

# Old Testament History

Lesson #24

Esther 1:1-10:3

## Outline

### I. ***Esther Becomes Queen Of Persia (1:1-2:23)***

- A. Queen Vashti's fall (1:1-22).
- B. Esther's rise (2:1-18).
- C. Mordecai uncovers a plot against Xerxes (2:19-23).

### II. ***Plot To Destroy The Jews (3:1-4:17)***

- A. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman (3:1-6).
- B. Haman's plot to destroy Mordecai and his people (3:7-15).
- C. Mordecai appeals to Esther for help (4:1-17).

### III. ***Esther Delivers The Jews (5:1-9:15)***

- A. Esther appears before Xerxes (5:1-8).
- B. Haman's plan to have Mordecai hanged (5:9-14).
- C. Mordecai honored and Haman humiliated (6:1-14).
- D. Haman exposed and executed (7:1-10).
- E. Xerxes' edict on behalf of the Jews (8:1-17).
- F. The Jews defeat their enemies (9:1-19).

### IV. ***The Establishment Of Purim (9:20-32)***

### V. ***Epilogue (10:1-3)***

## Notes

### ***Esther 1:1-2:23***

- "Ahasuerus" was the title of the Persian ruler; his given name was Xerxes, and he ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. History tells us that he was one of the most illustrious monarchs of the ancient world, but he was an impulsive ruler.
- A gathering was called for the purpose of conferring with chiefs and leaders in preparation for his famous expedition against Greece, in which he fought the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis (480 B.C.). Xerxes had put down a rebellion in Egypt and felt confident he could conquer the Greeks. The gathering lasted for 180 days; the huge banquet was at the end of that period.
- He deposed Vashti in 483 B.C., before he left, and married Esther in 479 B.C., the seventh year of his reign, after he returned from his disastrous expedition against Greece. During the banquet, Xerxes wanted to display his beautiful queen, Vashti. She refused and was deposed and

made a public example to the entire nation. Though the motive for her refusal is not stated, she probably did not want to degrade herself before the king's drunken guests.

- Shushan, or Susa, 200 miles east of Babylon, was the winter residence of Persian kings. The site was identified by W. K. Loftus in 1852, who found an inscription of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.): "My ancestor Darius built this palace in former times. In the reign of my grandfather [Artaxerxes I] it was burned. I have restored it." This palace was the residence of Darius, who authorized the rebuilding of the temple; of Xerxes, Esther's husband; and, of Artaxerxes I, who authorized Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem. Susa was the place where Daniel received one of his visions (Daniel 8:2). The remains of Susa are scattered over 100 acres, and the site, beginning in 1851, has been excavated for more than 100 years. The royal palace itself was almost 2 1/2 acres in size, with a whole series of courtyards, audience hall, residences, and auxiliary rooms.
- Esther and Mordecai were cousins; Mordecai had raised her like his own daughter. Mordecai's name is the Hebraized form of the Babylonian god Marduk. Idolatrous names for devout Jews grew out of a practice during the Diaspora of giving both a Babylonian and a Hebrew name to the same person. Esther's Jewish name was "Hadassah," and she was a great woman of beauty and character (cf. 1 Peter 3:3-4). Mordecai encouraged Esther to "enter the contest" but to hide the fact that she was a Jewess. Esther dutifully obeyed him.
- Esther was later chosen, which introduces us to evidences of God's providence in the book (even though He is never mentioned by name): (1) Esther being chosen queen over the other candidates (2:15-18); (2) Mordecai discovering the plot to kill the king (2:21-23); (3) the casting of lots for the day to destroy the Jews resulting in a date late in the year, giving Mordecai and Esther time to act (3:7-15); (4) the king's welcome to Esther after ignoring her for a month (5:2); (5) the king's patience with Esther in permitting her to hold a banquet (5:8); (6) the king's insomnia that brought to light Mordecai's deed of kindness (6:1-3); (7) the king's apparent lapse of memory in 6:10-14, that led him to honor one of the Jews he had agreed to slay; and, (8) the king's concern for Esther's welfare, when he had a harem to choose from (7:5-6).
- During the time he was sitting at the king's gate, Mordecai either overheard or was informed about a plot to kill Xerxes by two of the king's officers, Bigthana and Teresh (cf. 6:2). They were eunuchs, guards of the door -- i.e., men who protected the king's private apartment -- who had become angry with Xerxes. Mordecai got word to Esther about the plot; she relayed the information to the king, giving

credit to Mordecai, without mentioning their relationship. Plots against Persian monarchs were not uncommon. Xerxes was in fact assassinated in his bedroom in a similar situation in 465 B.C. in a conspiracy led by his chiliarch, Artabanus.

