

# LESSON 15

## A Final Comment on Ezra 6

Ezra 6:22 – And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

We end Chapter 6 with another puzzle – why does the author refer to Darius the Great, the king of Persia, as the “king of **Assyria**” in verse 22? Did Ezra make a mistake?

This puzzle is an easy one to solve when we remember that a major theme in this book is continuity. The trouble began with the Assyrians, and that empire had continued all the way to the present day of Ezra 6, albeit through the Babylonians and then through the Persians. Even Herodotus recognized this continuity when he referred to Babylon as the capital of Assyria. The Gentile oppression had begun under the Assyrians, as Nehemiah also recognized:

Nehemiah 9:32 – Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

Although the Gentile domination was not over, God had given his people a brief period of favor in the eyes of the foreign kings.

One commentator says that the reference in verse 22 to Darius as the king of **Assyria** is “perhaps the most significant statement about Persia in the book.”

So where are we at the end of Ezra 6? The first return under the decree of Cyrus has occurred and the goal of that return has been accomplished with the dedication of the second temple. Ezra 6 ends with a joyous celebration over the victory of God’s people.

**What happens next?** Ezra 7 will begin almost 60 years after the events in Ezra 6, with the second return under Ezra in 458. But we are not going to study the second half of Ezra until after we look at what happened between those two chapters, and we read about those events in the book of Esther, which is centered on the royal city of Susa. Other than a brief note about Xerxes in 4:6, Ezra tells us

nothing about this interim period.

## Esther is a Strange Book

I enjoy teaching strange books! Revelation, Daniel, Zechariah – about the only thing most people agree about for those books is that they are strange. But as strange as those books are, Esther may win the prize as the strangest book in the Bible.

Most commentaries on Esther begin with the question, “what kind of book is Esther?” And there are about as many answers to that question as there are commentaries.

Is it history? Is it fiction? Is it historical fiction? Is it fictionalized history? Is it comedy? Is it a Persian chronicle? Is it a Greek romance? Is it a carnival tale? Is it a wisdom tale? Is it burlesque? Each of those answers is proposed by commentaries.

About all the commentators can agree upon is that Esther is strange. Why?

- Although the heathen king of Persia is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses (29 times by name), God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. There is not even a divine title or pronoun referring to God in the book. And this was certainly intentional.
- There is likewise no mention of God’s commands or of God’s relationship with his people. There is no mention of Satan or angels. There is no mention of the covenant. Unlike the book of Daniel, no one prays in the book of Esther, and no one has a vision in the book of Esther. There are no explicit miracles in the book of Esther.
- Other than the fact that the book is about the Jewish people, there is nothing Jewish about the book of Esther in the religious sense. There is no apparent concern for the law in Esther. (Haman does say in 3:8 that “their laws are diverse from all people.”) Although the book was written after the events in Ezra 1-6, there is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple. “If one went through the text and replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Jews’ with the name of some other ethnic group, there would be no reason to think the story had anything at all to do with the Bible.” The lack of religious language in the book is highly unusual for books of that time and is certainly intentional. (But, as one commentator noted, God seems to lurk everywhere in the background of the book!)
- The book of Esther is never cited or alluded to in the New Testament.

- Neither Esther nor Mordecai is ever mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.
- Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman (the other being Ruth).
- Surprisingly, one of the central themes of Esther is **feasting**. The Hebrew word for “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of the Old Testament books put together. The Feast of Purim comes from Esther and is one of the two Jewish feasts not found in the Law of Moses (the other being Hanukkah.)
- Esther is the only book in the Old Testament that was not found among the Dead Sea scrolls. (That omission is probably because the Essenes did not celebrate the Feast of Purim.)
- Esther is the only Old Testament book describing events that take place entirely in Persia. In fact, every scene in Esther (except for two brief episodes in Haman’s home and the brief account of the Jewish victory in Chapter 9) takes place in the royal court of Persia, with some events in the throne room and in the king’s private quarters.
- In the rest of the Old Testament, Jews are introduced by giving the name of their father or the name of their tribe, while foreigners are introduced by giving the name of their country or ethnicity (Uriah the Hittite, Ruth the Moabitess). But in Esther, Mordecai is called “Mordecai the Jew” six times (the only six times the phrase “the Jew” occurs in our English Old Testament).
- The characters in Esther are presented very differently from one another. With Haman, for example, we are told his motives, his drives, and his ambitions. Haman is allowed no mysteries. But with Mordecai and Esther, we see only their words and their actions – we are largely left to wonder as to their motives. We aren’t told what they are thinking. For example, (although we might be able to guess) we are never told why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman or show him any reverence – the event that leads to all the trouble that follows.
- On one level Esther is a simple story, yet it has an incredibly detailed structure in which thesis after thesis is met by antithesis after antithesis. (See the handout.)
- There is very little direct speech in the book. In the book of Ruth, the plot is advanced primarily through dialogue, but the opposite is true in Esther, where the plot is advanced primarily through narration. Mordecai, for example, is mentioned by name 56 times in Esther, yet he has only one short (but memorable!) speech (4:13-14).

