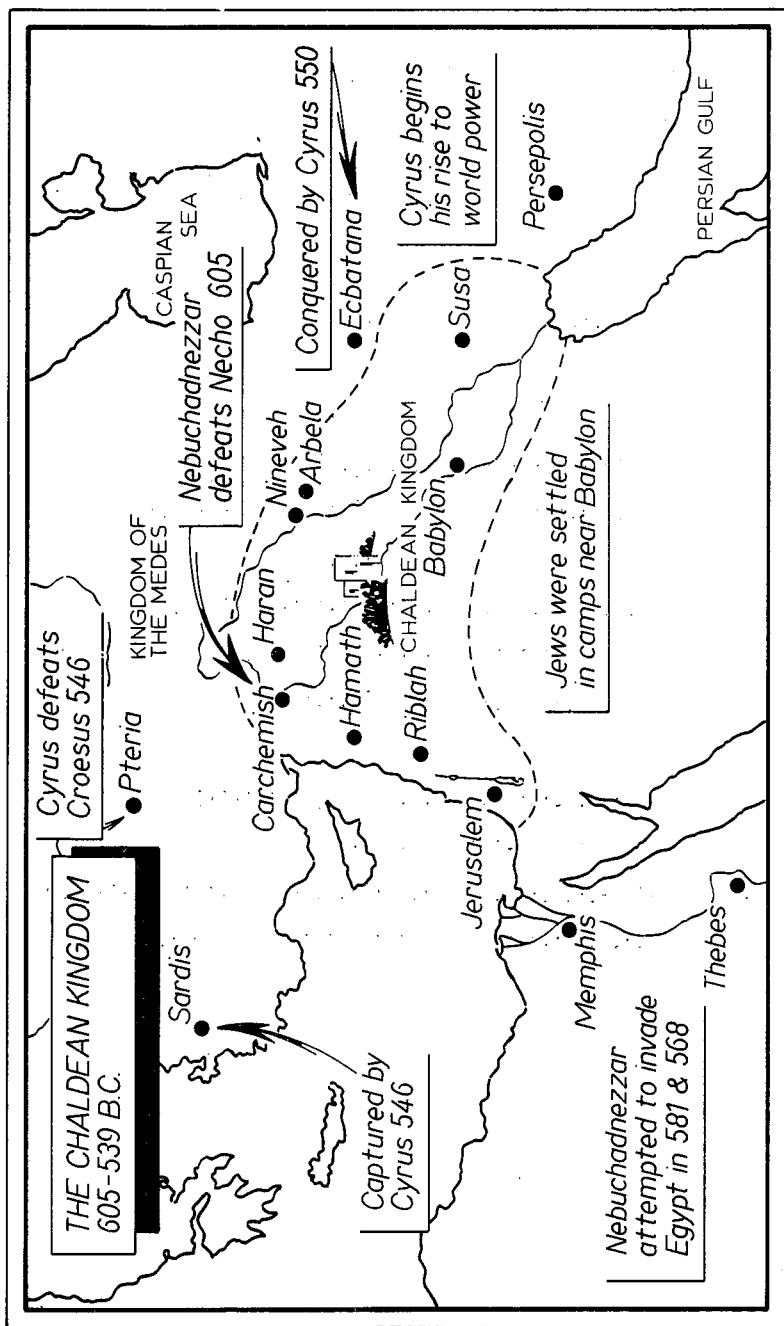


ESTHER



THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO

Don and Elsie DeWelt

*who not only encouraged me to write
but have had the courage to publish what*

I have written . . .

*and whose lives display the same daring
and determination to save*

God's people as Esther's . . .

with special thanks to my secretary,

Mrs. Penny Skaggs

*whose help with my administrative and instructional tasks
was invaluable in completing this work.*



Esther

INTRODUCTION

Author: Quite simply, we do not know who the author was. The name *Esther* is probably from *Ishtar*, a Persian or Akkadian word meaning, *star* (Venus). Jewish rabbinical tradition (Bava Beta— a part of the Talmud) says: “. . . the man of the Great Synagogue wrote . . . the roll of Esther.” Others (including Josephus and Ibn Ezra) attribute the authorship of the book to Mordecai, Esther’s uncle. We just do not know with any certainty who wrote this book. The author was probably a Persian Jew. Familiarity with Persian life and customs forces that conclusion. The author of this book made use of some of Mordecai’s writings (9:20), the official records of the kings of Media and Persia (2:23; 10:2), and probably the eyewitness accounts preserved through oral tradition.

