

Esther: A Chapter by Chapter Study

Introduction

In chronological order, only three books come after the events in the book of Esther: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi. There is no definitive author or date given to Esther, but the primary belief is that the author is Mordecai, the uncle of Esther. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are possible authors based solely on writing styles.

The possible given dates of writing range from 460 B.C. as the Jewish festival of Purim is already being observed and Xerxes has already died to as late as 330 B.C, although most scholars agree that an earlier date is most likely. The events in the book of Esther are believed to have taken place from 483 BC to 472 BC. There are some dates mentioned in the book (2:16, 3:7) to lend credence to the dates of these events.

The primary purpose of this book is to recount the events that led to the Jewish holiday of Purim, or the Festival of Lots. Purim is celebrated on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar. The Jews are no longer captives of Persia as Cyrus has allowed them to return to Jerusalem, but most of the Jews have made a life in Persia and opt to stay. This group of Jews is referred to as the “diaspora” or “scattered exiles”.

King Xerxes, or Ahasuerus as some translations call him, is the fourth ruler of Persia after Cyrus the Great defeated Babylon. Note that both Esther and Ezra refer to Xerxes as Ahasuerus. Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius all preceded him. Darius is the father of Xerxes. It is said by some historians that Xerxes loved his drink and his women. The events of Esther coincide with the Persian defeat in the Battle of Salamis and takes place during the famous Battle of Thermopylae, which is the basis for the movie “300”. This defeat may have been the reason for Xerxes to search for a bride in chapter 2 as his cabinet members sought to cheer him up.

Chapter 1

The date for chapter 1 is given as 483 BC. It is believed that the celebrations taking place are in honor of a military victory of some sort.

V1-9

This opening sets the stage for the mood in Persia. Xerxes throws a 180-day celebration for all of the government officials. The second feast was a weeklong festival for the entire kingdom. And still, a corresponding feast for the women held by the queen.

V10-22

Why would Vashti refuse to come before the king?

Xerxes has been partying for 6 months. Jewish tradition maintains that Xerxes was in a drunken argument with some of his cabinet members over who had the most beautiful woman. With a lack of sober judgement Xerxes orders his queen to be put on public display. Although not recorded in the Bible, Jewish tradition and even some verbiage used in the original Hebrew imply that Vashti was to appear before the king and his court wearing nothing but her crown.

Vashti refuses to appear. There are different opinions as to the reason why. Some hold that Vashti did not want to appear naked before the court. Others contend that she would have no problem appearing in public in such a fashion but that she had some form of skin ailment or, another Jewish tradition says she was struck with leprosy.

The king then drunkenly consults with his official cabinet on what to do. To avoid any precedent which might result in a female uprising or dissent against husbands, it is determined that the queen must be relieved of her position.

Chapter 2

The date in verse 16 indicates that as much as five years may have passed between chapters 1 and 2 and places the events of this chapter in 478 BC. Xerxes is defeated at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC.

V1-7

In order to replace Vashti, a beauty pageant is held. It is here that we are introduced to Esther who is described not only as an orphan, but as a beautiful young woman, the “fairest of them all” so to speak.

V8-16

This is a beauty pageant of the most beautiful women in Persia. For Esther to stand out says a great deal about her looks. But considering Hegai is the king’s eunuch in charge of the royal harem, it is believed that Esther also had a winning personality. The preference shown to her by Hegai works in her favor for becoming queen.

What was the fate of those that didn’t become queen?

In verse 14 it states that those women who were not chosen were to go to the second harem and would not see the king again unless called by name. This essentially means that the king got to take the virginity of all these women and those who weren’t chosen were to be prisoners of royalty, never to marry another.

V17-20

Esther becomes queen but is still silent as to her heritage.

What does the phrase “sat within the king’s gate” mean?

This indicates that Mordecai was in some way on staff at the palace, probably with some influence over the city in some capacity.

How would Mordecai have a position of authority in the Persian kingdom?

The Jews are no longer slaves. As such, they were free to make a living and seek positions of employment even in the palace. These Jews are the “diaspora” which remained in Persia as a free people. This would have been true for Ezra and Nehemiah in later years, as well.

V21-23

While Mordecai is doing his official duties in the palace, he catches wind of an assassination plot and it is thwarted. Xerxes would later die by assassination at the hands of Artabanus, the commander of the royal bodyguard which is not recorded in this book.

Chapter 3

The events in this chapter take place around 474 BC over the course of several months, adding another 4 years to the book of Esther.

V1-7

A man named Haman is rising in the ranks of the Persian empire to the point of having the king's ear.

Why would Mordecai not bow or pay homage to Haman?

Note that verses 2-3 do not give the reason as to why Mordecai would not honor Haman but there are many possibilities. Maybe Mordecai has some personal grudge against Haman. Maybe Mordecai knew of some evil that Haman did to get to his position of power. Most scholars believe simply that it was because Haman was an Amalekite who were ancient enemies of the Jews.

In verses 4-6, many historians find a common personality trait in Haman: insecurity. Haman was immensely proud and would only be satisfied if everyone honored him. Because one person would not bow to him, his insecurities grew, and his pride suffered.