- The first chapter of Esther has not a word to say about God or God's people, but rather is focused on pagan characters involved in a pagan event from the pagan world.

In addition to being a strange book, the book of Esther is an incredibly meaningful book, particularly to those facing persecution.

We will see how it is meaningful to Christians, but it has always been a very meaningful book to Jews as well, particularly when they have been faced with those seeking to destroy them, as Haman did in Esther's day and as Hitler did in ours. The Nazis forbade the reading of Esther in the concentration camps, but Jewish prisoners wrote the book from memory and read it in secret.

## What Kind of Book is Esther?

That is a strange question to ask about a book of the Bible. After all, no one ever asks what kind of book is Exodus or what kind of book is Ezra? But all commentaries on Esther begin with this same question, and many different answers are proposed. What kind of book is Esther?

Some argue that Esther is a historical narrative. That is, Esther contains an accurate account of a series of events that took place at the stated time and place. (Not wanting to keep anyone in suspense, this is where we are going to end up – but first we will look at some of the other answers that have been given.)

Esther certainly presents itself as history. Why does anyone argue otherwise? Because Esther has been weighed in most historians' balances and found wanting. Why? Here are some of the alleged problems gleefully recorded in any number of liberal commentaries:

- There are no extra-biblical sources that mention either queen in this book (Vashti or Esther) or either adviser in this book (Haman or Mordecai) during the reign of Xerxes.
- The Greek histories of Persia tell us that Xerxes' queen at this time was Amestris, who was not a Jew.
- Herodotus tells us about a Persian restriction of royal marriages to members of seven aristocratic families of which Esther was not a part.

- Esther 1:1 begins with a reference to 127 satrapies in the Persian empire; Herodotus mentions only 20 satrapies.
- One of the major complicating factors in Esther is the irrevocable nature of the laws of Persia. However, we are told that there is no extra-biblical evidence for this.
- There is likewise, we are told, no confirmation of a law that uninvited guests approaching the king would be slain without the king raising his scepter.
- It appears, at least on the surface, from Esther 2:6 that Mordecai was taken captive with Jehoiachin in 596 BC, but the events in Esther take place during the twelfth year of Xerxes, which was 122 years later.

One commentator reports that the “conclusions seem inevitable that the Book of Esther is not historical, and that it is doubtful whether even an historical kernel underlies its narrative.”

We look at a list like that in a commentary, and our first thought is that those do indeed seem like problems. But as soon as we start investigating them, the problems quickly disappear.

And a lack of evidence? Hardly. Esther is evidence. Daniel is evidence. Ezra is evidence. In fact, those books are the best evidence we have as to the events of that time.

We will discuss those alleged problems as we work through the text, but first let's look at how others characterize the book of Esther.

Some argue that Esther is a historical novel. That is, the author is writing about a historical event, but he is doing so with a degree of poetic license. Something of historical importance is being told, but in a creative way.

Others argue that Esther is a fictional narrative. That is, Esther is just a very creative short story meant to entertain or teach (or both), but not meant to convey a history of actual events.

Some argue that Esther is a comedy (and no one disputes that some of the events in this very serious book are very funny). They point to Haman and the King as a megalomaniac and a buffoon, respectively. They point to the many amusing coincidences, parallels, and reverses in the book. They point to what they see as mockery, ironic exaggeration, and underdeveloped characters and caricatures in the book.

We can group these proposals into two categories:

- The first option is that Esther is not fictional at all, but rather is what it purports to be: a historical account of the Jews in Persia during the reign of Xerxes.
- The second option is that Esther is either partly fictional or entirely fictional.

The arguments in favor of the second option and against Esther's historicity are based primarily on three things:

- Contrary statements by Greek historians (mainly Herodotus).
- The absence of confirming evidence by the same Greek historians.
- Events judged to be highly improbable, at least based on our limited knowledge of the ancient world.

For starters, those who bet against the Bible have been proved wrong over and over again as additional archaeological evidence is found, and we will see examples of that in our study of this book.

For example, in Esther 3:7, Haman casts lots during the first month of the year to determine a date (in the 12th month) on which to execute his plans. Commentators once pointed to this event as an example of something highly improbable, but evidence has since been found that some rulers in the ancient world would cast lots in the first month to determine events and actions for the following twelve months – and suddenly the improbable became very probable!

As for the absence of confirming evidence, that is not very surprising when one considers the lack of sources about Persia during this time. There are a few inscriptions about King Xerxes' reign written during his reign, which means that they are very biased in his favor. The Greek historians also tell us about Xerxes, but their focus is primarily on Xerxes' interaction with the Greeks, and they are biased against him. There is little information from any source on the period between 479 and the end of Xerxes' reign in 465, and even less information (such as Esther) that presents an objective account.

As for the supposed contradictions between Esther and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, it never seems to occur to these liberal scholars that perhaps Herodotus is the one who is

mistaken.

Also, while it is true that Herodotus does not mention Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti (at least not by that name), it is also true that Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar, whose existence was likewise denied by liberal scholars until archaeological discoveries confirmed his place in history and the left the liberal scholars with liberal egg on their liberal faces!

