

Esther Chapter 1

The book of Esther is an unusual book in that it seems to stand alone.

It is not connected to historical chronology of the Hebrews.

This is a beautiful story of how a young Jewish girl saves her people.

It is unknown who penned the book of Esther.

Many scholars do not like to include the book of Esther in the Bible, because it does not directly mention the name of God.

In this book however, we see the hand of God at work to save his people in a foreign land.

The setting for this is Persia.

It happens during the years of captivity of the Israelites.

One of the lessons to be learned in this is "you reap what you sow".

The feast of Purim is instituted in this little book.

In my opinion, this is a very spiritual book.

It causes us to see God, even though it does not call His name.

“Verses 1-2”

“King Ahasuerus” of Persia reigned from (486 – 465 B.C.), as Persia’s fifth king.

Ahasuerus is a title meaning “high father” or “venerable king” and was used to refer to all the Persian kings, much like the term Pharaoh was used to refer to Egyptian kings.

This king’s real name was Xerxes.

Esther 1:1 "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this [is] Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, [over] a hundred and seven and twenty provinces:)"

“Ahasuerus”:

In Greek his name is Xerxes; he is the Persian king mentioned (in Ezra 4:6), who reigned from (486 to 465 B.C.).

He attacked the Greeks and was twice humiliated by them (in 481 and 479 B.C. at Salamis and Plataea).

The “India” referred to was not peninsular India but the territory corresponding to the province of Punjab in West Pakistan today.

“Ethiopia was the country south of Egypt, now part of the Northern Sudan, not modern Ethiopia.

Darius had conquered it early in his reign (before 513 B.C.).

The reference to “a hundred and seven and twenty provinces” was an attempt to make the domain of the king as impressive as possible, for the primary divisions of the empire were the satrapies, of which there were never more than 31.

The word “provinces” refers to the smaller governmental units, such as that of Judah (Neh. 1:3), whereas the fifth satrapy included all of Phoenicia, Palestine, Syria, and Cyprus.

Ahasuerus or Xerxes I was a king of Persia and the husband of Esther, the Jewess.

Ahasuerus succeeded his father, Darius Hystaspis (in 485 B.C.).

The Book of Esther portrays the king as

1. Ruling a vast empire;
2. Being very wealthy;
3. Being sensual, continually giving feasts; and
4. Being cruel and acutely lacking in foresight (verses 13-22).

Ahasuerus “Reigned ... over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces”.

The kingdom comprised 20 regions (3:12; 8:9; 9:3), which were further divided into provinces ruled over by governors (3:12).

“India even unto Ethiopia”:

Ethiopia, not Asia Minor, is mentioned as representing the western edge of the kingdom to avoid any remembrance of the king’s previous defeat by the Greeks (ca. 481 – 479 B.C.; see verse 8:9).

This description also avoided any confusion with the Ahasuerus (of Dan. 9:1).

Ahasuerus banished his queen, Vashti, taking two years to find a replacement.

He finally chose Esther, after which the exciting events concerning her, Mordecai (Esther’s guardian), and the wicked Haman took place.

In 465 B.C., a courtier murdered Ahasuerus; his son, Artaxerxes I, Longimanus, succeeded him.

Ahasuerus is the same as Xerxes.

A province at this time, was an area that had its own governor.

We can see that this ruler had great world power.

This would have included Judea.

Esther 1:2 "[That] in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which [was] in Shushan the palace,"

“Shushan” (Susa), was the ancient capital of Elam (the southwestern area of modern Iran).

The city reached its height of importance as the residence and especially as the winter capital of the kings of Persia.

When Cyrus the Great (reigned 550 – 529 B.C.), established the Persian Empire, he made Shushan its capital.

At Shushan, Darius the Great (ruled 521 – 485 B.C.), built his magnificent royal palace, which later figured prominently in the story of Esther.

In fact, most of the events recorded in the Book of Esther took place in Shushan (verses 1:2-5; 2:3-8; 3:15; 4:8; 8:14-15; 9:6-18).

The great prophet Daniel had his vision of the ram and the goat in Shushan (Dan. 8:2), and Nehemiah lived there in exile (Neh. 1:1).

“Which was in Shushan”:

Shushan or Susa, the winter residence, was one of 4 capital cities.

The other 3 included Babylon, Ecbatana (Ezra 6:2), and Persepolis. Shushan (referred to as the citadel),” is referring to the fortified palace complex built about the city for protection.

