

The Book of Esther

“In those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him.”
—*Esther 1:2,3*

THE BOOK OF ESTHER IS classed with the historical books of the Bible, yet it is not merely a bygone chronicle. Besides providing a valuable segment in the history of the Jewish people during their captivity in Babylon under the Persian Empire, it also gives needed lessons for the foot-step followers of Christ at the present time. This absorbing historical account begins during the third year of the reign of Xerxes—called Ahasuerus in the Biblical narrative. Bible historians have placed the date of the great feast mentioned in our opening verses somewhere between 485 B.C. and 460 B.C.

In chapter 1, verses 3-9, we are told of the tremendous wealth of King Ahasuerus. He made a great

feast, lasting six months, for the princes, servants and nobles of the city and provinces, to celebrate the power and glory of Media and Persia. Following this was another feast for seven more days for all the people present around the palace.

Verse 6 notes the beautiful, rich curtains with their silver rings hung on marble pillars. There were gold and silver beds and couches for reclining. The floors were of colored marble tile of blue, white, black and red. The drinking vessels were gold, each one of a different pattern, and the wine was of the king's appointment in great abundance. Each could drink as he desired, neither being compelled nor restrained. The queen, Vashti, also made a feast for the women in the royal palace.—vss. 7-9

In verses 10-22, we are told of the natural result of such unrestrained merriment, for on the final day, when the king and nobles were partially beclouded in judgment, they acted foolishly. The king sent for the queen to come before the nobles and exhibit her beauty, with the royal crown upon her head. She seems to have had the only level head among them, and refused to demean herself. This inflamed the king, and his wise men debated what should be done about it. They finally decided that Queen Vashti should be deposed, and another chosen in her place. Thus, the great feast ended in folly and trouble for the king's household. As we will see, however, these events led up to and prepared the way for Esther to be chosen queen.

ESTHER CHOSEN QUEEN

The second scene of this account begins in chapter 2, with the advice of the king's counselors and

servants that a proclamation be made to gather the fairest maidens of the kingdom, and bring them to Hegai [also called Hege], one of the king's ministers, and prepare them for his selection. The one which pleased the king most was to be made queen in the place of Vashti. (Esther 2:1-4) Verses 8 and 9 state that many maidens were brought to Hegai to be prepared for presentation to the king, each seeking to be his choice as queen. Esther, a young Hebrew maiden, but with a Persian name, was also brought to Hegai, who was so pleased that he gave her seven maidens to assist her in her preparations to appear before the king.

Esther had been brought to Hegai by her cousin, Mordecai, who had raised her following the death of her father and mother. Mordecai was an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, who had been carried away from Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian captivity. (vss. 5-7) Mordecai evidently occupied a humble position at the palace court, and he instructed Esther not to make known to Hegai that she was a Jew. Esther, being preferred by Hegai, and afterward obtaining the favor of the king, was then returned to a new minister, or chamberlain, called Shaashgaz.—vss. 10-14

Much time, even a whole year, was spent for purification and preparation with perfumes and oils, and every known aid to accentuate beauty. (vs. 12) Verses 15 and 16 tell us that Esther's beauty was such that she needed nothing else but what the king's ministers had provided. Finally, she was brought before Ahasuerus the king in the seventh year of his reign, the tenth month, which is Tebeth, and the king was greatly pleased with her.

Here begins the evidence of God's foreknowledge, and of his preparation to eventually deliver the Jews from Haman, one of the king's princes and a hater of the Israelites. Ours is a covenant-keeping God. He always looks after his divinely chosen people. He is continually preparing, even before the events happen, for our deliverance and the destruction of the evil forces which rise up against us.—Isa. 54:17

King Ahasuerus "loved Esther" above all the other women, "so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti." (Esther 2:17) The king's satisfaction and delight in finding a maiden so pleasing was such that he made "a great feast" in her honor for his princes and servants. He also granted a holiday to all the provinces of the kingdom and gave gifts out of his bounty.—vs. 18

During the period encompassing the foregoing events, Mordecai became aware of a plot against the life of Ahasuerus. Two of the king's ministers, Bigthan and Teresh, keepers of the door of the palace, became wroth with Ahasuerus, the reason for which is not recorded. Nevertheless, they desired to kill him. Mordecai sent word through Esther to Ahasuerus of this plot, thus adding to her influence with the king. Esther reported it to the king in Mordecai's name, thus securing favor for him also. The plot against Ahasuerus failed, and the two ministers were slain for their sedition. Throughout this experience, Esther and Mordecai worked together, and were loyal to each other, as well as to the king. Esther still did not make known her nationality, however, as there was no need to do so. All of this was of the Lord's providence.—vss. 19-23

HAMAN—A WICKED PRINCE

In chapter 3 we are told of the rise to power of Haman. This account shows the spirit of pride developing unchecked in one who is a stranger to God. Haman's exaltation apparently was the preparation by Satan to destroy the people of Israel. The attempts of others, instigated by Satan, to destroy the polity of Israel has been a recurrent theme throughout their history as a people. Many of these took place in Europe by so-called Christian nations during the present Gospel Age, and were evidently repeated efforts by Satan to destroy the Jews as the covenant people of God. However, there has always been an overruling which stopped the carnage before it destroyed the whole nation.

