

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

# ESTHER



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## CHOSEN FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

When the opposition seems unbeatable, does God care? Am I alone in this world, with its suffering, injustice, and pain? Where can I go to resign when life becomes too tough? How can I risk my reputation, comfort, and future to rescue others?

These are questions that come up in the life of Esther.

It's easy to dismiss Queen Esther as a lucky young woman who won the heart of the king. But realistically, she was a woman with a tragic background and dangerous

secret that could cost her life and her family's. She was married to a king who destroyed peoples' lives on a whim and had a history of killing people close to him. Worse still, the king's favorite counselor and chief advisor was a mortal enemy of Esther's family. Esther had to keep a low profile, keeping her secret, hoping he wouldn't make the connection.

For Esther, life was unfair. But her story brings hope to all who face trouble by showing how God works even through the fears and dangers.

CHARACTER	GENEALOGY	ACTIONS IN HISTORY
<b>King Ahasuerus (Xerxes)</b>	Persian king Son of Darius I of the royal Persian line	The king in the Book of Esther Invaded Greece, but later defeated by Greece Assassinated by courtiers
<b>Queen Vashti</b>	Queen of King Xerxes May be Amestris, daughter of Otanes	Loses her position as queen for disobeying the king's orders
<b>Mordecai</b>	Son of Jair of the first royal (line of Kish to King Saul)	Raised his cousin Esther Prevents the assassination of the king Becomes the king's main advisor
<b>Esther</b>	Mordecai's cousin	Lost both of her parents; raised by her cousin. Wins over the king to become queen in a dangerous time Saves the Jewish people from genocide
<b>Haman</b>	King's main advisor Born of the royal line of the Amalekites (line of King Agag) an important detail.	Plots the destruction of all the Jews in the Persian Empire Is hung on the gallows

### THE MISSING CHARACTER

Yet the missing character in the book of Esther is the one who has the largest role: God, conspicuous by his absence, who uses the actions of the human characters to shape all of history.

- God worked through the Persian king's own weaknesses to preserve the Jewish people.

- God worked through the courage of Mordecai and Esther to keep the Jewish people from harm and redeem a family name (1 Samuel 9:1; 15).

- God overturned Haman's evil plans, and fulfilled a 500-year-old prophecy of judgment on the Amalekites (Haman's ancestors) (1 Samuel 15:1-3).

## POMP IN THE PERSIAN PALACE

This story takes place in the Persian royal court in Susa—a world of power where decisions, obsessions, and whims of the people with power in this world affect thousands. The book of Esther presents a childish, whimsical, unpredictable, and dangerous King Xerxes who acts in a drunken stupor, thoughtlessly punishes his own queen, is easily swayed by advisers around him, and is a danger to his people. However, these very qualities generate not only the main crisis in the book, but also its solution.

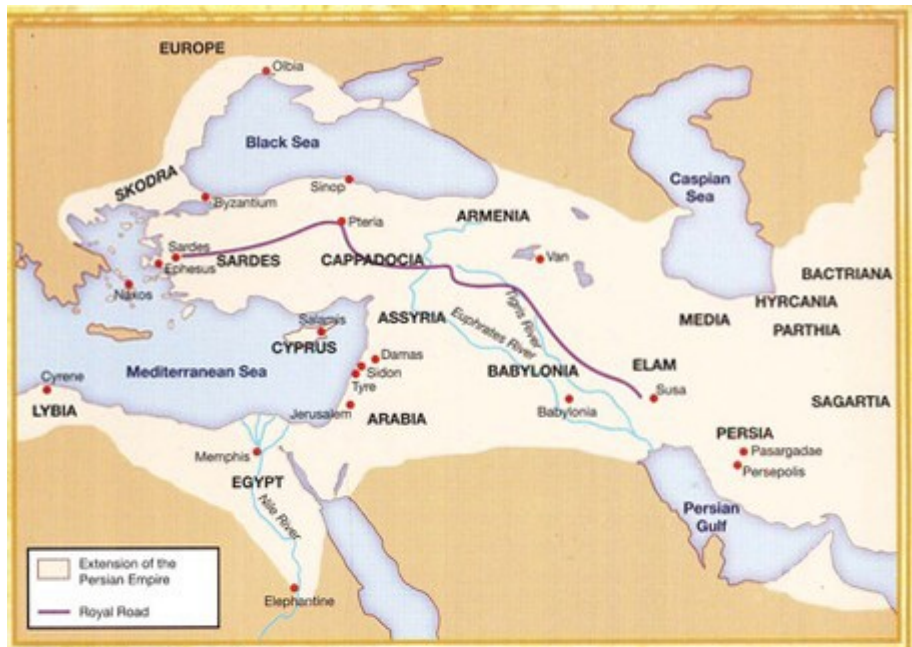
The book opens with Queen Vashti refusing to obey the king who wants to parade his beautiful wife in front of his banquet guests. On the urging of his advisors, the king deposes Vashti, leaving himself without a queen. Vashti's act of defiance sets up a series of events that will include conspiracy, pride, lies, murderous plots, unexpected heroism, and deliverance. A beleaguered, young Jewish woman is placed in a position of power and responsibility. The future of her people, endangered by a vindictive and ancient enemy of God's people, Haman, the Agagite, is in her hands. But, where is God in all of this? Are the Jews in Persia, and in many other places of the ancient world, all alone?

