

Esther Series

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Good News Bible Studies

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Esther – The Queen of Persia

Overview/ Historical Context

Introduction:

1. There are just two books in the Bible named after women:

- _____
- _____

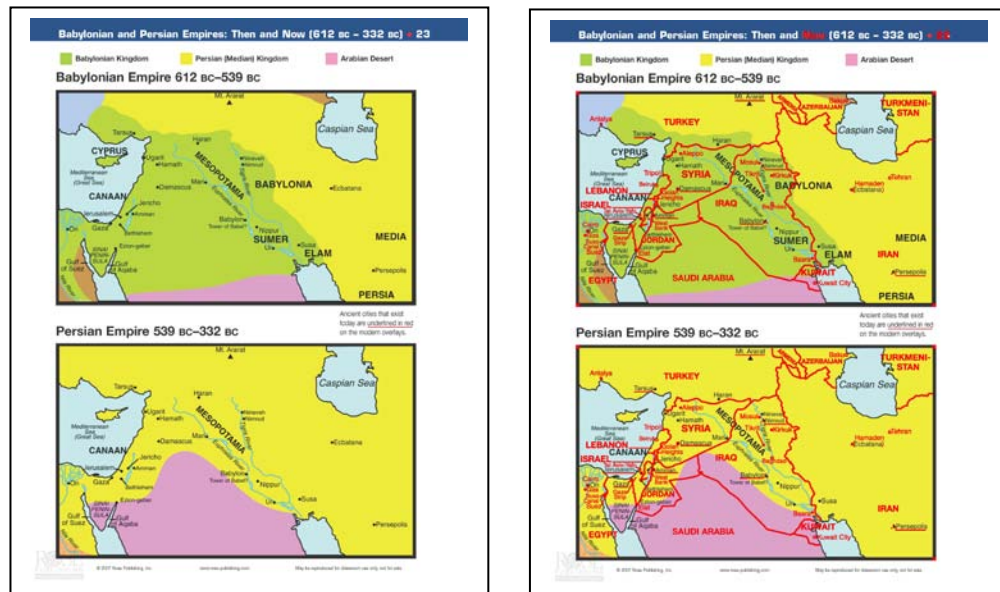
2. Here are a few interesting tid-bits of information that you may not know:

- There are no passages in the New Testament that quote or refer to the book of **Esther**, but you will also find that there are no quotations or references from Song of Solomon, Obadiah, or Nahum.
- The **Dead Sea Scrolls** (practically the only known surviving Biblical documents written before AD 100 and discovered during the years 1947-1956) contain the entire book of Isaiah, and portions of every Old Testament book **except Esther**.
- The **Mosaic Law** is not mentioned in the book of **Esther** and there is also no mention of sacrifices and offerings. This (as we will see later) reveals the overall spiritual condition of some of the people who chose not to obey God and return to **Jerusalem** after exile as **Isaiah** and **Jeremiah** so clearly advised them to do. (Jeremiah 29:10, Jeremiah 50:8, 51:6, Isaiah 48:20)
- Unlike the contemporary books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, there is also no mention of **prayer** throughout the book of **Esther**. There is a **call to fast**, but the subject of prayer is void which some commentators and others find interesting. We might get a better understanding of this when we examine the historical and spiritual setting a little later in the study.

3. There are 4 significant people mentioned in the book of Esther:

- **Xerxes** who is also mentioned as **Ahasuerus** in some translations

- 1) He was the **king of Persia** during the events recorded in the book of **Esther**
- 2) During his reign he ruled over **127 provinces** (from India all the way to Ethiopia) in the **Medo-Persian Empire**.



