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Esther 1:1–8



THIS IS WHAT happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. ²At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

⁴For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. ⁵When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. ⁷Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. ⁸By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.



THE BOOK BEGINS "This is what happened . . ." (Heb., *wyby*), which is the introductory formula found in other historical books, such as Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. Regardless of

how we judge the historicity of the book, the author's introduction to the story suggests he intends for his readers to understand the ensuing story as events that actually happened.

These events occurred during the time of Xerxes, the Persian king who reigned from 486–465 B.C. *Xerxes* is probably the Greek transliteration of his Persian name *Khsbayarshan*. In the Hebrew language his name takes the form *Abasuerus* (pronounced *Abashwerosh*). This name has no meaning in Hebrew, but when pronounced aloud sounds something like King Headache in English.¹

Xerxes was the son and successor of Darius I Hystaspes, under whose benefaction the temple in Jerusalem had begun to be rebuilt (Hag. 2:1–9; Zech. 7:1; 8:9). Xerxes is also mentioned in Ezra 4:6 as the reigning king when those opposed to that rebuilding project brought accusations against it.

Xerxes was known for his consolidation of the Persian empire “from India to Cush,” corresponding to the regions of modern Pakistan and northern Sudan, respectively. The reference to 127 provinces has been taken by some scholars as a historical inaccuracy. The standard administrative region within the Persian empire was known as a satrapy and was governed by an official called a satrap. The satrap was responsible for all administration of the region, including collecting tribute (i.e., taxes) and raising an army on the king’s behalf. A vast administration was required to govern and collect tribute throughout an empire that encompassed many nations and peoples of various languages. According to Herodotus, Xerxes’ father, Darius, created twenty satrapies comprised of sixty-seven tribes or nations.² There is no extant historical evidence that at any time were there as many as 127 satrapies, nor even 120 (as mentioned in Dan. 6:1).

In 1:1, however, the Hebrew word used does not mean “satrapy” but “province” and probably refers to a smaller metropolitan region that encompassed a city. In Daniel 2:49 the same Hebrew word refers to the “province of Babylon”; in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:6 it refers to the province of Judea surrounding the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem and Judea were a small part of the large satrapy of the Trans-Euphrates region. The relationship between the provinces and satrapies is unclear, but there were presumably a considerably larger number of provinces than satrapies. Furthermore, the number of provinces probably

1. See Yehuda T. Radday, “Esther With Humor,” *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 296.

2. LCL: *Herodotus* 3.89.

changed as cities were gained and lost in war. Moreover, since a satrapy was an arbitrary administrative unit, their number also likely changed to meet changing administrative needs. It is not surprising that documents written at different times during the Persian period may disagree on the numbers.

Since the authors of both *Esther* and *Daniel* use approximately the same number, most likely they are referring to smaller administrative units.³ Some commentators, especially in antiquity, have taken the number to be symbolic of Xerxes' reigning over all the whole earth (e.g., 12 [the number of the tribes of Israel] x 10 [the number of completeness] + 7 [the number of perfection]).⁴ F. Bush points out that the concern for historicity in this instance obscures the purpose of the number in the narrative: "By the choice of the larger number, the pomp and glory of the empire is magnified, contributing to the sardonic picture presented in this whole chapter."⁵ This use of the number is consistent with the grandiose picture painted of the Persian empire by the author in chapter 1. By choosing to refer to the smallest administrative units of the empire (hence the larger number), the author may also be implying that there was nowhere the Jews could go to hide from the decree of death that would be pronounced against them.

Susa was one of the four capital cities from which the Persian monarchs ruled (the others were Ecbatana [cf. *Ezra* 6:2], Babylon, and Persepolis). The royal court wintered at the palace in Susa, for the summer temperatures there were intolerable. *Daniel* previously had a vision at Susa (*Dan.* 8:2), and later *Nehemiah* served in Susa as cup-bearer to Xerxes' son, Artaxerxes I (*Neh.* 1:1).

Xerxes ascended the throne in November 486 B.C. at the age of thirty-two. The events of the *Esther* story span a period of about ten years, beginning in the third year of his reign, 483 B.C. At the time Xerxes ascended the throne, Persia was in conflict with the Greeks on their western frontier. Xerxes' father Darius had been defeated in his attempt to take Athens. The empire was resting in preparation for its next campaign against the Greeks.

