

ESTHER AND THE PERSIAN COURT

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Almost all critical scholars deny the historicity of the book of Esther, which is the only book of the Bible that describes life in the Jewish Diaspora and is the only witness to the reign of Xerxes. But the fact remains that the author of Esther does not contradict anything that is known from all the sources available to us from this period. The objections are basically arguments from silence.

The book of Esther begins in Susa, the winter palace of the Persian kings. It was the third year of Xerxes (483 BC), who is here called "Ahasuerus" in Hebrew or *Khshayarsha* in Old Persian. He was the Persian ruler from 486 to 465 BC. All commentators agree that Xerxes' empire stretched from India to Ethiopia (Esth 1:1) and that the lavish banquet at the opening of the book of Esther in Xerxes' third year corresponds to the great council to plan the invasion of Greece (Esth 1:3; Herodotus, *Histories*, vii. 8). Moreover, the strange gap of four years between 1:3 and 2:16 can be satisfactorily explained as the time from 483 to 480 BC, when Xerxes was conducting his ill-fated invasion of Greece. At the end of a seven-day banquet, Xerxes ordered his queen, Vashti, to pose before the drunken revelers (possibly naked). When she refused, the king had her deposed. A search for a new queen was inaugurated but apparently was interrupted by the Grecian campaign from 483 to 480 BC before a new queen could be installed.

The contest winner was Esther, a young Jewish orphan, who lived in Susa with her older cousin Mordecai. "Mordecai" is a direct transliteration of the Babylonian name of the god Marduk into Hebrew. What a pious Jew was doing with a pagan name like this can only be surmised. "Esther" is likewise a form of the goddess "Ishtar." Apparently neither had revealed their national identity up to this point.

Cyrus H. Gordon has drawn attention to a distinctively Iranian institution, which survives into modern times, known as *kitman* or *taqiyya*, which may be rendered as "dissimulation." According to this procedure, an individual is permitted to deny his or her own religion while posing as a member of some other faith if confronted with acute personal danger. Gordon illustrated this from modern Iranian life by showing how Shiites of Iran are permitted to pose with impunity as Sunnis when going on the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is in the hands of the Arab Sunnis who occasionally display violent hostility toward Shiites. Thus, Mordecai forbade his cousin to disclose her identity. This may explain why she used a non-Hebrew name. Her Hebrew name, Hadassah ("myrtle"), was mentioned once by the narrator when describing her background (Esth 2:7).

J. Stafford argued convincingly that Vashti refused to pose before the drunken banquet when ordered to do so by Xerxes because she was pregnant with Artaxerxes I. From the fact that Artaxerxes I was eighteen when he ascended the throne in 464/5 BC, Wright deduced that he was born in 483 BC. This is presumably sometime shortly after the lavish banquet described in Esther. He also argued that Vashti is the Hebrew rendering of the Greek "Amestris," the wife of Xerxes I, who exerted her power until her death in 424 BC.

Herodotus recorded a particularly unpleasant episode in Amestris's past. Amestris, despite being deposed, was taken along with the rest of the king's harem on the Grecian campaign. Amestris tried to win Xerxes back by making an especially fine robe that she wove herself. Meanwhile Xerxes, having an affair with both his brother's wife and daughter, offered the daughter whatever she



requested from him. She chose the robe that Amestris had woven for Xerxes. Amestris was furious and, as a result, had her mutilated and her tongue torn out. Xerxes had to wait for things to cool down before a new queen could be announced. Perhaps this is why Esther 2:1 implies a lapse of time when it says, "Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her." After time had elapsed and Xerxes had returned from the Grecian campaign (leaving Mardonius in charge at Plataea), Esther was made queen in Xerxes' seventh regnal year, 479 BC.

It was about this same time that a conspiracy was brewing in the palace and was overheard by Esther's cousin Mordecai, who was "sitting at the king's gate" (Esth 2:19, zr, 5:13; 6:10). The king's gate was most likely not a simple architectural unit; it was the center of auxiliary buildings belonging to the palace and included all the management offices of the palace. "To sit" likely means, in this context, as in modern Hebrew, "to be stationed" or to have an office at a particular place. It was in this capacity as a royal employee working in the palace offices that Mordecai learned of the plot of two bodyguards to kill King Xerxes. Mordecai may have been the head of what amounted to the king's secret service. (Note Esther 4:1's claim that Mordecai knew of everything that was going on in the court). The king's ill fortune in the Greek campaign likely signaled to some that he was not as invincible as he had portrayed. Mordecai reported the plot to the king through Esther, and the incident was made a matter of record.

At this point Mordecai received the title of *orosanges* ("benefactor of the king"), as Herodotus described it. This benefactor had the privilege of not prostrating himself to anyone other than the king. This may have been the reason why Mordecai did not prostrate himself to Haman. Angered by Mordecai's refusal, Haman somehow learned that Mordecai was Jewish, and thus he persuaded Xerxes to sign a decree that all Jews would be killed and their property confiscated. Mordecai informed Esther that she had to go, even at the risk of her life, to Xerxes to disclose that she too was Jewish and to plead for her people.

When Esther revealed what Haman was about to do, Xerxes ordered Haman's immediate execution. He also authorized the Jews to defend themselves. In the fighting that ensued on that date, some eleven months from when "they cast the *pur*" (that is the "lot," Esth 3:7) to choose the date for the murder of the Jews, 75,000 would-be executioners died. The *pur* is known from other contexts as a one-inch cube of clay with writing on it.



These cubes were used as dice to determine matters that needed to be arbitrated or that were believed to be in the hands of the gods. It was for this reason—when the Jews successfully defended themselves—that the festival called the Feast of Purim was instituted to mark the turning of this sorrowful day into one of joy (Esth 9:26-28).



The Tombs of the Persian (Achaemenid) Kings, Darius The Great, Xerxes, Artaxerxes and Darius II
(These Kings are mentioned in the Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther)