

BIBLE STUDY ON ESTHER

January 23, 2019

Background

Book is written literature that was meant to be read aloud.

It is described as an early Jewish short story with a clear beginning, middle and end.

Actions occur within a specified period of time.

Book is meant to be read as history even though it is fictional.

It is a work of fiction that happens to contain some historical elements.

It is an explanation of the *Festival of Purim* which is how it was allowed into the canon.

It has unwavering popularity among Jews but has come under theological criticism.

It contains no religious elements and does not mention God even once.

In addition there is no mention of prayer or the Temple or any kind of religious activity.

It also has a perceived hostility toward Gentiles.

Book had difficulty obtaining canonical status especially among the Eastern churches.

Esther is not quoted anywhere in the New Testament and rarely mentioned by church fathers.

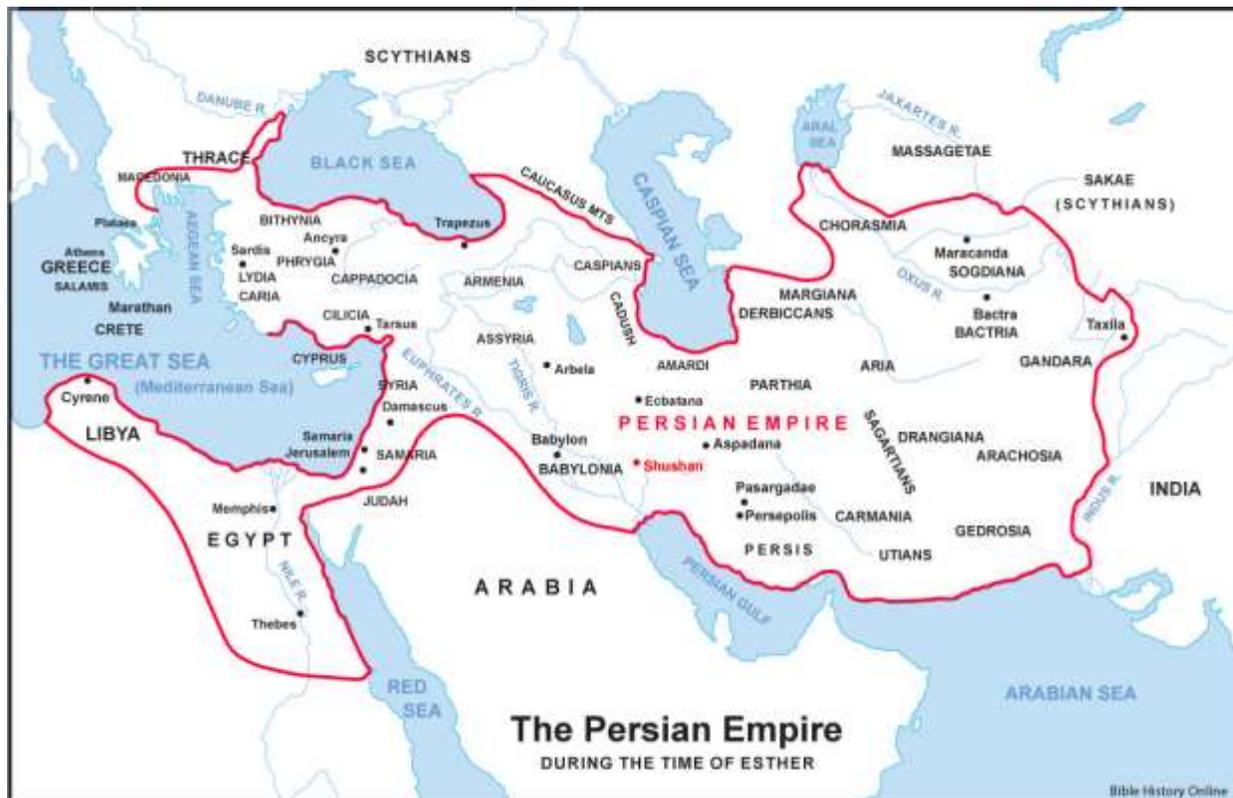
Martin Luther was vehement in his dislike of the book.

