

Esther 1 – 2

The Prelude

A. Who was Xerxes?

Nearly all the events described in the book of *Esther* took place in the palace of the king of Persia. In particular, *Esther* deals with the acts of King Xerxes - third king after Cyrus - and those who closely surround him in his court. The following table lists the various kings of Persia, including the years of their rule. (The dates are BC - before Christ.)

539 – 529	Cyrus
529 – 522	Cambyses
521 – 485	Darius (Hystapes) (Ezra 4:24)
485 – 465	Xerxes (Ahasuerus in RSV) (Ezra 4:6)
465 – 424	Artaxerxes I (Ezra 4:7,8,11,23; 6:14; 7:1,7,11,12,21; 8:1; Nehemiah 2:1; 5:14; 13:6)

To understand the life and times of Xerxes, it is worthwhile to pay some attention to Cyrus, the first of the kings of the Persian Empire, and subsequent events leading up to the reign of Xerxes.

The Lord assigned a task to Cyrus of which he was not aware. Isaiah mentions this in 41:1-7,25ff; 43:14; 44:28; 45:1ff,13; 46:11; 48:14-16. Nebuchadnezzar, conqueror of the world and founder of the Babylonian empire had been the rod in God's hand to punish his disobedient people. Driven from the land of Canaan, Israel was forced into exile for seventy years. However, the Babylonian empire would come to an end. According to God's plan, Cyrus had to (a) destroy Babylon's supremacy, (b) found the Persian world empire, and (c) allow Israel to return to Canaan. Because of this task, Isaiah called Cyrus "God's servant and anointed one". There were three phases in this task: the return of the people, the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Ezra 1:2-4), and the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem (Isaiah 45:13).

Isaiah's prophecy about Cyrus had a prophetic perspective. Isaiah portrayed Cyrus' role in history as that of a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and as such, a defender of the church. However, Isaiah's prophesy regarding the task of Cyrus remained unfulfilled after the death of Cyrus. His successors, including Xerxes, whom Isaiah did not even mention, ultimately fulfilled the prophesy, several centuries before the birth of Christ.

In contrast to Isaiah, Ezra and Nehemiah describe the history of the return from exile without this prophetic perspective. They illustrate the roles played by specific rulers, rather than the broader perspective spoken of by Isaiah. Darius was involved with the completion of the temple (Ezra 5,6; Haggai 1:1ff; 2:10ff,21ff.) while Artaxerxes was engaged in the completion of Jerusalem's restoration, namely, the rebuilding of the walls (Nehemiah 2:1ff; 3; 4; 6; 7:1; 12:27ff).

Cyrus, who let the Jewish captives go, "but not for a price or reward" (Isaiah 45:13), did receive the promise of a reward from the Lord. Jahweh promised to Cyrus that he would "give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead" (Isaiah 43:3). Egypt and Cush

were not conquered by Cyrus during his reign, but by his successor Cambyses (see list of dates and rulers).

Looking at a map of the Near East of this historical period shows that the Persian Empire had enormous dimensions. Even "India" was part of this empire, forming the easternmost boundary. India refers here to the land where the Indus (literally "the river") flows to the ocean through many channels. Of more importance to the empire was the south-west boundary with "Ethiopia". This does not refer to the land of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia), but to a part of the Nile valley that stretches from Syene (now called Assuan) southward. In the Bible this land was called Cush - presently the name of this region is Nubia, a part of the Sudan.

With a better understanding of the background to Xerxes' reign, it can be seen that Xerxes is included in this prophetic task of Cyrus. He ultimately receives Cyrus' reward for the liberation of Israel from exile, since he "reigned from India to Ethiopia" (Esther 1:1 RSV). Xerxes, the third successor of Cyrus, was king over "Ethiopia" as a borderland, and consequently also over Egypt and Seba. (The exact location of Seba is not known, but Seba was one of the sons of Cush according to Genesis 10:7 and 1 Chronicles 1:9.) It was Xerxes then that finally possessed this ransom for Israel's liberation, by God's providence. Thus, he owed the glory of his empire to God's love for his own people. Israel's freedom was the foundation of Xerxes' greatness. God had paid the ransom for his people.

