

INTRODUCTION TO THE 17TH BIBLEBOOK

ESTHER (about 380 B.C.)

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A. THE HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

1. The name of the book.

‘Esther’ (2:7) is a Persian name and means ‘star’(stara). In Hebrew her name is ‘Hadassa’ (2:7) en means ‘myrtle’. She was the niece and adopted daughter of Mordechai, who was a descendent of the exiles carried from Judah to Babylon in 597 B.C. (2:5-6), but after the edict of Cyrus to return to Jerusalem, had remained in the Far East.

Five books in the Old Testament are read during the Jewish liturgical year as follows:

- The book Song of Songs is read during 1st month (Passover)
- The book Ruth is read during 3rd month (Pentecost)
- The book Lamentations is read during 5th month
- The book Ecclesiastes is read during 7th month (Tabernacles)
- The book Esther is read during 12th month (Purim)

The reason Daniel was assigned to the Writings in the Hebrews Canon was because he was not regarded as a prophet, but as a *civil servant*. Although he possessed a prophetic gift he was not anointed to be a prophet. Ezra was not a prophet, but a *scribe*. Nehemiah was not a prophet, but a *governor*.

2. The historic background.

The history of Esther takes place during the reign of king Xerxes of Persia (485-465 B.C.). In Persian he is called ‘Kshajarsha’, in Hebrew ‘Ahasuerus’ and in Greek ‘Xerxes’ (wrongly translated in the Septuagint as Artaxerxes). Esther was promoted to be the queen in his 7th year of reign, 478 B.C. (2:16).

Although Mordechai recorded the historical events, the writer of the book of Esther is unknown. Jewish tradition ascribes it to one of the 120 men belonging to ‘the great synagogue’ in Jerusalem who had the task to establish the Canon of the Old Testament and teach the Law. Because the writer speaks of the reign of king Xerxes in the past (1:1) and records when and how the feast of Purim is celebrated (9:19), the book of Esther must have been written before the end of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C. The language suggests at least 50 years before that, about 380 B.C.

3. Historic reliability.

The circumstances and customs are those of the Persian Empire. The Empire was vast and had 127 provinces stretching from India to the Upper Nile region (Ethiopia)(1:1). The royal throne stood in the citadel of Susa (1:2). The enclosed garden of the palace was exquisite, serving banquets for princes and nobles (1:3-8). These facts were corroborated by excavations. The number ‘seven’ is a known fact among high Persian officials (1:10,13). Also ‘the laws of Persia and Media which cannot be repealed’ is known (1:19; 8:8)¹.

In an empire with so many nations and beautiful girls it would not be impossible for a young and beautiful Jewish girl to go unnoticed. The despot probably did not care to know the nationality of the women in his harem. Only when Esther pleaded with him to spare her people, and heard that Haman had tricked him into issuing an edict to exterminate all Jews in his empire, he realised that Esther was a Jew (7:3-6).

History records several examples of genocide: from the Scythians by the Median Cyaxares in the 7th century B.C. to the Jewish pogroms in Russia between 1821-1906 and the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915. Haman likewise planned such a genocide. He said to king Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business” (3:8-9). This enemy of the Jews sent dispatches of this decree by (running) couriers to all the king’s provinces and in the script of each province and in the language of each people “with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews - young, old, women and little children – on a single day, the 13th day of the 12th month (Adar)(3:10-13).”

4. The religious and moral value of the book.

The name of God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther. Mordechai warned Esther, “If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place ... Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this? (4:14)” Mordechai believed that help could come from another place and Esther requested a fast of three days be called for her. These point to their faith in God.

¹ Daniel 6:9,13

When the second edict was issued that allowed the Jews to defend themselves, many people of other nationalities became Jews (believers in the God who revealed himself in the Old Testament), because fear of Jews had ceased them (8:17). God clearly protected and guided his chosen people.

The fact that Esther replaced Vashti and became the wife of Xerxes violated the seventh commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4, "Do not intermarry with them (the heathen nations). Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me (the LORD) to serve other gods." But Esther was in no position to refuse or avoid her marriage to Xerxes.

The account does not glory Jewish nationalism or a spirit of fanatical revenge. The second edict granted the Jews in every city only the right to defend themselves by all means against any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them, their women and their children (8:11). It gave them no right to destroy, kill and annihilate anyone else. As a result "to protect themselves" (9:16) they put to death 300 men (who attacked them) in Susa and killed 75,000 in the other provinces.

B. THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

The theme of Esther is: *God upholds the Messianic line.*

Esther 1. The royal banquet and queen Vashti deposed.