- 3) The **Persian Empire** had its “official” beginnings when **Cyrus the Great** conquered what was considered then to be the “known world” at that time by **defeating the Babylonians** in 539 B.C. and becoming the undisputed ruler of Asia. As such, Cyrus became the new master of the exiled Jewish people who had been earlier captured and exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. It was **Cyrus the Great** who decreed that the Jews be permitted to return to their homeland (Jerusalem) in 536 B.C. to rebuild their temple and restore worship in Jerusalem (**Ezra 1:1-4**). Some Jews returned to Jerusalem and many remained in Persia. The story of Esther is about those who remained behind and did not return to Jerusalem.
- 4) The reign of **Xerxes** (486-465) who was the grandson of Cyrus the Great, began upon the death of his father (Darius I). History tells us that Xerxes was an ego-maniac. He ruled from two palaces; the winter palace in **Susa/Shushan** and the summer palace in **Persepolis**.

- Haman

- 1) He is referenced as an “**Agagite**” (Esther 3:1, 10). Some conclude that he was a possible descendant of king Agag who was an **Amalekite** (bitter enemies of the Israelites throughout the Old Testament), and others conclude he was from a **province called Agag** that was located in Persia.
- 2) He was promoted to a high ranking position by Xerxes and will be responsible for a sinister plot to slaughter all the Jews throughout the 127 provinces of Persia including the land of Palestine.

- Mordecai

- 1) He was an **Israelite** from the **tribe of Benjamin** (Esther 2:5)
- 2) It is most probable that his great grandfather Kish was captured and deported to Babylon (597 B.C.) by king Nebuchadnezzar.
- 3) Like so many of the Jews who lived in Babylon, they either took on Babylonian names to hide their Jewish identity or they were assigned Babylonian names – the name **Mordecai** was considered a Babylonian name which was *taken from the god (Marduk) of the Babylonians*. If you recall in the book of Daniel; Daniel was called Belteshazzar, Hananiah was called Shadrach, Mishaël was called Meshach, and Azariah was called Abed-nego.
- 4) The Jews in the Babylon Empire and the subsequent Persian Empire were not looked upon favorably and keeping their heritage secret was often a necessity of survival.
- 5) A problem will arise between **Haman** and **Mordecai** in which Mordecai will not bow down to Haman. This will create some bad blood between Haman and Mordecai and because it is discovered that Mordecai was Jewish, it will set off a chain of events in which the Jewish people throughout the provinces of Persia will have no protection and an order is given to have them all killed. This will prompt Mordecai to request of Esther that she intervene with King Xerxes to change this order and save their people from extinction which is what the book of Esther is primarily about.

- Esther

- 1) She is also from the **tribe of Benjamin** and is the cousin of Mordecai who raised her after her parents died when she was young.
- 2) Her family (like the family of Mordecai and others), chose to remain in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple as the Lord had instructed.
- 3) Her Hebrew name was **Hadassah** which means myrtle (a beautiful flowering evergreen plant). Her Persian name was **Esther** which means star. She went by her Persian name to keep her heritage secret as was common for the Jews living in exile.
- 4) She was very beautiful and will catch the eye of king Xerxes and will become the Queen of Persia.
- 5) As Queen, she will become a very powerful woman in Persia and will be an instrument through whom the Lord will work to save her people from extinction.

4. Author and Date of the book of Esther

- Possible authors:

- 1) Mordecai
- 2) Ezra
- 3) **Nehemiah** – There is a fair amount of agreement among some commentators that he may be the author of Esther but no formal conclusions.

- Possible dates that the book was written

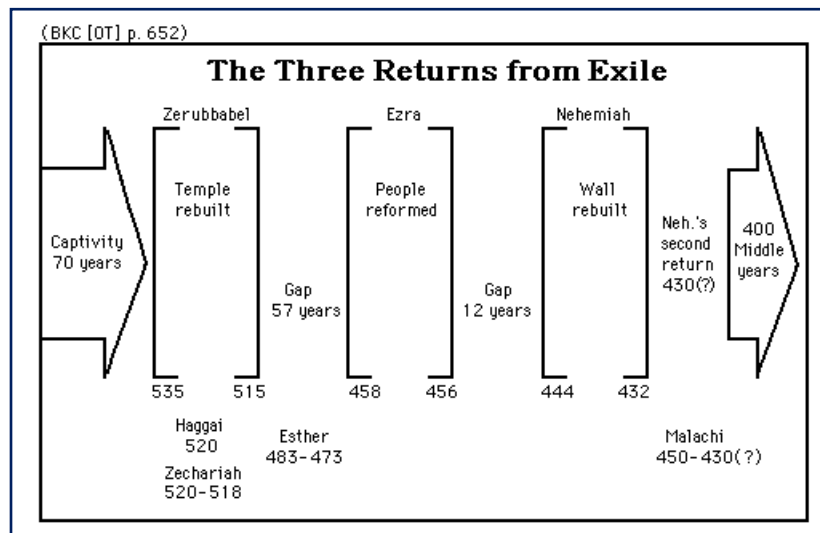
- 1) 470-465 B.C. – during the later years of the reign of Xerxes
- 2) 464-424 B.C. – during the reign of Artaxerxes (son of Xerxes)

