feast of the Purim commemorates the destruction of the Jewish enemies in the days of Mordechai. It is still celebrated by the Jews today. It comes from the word "pur" or "lot" because Haman casts lots for the destruction of the Jews.
 - **Esther 3:7** *In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the pur (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. NIV*
 - **Esther 9:24** *For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. NIV*
 - **Esther 9:28** *These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. 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. NIV*

ⁱ The NET Bible, © 2005, p.783 #11

ⁱⁱ Halley's Bible Handbook, ©1965, p. 238

ⁱⁱⁱ The NET Bible, © 2005, P. 782 #7

^{iv} Thompson Chain Reference Bible ©1983, p. 1693

^v The New Defenders Study Bible, ©2006, p. 771, see also The Quest for the Historical Mordecai

^{vi} The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, © 1962, p. 450-451; The New Defenders Study Bible, ©2006, p. 673

^{vii} The New Defenders Study Bible, ©2006, p. 674