3. Note, however, that *Dan.* 6:1 does refer to the leaders of the 120 regions as "satraps."

4. L. B. Paton, *Esther*, 124.

5. F. Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 345.

The banquet held “in the third year” of Xerxes’ reign (1:3) corresponds well with the great war council of 483 B.C., held to plan for the Persian invasion of Greece. Xerxes was mustering the nobles, officials, military leaders, princes, and governors of the provinces in Susa to rally support for his military campaign against the Greeks. The vast expanse of the Persian empire, from modern Pakistan in the east to modern Turkey in the west, encompassed many people groups with different languages, ethnic origins, and religions. Maintaining their support and loyalty over such a diverse and far-flung empire was no small feat. During the 180 days of the council, Xerxes displayed his wealth and glory to consolidate the leaders of the many provinces of the empire under his authority and to gain their loyalty to his cause. Herodotus records Xerxes as saying to his assembled nobles, possibly during the very banquet described in Esther:

For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose. It is my intent to bridge the Hellespont and lead my army through Europe to Hellas [Greece], that I may punish the Athenians for what they have done to the Persians and to my father. You saw that Darius my father was minded to make an expedition against these men. But he is dead, and it was not granted him to punish them; and I, on his and all the Persians’ behalf, will never rest till I have taken and burnt Athens. . . .

As for you, this is how you shall best please me: when I declare the time for your coming, everyone of you must appear, and with a good will; and whosoever comes with his army best equipped shall receive from me such gifts as are reckoned most precious among us.⁶

Xerxes displayed his wealth to show that he could make good on his promise and reward those who would rally to support his campaign.

Persia and Media were two separate, but ethnically related, nations that had a long but uneasy history prior to this period. The Medes’ greatest claim to fame came from joining forces with the Babylonians to overthrow the Assyrian empire. The prophet Jonah had predicted the eventual destruction of the Assyrian capital city, Nineveh, fulfill-

6. LCL: *Herodotus* 7.8.

ment of which, though deferred, was accomplished by the Medes in 612 B.C. Prior to the time of Cyrus, the Medes were the dominant nation of the two. Cyrus won the allegiance of both the Medes and Persians because his father was a Persian and his mother a Mede. In himself he united these two great nations and had the military power to enforce a union of both into one great empire. From the time of Cyrus onward the consolidated empire he founded was referred to as the Persian-Median empire, showing the hegemony of the Persians within the joint empire. The reference here to the military leaders of Persia first, and of Media second, is historically accurate for the time of Xerxes, who reigned after Cyrus.

A banquet of seven days was held for all the residents of the citadel of Susa, "from the least to the greatest," to culminate the six months of festivities (1:4–5). This event would have further consolidated support for the king and his campaign among all his subjects who lived and served him in Susa. These people had no doubt provided many of the services demanded by the lavish hospitality of the previous 180 days, and they were perhaps being feted for their efforts.

The description of the banquet focuses on the opulence of its setting in the king's garden and the abundance of wine "in keeping with king's liberality" served in goblets of gold (1:6–7). Both emphasize the wealth, and hence the power, of the king, who was expecting the men of his empire soon to march into battle on his command. Both Persia and Greece held wealth commensurate with their position as the two world superpowers of that time. Persia's wealth and magnificence dazzled even Alexander the Great when more than a century later he entered the palace at Susa and found 40,000 talents of gold and silver bullion (1,200 tons) and 9,000 talents of minted gold coins (270 tons), which had been accumulated by the Persian kings.⁷

The might and glory of the Persian empire were at Xerxes' disposal in order to reward those who would remain loyal to his cause and obedient to his command. This description of the lavish banquet shows that Xerxes was a force to be reckoned with.⁸

7. *Ibid.*, 17.66.

8. Excavations of Susa by the French archaeologist M. A. Dieulafoy between 1884 and 1886 have produced many treasures from the palace built by Darius I and occupied by Xerxes. Sculptures, colorfully glazed bricks, jewelry, and other treasures from Susa can be viewed today in the Louvre in Paris.