The Jews in Persia at this time had not availed themselves of the earlier decree of Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and help in the rebuilding of the Temple. However, their current experiences, and in particular the hatred of the cruel prince, Haman, evidently led many to later return to Jerusalem with Nehemiah. (Neh. 1:1-3) Thus God often uses adversity to bring his people back to him. The Israelites in Persia were still the covenant people of God, and he loved them and looked after them in mercy.

King Ahasuerus gave Haman very high honors and privileges, even commanding his servants to reverence Haman. Mordecai disregarded the order, however, giving as a reason that he was a Jew. According to the account, Haman seems not to have noticed this until it was called to his attention. Then Haman was "full of wrath," and planned to punish not only Mordecai but to destroy the whole Jewish population throughout the kingdom.—Esther 3:1-6

The lies told by Haman to the king were such as to make the Jews seem an utterly worthless and pernicious people, and also dangerous. So deceptive was Haman that he did not even identify them as Israelites, but told the king of “a certain people” living in the kingdom which should be destroyed. Haman even promised to pay into the king’s treasury ten thousand talents of silver, probably from the booty expected from the slaughter.—vss. 8,9

Ahasuerus gave his signet ring to Haman. This gave him full authority, as the king’s representative, to carry out his suggestions, and he graciously told Haman that the silver would be Haman’s to do with as he wished. Thus the king showed great trust in and esteem for Haman. This ring had the royal seal attached to it, which carried the full power of the empire behind it. Additionally, he granted Haman all the property of the Jewish families executed. As incredible as it may seem, the lives of the whole Jewish people were given to the hand of Haman. He ascertained that the destruction of the Jews would occur on the thirteenth of Adar, the twelfth month. Note the cruel, heartless and mad design to destroy, kill, and cause to perish even the women and children—all in one predetermined day.—vss. 10-14

Haman’s plan gradually became known among the people. The Jews throughout the empire thus had about eleven months’ warning of the peril which threatened them. Why did they not flee? To flee would be seen as giving public acknowledgment of their guilt, and would likely provoke an immediate massacre. Possibly Haman thought of this, and some may have fled during the intervening months, but as a whole the Jews stood

their ground, evidently believing some deliverance would come.

Why did Haman give such long notice? Perhaps it was partly to allow time for the decree to reach the utmost limits of the empire. It was possibly also to strike terror in the hearts of the Jews. His main wish, however, was that in the process of eliminating the Jews, he would also get rid of Mordecai, who was well respected by the king, and who Haman hated with extreme jealousy.

The people of the capital city, Shushan, were perplexed by this turn of events and the plan to exterminate the Jews. (Esther 3:15) Many Persians viewed the Israelites favorably, for they had records of how God had delivered Daniel from the den of lions, and the three Hebrews from the fiery furnace. They also knew of the benevolence that Cyrus, one of their previous kings, had manifested toward the Jews. Even apart from this, however, the decree was sufficiently sudden and ominous to perplex thoughtful citizens.

At this point of the narrative the situation looked as though Satan had triumphed and the Jews would certainly be destroyed, for the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be altered. No human eye could see any way of escape. However, the covenant-keeping God of Israel was not asleep. The unusual chain of circumstances by which the deliverance of the Jews and the destruction of their enemies was accomplished is one of the most interesting and astonishing accounts in human history.

ESTHER INTERVENES

When the news of the king's commandment reached Mordecai he rent his clothes, put on sackcloth

and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city streets with a great and bitter cry. Likewise, in every province, when the decree arrived there was great mourning, weeping and fasting. Mordecai came even before the king's gateway, though none were allowed to enter the palace clothed in sackcloth. Nothing of an evil omen was ever allowed to obtrude itself into the king's presence. This was the general practice in the East, so that it would show the absolute and sacred authority of the kings.—Esther 4:1-3

The mourning and wailing of Mordecai was reported to Queen Esther. She sent him raiment and asked him to put away the sackcloth, but he would not. Taking another approach, she sent Hatach, one of her trusted attendants, to meet up with the distraught Mordecai, and to find out the reason for his behavior. Hatach went out into the city streets and met Mordecai, who laid the whole matter before him, showing him a copy of the decree, and even telling of the money Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasury for the destruction of the Jews.—vss. 4-7