## SUSA

Susa (Shushan in the Old Testament) is an ancient city in Iran today. Some of the oldest written records referenced this city. As Empires appeared and disappeared, Susa became Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Macedonian, Parthian, Roman, and Muslim.

In the 6th century BC, King Cyrus' son, Cambyses II, transferred the capital of the Persian government from Pasargadae to Susa. His son, Darius I (Xerxes' father), extended and improved a road from Susa to Asia Minor in the West and to East to India. This road was known as the "Royal Road." The road was crucial for Imperial communication and commerce. Several centuries later the Royal Road became part of the "Silk Road" that joined the West to India and China.





## PERSIA

Persia became the dominant power of the ancient world in the 6th century BC. Under the leadership of Cyrus the Great, the Persian Empire (also known as the Achaemenid Empire) conquered Babylon in 539 BC. Besides being a brilliant warrior and conqueror, Cyrus was also a great politician. He created a policy to send people previously conquered in Babylonian and Assyrian times back to their homelands.



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The "Cyrus Cylinder" proclaims Cyrus as the legitimate king of Babylon. It also describes how Cyrus won the respect and favor of the Babylonian priests when he restored the temples in Babylon.

The Bible portrays Cyrus as God's instrument to free and restore the Jews to the Promised Land (Ezra 1:1-6, 6:1-5; Isaiah 44:23-45:8; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). Thus, a group of Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and the temple around 515 BC. Other Jews, like Mordecai and Esther, remained in Persia.

The Persians remained in power until 330 BC when Alexander the Great, the Macedonian conqueror, defeated the armies of Darius III and occupied Persepolis, the capital of the Persian Empire.

## KING XERXES (486-465 BC)

- Called Ahasuerus in the Bible
- Known for his war against the Greeks: Despite his famous loss at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC (the basis for the famed Leonidas of Sparta and his 300 warriors), Xerxes led his armies to sack Athens.
- A year later, however, the Greeks expelled the Persian army from the Greek islands to Asia Minor.
- Much of the information about this war comes from the accounts of the historian Herodotus.

## ONE QUEEN, TWO IDENTITIES

After Vashti is stripped of her crown, the king finds a new queen: a young, beautiful woman whose identity seems irrelevant at the time. Her name is Esther. On Mordecai's instructions, Esther hides her Jewish identity and successfully blends into the Persian culture. The king is so pleased with his new queen that he throws a great banquet in her honor and proclaims a holiday throughout all the provinces.

### What's In A Name?

The books of Daniel and Esther both depict life for Jews in exile. They show that Jews in prominent places had both Hebrew and Babylonian names.

HEBREW NAME	MEANING	ALTERNATE NAME	MEANING
Daniel	God is my judge	Belteshazzar	Bel protect his life. (Bel is another name for Marduk.)
Hadassah	Myrtle	Esther	Star
(No Jewish name mentioned)		Mordecai	Related to the Babylonian chief god Marduk

### Why Were the Jews in Persia?

In 722 BC the powerful king of Assyria, Sargon II, conquered and destroyed Samaria. Almost two hundred years later, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered the kingdom of Judah.

From 597 BC through 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar systematically undermined Judah until he destroyed Jerusalem and its temple.

To avoid rebellion and exert complete dominance, both Assyria and Babylonia deported people. By uprooting people from their land and their gods, they were easier to control. Some of the Jews who were taken from their homes during these years went to Persia.

