

Introduction to the Book of Esther

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A. Background of the Book

1. Skim the book of Esther and state the theme.

Theme

An historical narrative showing how God spared the people of Israel in exile by means of a courageous Jewish maiden.

Author

unknown

Location

Events occurred in Shushan (Susa) the capital of Persia during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) – 1:2. (See MAP.) Although many Jews had been permitted to return to Judea under a decree by Cyrus, many Jews remained in Persia or lands where they had been taken captive.

Main characters

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) - king of Persia

Haman – Chief of all the princes under Ahasuerus

Mordecai – A Jew in Shushan, a Benjamite, yet loyal to the king

Esther – A beautiful Jewish maiden, orphaned but raised by Mordecai, her cousin (his uncle's daughter – 2:7)

Summary of contents by section:

Chap. 1,2 – Esther becomes queen in place of Vashti

Chap. 3-5 – Haman rises to power and plots the death of Mordecai and the Jews

Chap. 4-7 – Esther pleads on behalf of her people; Haman is slain

Chap. 8-10 – Jews win the victory over their enemies

Suggested commentaries

Keil; Biblical Illustrator; Waldrons

B. Historical Setting

Events in the book of Esther occur in Persia during the period of restoration of the Jews from Babylonian captivity (see list of 15 periods of Bible history). When Persia came to power after defeating Babylon, they allowed captives to return to their homelands. The story of Esther began in the third year of Xerxes (1:3), after Zerubbabel had led the first group of Jews to return under Cyrus, but before Ezra led the second group to return under Artaxerxes (see introductory notes on Ezra and Nehemiah).

Major empires of the ancient world:

* Assyria – overthrew Israel (northern tribes)

* Babylon – overthrew Judah under Nebuchadnezzar

* Medo-Persia – overthrew Babylon in 538 BC

Cyrus – decreed return of the Jews to Judea

Cambyzes – 530-522 BC

Darius "the Great" – 522-486 BC

Xerxes (Ahasuerus) of the Book of Esther – 486-465 BC (NKJV footnote on 1:1 says 485-464 BC)

Artaxerxes – 465-424 BC

(These were followed by other minor rulers)

- * Greek – Alexander the Great defeated Persia
- * Roman

Notes on Esther 1

I. Esther Replaces Vashti as Queen – Chap. 1,2

A. Vashti Angers the King and He Determines to Remove Her – Chap.

1

The king's feast – 1:1-12

Verses 1,2

2. Who was the king? Where did he reign?

Setting of the book

These events occurred in the reign of Ahasuerus, king of Persia. He is also called Xerxes in secular history (NKJV footnote, cf. introductory notes). He ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. Obviously, this was a great empire, the greatest of that day, having overthrown the Babylonian Empire.

The events occurred in the capital city of the empire which is called Shushan or Susa. Specifically, they occurred in the citadel, a fortified palace.

Verses 3-5

3. For whom did the king make a feast, and what was its purpose? How long did it last?

The feast begins

The story begins during the third year of the king's reign. The nobles, officials, and princes of the provinces he ruled were called to witness a great display demonstrating the greatness of his kingdom and majesty. The nature of this demonstration is not described exactly, but it is called a feast that lasted 180 days (6 months).

At the end of these days, he had a specific feast that lasted seven days. All the people, great and small, were present in Shushan in the court of the palace garden.

Verses 6-8

4. Describe how the palace was furnished for the feast in vv 5-7.

A description of the feast

The palace was decorated with curtains of white and blue bound up by fine linen cords with purple on silver rods and marble pillars. People sat on couches made of silver and gold (Keil says this refers to gold and silver thread woven into the cloth of the couches), which were placed on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, white and black marble.

The people were then given golden vessels to drink from, each vessel being different from the others. In the vessels was royal wine served in abundance. However, the law required that drinking was not compulsory. The officers of the household were instructed to provide so each person could drink as he pleased.

This describes the lavish provisions of the feast and how it demonstrates the wealth of the king and his kingdom.

Verses 9-12

5. Who was Vashti? What request did the king make of her? Why?

6. How did Vashti respond? How did the king react? (Think: Do you believe Vashti's action was justified? Explain.)

Vashti refuses to come before the men of the banquet

While the men were feasting, the queen Vashti made a feast for the women in the palace. This apparently created no problems.

However, on the seventh day of the feast, the king was merry with wine. He then commanded the seven named eunuchs to bring Vashti before the king wearing her royal crown, so the people and officials could observe her beauty. She was beautiful to behold, and the king in effect wanted to show her off.

However, Vashti refused to come despite the command of the king. This infuriated the king. This was the event that led later to the queen being deposed, as the subsequent verses show.