B. The Crowning Festivities at Susa

With Xerxes' role in the history of salvation in mind, the first important event of Esther 1 can be examined. This event is the assumption of the throne at Susa, the capital of the empire. The phrase "King Xerxes reigned from his throne in the citadel of Susa" (1:2) could also be translated as "he *sat down* on his throne", referring to the time when he acceded to the throne. This expression has this meaning more often, both in Akkadian, the Babylonian language, and elsewhere in the Bible (1 Kings 2:12; 2 Kings 11:19; Jeremiah 22:4).

In itself, the fact that the king sat on his throne is not exceptional. As the text gives no other reason for these exceptional festivities, the latter translation is preferred as it makes the organizing of enormous festivities believable.

Some commentators look for another explanation, such as the campaign against Greece, for which Xerxes was likely preparing around this time. Intensive preparations were being made and it is quite possible that the cities of this campaign were indeed a point of discussion during the celebrations. But the text does not say one word about an expedition to Greece.

Therefore it is best to focus on Esther 1, which suggests accession to the throne, and to consider the festivities that are mentioned to be 'crowning festivities'. The fact that this ceremonial accession to the throne in the residential city of Susa took place in the third year of Xerxes' reign does not conflict with this interpretation. After all, nobody thought it strange that Queen Elizabeth was not crowned in the first year of her reign. Furthermore, in the east, it was necessary to fight before one could officially accede to a throne vacated

by a predecessor. It is known that Xerxes had to suppress uprisings in Egypt and in Babylonia in the beginning of his reign. Thus when he officially sat down on the throne in Susa, it was an indication that order had been restored in his domain.

The reality of governing in those days is also important to this narrative. The ancient orient, with its absolute monarchies, cannot be compared to the western world. In ancient times, to 'sit down on the throne' referred to the time a monarch began to govern. When Joash sat down on the throne (2 Kings 11:19), he commenced his royal government and took up his function. When God invited the priest-king of the future (the son of David, the Lord Jesus) to sit down at his right hand (Psalm 110:1), this meant that he would "rule" (Psalm 110:2). Christ now sits at God's right hand, which means that the Father governs all things through him (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19). Therefore, Esther 1 and the following chapters describe Xerxes' acts of government. This theme continues throughout the book of *Esther*.

C. Offended Majesty

In a crowning ceremony, it is fitting to host a festive dinner for the pillars of the empire (1:3): the civil authorities and the military leaders. The extravagant and lengthy display of royal majesty (1:4) and the meal for the inhabitants of the city and citadel of Susa (1:5ff.) bear witness to royal generosity. This is illustrated by phrases such as "in keeping with the king's liberality (1:7) and "royal wine" (1:7), as well as by the vast riches described (1:6-8).

The climax was to be the display of the queen's beauty (1:11). This was a whim of the king while he was under the influence of alcohol (1:10). It was not appropriate for Xerxes to display his wife as a crown jewel, an object. This would offend her honour and she would no longer be his "wife" alone, even though she was only a harem woman. Vashti refused, and this publicly offended the king. It was she who openly resisted Xerxes' will, while everybody else bowed and paid respect to his majesty. The final act and the climax of this display of royal glory fell to the ground.

What were Vashti's motives? One commentator suggests that Vashti's "sense of dignity was suddenly aroused." However, would this characteristic really be so strongly developed in someone who was probably a harem girl? Another suggestion is that Vashti was also "under the influence" after seven days of partying, and refused in arrogance. It is important that we not speculate about her motives where scripture is silent. However, Vashti should also not be imagined to be an 'angel of prudence'.