Historical Context:

1. The events recorded in the book of Esther take place over a 10 year period of time (483 B.C. to 473 B.C.), and occurred during the reign of **Xerxes** (*Ahasuerus*) who reigned over the Persian Empire from **485-465 B.C.**
2. The **Persian Empire** began as a world empire after the defeat of the Babylonians (539 B.C.), and during the reign of **Cyrus the Great** (their first ruler) they conquered/absorbed all of what was part of that empire and dominated the region from the western portion of **India to Ethiopia**. This included the land which is sometimes referred to by some as **Palestine** and by others as **Biblical Israel**.
 - The defeat of the Babylonian Empire was a significant historical event in that it wrestled control of the Mesopotamian region from the Babylonians and also the influences of Egypt, and the Arameans to the **Indo-European peoples of Persia**.
 - The Persian Empire also brought a new religion to the region known as **Zoroastrianism** which was a **dualistic** belief system in which two contrary gods (one which was evil/darkness and one which was good/light) controlled the universe and determined it and mankind's outcome. This was in contrast to the **One True God** (monotheistic) belief of the Hebrews and somewhat different from the **multi-god** systems of the Babylonians and other up and coming western powers like the Greeks and Romans.
3. **Cyrus the Great** (559-530 B.C.) was succeeded by his son **Cambyses** who had a short reign (530-522 B.C.) and he was more concerned with conquering Egypt and Africa at the time of his reign and less concerned with the people of Israel. **Cambyses** was a bit of a mad man and committed terrible atrocities against the people of Egypt and toward the end of his reign he committed suicide.
4. **Darius I** became the next monarch of Persia (522-486 B.C.) and he was responsible for issuing a decree for the Jews to be left alone so they could finish their Temple. (Ezra 6:1-22)
5. The next ruler to assume the throne was **Xerxes** (*Ahasuerus*) who ruled from 486-465 B.C. and he was the son of **Darius I**. It is during his reign that events of Esther occur.

Biblical Context:

1. The book of Esther (along with Ezra and Nehemiah) is placed in the middle of our Bibles, however from a chronological standpoint, the events actually occur toward the end the recorded Old Testament period. (483-473 B.C.)
- The events of Esther take place somewhere after Ezra 6 but precedes the events recorded in Ezra 7-10 and those events recorded in the entire book of Nehemiah.



(BKC [OT] p. 654)

Persian Kings	Dates of Their Reigns	Biblical Events	Scripture References	Dates
Cyrus	559-530 B.C.	Edict of Cyrus for the return <i>First return</i> of 49,897 exiles, under Zerubbabel (to build the temple)	Ezra 1:1-4 Ezra 2	538 B.C. 538
Cambyzes	530-522	The altar and the temple foundation built	Ezra 3:1-4:5	536
Smerdis	522			
Darius I	521-486	Haggai prophesied Zechariah prophesied The temple completed	Book of Haggai Book of Zechariah Ezra 5-6	520 520-518 515
Xerxes (Ahazuerus)	485-465	Accusation against Judah	Ezra 4:6	486
		Esther became queen	Esther 2:17	479
Artaxerxes I (Artashasta)	464-424	Artaxerxes stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem <i>Second return</i> of 4,000-5,000 exiles, under Ezra (to beautify the temple and reform the people) <i>Third return</i> of exiles, under Nehemiah (to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem)	Ezra 4:7-23 Ezra 7-10 Book of Nehemiah	ca. 464-458 458 444
		Nehemiah's second return Malachi prophesied	Nehemiah 13:6 Book of Malachi	ca. 430 450-430(?)

