

“A Study In The Book of Esther”

Edited By

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LESSON #1

Historical Background of Esther

Esther 1:1–2 mentions a great ruler by the name of A_____. He was a Persian king who was also known as Xerxes (the Greek form of his name). He reigned from 486 to 465 B.C. The following chart of the major Persian kings shows how Xerxes fits in with Persian history and Biblical history:

1. Cyrus the Great (550-530 B.C.)

See Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4. Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem under Jerubbabel in 538 B.C., following the Babylonian Captivity (see Ezra chapter 1; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

2. Cambyses (530-522 B.C.)

3. Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.)

Darius made a decree that the work of the temple should be continued without any hindrance (Ezra chapter 6). As a result of Darius' kindness to the Jews, the temple was completed in 516 B.C. Don't confuse this king with Darius the Mede who is mentioned in the book of Daniel. (See Daniel 5:31; 6:1; etc.) These were two different men who both had the same name. Darius the Mede was the governor of Babylon under Cyrus the Great.

4. Xerxes or Ahasuerus (486-465 B.C.)

Xerxes or Ahasuerus is the king mentioned in the book of Esther. He was the son of Darius the Great.

5. Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.)

This Persian monarch had a very godly cupbearer--Nehemiah. (See Nehemiah 1:11-2:1.) This king allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the walls of the city (Nehemiah chapter 2).

6. Darius II (423-404 B.C.)

7. Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.)

Therefore, the events recorded in the book of **Esther** took place after the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple (as recorded in the book of **Ezra**) and before the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls (as recorded in the book of **Nehemiah**).

In the book of Daniel we find a prophetic description of the four great world empires or kingdoms that would be established, beginning with Babylon.

These four kingdoms are shown on the following chart:

The Four Kingdoms Described in the Book of Daniel		
Daniel Chapter 2 Different Metals (The Kingdoms From Man's Viewpoint)	Four World Empires	Daniel Chapter 7 Different Beasts (The Kingdoms From God's Viewpoint)
GOLD	Babylon 7th and 6th Centuries B.C.	LION
SILVER	Medo-Persia 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.	BEAR
BRASS (BRONZE)	Greece 4th and 3rd Centuries B.C.	LEOPARD
IRON	Rome 1st Century B.C. and following	DREADFUL AND TERRIBLE BEAST

The events of the book of Esther take place during the second great kingdom, during the time of the Persian empire.

The Theme of Esther

A great Persian ruler was on the throne (Esther 1:2). His kingdom extended from India (West Pakistan, the region west of the Indus River) on the East to Ethiopia on the South (Esther 1:1). His kingdom was so great that for 180 days (nearly half a year) he made all his princes and his servants see "the riches of his glorious kingdom" (the riches and the glory of his kingdom) and "the honor of his excellent majesty" (the preciousness of the beauty of his greatness) (Esther 1:3-4).

Where was Israel's King? Where was Jehovah, the God of the Jews? The Jews had been carried away captive by the Babylonians, and in the days of Xerxes, most of the Jews were still away from their homeland. Only a small remnant of Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild Solomon's glorious temple which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. Was the God of Israel still on the throne? Was Jehovah still ruling? Did the Babylonians and Persians bring God's rule to an end? Did Persia control the world and the affairs of men, or did Jehovah?

The Name of God is nowhere mentioned in the book of Esther. All the other 65 books of the Bible make mention of God's Name, except for the Song of Solomon.

Why is the book of Esther silent when it comes to the Divine Name? Does this suggest that God was not concerned and not involved with His people Israel? Quite the contrary! Although **God's Name** is nowhere seen in this book, **God's hand** is seen moving and directing throughout! God often works "behind the scenes" accomplishing His purposes!

To many, it may seem as if God is not working at all; to the spiritual person, it is obvious that God is at work, moving and directing and controlling " **A** _____ **T** _____ after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11). Even as Nebuchadnezzar had to once learn, **God is still on the throne**. See Daniel 4:33-37; and see also 1 Timothy 6:15; 1 Chronicles 29:10-12; 2 Chronicles 20:6—"over the kingdoms of the _____" (including the kingdom of Persia!). God is on the throne of the universe and His kingdom rules over _____ (Psalm 103:19). Is He on the throne in your heart?

Not only is the Name of God absent from the pages of this book, but also Satan's name is nowhere to be found. The devil is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther, yet throughout the book we see his evil hand at work. Satan is active "behind the scenes," working through his man Haman, in a diabolical (devilish) attempt to exterminate the people of God.

Thus, as you study this interesting book, be looking for God's providential working "behind the scenes"! Be aware also of Satan's wicked activity, as he too is deeply involved in the affairs of men. Understanding these concepts will help the book to come alive with truth and meaning as never before!

Vashti, the Queen, is Deposed (Esther Chapter 1)

God's design and purpose was to place Esther as Queen of Persia, so that through her the Jewish people might be delivered. But, there was already a queen on the throne, whose name was _____ (1:9, 11-12). How then could God accomplish His plan?