Date: The book was evidently written after the death of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). We set this date because 10:2 implies that the official state history of the reign of Ahasuerus had already been written when the book of Esther was composed. Ahasuerus died by assassination in 465 B.C. Scholars have pointed to the absence of any traces of Greek influence either in language or thought as evidence that the book of Esther may *not* be dated any *later* than 330 B.C. While on the other hand, the intimate and exact knowledge of Persian culture of the fifth century B.C. indicates the most likely date to be somewhere between 460-450 B.C.

Canonicity: The unique nature of the book of Esther has caused problems concerning its canonicity. The problems will be dealt with later. Esther has been accepted as an authoritative part of the revelation of God from a very early date. Its canonicity may be traced as follows:

- a. The Council of Jamnia, held by Jewish scholars and rabbis in 90 A.D., was to discuss the canon of the Old Testament. The very fact that the canonicity of a few books (one of which was Esther) was challenged proves these books had *earlier* been considered canonical.
- b. Josephus (cir. 90 A.D.) indicates that the same books we

have in our present Old Testament (including Esther) are the same ones considered canonical by Jewish leaders of his day.

- c. Melito of Sardis (170 A.D.) went to Palestine himself and confirmed the canonicity of the O.T. as we have it today.
- d. Origen, Christian scholar of about 250 A.D. confirms the canon of the O.T. as it is today.
- e. The Jewish Talmud of about 400 A.D. confirms the canonicity of Esther.
- f. The scientific scholarship of 20 centuries (manuscript discoveries, archaeological discoveries) has amassed an accumulation of evidence to convince any honest student that Esther is truly a part of God's revelation to man.

One of the most significant arguments for the canonicity of the book of Esther is that there is no reasonable explanation for the historic fact of the Feast of Purim as observed by succeeding generations of Jews except that such remarkable events as recorded in this book actually took place there and then.

Persian Culture: Where did the Persians come from? In the hills of what is today known as Iran lived a rugged, dynamic man called Cyrus. Isaiah predicted his rise to fame over 100 years before he was born! (See *Isaiah, Vol. III*, by Butler, pg. 108-112; College Press.) He began his rise to world conquest among the shepherds of this land of majestic mountains and ferocious deserts. Under the leadership of Cyrus, this army of former shepherds overthrew the Median government and by 550 B.C. Cyrus had united the Medes and Persians into an unbeatable fighting force. By 547 B.C. Cyrus had defeated Croesus, king of Lydia (Asia Minor, known today as Turkey). Then he conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and continued expanding his territorial rule until he was slain in battle near the southern shore of the Caspian Sea.

Persian government was unique to a Mesopotamian world that had formerly been divided into many different warring clans and tribes. It was the first time people of many different races and

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cultures were controlled under one ruler and government. Cyrus and his immediate successors were very wise in administering their rule. All citizens (regardless of race) were given equal rights and the same demands of citizenship were made of all citizens. As long as there was no political rebellion, most people were allowed to worship according to their ethnic religions and maintain their cultural distinctions. In some instances they were even permitted to keep their own rulers (subordinate to the emperor of Persia, of course).

There were three capital cities in Persia. This made it possible for the emperors to travel throughout their empire and keep "in touch" with their subjects. The cities were: *Susa* or *Shushan*, in the delightfully temperate and fertile valley of the Choaspes River (river Ulai, Dan. 8:2) and many Jews lived here later in the days of Esther and Nehemiah—Persian emperors "wintered" here; *Persepolis*, down in the deserts east of the Persian Gulf about 200 miles, whose ruins are visible today, was the royal seat of the Achaemenid kings of Persia. It was a city of grandeur and strong defenses, but burned and looted by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., and; *Ecbatana*, the capital of Media, located in the cool mountainous region just south of the Caspian Sea, the summer residence of the emperors of Persia.