- The events of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther make up the period known as the Postexilic Period (Israel's history after the Babylonian Exile).

2. How did Esther, Mordecai and so many other Israelites/Jews end up in the middle of the Persian Empire and approximately 1000 miles from their homeland?

- Upon the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two divisions – one group followed Jeroboam and the other followed Rehoboam (Solomon's son):

1) The 10 tribes of Israel followed Jeroboam, formed the Northern Kingdom and the kings who succeeded Jeroboam were known as the kings of Israel.

2) The other two tribes (Benjamin and Judah) followed Rehoboam, formed the Southern Kingdom and the kings that succeeded Rehoboam were known as the kings of Judah.

(BKC [OT] p. 513)

Kings of Judah and Israel and the Preexilic Prophets									
JUDAH					ISRAEL				
Kings*	Dates	Years	Dynasty†		Kings	Dates	Years		
Rehoboam	931-913	17	1st Dynasty		Jeroboam I	931-910	22		
Abijah	913-911	3	"		Nadab ‡	910-909	2		
Asa	911-870	41	2nd Dynasty		Baasha	909-886	24		
Coregency‡ with Jehoshaphat	873-870	(3)	"		Elijah ‡	886-885	2		
Jehoshaphat	873-848	25	3rd Dynasty		Zimri	885	7 days		
Coregency‡ with Jehoram	853-848	(5)	—		Tibni	885-880	6		
Jehoram OBADIAH**	848-841	8			Overlapping reign‡ with Omri	885-880	(6)		
Ahaziah ‡	841	1	4th Dynasty		Omri	885-874	12		
Queen Athaliah ‡	841-835	6	"		Ahab	874-853	22		
Joash ‡ JOEL**	835-796	40	"		Ahaziah	853-852	2		
Amaziah ‡	796-767	29	"		Jehoram (Joram) ‡	852-841	12		
Azariah's vice-regency under Amaziah	790-767	(23)	"						
Azariah (Uzziah)	790-739	52	5th Dynasty		Jehu	841-814	28		
Coregency‡ with Jotham	750-739	(11)	"		Jehoahaz	814-798	17		
Jotham	750-735	16	"		Jehoash (Joash)	798-782	16		
Ahaz's vice-regency under Jotham	744-735	(9)	"		Coregency‡ with Jeroboam II	793-782	(11)		
Ahaz	735-732	4	"		Jeroboam II JONAH AMOS	793-753	41		
Hezekiah's vice-regency under Ahaz	732-715	16	6th Dynasty		Zechariah ‡	753-752	1/2		
Hezekiah	715-686	29	7th Dynasty		Shallum ‡	752	1/12		
Manasseh's vice-regency under Hezekiah	697-686	(11)	"		Menahem	752-742	10		
Manasseh NAHUM	697-642	55	"		Overlapping reign with Pekah	752-742	(10)		
Amon ‡	642-640	2	8th Dynasty		Pekahiah ‡	742-742	(2)		
Josiah ZEPHANIAH	640-609	31	9th Dynasty		Overlapping reign with Pekah	742-740	(2)		
Jehoahaz	609	1/4			Pekah ‡	752-732	20		
Jehoiahkim HABAKKUK	609-598	11			Hoshea	732-722	9		
Jehoiachin	598-597	1/4							
Zedekiah	597-586	11							

* Includes one queen (Athaliah).
† In coregency the kings ruled together; in overlapping reigns they reigned separately; in a vice-regency a son ruled with his father in a subordinate position.
‡ These kings and one queen were assassinated.
** A dynasty is a succession of rulers who are members of the same family or a single ruler of a family different from those before and after him. (The kings of Judah were all of one dynasty because they were all descendants of David.)
*** Evangelical scholars differ on these dates of Obadiah and Joel. Some place them at later dates (see the *Interpretation* to Joel and Obad.).
Note: In some kings' reigns the dates (e.g., Rehoboam, 931-913), when subtracted, may vary from the number in the "Years" column for that king. This is because the beginning and ending dates for a given king may include only portions of those years in the Gregorian calendar.
The dates of the kings are adapted from Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.