Shushan, the palace, sat on a hill.

It was in the area of Shushan the city, but was separate.

Verses 3-4

Feasting is a frequent theme in Esther.

This 180 day “feast” was staged to present the king’s wealth and present his people of his ability to carry out a campaign against Greece.

Success would make him the supreme ruler of the world of that day.

Esther 1:3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, [being] before him:"

“The third year” (ca. 483 B.C.).

This probably included the planning phase for Ahasuerus’ later campaign against Greece in which the king suffered a humiliating defeat (ca. 481 – 479 B.C.).

“Persia and Media”:

Cyrus the Persian inherited Media and thus the name Media became just as prominent as Persia (550 B. C.).

This was like a diplomatic dinner.

This dinner probably included as many as 15,000 people.

The governors of the various provinces had gathered for this feast.

It appears from the verse above, that his servants were included in this celebration.

The nobles mentioned, were possibly some of the Medes who held high favor with Persia, even though they were a captured nation as well.

Verses 4-12

Herodotus refers to this as a time when Xerxes laid plans for the great invasion of Greece.

Along with him were military and civil leaders during the “hundred and fourscore days” (180 days).

At the conclusion, a seven-day drinking feast was held (verses 5, 7), with the queen, “Vashti,” holding a separate feast for the women guests (verse 9).

On the last day of the feast, the drunken king (verse 10), summoned his queen, perhaps to make a lewd display of her before his guests, but she refused to obey (verse 12).

The name “Vashti” is puzzling because according to Herodotus, the queen’s name was Amestris, daughter of Otanes, who had supported Darius in his bid for the throne (in 522 B.C.).

Possibly he had other queens, whose names have not come to light, or she had alternative names. Or there may be a linguistic link between the names *Vashti*” and *Amestris*”.

Esther 1:4 "When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, [even] a hundred and fourscore days."

Xerxes was the fourth king of the Persian monarchy, and was "far richer than all" that went before him, all their riches coming into his hands (Dan. 11:2).

And now that prophecy began to be fulfilled, "that by his strength, through his riches, he should stir up all against the realm of Grecia"; which he began to do in the third year of his reign.

And for which these his nobles might be called together, as to have their advice.

So to animate them to come in the more readily into the expedition, by showing them the riches he was possessed of; for to none of the kings of Persia does this largeness of riches better belong than to Xerxes.

"And the honor of his excellent majesty”:

The grandeur he lived in, the pomp and splendor of his court; he was the most grand and magnificent of all the kings of the Medes and Persians.

"Many days, even a hundred and fourscore days”:

To which seven more being added, as in the following verse, it made one hundred and eighty seven, the space of full six months.

This 180 days is a lengthy time of festivity in their land.

Possibly a few of the governors and nobles would come, and when they left, another group would come.

We are not told for sure but 180 days is a long time for one party to last.

He was showing off his wealth and power to the subordinate rulers of his provinces.

Esther 1:5 "And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;"

The “citadel,” or palace, was in “Shushan (Susa), and served as one of the king’s lavish winter residences.

It was also the site of one of Daniel’s visions (Dan. 8:2).

Remains of this palace have been discovered in the modern-day city of Shush, in Iran.

It was not unusual for a feast of this kind to last for 7 days.

This court was estimated to be about 350 feet long by 250 feet wide.

It seems, there was a building sitting in the middle of it.

To accommodate the large numbers of people, it would have been necessary for it to be this large.

This feast was for everyone.

The servants of the king and all the people, small and great, joined in the feast.

Esther 1:6 "[Where were] white, green, and blue, [hangings], fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds [were of] gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble."

The fashion, in the houses of the great, on festive occasions, was to decorate the chambers from the middle of the wall downward with damask or velvet hangings of variegated colors suspended on hooks, or taken down at pleasure.

"The beds were of gold and silver":

That is, the couches on which, according to Oriental fashion, the guests reclined, and which were either formed entirely of gold and silver or inlaid with ornaments of those costly metals, stood on an elevated floor of parti-colored marble.

This court was magnificent.

The hangings could have been used as a type of awning to shade the people from the heat, since the court probably had no roof.

The beds mentioned, were actually couches where the people reclined.

They were probably made of the precious metals, silver and gold, because there was so much wealth.

The pillars of marble were possibly limestone blue.

The floors were of the same material as the pillars, and some other colors that made a mosaic design.

There were 4 different mosaics mixed and matched to make a beautiful floor.