King Xerxes gave an elaborate banquet in the enclosed garden of the palace to his military leaders and other nobles, while according to the historian Herodotus (485-425/420 B.C.), he was planning a great military campaign against the Greeks. These preparations took 180 days. At the same time queen Vashti gave a banquet to the women inside the palace. When she refused to obey the king's request to appear before all these men, he consulted his wise lawyers and they advised him to depose Vashti and command all women to respect their husbands. This 'law of Persia and Media' in 483 B.C. could not be changed and was published in all languages and in every script.

Esther 2. Esther made queen and the plot to assassinate king Xerxes discovered.

All the beautiful girls in the Persian Empire were assembled in the harem in the capital Susa. Esther was the daughter of Mordechai's uncle and had been adopted and brought up by Mordechai. She followed Mordechai's instruction not to reveal her family background and nationality. She was among the chosen girls. They underwent the yearlong beauty treatment with oils and perfumes prescribed for the women. In 478 B.C. it was Esther's turn to visit the king in his royal residence and he chose her to be his queen. He gave a great banquet for all his officials and nobles, proclaimed a holiday throughout his empire and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

One day as Mordechai was sitting in the king's gate he found out that two of the king's officers were angry and plotted to assassinate the king. He told Esther and she warned the king. The two officials were impaled on poles (or hanged on a gallows) as was a common way of execution among the Persians, Assyrians and Babylonians. The incident was recorded in the book of annals in the presence of the king.

Esther 3. Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews.

Later the king honoured Haman by giving him a seat of honour higher than other nobles. All officials had to kneel down before him with their heads on the ground as a gesture of respect. For an unknown reason Mordechai refused to do that. He had told some royal officials that he was a Jew. Then Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordechai's people. He said to the king, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business" (3:8-9).

The persecution was not because of religious reasons, because bowing down to the ground was a common custom in all the east: Abraham to the Hittites², Jacob to Esau³, Josef to his father⁴, Solomon to his mother⁵, the prophets to Elisha⁶ and Israelite kings often received this greeting⁷. Mordechai was probably careless.

It is true that the Jews separated themselves from the non-Jews. Their laws were certainly different. Moses said, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"⁸ The Psalmist says, "He (the LORD) has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws."⁹ But the accusation that all Jews disobeyed the king's laws, was a deliberate unfounded lie.

² Genesis 23:7,12

³ Genesis 33:3

⁴ Genesis 48:12

⁵ 1 Kings 2:19

⁶ 2 Kings 2:15

⁷ 2 Samuel 1:2; 9:6; 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16,31,53; 1 Chronicles 29:20; 2 Chronicles 24:17

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:8

⁹ Psalm 147:19-20

Haman must have been very rich that he was willing to pay for the dirty job without costing the state money. His offer to pay money into the state treasury was nevertheless bribery, a violation of God's words, "Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous"¹⁰.

The king gave his signet ring to Haman to validate the decree of Persia and Media. The decree was written in the script of each province and in the language of each people (3:12). Dispatches were sent by running messengers/couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and little children – on a single day, the 13th of the 12th month (3:13). Then the king and Haman sat down to drink. But the city of Susa was bewildered (3:15).

Esther 4. Mordechai persuades Esther to plead with the king to intervene.

When Mordechai learned about the plot, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly (4:1). In every province where news of the plot arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes (4:3). When Esther heard from her maids and eunuchs about Mordechai, she was in great distress and sent Hathach, one of the eunuchs, to find out what was troubling Mordechai.

Mordechai gave a copy of the text of the edict. But Esther replied that she had not been summoned for thirty days and if she approached the king without being summoned, she would be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the golden sceptre and so spare her life (4:11). Mordechai replied, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but you have come to royal position for such a time as this" (4:14). She asked all Jews in Susa to fast for three days for her.

Esther 5. Esther's request to the king and Haman's boasting.

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes to look as attractive as possible and stood in the inner court of the palace (5:1). The king sat on his throne facing the inner court, saw her and held out his sceptre, allowing her to approach him. He asked her what her mission was and promised hyperbolically to give half his kingdom to her (5:2). She invited the king and Haman to attend a banquet she had prepared for them and said that she would answer him there. At this banquet the king asked what her request was and she invited him to another banquet the next day, again with Haman.

Haman was in high spirits that the king had singled him out to such a great privilege. But when he passed the king's gate and Mordechai remained seated, he was furious (5:9-10). He boasted to his friends and wife that the king had elevated him above all other nobles and officials (5:11), but was vexed about Mordechai. His wife and friends advised him to prepare a very high pole, about 23 metres high, to impale Mordechai on it (or: to build a high gallows to hang Mordechai on it) and then ask the king to impale (or: to hang) Mordechai on it before he went to the queen's banquet with the king.