Steps were immediately taken to avenge the offended honour of the king. Xerxes felt that his office had been held in contempt. Therefore he asked advice of senior government officials, "experts in matters of law and justice... wise men who understood the times" (1:13), who "had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom" (1:14). This was a matter that pertained to the government and state.

The advisors understood the king's intent. Vashti's refusal to appear before a half-drunk king was 'interpreted' by them as the signal for a revolution in marriage and family life (1:16-18). Xerxes' thirst for revenge could be perfectly disguised as concern for the well-being of the entire nation. The role of 'father of the fatherland' was prepared for him. The

advisors helped portray him as a king with real social concern, standing on guard for domestic peace (1:21, 22).

As a logical result, Vashti was demoted in this atmosphere of 'caring for familial welfare' (1:19). However, the counselors appeared to know very well that they were building a beautiful facade for a crumbling building. The next day, the whimsical monarch might well regret the loss of Vashti. Would 'their seven highnesses' be blamed and eliminated next? Therefore, it was necessary to have Vashti's dismissal - which, after all, the king himself wished to see as a state affair! - made irrevocable by confirming it "in the laws of Persia and Media" (1:19). These laws, once proclaimed, were binding even for the king.

What an accumulation of sin and diplomacy! It was to this king that God's people had been surrendered, since the throne in Jerusalem remained vacant. Was Xerxes really the "servant" of the Lord in the lineage of Cyrus? Indeed he was. But The Servant of the Lord, the great son of David, was yet to come. In his kingdom he truly reformed life (Ephesians 5, 6).

D. The Vacancy Left by Vashti and Filled by Esther (2:1-18)

When the king again remembered the Vashti affair, the courtiers suggested that a new selection of harem women be brought together. Civil servants were appointed for this purpose (2:3). This was far from the care for familial welfare mentioned above! A young Jewish girl, Hadassah, was selected to become the king's favourite instead of Vashti (2:17,18). She received the name Esther, a new name for new surroundings. This young virgin (2:2) lived in the same sphere as that of her guardian and cousin, Mordecai: the sphere of the forsaken covenant.

Via father, grandfather and great-grandfather, Mordecai appeared to belong to Benjamin, one of the twelve tribes of God's people. In the time of Kish, his great-grandfather, the judgment of exile had come over the kingdom of Judah. Kish was taken along with the first deportation under Jehoiachin (2:6; 2 Chronicles 36:9,10). At this time the favour of the Lord was lost. He no longer allowed his people to live with him in his courts, as he had. For seventy years, it could no longer be said: "Your procession has come into view, O God... into the sanctuary.... There is the little tribe of Benjamin..." (Psalm 68:24,27). However, through Cyrus (539-529 B.C.), God gave them an opportunity to return after seventy years. (Deportation under Jehoiachin occurred in 597 B.C., and Cyrus' decision was in 539 B.C. See 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.)

Relatively few people made use of the opportunity to return to the Promised Land. Of those that went, the greatest number used the cheapest means of transportation: 6,720 people traveled on donkeys (Ezra 2:67). Today we would say that there were very few people among them with 'expensive vehicles'. Many had made a good living in exile and were unwilling to leave this behind for an emigration to Canaan, where a difficult pioneering task awaited them. To these, the favour of the Lord was not more excellent than the choicest meats. So it was also with the family of Mordecai and Esther, who had happily spent another 61 years far away from Jerusalem. (Cyrus' decision was in 539 B.C., and it was now the seventh year of Xerxes, thus the year 478 B.C.; this comes to approximately 61 years later.)

The family had evidently adapted to their surroundings. Just as immigrants to Canada

often change their birth name to something that sounds more Canadian, Mordecai was named after Marduk, the city god of Babel, who was still honoured under the reign of Cyrus. Literally, Mordecai means 'worshiper of Marduk' (cf. Jeremiah 50:2).

Mordecai did not dwell among the poor, labouring people of Jerusalem, but lived as an influential man in the king's city. He was a profiteer who chose to remain where he could enjoy the good things of life, and who shunned the tiresome work of building God's church: Jerusalem!