Esther 1:7 "And they gave [them] drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king."

In the pattern and workmanship of them, though of the same metal, which diversity made the festival grander.

Earthen cups, with the Persians, were reckoned very mean; when a king would disgrace a man, he obliged him to use earthen cups.

"And royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king":

Such as the king was able to give, the best he had, and that in great plenty.

The wine the kings of Persia used to drink, as Strabo relates, was Chalybonian wine, or wine of Helbon, as it is called (see notes on Ezek. 27:18).

But by the wine of the kingdom, as it may be rendered, is meant wine of the country; the wine of Schiras is reckoned the best in Persia.

The fact that the drinking cups were of gold, just showed the extreme wealth of the Persian king.

It is interesting to me, that the cups were different.

Perhaps it would have been easier for each one to keep up with his cup that way.

It certainly would have been more expensive to make them different.

This would have taken many barrels of wine to have enough to furnish so large a party.

Esther 1:8 "And the drinking [was] according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure."

According to the law Ahasuerus gave to his officers next mentioned, which was not to oblige any man to drink more than he chose.

The Targum is, "according to the custom of his body"; that is, as a man is able to bear it, so they drank.

Some read it, "the drinking according to the law, let none exact"; or require it to be, according to the custom then in use in Persia.

"For so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure":

To let them have what wine they would, but not force them to drink more than was agreeable to them.

It was usually understood that the officers must all drink.

This generally led to many getting drunk.

It is interesting to me, that the edict of the king here, allowed each person to decide for himself whether he would drink or not.

It appears the king wanted to treat all of these people as guests, and not as his subjects.

Esther 1:9 "Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women [in] the royal house which [belonged] to king Ahasuerus."

“Vashti the queen”:

Greek literature records her name as Amestris.

She gave birth (ca. 483 B.C.), to Ahasuerus’ third son, Artaxerxes, who later succeeded his father Ahasuerus on the throne (Ezra 7:1).

This shows that the men and women had separate feasts.

We mentioned before that the feast was like a diplomatic dinner.

Vashti was the wife of the king.

She was queen, because she was married to the king.

It was in his royal house that Vashti held the feast for the women.

"Vashti" means beautiful.

This was probably a name the king gave her, after they were married.

Many believe her real name was Amestris.

Verses 10-12

The king’s “anger” was aroused, probably because of embarrassment.

His guests were gathered to decide whether or not they were going to follow him into war against Greece, and he could not even control his own wife.

Esther 1:10 "On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,"

Of the feast, the last day of it, which the Rabbins, as Jarchi observes, say was the Sabbath day, and so the Targum.

"When the heart of the king was merry with wine":

When he was intoxicated with it, and knew not well what he said or did.

And the discourse at table ran upon the beauty of women, as the latter Targum; when the king asserted there were no women so beautiful as those of Babylon, and, as a proof of it, ordered his queen to be brought in.

"He commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king":

Or "eunuchs", as the word is sometimes rendered; and such persons were made use of in the eastern countries to, wait upon women, and so were proper to be sent on the king's errand to the queen.

Esther 1:11 "To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty: for she [was] fair to look on."

Not against her will, or by force; but they were sent to let her know it was the king's pleasure that she should come to him immediately.

"With the crown royal":

That is, upon her head, to make her look the more grand and majestic.

"To show the people and the princes her beauty":

For she was fair to look upon; which was not wisely done, neither was it comely nor safe.

On the seventh day of the feast, it seems the king had too much to drink, and asked seven of his eunuchs to go and get the queen.

He wanted to exhibit her before the men at his party to show her great beauty.

We may assume that he wanted her to remove her veil of covering.

He was very proud of all his possessions and he counted the queen as part of his possessions.

To present the queen in such a manner as this was a breach in Persian etiquette.

Esther 1:12 "But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by [his] chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him."

"Vashti refused":

Her reason is not recorded, although suggestions have included that

1. Her appearance would have involved lewd behavior before drunken men, or
2. That she was still pregnant with Artaxerxes.

“Queen Vashti” was deposed at about the same time that she gave birth to a son, Artaxerxes (484 or 483 B.C.).

Although her insubordination infuriated the king and cost her the kingdom, Vashti seems to have regained some of her influence when Artaxerxes ascended the throne (in 465 B.C. and until she died in 424 B.C.).

Vashti had to realize that it might cost her her life to refuse to obey the command of her king, who was also her husband.