Esther 1:1-9

Function of the opening chapter is to set the story within the framework of the Persian Empire.

King Ahasuerus is the only character from Chapter 1 who will appear in the rest of the story.

Story of Vashti serves the important role of providing background and a framework for the rest.



Most scholars identify Ahasuerus as Xerxes I of Persia:
Hebrew word *Ahasuerus* (mighty man) descended from the Persian name for *Xerxes I*.
Xerxes I used the title *mighty man* on his inscriptions.
Form of the name in Esther 10:1 bears resemblance to the original Old Persian form.
Historians record Xerxes I having a fondness for women and wine.
He also ruled from India to Ethiopia in a palace in Shusan (corroborated in Esther).
He sought comfort in his harem following his defeat at Salamis (similar to Esther 2:16).
Records from his reign mention an official by the name of *Marduka*.
Chapter 4 of the Book of Ezra mentions Xerxes I imposing sanctions on the Jewish people.

Septuagint, the Vulgate and the Midrash of Esther identify the king as Artaxerxes I, II, or III.

Story is placed in a historical place and time (the court of an actual Persian king).
Ahasuerus had established his throne securely enough by his third year to give a banquet.
First banquet includes all the officials of the entire Persian Empire and lasts about six months.
Second banquet was for the people of Susa to show the opulence of the palace.
Emphasis is placed on the drinking as the Persians were notorious for their heavy drinking bouts.

Historians state that the king set the pace for drinking.
When he drank then everyone was to drink as well.
However, at this banquet people could drink based on their desires (normal rule was suspended).
Implication is that everything in this court proceeds according to the whims of the king.

We are introduced to Queen Vashti (in Persian it means *best*).
Historians state that the Xerxes' queen was Amestris.
It is our first clue that the Book of Esther is a story.
Vashti gives a comparable banquet for the women inside the palace.
Persian men and women could eat together but the women left when the drinking began.
Banquets signal important events, indicate closure, and/or provide a way to move action forward.
It is a signal to the reader that something important has happened or is about to happen.

Esther 1:10-22

Hebrew text indicates that the king summons Vashti when he is drunk.
His actions were not rational and her refusal to obey was justified (by our standards).
Ahasuerus sends for seven eunuchs to fetch her.
Eunuchs are listed by name in an attempt to give the story the appearance of being a true story.

Persians valued eunuchs highly for their trustworthiness.
A eunuch generally refers to a man who has been castrated early in his life.
It was known to be done without his consent so he might perform a specific social function.
Social functions included courtiers, soldiers, royal guards, and guardians of women.
Earliest records of intentional castrations to produce eunuchs date to the 21st century BC.
Eunuchs were castrated to make them reliable servants of a royal court.
Eunuchs were seen as less interested in the powers of the royalty (added to their reliability).
Because their condition lowered their social status they could be easily replaced or killed.

Esther 2:1-4

Shortly after the events in Chapter 1, the anger of Ahasuerus passed. He remembers Vashti but the Hebrew does not tell us if it is with love, regret, or loneliness. Septuagint (Greek version) reads that the king remembered her no longer. He was ready to find another wife.

Young women were to be sought and one of them would become the new queen. Women were to be beautiful and young virgins. Criteria meant young women of marriageable age from all over the kingdom. Women would be placed in the royal palace of Susa under the care of one of the eunuchs. Each young woman was to be given cosmetic treatments (sensuality of the Persian courts). Girl who pleased the king the most would become queen.

Reality check:

Persian king limited by law to marriage with a woman from one of the 7 noble Persian families. No sense of coercion is found within the lesson. Author assumes that the young women will wish to enter the harem. We assume the women were not consulted. Seen as a contest for the woman who pleased the king the most and would become the winner.
The Bachelor

Esther 2:5-7

Flow of the story is interrupted in order to be introduced to the two main characters.