Persian emperors administered their rule through "The Law of the Medes and The Persians." Once a law was passed, it could never be changed. Not even a king could change it (cf. Dan. 6:12ff.). This was actually beneficial to the citizens in two ways: (a) It meant that the laws necessary to maintaining the structures of society were above the individual's whims, even those of capricious emperors! Not even the emperor was as powerful as the law. (b) Those who had the responsibility of making laws and enforcing them were very careful to make sure the law was a good and just law before it was passed. If even those who make the laws could not change them to suit their own fancies, it tended to make for laws that were more just for everyone.

The empire was divided into twenty-one provinces called *satrapies*. Each province was ruled by a *satrap* who might be a local ruler or a Persian noble. The emperor appointed his own

elite inspectors to check up on the *satraps* and these inspectors were called "the eyes and ears of the emperor," (cf. Dan. 6:1-5), and if the emperor received an unfavorable report about one of his satraps, he usually executed the culprit.

In order to create a good economic base for the empire, Persian rulers instituted a standardized currency, built an empire-wide road system and policed it with soldiers so that it was said a woman could travel across the country in safety. They set up a type of "pony express" whereby the emperor could be in touch with information from any part of his empire within almost one week. Every 14 miles along the main roads was an express station where messengers would change horses so they could travel the 1600 miles between Sardis (in Asia Minor or Lydia) and Susa in one week.

The Persians were not exactly monotheists, but neither were they polytheists. They thought it was foolish to worship many gods, but they did not mind other peoples being polythesists. Their god was Ahura Mazda, "the Wise Lord." Zoroaster, a philosopher who lived about 600 B.C., taught that Mazda created the earth and that Mazda's holy spirit wars against an evil spirit, Ahriman. Human beings are involved in a warfare between these good and evil spirits. There was an element of Messianism in Zoroastrianism for it taught that after the earthly life of a future Savior, God would finally triumph over evil, and all souls on the side of good would pass over the "bridge of decision" and enjoy eternal bliss while all on the side of evil would be tortured forever. Zoroaster stressed truth and mercy. Some think that Isaiah 45:7 (contextually predicting the reign of Cyrus about 180 years later) is a prophetic rebuttal of Zoroastrianism. The teachings of Zoroaster were written in twenty-one volumes and are known as *Zend Avesta*.

Persian Imperialism: When Cyrus defeated Croesus (king of Lydia), all the cities Greece had colonized in Ionia (Asia Minor) came under Persian rule. In 500 B.C. these cities rebelled against Persian rule, but Darius I suppressed the rebellion even though the Ionians had help from the mainland Greeks. Interference from the Greek mainlanders angered Darius so he decided to invade the mainland and bring all Greece under Persian control.

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In 490 B.C. the Persian army sailed across the Aegean Sea and landed on the plains of Marathon, just north of Athens. The Athenians, greatly outnumbered sent a runner to Sparta for help. The runner made the 150 miles over hilly, rocky territory in two days, but the Spartans were having a festival and refused to send help until after the celebration. The Athenians attacked, scattered the Persian forces, killing 6400 Persians while losing only about 200 men. It was a great victory for the Greeks. The Battle of Marathon was significant for if Persia had conquered Greece and destroyed her culture (her ideas on democratic and republican forms of government, her art and philosophies) the history of western civilization might be far different than it is today.

Darius' son, Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was determined to complete what his father could not. Xerxes took the throne in 486 B.C. In 483 B.C. Xerxes (Ahasuerus) gave his great banquet (Esther 1:3) probably to display his pompsity and power in preparation for the invasion of Greece. This was the banquet where he was humiliated by his wife Vashti. Three years later, 480 B.C., Xerxes had a pontoon bridge stretched across the Dardanelles Strait using 674 small boats as pontoons. When a storm temporarily destroyed part of the bridge, Xerxes took his rage out by trying to "scourge" the sea and by executing the engineers who built the bridge. Finally Xerxes and his massive force walked across the bridge and invaded Greece. For three days a small force of Spartans held up the massive Persian army at Thermopylae (a narrow mountain pass). The Persians found a way around this pass through a Greek deserter, destroyed the Spartan army and marched down to Athens. There they burned the city to the ground. The Athenians, however, escaped to their fleet of small boats and tricked the Persian navy (350 large, cumbersome ships) into the small Bay of Salamis where 200 of the Persian ships were destroyed. Xerxes made a hasty retreat to Persia, leaving a large army still in Greece. This force was totally defeated at the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. The battle of Plataea became the watershed of Persian imperialism. Persia remained a powerful empire for another 150 years, but she began to deteriorate culturally and

morally from the days of Xerxes until Alexander the Great finally conquered her in 330 B.C.

