

Joseph and Esther

Lesson 8 (Esther)

Esther 1-2

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?

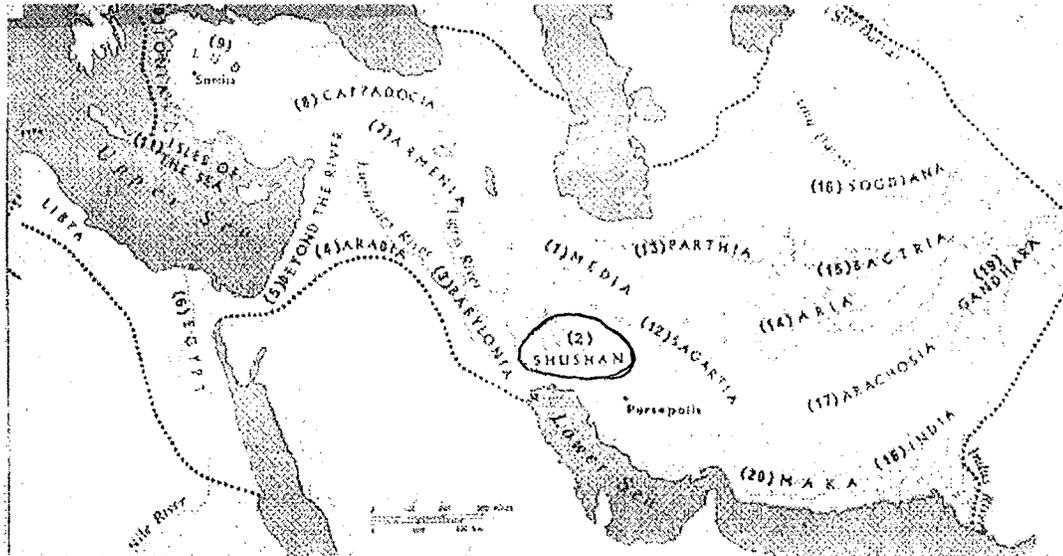
Method 1: The sovereign God could directly intervene and interfere in the affairs of men by forcing Vashti off the throne—by sending angels to carry her off to a distant land or even by striking her dead.

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)? _____ This can be found on the following map:



The Persian Empire in the Time of Esther

[The above map is taken from *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*, by Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, Map #168.]

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 _____ (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 _____ (1:19). That person would be Esther!

God's purpose was to place Esther on the throne as queen. To fulfill this purpose, the throne must be vacated (emptied). Esther chapter one showed how this purpose was accomplished. Now the king must choose a new queen. God's choice was Esther. What would the king's choice be?

Esther, the Jew, Becomes Queen (Esther Chapter 2)

After the decree was published throughout the kingdom, the king's wrath was _____ (Esther 2:1; "appeased" means "decreased, diminished, abated"). When he finally simmered down, he remembered Vashti and realized he needed a new queen.

The king's servants had a plan that would surely please their heathen master, Ahasuerus (Esther 2:2-4). They would search for the most lovely virgins in the kingdom. When the beauty contestants gathered the king would choose the one who pleased him the most! If two virgins were selected from each province, how many contestants would there be? _____ (see Esther 2:3 and 1:1)? With so many women involved (compare Esther 2:8), what would be the chance of Esther becoming the one chosen? From man's viewpoint it seemed very unlikely. From God's point of view, there is no such thing as chance, only a sovereign God Who "works _____ after the counsel of His Own _____" (Ephesians 1:11).

How should a believing young person select a mate for life? In the king's search only physical beauty and appearance were considered important. Is beauty only skin deep? Is there such a thing as "inner beauty" (1 Peter 3:3-6; 1 Timothy 2:9-10; Psalm 90:17)? Outer beauty may conceal and cover the real you without Christ (which is quite ugly), but inner beauty, which is produced by the Lord Jesus, shows through and can even be seen on the outside! What do you look for in a young man or young woman? What would someone find in you? Can you improve or change? How can you develop inner qualities that can make you the person you need to be?

How can a young woman develop inner beauty and strength of character? What inner qualities should young men develop? What does it mean to be "manly." Does it mean that the young man must be at least six feet tall with bulging muscles? What does God look for in a man, in a woman?

Whether male or female, which of the following qualities do you need to develop with the Lord's help?

Modesty (not seeking to draw attention to self, but to the Lord)

Dressing in a respectable way (attractive, neat, clean, well-groomed)

Having a warm, genuine smile

Being friendly but not a flirt

Avoiding what is not healthy (smoking, drinking, drugs, etc.)

Using clean and wholesome speech (no swearing)

Being thoughtful and helpful towards others

Being sexually pure

Courtesy (do you ever hold a door open for others?)