Mordecai –

He is identified as a Jew in the citadel (fortress) (not the city) of Susa. Implication is that he is a court official. Jair is probably the father of Mordecai. Biblical tradition names Shimei as a member of the house of Saul (Benjaminite). In 2 Samuel 16:5-14 we read how he cursed David as he fled from Jerusalem. Kish is the father of Saul and the first king of Israel. Author makes two connections to Saul which will be important later.

Esther is introduced in verse 7 as being under the care of Mordecai. She has both a Hebrew name (myrtle) and a Persian name (star). Third derivative refers to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar (Queen of Heaven). Just taking the consonants, Esther means in Hebrew – I will hide. Practice of having two names (Jewish and a name of one's place in exile) was common. Her status as an orphan mirrors the status of the Jewish people who were exiles. It is our first clue that Esther will become a role model. As of this reading she met the one criterion for entrance into the harem – she is beautiful.

So far, Mordecai is more significant in the story while Esther plays a secondary role. His ethnicity, public status, genealogy, and his links with nobility are emphasized. All that is revealed about Esther is that she is a beautiful orphan.

Esther 2:8-18

Esther joins all the other women in the care of Hegai.

King established the law and Esther and Mordecai obeyed it.

Rabbis (troubled by the immoral command) claimed that Esther was taken by force.

Claims insert moral standards that do not apply to the story.

Author is not disturbed that a Jewish girl is about to become a concubine of a Gentile king.

In verse 9 her first action is recorded: She wins the favor of Hegai.

In Hebrew she does not find favor but actively earns it.

It is her first step on her road to political power.



Mention of food is significant in that she does not seem to eat kosher food.

Remember in the story of Daniel (another Jew in a foreign court) that he insisted on kosher food.

Mordecai instructed her not to reveal her ethnic background.

No reason is given for his caution.

It could be a political move or that it was dangerous to be a Jew in the Persian court.

Mordecai inquired after her on a daily basis without revealing his identity as her foster father.

Process to go before the king took twelve months (seen as a custom and not a law).

For 6 months Esther is massaged with oil of myrrh and 6 months with perfumes and cosmetics.

At the end of the year each woman was brought to the king for one night.

Purpose of the night was to have sexual intercourse.

In the morning the women returned to a different harem.

She would not see the king again unless summoned by name.

Historically the women had no hand in selecting their lot.

However, they had the potential of acquiring power and influence if chosen.

When Esther goes to the king for her night the author heightens her importance.

She is the daughter of Abihail (my father is mighty) is not connected to others in the Bible.

But it emphasizes that she is part of the family of Mordecai so is worthy to be queen.

Allowed to take whatever she wants with her she is wise and takes only what Hegai advises.

Hegai would know what the king preferred.

Hegai and the author are rooting for Esther to win the contest and become queen.

Esther sees the king in the seventh year of his reign which means four years have elapsed.
Ahasuerus loves Esther as opposed to how his anger burned at Vashti.
Esther wins his devotion and he sets the royal crown on her head.
It is the same crown that Vashti refused to wear.
Ahasuerus gives a banquet in honor of Esther which brings a satisfactory close to the first scene.
Vacancy created by the rebellious Vashti has been filled by the pliant and pleasing Esther.
Ahasuerus is once again content.

But two loose threads remain for the author to unravel:
Esther as a Jewish woman remains undisclosed.
Court's knowledge of Mordecai's relationship to Esther is still a secret.

Esther 2:19-23

Plot thickens!

It was impossible for Esther to obey Jewish law while in the palace.
She continued to conceal her ethnic identity.
She also placed her first loyalty with her foster father rather than with her husband.
Esther and Mordecai (not Esther and Ahasuerus) remain the primary focus of the story.
It demonstrates their partnership and loyalty.

Two eunuchs plot to overthrow the king with whom they are angry.
Plot is foiled by Mordecai who reports it to Esther who reports it to Ahasuerus.
Matter is investigated and punishments are meted out.
Mordecai is duly recorded in the royal annals.
But later we will learn that Mordecai is not rewarded for his good deed.
It is negligence on the part of Ahasuerus.

With all the characters in place and the setting prepared, the main narrative begins.

Assignment for January 30

Read Esther 3-5