

ESTHER

ESTHER 1-7 — THE JEWS IMPERILLED

The events of this book belong chronologically after Zerubbabel's company have gone to Jerusalem, and before the commissions of Ezra and Nehemiah. The scene is laid in Persia. Cyrus and Darius 1 have passed away, and Ahasuerus, son of the last named, and identified by some with Xerxes, and by others with Darius Hystaspes, is on the throne. He is a sensual, fickle, cruel despot. It was his great fleet that was defeated by the much smaller one of Greece at Salamis, about 480 B.c. He is mentioned in ^{<5016>}Ezra 4:6. He was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes, who figures in the later chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The story of the book is well known, and may be divided as follows:

Queen Vashti's Fall (1:1-22)

Esther's Exaltation (2:1-23)

Haman's Conspiracy (3:1-15)

Esther's Intervention (4:1-7:10)

Haman's Judgment (8:1-9:19)

The Commemorative Feast (9:20-32)

The Epilog (10:1-3)

QUEEN VASHTI'S FALL (1:1-22)

Some think this feast (v. 3) was the occasion when the great campaign against Greece was determined upon. If a half-year seems long (v. 4), perhaps the time was extended to allow the different nobles and princes to "make their appearance at the court successively." The climax was the "garden party" of a week (vv. 5-7), although it should be understood that only men were present (v. 9). Verse eight seems to mean that in contrast with the customary excessive drinking, any were free to remain sober if they would. "Knew the times" (v. 13) is equivalent to "skilled in the law."

ESTHER EXALTED (2:1-23)

When sober, the king rued his action (v. 1), but had he changed his mind and restored Vashti, the consequences would have been serious to his advisers, hence their present counsel (vv. 2-4). "Things for purification" (v. 3)

mean the oils for cleansing and anointing (v. 12). "She required nothing," etc. (v. 15), points to a desire of the virgins on similar occasions to bedeck themselves with ornaments, but Esther acted differently on the chamberlains advice, and with good results (v. 17). Note the expiration of four years between 1:3 and 2:7, which some think was occupied by the expedition against Greece, and for which secular history gives some justification. The incident of verses 21-23, is recorded here to explain that which follows later.

HAMAN'S CONSPIRACY (3:1-15)

The casting of the lot (Hebrew, put, v. 7), was for selecting the most propitious day for the murderous undertaking Haman had in mind. While in western nations such an idea as in verses six and nine would never occur to a revengeful man, it was different in the East. Massacres of a race, or a class, have at all times been among the incidents of history there. A great massacre of the Magi occurred only about fifty years before this, and a massacre of the Scythians fifty years before that again. The ten thousand talents (v. 9), or as some calculate it \$12,500,000 of our money, was to be obtained by the confiscation of the Jews' property.

ESTHER'S INTERVENTION (4:1-7:10)

It would appear by a comparison of verses 12 and 13 of the preceding chapter, that the Jews were for a whole year harassed because of their impending fate. This explains the opening verses of the present chapter (4:1-3). Observe Mordecai's reliance on the promises of God concerning Israel (v. 14). They can not all be destroyed. God would not permit it, for it would defeat His purpose concerning the Messiah, the Redeemer of the world, and all else that was included in that purpose. Esther's request to fast is a call to repentance and a request for prayer (compare ^{<127>}1 Kings 21:27-29; ^{<2014>}Joel 1:14; and ^{<3386>}Jonah 3:5). Her boldness is seen in the following: She proposed to go to the king without being called; to make request for the change of a law which, according to Persian custom, could

not be done; to reveal herself as a Jew; and to place herself in opposition to the all-powerful favorite, Haman.

The usual situation of the throne in the throne-room of an oriental palace is one from which the monarch can see into the court through the doorway opposite to him (v. 1). Esther's tactful delay in making known her request (vv. 7-8), was doubtless to further impress the king, or possibly to evolve her plan, which may not yet have been clear in her own mind.

God's hand is seen clearly in 6:1 (compare with 2:23). The dramatic incidents of the chapter tell their own story as they swiftly pass before us. In 7:3, Esther's words are to be understood as offering her own life in the place of the people. The loss of the people would be a great damage to the king (v. 4). In the East at banquets they recline on couches (v. 8).

QUESTIONS

1. What chronological place is occupied by this book?
2. Give some historical data of the king.
3. What great historical event may have intervened between the fall of the one queen and the exaltation of the other?
4. What does *pur* mean?
5. Name some great massacres of this general period.
6. What shows Mordecai's faith?
7. What shows Esther's courage?
8. Give an illustration of the special providence of God in this lesson.

ESTHER 8-10 — DELIVERANCE COMES

THE KING'S DECREE (CHAP. 8)

The "house" of Haman meant his possessions (8:1). His death, however, and Mordecai's distinction did not mean that the decree against the Jews had been annulled, which, indeed, could not be annulled, according to Persian law. This is the problem, now before Esther and Mordecai (vv. 3-5), and which the king solves by granting permission to the Jews to arm themselves against their executioners (vv. 8-11).

The effect of this measure on the Jews was what might have been expected (vv. 15-17). The meaning of the last sentence of the chapter is illuminated by ^{<02516>}Exodus 15:16 and ^{<6125>}Deuteronomy 11:25. The Persians felt that the God of the Jews was ruling over their destiny in a peculiar way.

THE HEATHEN MASSACRE (9:1-15)

The first part of this chapter records the successful stand made by the Jews against those who ventured to oppose them, and demonstrates that the God of their fathers was still their God. It reads like a chapter in Judges or Kings.

Rawlinson calls attention to the importance of verse three as bearing on verse 16. That the Jews should have been allowed to slay 75,000 Persians has been pronounced incredible, but it is not so when we see that the leaders of the nation took their side. The probability is, however, that the slain were people of other, subject nations the Persians did not particularly care for.

How does verse 10 show that the Jews' motive was not avarice but self-defense? The king's inquiry and Esther's reply (vv. 12-13) indicate that danger still threatened the Jews in Shushan at least, unless further measures were taken. Haman's sons were to be hanged after death. "Hanged" here really means "crucified," which was the Hebrew and Persian custom.

THE FEAST OF PURIM (9:16-32)

It seems that the Jews outside of Shushan celebrated on the fourteenth of Adar, but those within could not do so for obvious reasons until the fifteenth. This gave rise to different memorial days until Mordecai settled the matter as in verse 21. The whole writing of Mordecai here spoken of (vv. 20-25), may have included the substance of the book we are considering. Nevertheless a second document by Esther herself seems to have been necessary to finally determine the perpetuity of the feast (vv. 28-32). The feast is still kept by the Jews, proving the authenticity of this book.

MORDECAI'S GREATNESS (CHAP. 10)

The greatness of the Persian king (v. 1) reflects on Mordecai (v. 2), who is recognized even in the kingly chronicles, and whose exalted privilege becomes a benefit to all his race in Persia (v. 3).

QUESTIONS

1. To what tribe and family did Mordecai belong (2:5)?
2. What is Haman called (3:5)?
3. What correspondence do you see between the above and what is recorded in ~~1~~ 1 Samuel 15?
4. Have you compared the passages of the Pentateuch named in this lesson?
5. Why is the feast called Purim?
6. Who may have been the author of this book?
7. How is its authenticity attested?