God's presence in the Jerusalem temple was a direct source of assurance and security for the Israelites, God's chosen people. If God was with them and dwelt among them, who could dare challenge them? However, the Babylonians not only conquered them but also destroyed their temple. Because every region had its own local gods, wars were also representations of divine wars. In conquering Judah, the Babylonians could claim that their god, Marduk, was superior to the Jewish God, Yahweh—a tremendous spiritual blow to the Jews (see for example 2 Kings 18:31–35).

Exiled Jews not only lost their homes and their land, but also the certainty of God's presence. In light of this desperation and spiritual grief, the words of the prophet Isaiah echo powerfully: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1).

When King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem about 70 years later, an event Isaiah prophesied as God's own action (Isaiah 44:28–45:13), many who had already begun a new life in exile stayed in Babylon and Persia.

## BEAUTY SECRETS

Everything we know about Esther's personality is derived from her actions and the responses of people around her. The expression "won his favor" (2:9, 15) is a clue to Esther's personality. The common expression is for someone to "find favor" with a king. However, Esther "won" the king's favor, showing Esther as active and purposeful. She is no passive and powerless observer in this story; rather, she shows herself to be daring, intelligent, and strong despite having been orphaned in her youth.

But before Esther won the king's favor, she won the favor of the man in charge of all the virgins. Hegai "quickly" provided Esther with the diet and beauty treatments required, and even advanced her to the best spot in the harem! Clearly, Esther showed pleasing qualities that wore well with those who mattered. But the depth of her ability to choose wisely and to trust worthy advice is shown in her willingness to rely on Hegai's advice as to what to bring with her when it was Esther's turn to go in to the king. And the payoff is big—the king is so pleased that he crowns Esther as his new queen.

In the dangerous atmosphere of the Persian court, where conspiracies were thick and executions routine, Esther's apparent serenity stands out. She "won the favor of everyone who saw her." Her life must have seemed charmed—until the royal shoe dropped.

## INTRIGUE IN THE PERSIAN COURT

Esther's Uncle Mordecai, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, holds a high post at the royal residence. Mordecai overhears two guards plotting to kill the king, which he reports to Queen Esther who exposes the plot. The Bible relays this event without giving it much importance, but it turns out to be crucial in the climax of the story. Not only does the event determine Mordecai's future, it shows the intolerant reaction that the king has to betrayal and deception—he hangs the two guards on gallows.

Because of Mordecai's position of high visibility in the royal residence, Haman, an Amalekite and the king's closest advisor, notices Mordecai. Haman is a vain and conceited man and the mortal enemy of the Jews. Haman determines that everyone should treat him as royalty. However, Mordecai refuses to bow down before him. Haman persuades the king to approve an edict he has written to annihilate all the Jews—men, women, and children—in every province of Persia.

## WHY DID MORDECAI REFUSE TO BOW?

The text does not specify the reasons for Mordecai's refusal.

Possible reasons:

- Mordecai's religious conviction that only God deserves praise, or
- A reflection of the ancient enmity between the Amalekites and Israelites. Mordecai's refusal provides the excuse for Haman's hatred and homicidal plans.

## AN ANCIENT FEUD

The Amalekites were semi-nomadic people, descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:11–12).

They became one of Israel's most bitter enemies.

They made an unexpected attack against Israel at Sinai (Exodus 17:8–16).

King Saul's failure to destroy the Amalekites, especially their King Agag, was one of the main reasons God eventually rejected Saul as king of Israel (1 Samuel 15).

The enmity between the descendants of Agag and Saul, Amalekites and Benjaminites, became an essential part of Esther's story in the Persian court.

Haman was Agag's descendant (Esther 3:1).

Mordecai was a Benjaminite (Esther 2:5).

## COURAGE FOR DANGEROUS TIMES

**Esther:** Orphan, despised minority, exiled captive, beauty queen, trophy wife. Yet what defined Esther and gave her a place in history was the faithfulness and courage of her character, as shown in action. What lessons might we search out from her elegant story?

Esther was faithful and courageous in dangerous times.

*Think of the last time you felt afraid. What did you do in response to your fear?*

*Why do you think God allows us to feel afraid and face danger?*

Power is a noticeable theme in the book of Esther.

*How have you seen people use and abuse their power?*

*What kinds of power do you have in your life?*

*What can you do to make sure you are using power wisely and not harmfully?*

The book of Esther contains many reversals of fortune and power.

*What reversals have you experienced in your own life?*

*In what ways was God working through those changes?*

*What do the reversals in the book of Esther teach us about hope?*

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