We may wonder at the wisdom or folly of Vashti's decision. Most commentators uphold her (especially Clarke, Keil, and Zerr). However, some question her conduct (see Henry). Whether she was justified in her refusal or not depends on exactly what the king asked her to do and what her reasons were for refusing, and this seems hard to determine.

Obviously the men at the feast were drinking and probably some were drunken. No self-respecting woman, especially if beautiful and yet modest, would want to be a toy displayed before such men. Doubtless she would be submitted to suggestive thoughts and probably even suggestive remarks. Furthermore, Oriental women were generally extremely modest, covering themselves thoroughly, especially in the presence of men. For the men to look on her beauty would require some display. She may have felt this was a violation of her dignity and/or her modesty.

On the other hand, if all she was required to display was her face, if she was not expected to expose more of herself (which some commentators suppose was expected of her), it is hard to say that she would have been wrong to go. The very fact she refused to go implies that she felt something out of the ordinary was being asked of her. It is possible, however, that she was haughty and simply determined to please herself regardless of her husband's wishes.

Perhaps we do not need to decide the right or wrong of her case, since we do not know the specifics. However, we do need to realize that God instructs women to submit to their husbands, unless they are asked to sin against God (Genesis 2:18; 3:16; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12-14; 3:4,12; Titus 2:4,5; 1 Peter 3:1-7). On the other hand, immodesty is definitely sinful, so if a husband did request his wife to practice such, she should refuse.

The king's decree to depose Vashti – 1:13-22

Verses 13-15

7. Whom did the king consult regarding the matter? What did he ask them?

The king consults with his advisors regarding Vashti.

The king then called a meeting of his trusted advisors. These were wise men who understood the times. This is explained to mean that they knew the law and justice as properly applied in that society at that time (though some theorize that it might also have included the practice of Astrology). Cf. 1 Chron. 12:32, which is similar and does not seem to have any reference to Astrology. The seven closest advisors are named, being the princes of Persia and Media. They had the highest rank as princes in the kingdom and so had access to the king's presence.

The king then inquired of these men what he should do about Vashti. She had disobeyed a direct command of the king taken to her by the eunuchs. He evidently thought some penalty should be assessed against her.

Verses 16-18

8. Who answered? What concern did he express?

Memucan expresses concern that Vashti's disobedience may spread to other women.

The advisor who spoke up was Memucan (at least he is the one whose advice is recorded). He said that Vashti's conduct was not just an act of rebellion against the king, but it was a wrong done to all the princes and all the people because of its influence. The queen was so prominent that, if she were allowed to rebel against the king without consequence, then other women would follow her example and would show contempt for the authority of their husbands. The women would all hear what had happened and would use Vashti's example as justification for them to do likewise.

The principle that Memucan states here is an important principle (though we do not know that it is proper to apply it in this case). It is true that the conduct, especially of prominent people, has an influence on others. When people in positions of authority and prominence are known to practice sin, the result is harmful influence on people of the nation. This is a legitimate concern.

Of course, as discussed already, it could be that the principle is misapplied in Vashti's case. If her conduct was justified, then this is not a right conclusion in her case. In that case what could have been done would be to send a proclamation explaining to everyone why the queen did as she did. Women could still be admonished to respect their husband's authority and men would be admonished not to request their wives to act improperly.

Verses 19-22

9. What did he advise the king to decree? What purpose would this serve?

10. What was special about royal decrees among the Persians and Medes (v19)? What did the king decide to do?

The decree to depose Vashti

The recommendation was that Vashti should be punished by royal decree removing her from her position as queen and forbidding her to come anymore before the king. Someone else would then be chosen as queen in her place. Such a proclamation would give all the women of the empire reason to respect the will of their husbands.

Note that we are told that, when such royal decrees were made, they were recorded in the laws of the Medo-Persian Empire and then could not be altered. No one could change them, not even the king himself. This was a fundamental law of the empire. We will see that this principle of law becomes quite significant in other applications as the story proceeds.

Such an action by the king would have the effect of a divorce, though in some technicalities it might not have actually been a divorce. She was deposed from being queen, but we will see that the king had a large harem of which only one woman would be queen. So she might still have remained in his harem. Nevertheless, she would never be favored to come before the king, so she was at least in disgrace and banished from his presence for life. Yet having been queen, it seems unlikely (to me) that she was hereby granted permission to marry some other man. If such were the case, then this was not technically a divorce. Nevertheless, if it was a divorce, such was permitted under the Old Testament law but would not be permitted under the gospel (Deut. 24:1ff; cf. Matt. 19:3-9).

The king and other princes were pleased by this advice. So letters were sent to all the provinces stating the decree. These were translated into the language of each of the provinces, so that people everywhere would know that each man should be respected as head of his house.

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