Mordecai asked Hatach to show the decree to Esther and urge her to make supplication to the king to release them from such a doom. Here arose a difficulty, however, which seemingly made it impossible for her to do so. The national law, known to all people, was that none could enter the king's presence, into the inner courts of the palace, without his invitation, on penalty of death, except to such as the king would hold out the golden scepter to signify that the caller could come in and make his petition. The reason for this precaution may have been the danger of some disaffected person assassinating

the king. Esther stated these rules to Mordecai and said she had not been called by the king for thirty days.—Esther 4:8-11

When Esther's answer reached Mordecai he realized the desperateness of the situation, but felt sure that God would not allow his people to be destroyed. He sent word to Esther that if she was not willing to risk her life for her people, then deliverance would come from some other quarter, and she would not only lose the blessing, but could not hope to escape the decree just because she was queen. Thus she, too, would be punished for her failure to act. He suggested that it might be she was raised up to her high position for this specific occasion.—vss. 12-14

Mordecai's confidence and his encouraging words to Esther should teach us a lesson. Our covenant with God is not merely that we will obey him, but that he will take care of us as his own, and in accord with his promises. Thus, from such records as this we may have full confidence and assurance in God's promises for our spiritual interests, and that he is ever watchful over his people. He will never leave us nor forsake us; he will never forget, nor be taken off his guard.—Ps. 34:19; 91:1-11; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5,6

Esther sent her answer to Mordecai that she would take the risk and trust in the Lord, but that she and all the Jews in Shushan should first fast and neither eat nor drink for three days. Then she would go in unto the king without the required invitation. In faith, Esther said, "If I perish, I perish." Mordecai then was content that all would be done that was possible, and trusted that God would intervene in his own time and way.—Esther 4:15-17

ESTHER MEETS WITH THE KING

On the third day from the beginning of the fast, the time had finally come to act. Esther put on her royal apparel and stood in the “inner court of the king’s house,” opposite the entry of the throne room “in the royal house.” The usual location of the throne was evidently such that from its raised position the king could look out beyond the door into the court.—Esther 5:1

Seeing Esther, King Ahasuerus extended his golden scepter, indicating that she was granted an audience. Her touching the top of the scepter was an acknowledgment of the king’s authority, and a gesture of obedience and submission by Esther. The king offered her anything up to half of his kingdom, showing his appreciation of her. Note the gracious expression of the king, “What wilt thou, queen Esther? And what is thy request?”—vss. 2,3

Esther’s wisdom is shown in that she did not ask her petition immediately, but wished to impress the king favorably. She judged that the king would understand that she indeed had a petition in the background, and that he would persist in requesting it, which he did. At present, however, Esther asked for the presence of both the king and Haman at a banquet which she would prepare. The king agreed and instructed Haman to attend. After the meats were removed, it was customary to continue the banquet with fruits and wine. The king repeated his request for Esther’s petition, but Esther again postponed, and asked both the king and Haman to a second banquet, promising to present her petition then.—vss. 4-8

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(Continued from page 31) This wise delay gave an opportunity for this great honor toward Haman to work on his mind and his pride. He had risen greatly in his own estimation, thinking that he must truly be on the road to greatness to be thus honored by the queen. Pride is thus pictured in effective colors. It blinds the discernment, and often throws caution to the wind. Vanity and pride blind one to any possible warning to take care. Instead of wondering what could be behind such an unusual honor, he gloated in great delight on these favors bestowed on him. In Haman's distorted view of matters, we see a clear example of the stark warning pronounced in these words: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."—Prov. 16:18

Although gloating inwardly about the honors being bestowed upon him, Haman deeply begrudged the neglect of Mordecai to notice him. (Esther 5:9) Pride brings resentment because of the failure of another to gratify it. How different is the effect of humility, which leads one to be glad to remain unnoticed, and even to appreciate being admonished from time to time, lest too great an honor should awaken pride. Recalling an incident considered earlier, Mordecai did not complain when his saving of the king's life seemed to pass unnoticed. (Esther 2:19-23) Two strong characters are thus clearly contrasted—one humble and the other proud above measure.

Haman called for the advice of his friends and his wife Zeresh. He enumerated to them his honors, wealth and social position. He dwelt on how the king promoted him and advanced him above the

servants and even the princes, and how the queen had honored him so conspicuously. Yet, in spite of all this, the thing that continued to anger him was that this one man, a Jew named Mordecai, would not bow the knee. (Esther 5:10-13) We would think that surely any sensible person would be satisfied with such honors as had been bestowed upon him, and not be upset because one man refused to honor him—but not so with Haman. He was an example of unrestrained pride working out the destruction of its victim.

Haman's friends and his wife urged him to build a gallows seventy-five feet high, and ask the king that Mordecai be killed for failing to obey the king's command, for he refused to acknowledge and bow the knee when the king had commanded all men to honor Haman. Notice the heartlessness of his wife and friends in the advice: "Go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet." (vs. 14) Thus ends the first five chapters of the Book of Esther. In next month's issue, we will examine the remainder of this interesting and thought-provoking account, and consider more of its noteworthy lessons of benefit to the child of God. ■