*Bridging
Contexts*

IN THESE VERSES the author sets an elaborate stage for the opening act of the story. The king's power, wealth, majesty, and generosity are being highlighted by the description of the opulent banquets in the Persian court at Susa, where the king is gathering support and loyalty for his campaign against Greece. The irony of this description is lost on modern readers. The original readers would have known that Xerxes returned from Greece four years later after a surprising defeat that depleted his royal wealth. Since the author of Esther was writing long after Xerxes' defeat, he could have introduced Xerxes as the Persian king who lost a famous battle to the Greeks at Hellepont. Instead, he chose to introduce Xerxes in the splendor and optimism of his glory days. The unstated reversal of the king's fortune, which would have been known to the author and original readers, sets the stage and foreshadows another reversal of destiny within the book.

The elaborate description of the palace found in these verses is unusual for biblical narrative. Only the description of the tabernacle and Jerusalem temple receive similar treatment. The description of the colors and materials of the Persian palace are reminiscent of the description of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–28 and the descriptions of the temple in 1 Kings 7 and 2 Chron. 3–4. The magnificent temple in Jerusalem had been the throne of Yahweh's theocracy. At its dedication the Lord promised that if the king of Jerusalem walked before him in obedience, "You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel" (1 Kings 9:5).

The Jews found themselves in Susa beholden to the glory of a pagan king because of the other side of that promise made at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 9:6–9):

But if you or your sons turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, "Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this

temple?" People will answer, "Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their fathers out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why the LORD brought all this disaster on them."

When Esther 1:1–8 is read in light of Xerxes' defeat, the description of the splendor of his palace in Susa while he planned for war foreshadows his reversal of fortune. The Jews had also previously experienced a humiliating reversal of fortune that had brought them to Susa. Nevertheless, because of the covenant Yahweh had made with them when he "brought their fathers out of Egypt," the ultimate destiny of God's people was secured. Despite the great power and wealth of the Persian empire, it could never frustrate the plan and promise of God.

Though God chastened his people in the affliction of the Exile, it was never his intent to destroy them completely. Because the Jewish nation was delivered from genocide, it survived to bear the Messiah, through whom all nations have been blessed (cf. Gen. 12:2–3). The Messiah fulfilled all of the demands and promises of the covenant God had made with his people at Sinai. He is the man promised in 1 Kings 9:5, seated on the throne of his father David and ruling over an eternal dynasty.



ALTHOUGH THE GREAT splendor of Xerxes' empire now lies in ruins beneath centuries of dust, the world continues to see opulent displays of military bravado. After the Persians, the Greek Ptolemies and Seleucids dominated the eastern Mediterranean, bringing conflict and tumult to the Jewish people. Then the Romans, perhaps the greatest military machine the world has ever seen, tried to destroy the infant Christian church. The book of Revelation, which contains a description of the opulent royal city of God and the Lamb, was written to assure the early Christians that the persecutions of even the mighty Romans could not thwart or frustrate God's sovereign plan to bring all of history to culmination in Jesus Christ.

In our own time, one thinks of Adolph Hitler and the massive display of power he brought against the Jews and others in his attempt to establish the Third Reich as a world government. The May Day celebrations in Moscow, where the military might of the former Soviet

Union was paraded through Red Square, are another example of military power that has at times been turned against both Jews and Christians. After almost a century of state-sponsored atheism, the mighty communist state, powerful both militarily and intellectually, was unable to extinguish the church, which is now experiencing a new renaissance in the former Soviet Union. In Beijing's Tiananmen Square, China's crushing military power was displayed against students protesting for democracy. Through the centuries and around the world political and military might has been glorified as the epitome of a nation's strength.

America, too, must take heed that, though perhaps founded for Christian liberty, its might and power are nonetheless worldly might and power. Name whichever empire, nation, or government you wish as the mightiest, the greatest, and the most powerful, the King of the universe sits high above on his throne, laughing at the impotence of even the greatest of nations. Psalm 2 reflects on the majesty of God above the din of the nations' worldly power:

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the LORD
and against his Anointed One.
"Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill."
I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.

You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry
and you be destroyed in your way,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Through invisible and inscrutable means, God continues to move all of history to fulfill his covenant in Jesus Christ. He alone truly is the King of kings. The one who opposes Christ the King opposes God. To such a person, the Esther story stands as a warning that whatever ease and prosperity one might enjoy, whatever worldly power and position have been attained, ultimately there will be a reversal of fortune that will end in death and destruction.

For the Christian, the sovereign power of the Lord is of greatest comfort. Throughout every generation in every corner of the world, God rules supreme "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10). To be in Christ is to be on the winning side of history, to be victors even in the face of life's greatest threats.