Esther 6. Mordechai is honoured.

That same night the king could not sleep. So he ordered the book of chronicles to be brought in and read to him (6:1). There the king heard that Mordechai had exposed and prevented an attempted assassination against him, but that Mordechai had not received any recognition. Just then Haman entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordechai on the pole (or: hanging Mordechai on the gallows) he had erected. The king asked Haman, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?" Haman thought that there was no one the king would rather honour than himself. So Haman answered that that man should be clothed in royal robes the king had worn and ride on a horse the king had ridden on and be led through the streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!" The king ordered Haman to do this to the Jew Mordechai who sits at the gate. Haman was extremely shamed and afterwards rushed home to tell his wife and friends that he was ruined. Just then the king's eunuchs arrived to hurry Haman away to the queen's banquet.

Esther 7. Esther makes an appeal to the king on behalf of her people.

The king asked Esther again what her request was. Esther replied, "O king, if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life – this is my petition, and spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation." The king asked, "Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther replied, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." While the enraged king contemplated the plot in the garden, Haman was begging Esther for his life, falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king saw this and interpreted it as molesting Esther. The eunuchs reported about Haman's 23 metre high pole/gallows and the king commanded them to impale (hang) Haman on it.

Esther 8. The king's edict in behalf of the Jews.

The king gave Haman's estate to Esther and his signet ring to Mordechai. She appointed Mordechai over this estate. Esther again pleaded with the king to put an end to Haman's plot to annihilate all Jews. "Let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman had sent to all the provinces." Because no document written in the king's name and sealed with his signet ring can be revoked (8:8).

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 16:19

The royal secretaries wrote all Mordechai's orders to the Jews, the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India in the East to Ethiopia in the West, written in the script of each province and the language of each people (8:9). Mordechai wrote in the name of the king and sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring and sent them by mounted couriers who rode fast horses especially bred for the king (8:10). The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves, to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children. They may even plunder the property of their enemies (8:11). The edict announced that the Jews would be ready on the 13th day of the 12th month to avenge themselves on their enemies (8:13). Everywhere where the news came, the Jews celebrated and many people from other nationalities became Jews because of their fear for the Jews (8:17).

Esther 9. The Jews take revenge on their enemies and the celebration of Purim.

On the 13th day of the 12th month when the first edict was to be carried out, the tables were turned and for fear of Mordechai, all the satraps, governors, nobles and the king's administrators helped the Jews (9:1-2). Mordechai became prominent in the king's palace and his reputation spread throughout the provinces. He became more and more powerful (9:4). The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them (9:5). In Susa the Jews killed 500 men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder (9:5-10). Esther got permission to extend the killing to the next day and the sons of Haman were impaled on poles (hanged on gallows) (9:13). In the provinces the Jews killed 75,000 enemies, but did not lay their hands on the plunder (9:16).

The Jews in Susa and those living in villages observed a day of joy and feasting (9:19). Mordechai recorded these events and he and queen Esther decreed and sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces to have them celebrate annually the 14th and 15th day of the 12th month (Adar), called the Purim¹¹ festival, as a day of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

Esther 10. The greatness of Mordechai the Jew.

King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire (10:1). Mordechai became second in rank to king Xerxes and his greatness was recorded in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia (10:2). He was prominent among all the Jews and held in high esteem because he worked for the good of his people (10:3). The Jews (not the LORD) determined that these days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family (of Jews) and in every province and in every city (of the Persian Empire).

C. THE MESSIAH, JESUS CHRIST IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

If the attack and resulting annihilation of all the Jews in the empire of Persia had succeeded, the first coming of Jesus Christ would have been hindered. 'The seed of the woman that would have crushed the head of Satan'¹² would not have been born. 'The seed of Abraham in whom all the nations on earth would be blessed'¹³ would not have been born.

This is also the significant message of the book of Esther. Satan had planned to annihilate God's people and with them prevent the birth of the Promised Messiah. But Satan failed and Christ triumphed. The vision shown to the apostle John in Revelation 12:1-5 depicts the Old Testament history in a nutshell. The dragon (Satan) stood in front of the woman (God's Old Testament people) who was about to give birth (to the promised Messiah child), so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. But the child was born, lived, died on the cross, was resurrected from the dead and snatched up to God and his throne in heaven (the ascension and enthronement of Christ)(verse 5). God's salvation plan could not fail and it did not fail!

¹¹ 'pur' means 'lot'. It commemorates the day Haman casted the lot to annihilate the Jews.

¹² Genesis 3:15

¹³ Genesis 22:18