### ***Esther 3:1-4:17***

- Haman's promotion went to his head and turned him into a murderer. Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites, the enemies of the Jews (Deuteronomy 25:17-19; Exodus 17:8-16; 1 Samuel 15:1-3). Mordecai would not bow down to Haman, and this made the ruler angry enough to want to kill all the Jews. The decree to kill all the Jews occurred in the king's 12th year, after Esther had been queen for five years. Xerxes was assassinated in 465 B.C.
- Haman and his fortune-tellers cast "lots" (*pur* in Hebrew) to find what day would be set aside for the execution, and it fell almost a year later. To obtain the king's permission to destroy the Jews, Haman appealed to the monarch's greed, offering to put 10,000 talents of silver of his own private fortune into the royal treasury to pay the men who would carry out the decree. The value of the silver was a fabulous sum, estimated to weigh approximately 375 tons. Haman wasted no time, and during that very month he had the decrees written and sent out, ordering the Persians to destroy, kill, and plunder all the Jews in the vast reaches of the kingdom.
- Mordecai sent Esther a copy of the decree so she would realize how desperate the situation really was. Mordecai told Esther that she would not escape Haman's edict against the Jews because she was in the king's house. If she remained silent, deliverance of the Jews would come from another source; but because of her cowardice, she and her father's family would perish. Not even royal status could protect her from the king's edict. Then Mordecai asked the question that has become the classic support of the doctrine of providence as a key to the understanding of the book of Esther. No matter what, Mordecai knew God's covenant with Abraham. He knew that God would never allow the nation to perish.
- A person named Marduka, whose name was found on a cuneiform tablet from Borsippa in southern Iraq, was evidently a minister at the Persian court in Susa and may actually have been the biblical Mordecai.

### ***Esther 5:1-9:15***

- Oriental rulers were almost like gods to their people, and their commands, right or wrong, were obeyed. Esther was taking her life in her hands, but she had already put her life into God's hands. Esther invited Xerxes and Haman to a banquet that day. After Xerxes asked

Esther about what was on her heart, she delayed telling him. Haman went home elated, puffed up with pride that he should enjoy such an exclusive banquet with royalty.

- But his peace and security would not last long. He saw Mordecai at the gate, and he refused to bow down to him. Haman invented a charge against Mordecai and wanted to have him executed. Haman's wealth and honors could not satisfy him when he thought of one Jew who failed to show him the proper respect he felt he deserved! He had a 75-foot gallows erected, intending to have Mordecai hanged from it.
- In the course of reading the annals because of a night of sleeplessness, the record of Mordecai's exposure of the plot of Bigthana and Teresh against the king was found. On inquiring what "honor and recognition" had been bestowed on Mordecai, the king was told that nothing had been done to honor him. The oversight must have disturbed Xerxes, as it was a reflection on him for not rewarding one of his benefactors. Haman, thinking the king meant him, suggested that the one to be honored be given a royal robe that had been worn by the king, along with a horse the king had ridden, and that had a royal crest be placed on its head (cf. Psalm 37:1-15). Haman must have been ecstatic in anticipation of the high honor he thought was about to be accorded him before all the people of Susa.
- The next day, Esther plead for the salvation of her people, thereby revealing to all her true identity as a Jew. Xerxes was enraged at the actions of Haman, and he commanded him to be executed and this was done on the very gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai (Proverbs 11:8; 16:14). The servants were only too glad to obey, for Haman had made many enemies during his proud, selfish lifetime.
- Although matters seem to have settled, there was still a problem: the king could not cancel his decree and the Jews would be robbed and killed in nine months. Esther once again begged the king to act for the salvation of the people. He reminded them that he could not write the new decree himself, as no prior document written in his name and sealed with his ring could be "revoked," even by the king himself. It could only be neutralized by another decree. The new decree permitted the Jews to protect themselves and to destroy anyone in the kingdom who was an enemy of the Jews. The king did not cancel the old law; he merely gave a new law that superseded it.
- The scribes hurried and wrote the messages, and the official ambassadors hastened to get the message to every corner of the kingdom (Proverbs 24:11-12). The Jews knew that the Persians would not dare to fight them and incur the wrath of the king. In fact, many of the Persians called themselves Jews to escape punishment. When the time arrived, the Jews were ready for victory; they had the edict of the

king on their side. Ultimately, they killed 75,000 of their enemies, including the ten sons of Haman.

### ***Esther 9:20-32***

- The Jews' sorrow and mourning had been transformed into joy and celebration by the turn of events. Mordecai instructed them to observe the the 14th and 15th days of the twelfth month by feasting and by giving food to one another and gifts to the poor. This celebration is called the Feast of Purim (or "lots"), referring to the lots cast by Haman to determine the day of the Jews' slaughter. It is usually preceded by a fast on the 13th day in memory of Esther's fast (4:16).
- The days of Purim would never cease to be celebrated by the Jews nor forgotten by their descendants. The Jews agreed to observe their celebration every year in the same way as they did that first time and in accordance with the instructions given them by Mordecai. It has no basis in the Torah, but it is considered just as binding as the other festivals.
- Esther, together with Mordecai, wrote to all the Jews in the 127 Persian provinces with the full authority of her position to confirm the celebration of Purim and its regulations. It was written down "in the records" to be available to future generations for verification.
- To this day, the Jews still celebrate the Feast of Purim, and it is one of the Jews' most festive holidays. On the evening of the 13th day, Esther is read publicly in the synagogue. Each time the name of Haman is read, the Jews stamp on the floor, hiss, and cry, "Let his name be blotted out!" The next day, they again meet at the synagogue for prayers and the reading of the Mosaic Law. The rest of the day and the next day are given over to rejoicing, feasting, and giving gifts.

### ***Esther 10:1-3***

- As it had begun, the book closes with a statement that reveals the imperial power and wealth of Xerxes. He was able to impose "tribute" (i.e., forced taxation or involuntary labor) to the most distant shores of his empire.
- The reader is told that the mighty acts of Xerxes as well as a full account of the greatness of Mordecai were recorded in the book of the official annals of the kings of Media and Persia (cf. 6:1; 1 Kings 11:41; 2 Chronicles 25:26). Mordecai rose to be second in rank to Xerxes and was popular with the Jews. His and Esther's popularity with Xerxes paved the way for Ezra and Nehemiah. Like Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, so here God used Mordecai and Esther in Persia.