

Survey of the Bible part 67

As we come to the book of Esther it is noteworthy to show the time line of this book because it places certain of the Jews in a land that we have been discussing for some time now.

Esther 1:1-3 ^{NAU} Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa, ³ in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army *officers* of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence.

Does anyone remember who King Ahasuerus was?

King Ahasuerus is the same king mentioned in the book of Ezra.

Ezra 4:6 ⁶ Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

The people mentioned in this verse are the inhabitants of the land who feel that the Jews have invaded them, albeit at the command of Cyrus king of Persia.

Ezra, you'll remember, was the first to go back to Jerusalem with the task of rebuilding the temple. The decree of Cyrus made this possible in the mid 530's BC. Esther is a Jew like Ezra and Nehemiah, and she comes on to the scene now many years after Ezra returns to Jerusalem.

Esther does not come onto the scene until around 480 BC. If you do the math that's around 55 years after Ezra first goes to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But Esther is around before Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls surrounding Jerusalem. Nehemiah doesn't return to Jerusalem until the mid-440's BC, placing Esther's exploits taking place around 35 years before Nehemiah.

So, she sort of falls mid-way between Ezra and Nehemiah. Unlike Ezra and Nehemiah, both of whom are noted for their return to Jerusalem to do the work of the Lord in building projects, Esther never appears to lay foot in Jerusalem but continues to live and actively be a part of the reign of Ahasuerus.

And so, as we come to the first chapter of Esther the scene is set as King Ahasuerus displays his great wealth before all the peoples of the land.

Esther 1:4 ⁴ And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

So, for almost half a year the king displays his riches for all to see. You don't hear much of it these days, but in years past there was an event throughout parts of the world that was known as the World's Fair.

Different countries would put on this great event that displayed many new technologies and wonders that could be found in their own countries as well as that of other countries.

The first one was in 1791 in what is known today as Germany, the last one was in 2012 in Yeosu, South Korea. The last one in this country was in New Orleans in 1984.

The only world's fair that I ever got to attend was the one in the city in which we lived back in the early 1980's in Knoxville Tn.

The fair happened in 1982 and it was formally known as the Knoxville International Energy Exposition . And so, as you can imagine its theme lent itself to countries all around the world bringing their latest technology to the fair for all to see.

In a similar way, Ahasuerus is having his own world's fair where people from around his kingdom can come and be amazed at the wealth and the technology of his day. And so, it was probably a carnival atmosphere with food vendors and special booths where trinkets could be bought along with special displays by the king that would have been constructed on a grand scale with the intention of making everyone go ooh and ahh.

But at the end of this event the king throws another banquet to essentially thank those dignitaries and servants who helped to plan and pull off this enormous undertaking that lasted 180 days

Esther 1:5 ⁵ When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

This celebratory event was going to last seven days. At the end of the seven days the king is ready to show off his beautiful wife and queen.

Esther 1:10-12 ¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was ^amerry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal ^acrown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful. ¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

Now we might wonder why Vashti wouldn't come at the command of the king. There has certainly been speculation on this. Some have suggested that the king being a little drunk may have called for Vashti to entertain his guests by displaying her nakedness as her beauty was something he took pride in and wanted others to gaze upon

Fawcett's Bible dictionary poses this reason. Conjug. Precept. c. 16, in agreement with Herodotus v. 18) says the Persian kings had their legitimate wives to sit at table, but when they chose to drink and revel they sent away their wives and called in the concubines, it was when his "heart was merry with wine" that he sent for Vashti as a concubine; but she, looking on herself as a legitimate wife, would not come.

The problem with this is that she is designated as the Queen, a title not usually associated with concubines.

Whatever the reason, Vashti makes a decision she will later regret.

Esther 1:12 ¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

What follows is kind of interesting because he doesn't take his wrath out on her. Keep in mind, if you are king you can pretty much do what you want. And so, it would not be unusual for such a man to have her immediately beheaded if that is what he wished. But that's not what he does despite him being very angry and having his wrath burn within him, probably in a drunken state.

Instead he approaches the wise men who knew the law, the lawyers of that day, and he asks them a question.

Esther 1:15-22 ¹⁵ "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King

Ahasuerus *delivered* by the eunuchs?" ¹⁶ In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but *also* all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷ "For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.' ¹⁸ "This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in *the same way* to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger. ¹⁹ "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. ²⁰ "When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small." ²¹ *This* word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. ²² So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

In an odd sort of way the lawyer Memucan is thinking outside the box. He knows that to keep women in their place, including the Queen, it would not be advantageous to allow this snub of the king to go unanswered because it may actually give rise to other women throughout the kingdom to act in a similar way to their husbands.