Method 1: The sovereign God could directly intervene and interfere in the affairs of men by forcing Vashti off the throne—by sending angels to carry her off to a distant land or even by striking her dead.

Method 2: The Lord could work "indirectly" and "behind the scenes." He could control all circumstances and events, allowing men to go their own way and to do their own thing, but ultimately to accomplish His will. An example of this would be when God allowed Judas and wicked men to betray and crucify His Son, but in the end they had perfectly fulfilled His plan. See Luke 22:22 and Acts 2:23.

As we shall see, God used the second method to fulfill His good will. He used a disobedient woman and the wrath of a king to accomplish His good pleasure!

In vacating thrones God sometimes uses the first method (Acts 12:21–23; Daniel 4:28–33; 2 Kings 15:5; Rev 19:11–20) but most often He uses the second method (Matthew 2:19–20; Daniel 5:30–31; 2 Kings 19:36–37, etc.).

Who reigned as king over all the Persian empire (Esther 1:1)? _____ He thought he ruled and controlled the entire kingdom, made up of _____ provinces (Esther 1:1). But actually there was a greater **King** who really was in control of this vast kingdom, and all kingdoms (2 Chronicles 20:6)!

What was the capital city of the Persian empire (Esther 1:2)? S_____

The feast mentioned in verse 3 is the same feast that is mentioned in verse 5. Before this "drinking feast" the king "showed off" the glory and greatness of his kingdom. For how long did he put his kingdom on display (Esther 1:4)? _____ During this time, the king made them all see the riches of the glory of his kingdom and the preciousness of the beauty of his greatness.

Today, our God and King wants all His saints to see something that is very precious and glorious to Him; see Ephesians 1:17–19; 3:8–9; Colossians 1:27.

According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, it was during these months that Xerxes was planning a military expedition against Greece (an attempt to add to his 127 provinces!), which later proved to be a disaster! Following the six-month "display" period, the king held an amazing drinking party (Esther 1:3,5). How long did this feast last (Esther 1:5)? _____. The **decorations** for this party are described in verse six; the **entertainment** is described in verse seven; the **rules and regulations** are described in verse eight. These people were given the liberty to please themselves and to drink as much or as little as they wanted. Most of them probably wanted to drink much! Meanwhile, the women were feasting as well (verse nine)!

You can imagine the state the king and his guests must have been in when they reached the last day of the drinking-feast, after indulging in wine for six days in a row (Esther 1:10). The king's heart was "**merry** (joyful, cheerful, glad) with _____" (Esther 1:10), but this joy and gladness did not last very long (Esther 1:12).

The Lord gives a much more lasting and satisfying joy and gladness of heart, and it does not come from wine (2 Chronicles 7:10; Proverbs 15:13; Ephesians 5:18–20)! The most the world can endure is a seven-day feast, but the person whose heart is right with God can enjoy a C F (Proverbs 15:15)!

Not only did the king want to show off his kingdom (Esther 1:4), but he also wanted to show off his beautiful queen (Esther 1:10–11). If you were Vashti, would you want to be put on display before such drunken guests? Her refusal is understandable (Esther 1:12). As a result, the king was angry and in a drunken rage (Esther 1:12). Instead of greatly impressing his guests, he was greatly embarrassed among them. This great and glorious king was unable to gain the respect and obedience of his own queen! He ruled over the greatest empire of the world, but he could not even rule over his own wife!

Immediately the king turned to his closest advisors to see how to handle what could potentially turn into a national crisis (Esther 1:13-15). Memucan pointed out that Vashti's wrong example would result in similar wrong conduct by women throughout the kingdom (Esther 1:16-18). The wives living in the Persian Empire, instead of respecting their husbands, would look down on them with contempt, saying, "If the queen can disobey her husband and get away with it, why can't we?" They feared that Vashti's deed of disobedience, if unpunished, would possibly be the spark that would ignite a national **women's liberation movement** with disastrous consequences.

If the king could not rule his own house well, how could he govern an entire kingdom?

How does this principle apply to the leaders of a local assembly (1 Timothy 3:4–5; Titus 1:6)? Why is it important that church leaders be the example of the highest ideal of Christian marriage and parenthood? Remember, people will often misuse the example of leaders as an excuse for their own sinful conduct: "Well, if he or she does it, why can't I?"

The King should deal severely with Vashti's act of disobedience so that all the women of the kingdom would learn by her example that **it does not pay to disobey** (Esther 1:19-20). The king's decree should be published throughout all the kingdom so that the women would know that disrespect on the part of wives would not be tolerated: "If the queen gets into trouble for such conduct, how much more will the common wife." Memucan's counsel pleased the king, the decree was published, Vashti was deposed and her royal estate would be given to another (1:19). That person would be Esther!

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