She, perhaps, would rather lose her life, than become shamed by such an exhibit.

This was as if he were showing her off for the envy of the other men.

Her refusal to come would greatly shame her husband before his subordinates.

He would possibly not have asked such a thing, had he not been drinking.

She would have to be severely punished, and it had to be known publicly for him to regain his self-respect.

Most kings would have had her killed for such an act of disobedience.

Verses 13-20

King Ahasuerus liked to make decisions by committee, gathering together those he deemed “wise”.

In this case, he was advised by lawyers and astrologers.

Like modern-day spin-doctors, they sought to help him out of an embarrassing political situation so that the people of Persia would know their king could command both his wife and his country.

Esther 1:13 "Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so [was] the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment:"

“The wise men, which knew the time” were a part of a traditional institution; they were consulted by Pharaoh (Gen 41:8), and were present in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 2:2).

The “times” were strictly propitious occasions for action according to the stars, that is, astrologers.

Even in his heated anger, he did not act hastily.

He left the judgement of what her punishment should be to the law of the land.

The king wanted to do what was right in this case.

Esther 1:14 "And the next unto him [was] Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, [and] Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, [and] which sat the first in the kingdom;)"

“The seven princes”:

These high-ranking officials (compare Ezra 7:14), were perhaps equivalent to the magi (of Dan. 1:20).

Carshena and Shethar were his trusted advisers.

Next to them, were the seven princes.

All of them sat near the king at the table of the feast, and were treated with great respect.

They had high offices directly under the king.

We may assume that some of them were Medes, from the mention of "Persia and Media" here.

Esther 1:15 "What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?"

The king desired to know what law was provided in such a case as her's, and what to be done according to it.

"Because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?"

As this was the crime, disobedience to his commands, he would have those who had knowledge of the law consider what punishment was to be inflicted on her for it.

According to former laws, usages, and customs, or as reason and justice required.

And it being a festival, and they heated with wine, was no objection to a consultation on this head; for it was the manner of the Persians at festivals, and when inflamed with wine, to consult and determine about matters of the greatest moment.

Notice "we" in the verse above.

The king did not want to make this decision himself in the heat of the moment of anger.

Another thing that speaks highly of the king was that he wanted it to be according to the law.

Esther 1:16 "And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that [are] in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus."

Who was the last, and perhaps the least and the youngest of the counsellors.

It being appointed by the king, according to the latter Targum that when his counsellors sat, the least should give their counsel first.

Just as lessor ranking judges, and the youngest peers with us, give their opinion in a case first.

"Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus":

He means, by setting a bad example to their wives, as after explained.

It is an exaggeration of her crime, and made with a design to incense the king the more against her.

The public shame that she had brought on the king would affect the entire kingdom.

A king could not expect the people to do as he commanded, unless his queen set the example of obedience.

The Persians had been so sure this would never happen, that there was no specific law against it.

The advisers and the king would have to decide what would be appropriate punishment.

Esther 1:17 "For [this] deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not."

It will soon be spread all over the king's dominions, and reach the ears of the wives of all his subjects, and become their general talk everywhere.

"So that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes":

Make light of their authority, refuse subjection to them, slight their commands.

And neglect to yield obedience to them, and so not give them the honor that is due unto them.

"When it shall be reported, the King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, and she came not":

Was disobedient to his commands, refused to go along with the chamberlains sent by the king to fetch her.

The husband was the absolute ruler over his wife and children, in this heathen land.

The queen's act might cause all of the women to rebel against their husbands.

Esther 1:18 "[Likewise] shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus [shall there arise] too much contempt and wrath."

From henceforward they will give a like answer to their husbands, when they lay their commands upon them, as Vashti has to the king.

They will tell them to their faces they will not obey their orders.

Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath”:

There will be in wives a general contempt of their husbands, which will cause discord and strife, quarrels, wrath and anger.

Contempt on one part, wrath on the other, and contention between both.

In Persia and Media, women were thought to be under the complete rule of their husbands.

This act of Vashti's would affect not only the women of the ordinary citizens, but would affect the wives of the princes.

They thought they might lose control of their family.

The queen was an example for all of the women of the land for good, or evil.

Whatever she did, the other women did too.

A good lesson is to be learned here.

We can see that our lives influence others by the actions we take.

Esther 1:19 "If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she."

“That it be not altered”:

The irrevocable nature of Persian law (Dan. 6:8, 12, 15), played an important role in how the rest of Esther concluded (compare 8:8).