Lending a helping hand

Having a concern for the needs of others

Can you think of others?

What was a Jew doing in the capital of the Persian Empire (Esther 2:5)? Jews belong in Palestine. Why was Mordecai in Shushan (see Esther 2:5-6 and 2 Kings 24:10-16)? Mordecai's cousin and adopted daughter was named H_____ (this was her Jewish name) and E_____ (this was her Persian name which means "star").

Who was Esther's father (Esther 2:15)? _____. Her mother and father were both D_____ (2:7). Esther is described as "fair and beautiful" (beautiful of form and lovely of appearance-- Esther 2:7) which qualified her as one of the many finalists in the king's beauty pageant (Esther 2:8). Immediately Esther won the favor of the eunuch who was in charge of the women, as the blessing of God was evidently upon her (Esther 2:9). What fact did Esther conceal and cover, according to Mordecai's command (Esther 2:10)?

Should believers hide the fact that they belong to the living God? See Romans 1:16; Jonah 1:8-9; compare Esther 7:3-4.

Before any young woman could go in to the king, she first had to go through a time of "purification" and preparation that lasted _____ months (Esther 2:12). This involved being rubbed with various ointments and perfumes, as described in verse 12. Thus a whole year was spent in preparing for that brief time when she would be before the king, in order to please him.

The believer shall someday stand before the King of Kings (Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10), where he or she will be judged not just outwardly but with a penetrating inward judgment (1 Corinthians 4:4-5; compare Hebrews 4:13). The time to prepare for that event is **now** so that we will be pleasing the King **then** (2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 5:10).

When each maiden's turn came to see the king, she could choose to adorn herself with as many ornaments and jewels as she wanted, so that she might appear before the King adorned and dressed according to her own taste (Esther 2:13). When Esther's turn came she required N_____ (Esther 2:15, literally—"she did not seek or ask for a thing").

There is something more important than mere outward adornment and jewelry—see 1 Peter 3:3-4; 1 Timothy 2:9-10. What kind of clothes and garments should believers put on according to Colossians 3:12-14?

Esther's turn came in the _____ year of Xerxes' reign (Esther 2:16). Vashti was dethroned in the _____ year of his reign (Esther 1:3). What happened during this long four-year period? History tells us that during this time Xerxes held his military campaign against Greece that was totally unsuccessful. The defeated king hoped to find some measure of encouragement from his new queen. Esther is the one he chose and loved more than all the others (Esther 2:17). She received the royal crown (Esther 2:17; see Esther 1:11) and

became _____ instead of Vashti. **God's choice was chosen!**
 God removes queens and sets them up (compare Daniel 2:21).

Do you want **God's choice** for you? If so, then let Him work out all things. It is impossible for the One Who controls all events and circumstances to make a mistake! Make sure your heart stays right with Him and that your greatest concern is to please Him (1 Corinthians 7:32).

The king declared a national holiday and called a special feast in honor of the new queen (Esther 2:18). Meanwhile Mordecai was able to communicate with Esther, being concerned for her welfare (Esther 2:11,19). During all this time Esther had obeyed Mordecai's command to hide the fact that she was a Jew. She was obedient and submissive to her "cousin-father," just as she had always been during the time that Mordecai nourished her and brought her up (Esther 2:20).

Vashti was known for her disobedient rebellion. Esther was known for her obedient submission (Esther 2:20).

"Submission" means "to rank one's self under God and under His orderly arrangement." What are you known for? Are you submissive to those who are over you in the home, in church and in school? If you fear God, then you will _____ (Ephesians

5:21).

Who was our perfect example of submission? (Luke 2:51)?

Two of the king's eunuchs became wroth (hot with anger) against the king and intended to stretch out their hand against him to slay him (Esther 2:21). The Lord allowed Mordecai to find out about this assassination plot. He told _____ and she told _____ (Esther 2:22). The king investigated and found it to be just as Mordecai said (Esther 2:23). The criminals were executed and the matter was recorded in the official records of the kingdom. In the providence of God (God working unseen and "behind the scenes"), the king soon forgot the incident and Mordecai was not even rewarded for the lifesaving information that he provided. Later, **in God's time**, this deed would be remembered and a whole nation would be saved (compare 6:1-3)!

Because of the wrath of the king, Esther became queen. Because of the wrath of two men, the Jewish nation was saved from destruction. Truly, God is praised by the _____ of _____ (Psalm 76:10)!

We have seen the hand of **God** at work in the first two chapters of Esther—removing Vashti (Chapter 1) and setting up Esther (Chapter 2). Now we shall see the active hand of **Satan** as he works through his yielded instrument, Haman! In the end, we shall see who is the Greater (see 1 John 4:4)!