What is 'Pur' in verse 7?

Some early translations refer to 'Pur', but most translations confirm that 'Pur' is a Persian form of rolling dice or some other game of chance. What is happening here is that Haman is leaving it up to 'fate' as to when the Jews will be destroyed by his hand. Note that this takes place during the first month and that 'fate' decides to wait until the twelfth month. This gives God and the Jews almost 11 months to thwart this plan.

V8-15

Haman tells the king of a 'threat' to his kingdom and offers a solution. What Haman doesn't tell the king is the number of people this will affect, nor that the laws of the people involved in this threat have no ill consequences in the Persian kingdom, nor even that this people are the Jews.

The king's decree is made public and well in advance of the coming extermination. The citizens of Shushan are confused as to why this decree is in place because the Jews have settled in Persia and have been good citizens and neighbors for decades at this point. No one understood why the king would want to do away with them. The Jews now lived under a shadow of death.

Chapter 4

V1-3

Mordecai and his fellow Jews are shocked at this new development. They have lived peacefully among the Persians for three or four generations. This would be a complete surprise to them. What have they done? Why are they being persecuted again? What does it mean? What had happened was they had integrated so completely into the Persian culture that they forgot who they were. They had become worldly instead of Godly. They had traded God for comfort among their captors. God needed them to wake up and this was the fire that would reignite the Jews. They mourn in the traditional Jewish way with ashes and sackcloth, a small sign that they were looking to their origins.

V4-12

Esther is living in the palace but that does not mean she is informed of all the politics of the palace. In fact, she hasn't seen her king in a month! She has no idea what has happened until informed by Mordecai. He has a copy of the edict sent to her and this is the first she has heard of it. Not only does Mordecai inform her of this decree, but he asks Esther to speak to the king about it. Esther is understandably hesitant as coming before the king uninvited carries a penalty of death.

Why is Esther hesitant even as the Queen of Persia?

Although Esther is queen, this is more of a title and does not carry much weight as far as policies or laws go. This simply means that she is the preferred woman of the king. She is little more than a favored slave in the palace.

V13-17

Mordecai informs Esther that this is bigger than either one of them. He provides one of the most famous quotes and edicts of faith in all the Bible in verse 14.

What are the implications of the phrase, "...who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" in verse 14?

This verse can apply to so many situations, not just in the Bible but in every believer's life. We do not know what God has in store. Esther didn't know she would be chosen as queen, Jonah didn't know he was going to be swallowed by a whale, Moses didn't know he was going to lead the Jews out of Egypt...yet God used each of them in the situation they were in for His purposes and glory. Having faith in God often means doing something which we are afraid of or even afraid that we might be killed over. Knowing that regardless the outcome that God will be served is the reason for faith. God doesn't ask us to be comfortable. God asks us to trust Him that eternal life waits for us.

Esther agrees to go before the king and asks Mordecai and all of the Jews to support her with prayer and fasting.

Chapter 5

V1-8

Esther is strategic in her coming before the king unannounced. She waits a few days for the opportune moment, and she dresses as a queen fit to be seen by her king. As shown in previous chapters, Xerxes is not known for his congeniality to his women, even his queen. Not only does he welcome her into his palace, but he is cordial and offers to fulfill whatever request she desires. This speaks even more to the character of Esther that she is capable of swaying a person of Xerxes temperament. Her strategy doesn't just involve Xerxes, but also Haman as she seeks to expose him for who he truly is.

Why two banquets? Why not just express her desires at the first banquet or even at the moment Xerxes offers her half his kingdom?

There is no defined explanation in the chapter, but this most likely comes back to the strategy of Esther. She is playing coy and trying to win her king over by being enticing and possibly even slightly mysterious. She wants his full attention and his willingness to fulfill her request.

V9-14

Haman's insecurity is on full display at this point. He has the king's ear, he has been invited to a banquet by the queen as one of only two guests with the king being the other attendee, and he has wealth and power. Yet one man can bring him to vile anger. He expresses his despair to his wife and friends, and they appeal to his vanity by suggesting a gruesome death for the offender.

What form of death does the term 'gallows' suggest?

Although the word 'gallows' is usually associated with hanging by the neck until dead, in ancient Persia it had a different meaning. Hanging from the gallows in this time period refers to a form of grisly execution. A sharp pike, probably not much larger in diameter than a throwing spear at the tip would be fashioned as the tool from which the victim would hang. In this case, the pike would be 50 cubits high, or about 75 feet. The sharp end would be at the top. Most pikes widened from a point on one end to small-tree-trunk size on the other. The victim would be placed lying face down on a table with his hands tied behind his back and his legs tied in an open, spread-apart position. The pike would then be thrust into his body through the rectum and run through him following the spine, carefully and intently not damaging any vital organs, until it came out the top of his torso, preferably near the neck or even out the mouth. The pike would then be stood upright. The victim would be hung on this pike in excruciating pain, slowly sliding down the pike as the entry wound widened, until he died. If done right, death would not come for days.