Xerxes: Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486-465 B.C.) was the son of Darius by Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus. For twelve years he served under his father as viceroy of Babylon before succeeding to the throne at the death of Darius. The Persian form of the name Xerxes is Khshayarsha, which, in Hebrew is rendered Ahasuerus (cf. Ezra 4:6 and the Book of Esther). Xerxes lived 14 years after the loss of Greece, but little is known about him in that time. He was murdered by a usurper, Artabanus, who is said to have reigned seven months before being killed by Artaxerxes, the third son and legitimate heir to Xerxes. Xerxes was about 55 years old when he was assassinated. He was reportedly very rich and indulgent and habitually acted like an impudent, petulant brat. The episode with the pontoon bridge, the Vashti incident, and the hasty accession to the spiteful hate of Haman all agree well with this description. He was given to ostentation and loved display and appears to have been susceptible to the flattery and intrigue of fawning courtiers. Xerxes is probably the "fourth" Persian ruler mentioned in Daniel 11:2. For thorough treatment of Persian historical background see *Daniel*, by Paul T. Butler, College Press, chapters six, eight and eleven.

Some Historical Difficulties in Esther:

1. Herodotus, Greek historian of the 5th century B.C., says that a woman named Amestris, daughter of a Persian named Otanes, was Xerxes' queen in the seventh year of his reign. The book of Esther says Esther was. Amestris and Esther cannot be the same person since Amestris was cruel, even to the point of sadistic brutality. Amestris was a Persian. There are those who might think there is a historical contradiction between the biblical record and Herodotus. However, Herodotus does *not* say Esther was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes; neither does the Bible say Amestris was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes. Therefore, there is no contradiction. It is altogether possible that Xerxes, having given his banquet in the third year of his reign (483 B.C.) (Esther 1:3) and deposed Vashti,

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then made Amestris queen. After this, Xerxes entered into his first campaign against Greece (480 B.C.) and was defeated. He returned, deposed Amestris and elevated Esther to queenship in the seventh year (479-478 B.C.) (Esther 2:16) of his reign. Omission by Herodotus of Esther and Vashti does not mean he *contradicts* the Bible. Omission in the book of Esther of Amestris does not mean that the Bible contradicts Herodotus. It might be of interest to remember that on the basis of an omission of the name of Belshazzar by Herodotus, many critics of the Bible denied the historicity of Daniel's book—that is, until archaeological discoveries verified the existence of King Belshazzar and the historicity of Daniel's account concerning him!

2. The statement in Esther 2:5-6 has been offered by some as evidence of the historical inaccuracy of the book of Esther. Critics insisted this passage was an historical *faux pas* because it implies that Mordecai was taken captive from Palestine in the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. Mordecai was, of course, a contemporary of Xerxes. That would have made Xerxes and Nebuchadnezzar contemporaries—an historical impossibility! However, the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *'esher* ("who") in verse six is not Mordecai but Kish, his great grandfather. Actually, the time between the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. and the time of Mordecai (483 B.C.) is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai!

3. A third objection to the accuracy of the text of Esther is in connection with the statement (9:16) that the Jews killed 75,000 enemies throughout the empire in one day. First, it was by command of the emperor that the Jews "in every city" carry out this execution. Second, there were 500 executed in Susa, the capital, in one day (9:6). It would only require that 500 be executed in 150 cities each to total 75,000. When the vastness of the Persian empire is considered (Asia Minor and parts of Greece on the west, to India on the east; Armenia on the north, to Palestine and Egypt on the south) it is not in the least incredible that it actually happened. Josephus mentions that a small detachment of the Roman army killed more than 15,000 Jews in one day who were

fleeing from Gadara during the Jewish revolt (64-70 A.D.). The Septuagint gives the number slain in Esther 9:16 as 15,000, but the Hebrew text probably gives the accurate number. We will deal with the ethics of the situation in our comments on the text.

4. Fourth, the book's historicity was impugned because no trace of the name Mordecai was to be found in secular history. Critical opinions have been changed since archaeological inscriptions were found mentioning a certain Marduk-ai-a (Mordecai??) as an official in Susa during the reign of Xerxes (See *A Survey of O. T. Introduction*, Gleason Archer, Moody Press, pg. 405.).