Generally, the problems in the home between a husband and a wife would have been kept very secret.

He would have put her away from him, but it would not have been known publicly.

Since she had disgraced him before the entire land, this punishment must be public as well.

We might say he divorced her, and threw her out.

It was not enough to punish her.

They wrote a law, so this would not happen again with any of their wives.

Esther 1:20 "And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small."

As it was proper it should, since the report of the queen's deed would be made everywhere.

"For it is great":

The empire consisting of one hundred and twenty seven provinces (Esther 1:1).

Aben Ezra and Abendana interpret it, "though" it is great, yet the decree should be published throughout.

The latter observes, that this may respect the king's decree; and so the Targum is, "for his decree is great;" it respecting a matter of great importance, and relating to a great personage.

And would have great effect on the minds of persons, when it was observed that one so great was treated in this manner.

And therefore;

"All the wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small":

Speaking respectfully to them, yielding a ready and cheerful obedience to all their commands.

Which would be done to princes and peasants, to high and low, to every rank of men.

They wanted this to strike fear into their wives, so that this would not happen again.

This was not just for Persia, but for all the provinces, as well.

Verses 21-22

Memucan's appeal was to male self-interest.

Note the whimsical way laws were made in a land where so much was made of law and judgment (verses 8, 13, 15, 19).

The king dispatched his edict without so much as a further thought.

There was something ludicrous about this decree that a husband was to take charge in his own household, for this was the standing rule in an oriental home.

The law was not even enforceable.

There is an ironic contrast between King Ahasuerus at the beginning of the chapter, when he is the world's greatest monarch, rich and powerful, aloof yet generous.

And that same king by the end of the chapter, where he attempts to maintain his dignity despite the defiance of his wife.

The lawmaker of the Persians and Medes, whose law could not be altered, was prepared to pass an edict framed in a moment of pique, when he was not even sober.

Such is the measure of the king who reigned over the world, and had the future of all in his power.

Esther 1:21 "And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:"

The haste of impulse can make anyone “waste” his or her decisions.

In a moment of weakness, the king was persuaded to declare a law that could not be broken, a law he would soon regret (2:1).

The laws of the Persian and the Medes later figure prominently (8:8), in the story of Daniel (Dan. 6:8-12).

They all decided this was a good solution to a difficult problem.

It would also, let all of the king's subjects know that the king did not let Vashti get away with this.

Esther 1:22 "For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that [it] should be published according to the language of every people."

“Letters”:

The efficient Persian communication network (a rapid relay by horses), played an important role in speedily publishing kingdom edicts (3:12-14; 8:9-10, 14; 9:20, 30).

Persia was a country that lived by different rules than our country.

The Bible teaches that the father should be the ruler of his own house.

This does not mean that he is to be a tyrant, however.

It also is speaking of the family unit.

This is not something that should have been a law of the land.

Morality cannot be legislated.

The family unit, with the father as the head, is symbolic of our heavenly relationship with our Father.

Esther Chapter 1 Questions

1. What is unusual about the book of Esther?
2. What is the book about?
3. Who was the penman?
4. Why did some of the scholars not want this book in the Bible?
5. The setting for this is _____.
6. What feast is instituted in the book of Esther?
7. What is a message for all of us in this book?
8. The author believes this is a very _____ book.
9. Where did Ahasuerus reign?
10. Who was this Ahasuerus?
11. What was a province at this time?
12. Where was the palace of the king?
13. What year of his reign did he have the great feast?
14. Who were invited?
15. This was like a _____ dinner.
16. How large were some of these celebrations?
17. Who were the nobles mentioned, probably?
18. There was festivity in the land for _____ days.
19. How long did the actual feast last?
20. How big was the court?
21. What were the hangings, probably?
22. The couches were made of what?

23. The pillars were made of what?
24. What made up the floor?
25. They drank out of _____?
26. What was unusual about them?
27. What were they drinking?
28. What was different about the drinking at this feast, than what usually happened?
29. Who was the queen?
30. What does her name mean?
31. What could have been her real name?
32. What did the king request Vashti to do?
33. What answer did she give him?
34. Who did the king consult about her punishment?
35. Who would Vashti's disobedience of the king affect?
36. What royal commandment went forth to all the lands the king ruled?
37. How would this help the king?
38. What punishment was inflicted upon Vashti?
39. What was in the letter he sent to all the lands?
40. _____ cannot be legislated.