But when the liberals throw mud, we need to do more than just throw mud back in return. We need to investigate their charges.

So let's start with perhaps the biggest charge against the book – Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was Amestris. The book of Esther, by contrast, does not mention Amestris, but instead names two other queens: Vashti and Esther, neither of which was named by Herodotus. How is this explained?

First, this may be yet another example of historians automatically assuming Herodotus is correct and the Bible is mistaken. It never seems to occur to them that Herodotus might be wrong and the Bible might be correct.

Second, Persian kings generally had many royal wives, a fact confirmed about Xerxes by the book of Esther. Esther tells us that Xerxes had at least two queens, and that he had a harem from which he selected at least one of those two queens. And so Xerxes could have had three queens: Amestris, Vashti, and Esther (with Herodotus naming one of them and the book of Esther naming the other two).

But, if so, why? Why are two of those three queens not mentioned by Herodotus?

Perhaps Herodotus mentions only Amestris because he was interested only in the royal wives who bore the successors to the throne. All other royal wives and concubines, of which Persian kings typically had many, were presumably irrelevant to Herodotus' purpose of tracing the succession of the Persian dynasty.

Herodotus mentions only two of the several wives of Xerxes' father, Darius, both of whom bore sons who contended for the throne of Darius, which Xerxes eventually won. If Herodotus includes in his history only the royal wives who were directly relevant to the succession of the throne, then this historical problem in Esther disappears. Only Amestris would be expected to be named by Herodotus since she gave birth to Xerxes' successor, Artaxerxes.

A third possibility is that Amestris is in fact mentioned in Esther, just not by that name. That is, perhaps Amestris is either Esther or Vashti. But which one? To answer that question we need to know more about Amestris.

Who was Amestris? The Greeks describe her as strong-willed and brutal, once ordering 18 noble Persian youths to be buried alive as an offering to one of her false gods. Amestris gave Xerxes a robe she had personally woven, and Xerxes was tricked into giving that robe to his niece and daughter-in-law, with whom he was seeking to have an affair. In fact, Xerxes had also attempted to have an affair with her mother, his brother's wife, and he had married that woman's daughter to his son, hoping it would bring him closer to her mother – but when her daughter showed up, he turned his attention on her, forgetting about her mother. Once Amestris found out about the affair with the daughter, she had the girl's mother mutilated, believing she was behind all of the trouble.

What does that sordid account tell us? Several things, but one thing it tells us for sure is that Amestris was not Esther! But could Amestris have been Vashti?

We haven't made it to Chapter 1 yet, but I suspect many of us already know all about Queen Vashti. She was the queen in Esther 1 who was commanded to appear before King Xerxes while he was giving a drunken feast, but who refused to appear as commanded. She was then demoted, which led to Esther becoming queen.

Could the evil Amestris really be the same person as righteous Vashti? That's a trick question – what makes us think that Vashti was righteous?

Earlier we talked about the different ways that the people in Esther are described by the narrator. Haman, for example, is laid wide open for our inspection – we know what he is thinking and planning. Others, by contrast, are known to us only by their words and their actions – we are never told their motivations or their thoughts. Vashti falls in this latter category, and we don't know too many of her words or actions either! Here is the sum total of what the Bible tells us about Vashti:

- She was queen, and she gave a feast for the women while Xerxes was giving a feast for the men.
- Xerxes commanded seven eunuchs to escort her to his feast so that the men could see her great beauty.
- Vashti refused to come, and the king got very angry.



- Her punishment was that she was no longer allowed to come before the king. (She was not killed or divorced, but rather she was demoted.)

The key question is why did Vashti refuse to come before the King as she was commanded? The Bible does not answer that question.

Was Vashti righteous? Perhaps. Was Vashti evil? Perhaps. We just can't tell too much about her from her refusal to appear before the king and all of his drunken guests. Even the most evil woman alive would likely have thought twice before accepting an invitation to appear before a group of men who had been drinking for seven days straight!

When we get to Chapter 1 we will have more to say about Vashti's possible motivations, but for now all we need to know is that we cannot rule out Vashti and Amestris being the same person based just on the Biblical evidence about Vashti, and there is some extra-Biblical evidence suggesting they may indeed have been the same person.

And if they are the same person, then that identification would likely require us to change our typical view of Vashti as a positive example of righteousness and courage. But, again, when we get to Chapter 1 we will see that many readers of Esther, both Christian and Jewish, throughout the years have categorized Vashti as a very negative example because she disobeyed her husband.

Vashti was punished by no longer being allowed to come before the king. What does history tell us happened to Amestris?

Amestris is not mentioned by Herodotus during Xerxes' reign after the "mutilation" event we discussed earlier – apparently suffering the consequences of her own vindictiveness. She reappears later as a strong figure after Xerxes was assassinated, during the reign of her son, Artaxerxes I. As queen mother, she pressured her son, the king, to behead 50 Greek prisoners and crucify another.

#ezra-esther