Chapter 6

V1-9

Earlier in the book of Esther it is shown that God has eleven months to thwart an evil plan. Here, God resolves an issue overnight. Xerxes may be a king, but he's still human and subject to human ailments. Insomnia grips him and he does what many people in that situation do. He tries to find something dull and boring to read. As it happens, this boring book is a list of records from the palace and it mentions the events in chapter 2 where Mordecai informs the king of an assassination plot. Several years have passed between chapters 2 and 6 and the king realizes nothing was done to reward this man who saved his life. First thing in the morning, the king seeks to rectify this oversight and the first person he lays eyes on to accomplish such a task is Haman who is seeking to consult the king about Mordecai's execution.

The king consults Haman on how to honor an individual, but he's very vague in who the request is for. Haman, believing he is the recipient of the king's honor, is lavish with praise and accolades in what he thinks is his own reward. Another hint of Haman's insecurity is that this reward did not consist of monetary prizes, just praise from the people.

V10-14

Haman is not only shocked but devastated when he learns that the king desires to honor the very man that he came to seek permission to execute! Instead of receiving the great honor that he himself had desired it would be given to his rival and he would be the implementor of this accolade. These events give an insightful glimpse into the great sense of humor and irony of God.

What does it mean in verse 13 when Haman's friends and wife say that he will not prevail against Mordecai the Jew?

There is no clear description defining this statement. There are several possibilities. One, the Amalekites had fallen to the Jews before, so history was on the side of God. Another possibility is that this is an embellishment on the part of the author for the sake of the Jews reading it. However, this is unlikely as the leading candidates for authorship, Mordecai and Ezra, are both scribes and would not take their jobs lightly as to add exaggerations. This is evident throughout the book of Ezra as most recounts try to remain factual. It is likely that this private conversation was relayed to the author from associates of Haman after the fact.

Chapter 7

V1-6

Esther remains tactful at the second banquet with her guests.

- She gives them wine which will lower their logic and make them more emotionally charged.
- She remains humble and submissive.
- She appeals to her favor with the king by revealing her life is in danger without revealing that she is a Jew first.
- She makes it personal for the king by having him realize that he's being insulted by a threat to the queen.

V7-10

The king immediately goes off to fetch his guards to deal with Haman. Meanwhile, Haman realizes the turn of events and is pleading to the queen for his life.

What does it mean 'Haman had fallen across the couch where Esther was?'

This is another vague statement without much explanation. The leading possibilities are that Haman fell before the queen begging for his life. Another possibility is that Haman was intoxicated enough at this point that he staggered and fell. There is one Jewish writing that states that the angel Gabriel pushed Haman, so he fell on the couch just as the king was returning with his guards.

Haman's fate is sealed. One commentator made a play on words with this statement: "Haman found his end on the same instrument he had intended for the death of Mordecai."

Chapter 8

Although the first three chapters of the book of Esther are spread out over several years, chapters 4-8 are within days of each other.

V1-2

With Haman gone, there was a position in the king's palace that needed to be filled. Esther was the recipient of all of Haman's belongings and Mordecai was given the rank that Haman held.

V3-6

The immediate threat of Haman was gone, but the edict that he put in place was still in effect. Esther implores the king to rescind the order, but this form of royal proclamation was not meant to be overturned so now there is a dilemma.

V7-14

The king knows that his previous decree cannot be overturned, but he allows Mordecai, using the same authority that Haman once had, to offer a counter decree. The Jews may take up arms and defend themselves against those who would do them harm and the Jews would have the support of the king.

One commentator made a comparison between these two decrees and our relationship with God. One decree states that God cannot be around sin and that the wages of sin is death. How does this decree get overturned? The answer is it doesn't. There is a counter-decree in which we have the support of our God and He will bear the burden for us.

V15-17

With Mordecai being raised as a high-ranking officer in the kingdom the Jews have a sense of relief that is felt through all of Persia to the point that many Persians seek to know God better.

Chapter 9

V1-17

On the day of the execution of the two edicts there were still enemies of the Jews who rose to try and defeat them, but it ended in disaster for them. The Jews were able to defend themselves in splendor with the support of the palace and Mordecai. In the capitol, 500 men were killed including the 10 sons of Haman.

When the king heard the news of the local uprising, he asked Esther if there was more he could do. At her suggestion, the rest of the kingdom rose up against the enemies of the Jews and 75000 were killed.

The sons of Haman were hung on the gallows like their father fulfilling the command given to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:2-3. It is not clear if the sons were taken alive and then hung on the gallows or if they were killed and their corpses hung for display, but they were killed in the end.

V18-32

The closing of this chapter explains the establishing of the feast of Purim. It is named after Pur, the casting of lots. It is celebrated over two days, one day for the celebration in the capitol city and one for the outlying regions. Its purpose is to remind the Jews of Haman, Mordecai and Esther and the God that saved the Jews yet again.

Chapter 10

V1-3

These last verses are separated on their own for some reason, yet they are a nice closing to the previous chapter. Mordecai is raised to the right hand of the king and controls Persia with that authority. This would give Mordecai the same authority that Daniel held in Babylon. Although it is not mentioned, it is likely that Mordecai had a great influence over Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes that would inherit the throne. This would allow the events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to occur with great ease.

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