In this atmosphere, a young cousin in the king's palace would be an excellent connection for career-building. Thus, Mordecai offered no trace of prophetic opposition to the mixed 'marriage' of Esther and Xerxes (cf. Ezra 9).

In fact, Mordecai even directed Esther not to make known her "nationality and family background" (2:10, an instruction she obeyed. Thus there was no difficulty with respect to unclean food (2:9) in contrast with Daniel's situation. There was no evidence of a struggle to retain a Godly, covenantal lifestyle. Like the chameleon, which adapts its colour to its surroundings, 'accommodation' was the motto of Esther and Mordecai.

Esther was directed to hide her family background (2:10), which means that the people did not know of her relationship with Mordecai. In this way, Mordecai dug a hidden tunnel to political influence and power.

E. Mordecai's Name in the Chronicles of the Empire (2:19-23)

Esther's success, however, was like a wormy apple. She had become the queen and wife of a man who had never been satisfied with only one woman (2:19). Nevertheless, her position did provide her cousin Mordecai with wonderful opportunities for advancement. But her position was completely dependent upon Xerxes. If Esther ever lost the king's favour as Vashti had, her influence would be over.

There was also another danger. If Xerxes died, Esther's fate would be sealed as well. The wives of deceased kings were usually ignored by his successor. They would probably be kept, but would likely be 'put into storage' somewhere in the residential complex, like a museum artifact. Their influence and honour would be a thing of the past.

Clearly then the conspiracy of Bigthana and Teresh (2:21) endangered the success of Esther and Mordecai. As "king's officers who guarded the doorway" (2:21), Bigthana and Teresh held an influential position (Psalm 84:11). Similarly, the doorkeepers at the temple in Jerusalem held an important office as they guarded the entrance to the temple. As influential Israelites, the doorkeepers were killed during the siege in the time of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 52:24-27). (A New Testament parallel are those who 'fence' the Lord's Supper table, or who exercise church discipline.)

Thus, Bigthana and Teresh were men who controlled access to the king. A conspiracy among these men, whose duty it was to protect the king, was a critical thing. Who would be able to stop it? Mordecai discovered the plans and acted as an informer, as a result of his hidden contact with Esther. It was a silent race between the embittered guards and the crafty man, Mordecai. The affair was investigated on time, and the conspirators were killed. At this point, Mordecai's name was mentioned. Xerxes had to know who his friend,

the protector of his crown, was. Would this cause the sun of Mordecai's 'good fortune' to rise higher? In any case, his acts were written down in the presence of the king, in the chronicles of the Persian empire (2:23).

F. The Opening Moves

In looking back on the first two chapters of *Esther*, we must try to follow the thread of God's revelation. The book *Esther* describes how God saved his church in the days of Xerxes.

One could compare this story with a chess game between God and Satan, played on the board of a combined history of the world and the church. Chapters 1 and 2 show the opening moves. At stake in this 'game' is the kingship of Xerxes: would he remain, according to God's providence, the defender of the church? His arbitrary acts of foolishness in the first chapter do not seem to offer much hope for this. Did the holy seed of God's covenant - Mordecai and Esther - then give reason for hope? No. Instead, they broke through the holy isolation demanded by God and tried to find their way in the intrigues of the court, as seen in chapter two. They were filled with vain ambition, and made a successful beginning: Esther as queen and Mordecai as a 'worthy man'. Yet, God would use them as pawns on his chessboard in the following chapters. Therefore, Vashti had to leave, and Esther had to fill the vacancy left by Vashti. God protected his pawn, Esther, when the conspiracy brought her position into danger. Esther stayed in the royal palace and Mordecai's action was written down in the chronicles of the state. God placed his pawns in the proper formation, until the time would come for the next move. This can be seen most clearly with Mordecai, since his name was written down ... and forgotten, until the day that God would use Mordecai and exalt him (6:1ff.).

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