5. The science of archaeology has provided undeniable evidence of the historical accuracy of the book of Esther. An inscription of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.) states that the palace of Xerxes (Esther's husband 486-465 B.C.) was destroyed by fire in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.). The ruins were located in Susa and very definite portions of the palace were identified: e.g., the "king's gate" (4:2); the "inner court" (5:1); the "outer court" (6:4); the "palace garden" (7:7); and even one of the dice or lots (called "Pur" in Persian) were found (3:7)! Now if this palace was destroyed in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.), it was destroyed within 30 years of the time of Esther's living in the palace (486-424 B.C.). Yet the critics who attack the historicity of the book would have us believe that an unknown author 200 years after this palace was destroyed could describe its ground plans in intimate and perfect detail! The reader may find more information of Esther's palace in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, art. 1009a.

6. The most important criticism of the book of Esther, however, is not aimed toward its historicity, but toward its theology. The total absence of the name of God is the chief difficulty for many critics. The Talmud gives Deut. 31:18 as a reason why God's name is not mentioned. Because of the sin of idolatry, God had cast them into captivity and "veiled His face" from the Jews. The promise of this judgment is intensified in the Prophets. Edward J. Young (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pub. Eerdmans, pg. 378) theorizes, "These Jews in Persia . . . showed no desire to return to Palestine . . . Their theocratic spirit . . .

was weak . . . despite that fact, God had not rejected them . . . He would still watch over them. . . . But, since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the *Name* of the covenant God (Yahweh) is not associated with them . . . since they are in this distant, far country, and not in the land of promise, His name is not mentioned. . . . By causing us to behold the workings of providence, the book does, after all, turn our eyes to God who determines the destinies of men and nations." Perhaps more significant is the indication from the book of Esther itself that it is, after all, primarily an extract from the official documents of the Persian Court and this would account for both its minute secular details and the omission of the name of God (e.g. 2:23; 3:14; 6:2; 8:9-14; 9:14, 20; 9:29-32; 10:1-3). Matthew Henry said, "If the name of God is not here, His finger is." No other book in the Bible teaches the providence of God as forcibly as the book of Esther. The providence of God preserving the Jews through Esther is no more astonishing than that predicted (Dan. 2:20-23) and recorded in the life of Daniel. God's providence is over all things. Nothing "just happens," even in a pagan empire. One commentator says, "It is almost universally agreed that this omission (of the name of God) must have been intentional. He offers the theory that since Esther was to be read at the annual Feast of Purim and it was such a time of merry-making, the author feared that the Divine Name might be profaned, or that the book might be profanely treated by Gentiles because of its story of the triumph of the Jews over their enemies.

Outline: The Providence of God Preserving His People

- I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22
- II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23
- III. Perverseness of Haman, 3:1-15
- IV. Pluck of Esther, 4:1-17
- V. Plan of Esther, 5:1-8
- VI. Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14
- VII. Pride of Haman, 6:1-14
- VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10

- IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17
- X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19
- XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32
- XII. Postscript, 10:1-3

Value: The Book of Esther, in the Hebrew Bible, is the last of the five *Megilloth*. The *Megilloth* (literally, the word means, *rolls* or *scrolls*) is a group of writings (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther) which are used in the Jewish liturgical year. Song of Solomon is read at Passover (first month); Ruth is read at Pentecost (third month); Lamentations is read in the fifth month (Ab); Ecclesiastes is read at the Feast of Tabernacles (seventh month); and Esther is read at the Feast of Purim (twelfth month). At one time it was normal for every Jewish household to possess a scroll or book of Esther for such liturgical purposes. Among the Jews Esther is the best known of all the books of the Bible. The impetus for a patriotic Jewish nationalism provided by the book would make it very popular among Jewish people. The book is of the calibre of literary excellence. It is recognized to be a valuable source of information filling many gaps in the accounts of classical historians. It is thus an invaluable research source for biblical historians. It has all the merits of great literature: distinct characterization; graphic, vivid descriptions; clear and concise language; action; plot; resolution; drama. A vast body of Jewish apocryphal literature has grown up around the book of Esther which is of no value whatever because of its unhistorical nature. Its greatest value is the lesson that God is able to providentially preserve those who trust Him in the face of overwhelming opposition.