- This chart helps tell the story of over 300 years of Israel's history known as the time of the kings. There were times of repentance and renewal, but for the most part, the people of God were disobedient and thus faced God's judgment.

- As the disobedience of the kings and the people continued; the “prophet” became the spokesperson for God (see the chart page 7) who would issue a call to repent and more often than not, they would lay out the judgment that would come to the people for failing to repent and follow the Lord.
- There were two significant judgments that changed the course of history for the Israelites/Jews:
 - 1) The **Assyrian Empire** conquered the *Northern Kingdom of Israel* in **722 B.C.** as prophesied by **Hosea** and **Amos**. The capital city of the Northern Kingdom (**Samaria**) was destroyed and most of the people (Israelites) who survived, inter-married with the Assyrians and became known as Samaritans. Those who remained faithful to the Lord migrated to the Southern Kingdom.
 - 2) The **Babylonian Empire** conquered the *Southern Kingdom of Israel* in **586 B.C.** as prophesied by **Jeremiah** (Jeremiah 25:1-11). The people were taken from their land of Judah to the land of Babylon. This period of time (70 years) became known as the “**Exile**” and the two prophets who were active during this time were **Ezekiel** and **Daniel**.
- The **Persian Empire** conquered the **Babylonians** in 539 B.C. and ruled over the people of Judah. It was during the Persian rule that the *people of Judah* began to be called **Jews**.
- The Lord promised the people of Judah that He would allow them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, their homes and their city. (Jeremiah 25:9-11, Isaiah 44:28-45:1, Daniel 9:1-19)
 - 1) It was **Cyrus the Great** who made the decree to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:1-4)
 - 2) The Jews who did not return to Jerusalem and remained behind were disobedient and did not follow the instructions that God gave to the prophets **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel**.
- **Esther** and **Mordecai’s** grandparents were part of the group that remained behind in **Persia** which sets the stage for the events recorded in the book of Esther.

Overview of the Book:

1. The first two chapters introduce the main characters of the book (Xerxes, Haman, Mordecai and Esther), and sets the stage for Esther to be made Queen of the Persian Empire. (Esther 1-2)
2. The next significant event is Mordecai discovers a plot to assassinate Xerxes and is able to tell Esther who in turn provides the information to the king. (Esther 2:21-23)
3. Haman, who becomes jealous of Mordecai, devises a plan to destroy all the Jews throughout the 127 provinces of Persia (Esther 3)
4. Esther finds out about the plot by Haman to kill all Jews and intercedes on behalf of her people to save them from this attempted extermination. (Esther 4-7)
5. The attempted plot is uncovered, Haman is hanged, Mordecai is promoted to prime minister, and the Jews are saved. (Esther 8-10)

Concluding/Special Remarks:

1. The story of Esther doesn't just reveal the triumph of good over evil, but more important it shows the intervention by God who preserved His chosen people through not only a series of unusual circumstances, but by His own sovereign power.
2. The celebration of the Feast of Purim was declared (by Mordecai and Esther) to be observed annually by all Jews in remembrance of God's sovereign protection and intervention even at times when they weren't aware that God was at work. The Feast of Purim (a 2 day celebration) continues to be celebrated to this day (falling somewhere between late February to early March and precedes the Jewish Passover) even though it is not required by Mosaic Law.
3. *Esther is a real pivotal book as it helps bridge a gap that connects a people once governed by God and His laws to a people ruled by ruthless tyrants and dictators. Their plight continues to this day as they, (the Jews) are hated by those who don't understand them or willfully choose to reject them.*
4. Now let's study the book of Esther