And so, he proposes sending a message to all women everywhere that to disrespect your husband may have legal ramifications as it will with Vashti who from this time forward will never be able to enter into the king's presence in public and by inference, because she will be replaced, has been divorced at least from being queen, though she may have remained on as a concubine. After all she was pretty hot.

So at this point what do you do? You've fired the Queen and it would seem that a King must have a Queen to fill that role of being his better half as he sat on the throne with her by his side. Well, the answer is obvious you put on a beauty pageant.

Esther 2:1-4 Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. ² Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. ³ "Let

the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*.⁴ "Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.

And this is where a young girl is going to get her chance to not only be taken out of poverty but also given the chance to represent the people of God in a way where the Lord will use her to providentially be part of God's plan to protect His people there in the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Esther 2:5-7⁵ Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite,⁶ who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.⁷ He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Mordecai had an uncle, also one who would have been taken in the captivity that caused them both to be brought to Babylon. In most cases the uncle is a brother of your father or mother. Because of this relationship the uncle is usually older by a generation.

The reason I point this out is because we're not told how much older Mordecai is than Esther. Keep in mind that because Mordecai's uncle had a child named Esther, this would make Mordecai and Esther cousins.

But Mordecai's uncle and aunt have obviously died because in verse 8 of our text we're told that Esther had no father or mother precisely because they both died.

For this reason we're told that Mordecai took Esther as his own daughter. This doesn't necessarily mean that Mordecai is some old gentleman who is old enough to be Esther's father, only that he took her as his own daughter. The implication is that as a surviving relative he is going to provide shelter and food and a place where she can survive.

For example, Cheryle has a cousin who is about 16 years older than her. So, when Cheryle was, let's say, 15 years old her cousin

would be around 30. We're not told when Mordecai's uncle died but even if it was later in life, if Esther was around 15 when placed before the king Mordecai could still be a young man.

Be that as it may, Mordecai has taken the lead to set Esther up in a position of leadership that will have far reaching effect for the Jews living in the area.

Esther 2:8-9 ⁸ So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. ⁹ Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.

We're not told how many young girls were rejected but for Esther this was going to turn out to be a Cinderella story.

But there's a problem with Esther. Does anyone remember what that was?

She was a Jew.

Esther 2:10 ¹⁰ Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make *them* known.

Why would she not make known her people and her kindred?

Because the Jews were still seen as a sub group of the nation who were forcefully brought to the land to serve the nation, not as Babylonians, but as a conquered group, and because of that they were still seen as pretty low on the ladder of society.

But as we see here beauty still trumps your social or ethnic background. However, you may not want to flaunt it in case someone who is not sympathetic to your background gets wind of it and tries to exploit you or expose you for some ill purpose.

But back to our text. It would seem that as each girl was prepared to become queen there was a day of reckoning where they would be brought before the king for inspection. Each would have their day and Esther was no exception.

Esther 2:16-17 ¹⁶ So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. ¹⁷ The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

And then we are told that the king had a special banquet for all the virgins to celebrate his choice of Esther as the new queen. And of course, Mordecai was always close by as we see him at the king's gate for this special occasion.

And so, the second chapter of Esther ends in this way.

Esther 2:20-23 ²⁰ Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care. ²¹ In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. ²³ Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

Again, we see the caution that Esther employs here even after she is crowned queen. It is still not beyond the power of the King to get rid of Esther if he felt it was necessary and lawful to do so, and so she keeps quiet about being a Jew.

But the scene changes from Esther to Mordecai who always seems to be at the king's gate.

Why do you suppose that is?

He was protective of Esther and was always desiring her best and since she is now part of the establishment it is very likely that he had people on the inside who were constantly monitoring and giving him information as to her well-being. And he also had a Star Bucks set up outside the gate since he didn't seem to have a job anywhere else.

Keep in mind that he is not seen as any one special at this time despite his relationship with Esther. That was about to change however and from this point in the story the real story begins to

unfold as the rest of the book is not so much how Mordecai or even Esther seem to be maneuvering themselves within the king's court, but as we'll see it's all about the God who saves.

But being at the gate all the time pays off as he gets word that two of the king's disgruntled officials are plotting to hurt the king.

When he finds out he relays the information to Esther. Esther then informs the king. But notice how she breaches this because this is going to be very important in the future for Mordecai.

Esther 2:22 ²² But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.

What is important in the last part of this sentence?

In Mordecai's name.

Why is that important?

Because it shows Mordecai to be someone that the king can trust and rely on in the future.

But the king doesn't simply take Mordecai's word for it because we see that there is an investigation which proves that the plot was real and the result is the death of both of those officials on the gallows.

It will be this one action that will propel Mordecai into favor with the king. Again, if we were simply looking at this situation through the eyes of men we would conclude what an amazing set of circumstances and luck that seem to have Mordecai and Esther in the right place at the right time.

No, God is orchestrating these circumstances for His purposes and His will. And the next time we'll look into this **will of God**.