

ESTHER

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

This book has its name from the person who is the principal subject of it; it is by Clemens of Alexandria^{f1} called the Book of Mordecai also; it is commonly called, in the Hebrew copies, “Megillah Esther”, the Volume of Esther; and sometimes in the Jewish writings only “Megillah”, by way of eminency, “the Volume”. It was written, according to the Talmudists^{f2}, by the men of the great synagogue, composed by Ezra; and some think it was written by Ezra himself^{f3}; but Aben Ezra is of opinion it was written by Mordecai, since he was concerned in, and had perfect knowledge of, all things related in it; which is rejected by Spinoza^{f4}, who conceits that this, and the books of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, were written by one and the same historian long after the times of Judas Maccabaeus: as to the canonical authority of it, it has been generally received by Jews and Christians; our wise men, says Maimonides^{f5}, openly and plainly affirm of the book of Esther, that it was dictated by the Holy Spirit; so Aben Ezra on (אֶסְתֵּר 6:6) Esther 6:6), and he himself^{f6} affirms, that

“all the books of the prophets, and all the Hagiographa (or holy writings), shall cease in the days of the Messiah, except the volume of Esther; and, lo, that shall be as stable as the Pentateuch, and as the constitutions of the oral law, which shall never cease.”

Though the versions of other books of Scripture might not be read in the synagogues, versions of this book might to those who did not understand Hebrew^{f7}; and so Luther^{f8} says, the Jews more esteem the book of Esther than any of the prophets. Whence Mr. Baxter^{f9} had that notion, I can not devise, that the Jews used to cast to the ground the book of Esther before they read it, because the name of God was not in it: nor is that any objection to its authenticity, since the hand and providence of God may be most clearly seen in it; in raising Esther to such grandeur, and that for the deliverance of the people of the Jews, and in counter working and bringing to nought the plots of their enemies, and in saving them: nor that it is not

quoted in the New Testament; it is sufficient there is no disagreement between them, yea, an entire agreement, particularly in the account of the captivity of Jeconiah, which is expressed almost in the same words in (~~1706~~ Esther 2:6) as in (~~4011~~ Matthew 1:11,12). It stands in Origen's catalogue ^{f10} of the books of the Old Testament; nor is it any material objection that it appears not in the catalogue of Melito ^{f11}, since in that list is comprehended under Ezra not Nehemiah only, but Esther also, which Jerom ^{f12} mentions along with it. This book is not only of use to the Jews, as it shows the original and foundation of a feast of theirs, still kept up by them, the feast of Purim, and makes for the glory of their nation, and therefore it is no wonder it should be so highly esteemed by them; but serves to show the singular providence of God in taking care of his people in adversity, in humbling the proud, and exalting the lowly, and saving those that pray to him, and trust in him; it furnishes out various instructions in the conduct of the several persons herein mentioned; it is a history but of ten or eleven years at most, from the third of Ahasuerus, to the twelfth of his reign, (~~1706~~ Esther 1:3 3:7).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER 1

This chapter relates, how that Ahasuerus, a great king of Persia, made a feast, first for the grandees of his kingdom, and then for his people, as his queen did for the women, (^{<7000>}Esther 1:1-9), who being sent for by him, and she refusing to come, was, by the advice of one of his counsellors, divorced from him, and an order made and published throughout his dominions, that every man should bear rule in his own house, (^{<7000>}Esther 1:10-22).

Ver. 1. *Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus,* etc.] Who he was is not easy to say; almost all the kings of Persia are so named by one or another writer. He cannot be the Ahasuerus in (^{<2000>}Daniel 9:1), he was Astyages, the father of Cyaxares or Darius the Mede; but this must be one who had his royal palace in Shushan, which was never the royal city of the Medes, but of the Persians only; nor does he seem to be the Ahasuerus in (^{<1500>}Ezra 4:6), who is thought to be Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus; since, according to the canon of Ptolemy, he reigned but eight years, whereas this Ahasuerus at least reigned twelve, (^{<7000>}Esther 3:7), though indeed some account for it by his reigning in his father's lifetime; besides, Cambyses was always an enemy to the Jews, as this was not; and yet this way go many of the Jewish writers ^{f13} and so a very learned man, Nicolaus Abram ^{f14}; according to Bishop Usher ^{f15}, this was Darius Hystaspis, who certainly was a friend to the Jewish nation; but he is rather the Artaxerxes of Ezra and Nehemiah; and so says the Midrash ^{f16}. Dr. Prideaux ^{f17} thinks Ahasuerus was Artaxerxes Longimanus, which is the sense of Josephus ^{f18}, and who is thought by many to be the Artaxerxes in the foresaid books. Capellus ^{f19} is of opinion, that Darius Ochus is meant, to which Bishop Patrick inclines; but I rather think, with Vitringa ^{f20} and others ^{f21}, that Xerxes is the Ahasuerus that was the husband of Esther here spoken of; so the Arabic writers ^{f22}; and as he was the son and successor of Darius Hystaspis, if he is meant by Artaxerxes in the preceding books, the history of which is carried to the thirty second year of his reign, (^{<1500>}Nehemiah 13:6) and who reigned but four years more; this book of

Esther stands in right order of time to carry on the history of the Jewish affairs in the Persian monarchy; and Mr. Broughton^{f23} owns, that the name of Xerxes, in Greek, agrees with Ahasuerus in Hebrew; and in (<790>Esther 10:1) his name is Achashresh, which, with the Greeks, is Axeres or Xerxes^{f24}.

this is Ahasuerus, which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia; properly so called; the Ethiopians had been subdued by Cambyses the son and successor of Cyrus^{f25}, and the Indians by Darius Hystaspis the father of Xerxes^{f26}; and both, with other great nations, were retained in subjection to him^{f27}; and many of both, as well as of other nations, were with him in his expedition into Greece^{f28}:

over an hundred and twenty and seven provinces; there were now seven provinces more under his jurisdiction than were in the times of Darius the Mede, (<790>Daniel 6:1).

Ver. 2. *That in those days, when the King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom*, etc.] Not only was placed upon it, but settled in it; after Xerxes had subdued Egypt, in the second year of his reign^{f29}, and enjoyed great peace and tranquillity:

which was in Shushan the palace; that is, the throne of his kingdom was in Shushan, the royal city of the kings of Persia; of which (See Gill on <790>Nehemiah 1:1") (See Gill on <790>Daniel 8:2").

Ver. 3. *In the third year of his reign he made a feast unto all his princes, and his servants*, etc.] The nobles and officers in his court; on what account this was cannot be said with certainty, whether the first day of it was his birthday, or the day of his coming to the throne, on which day Xerxes used to make a feast annually, as Herodotus relates^{f30}:

the power of Persia and Media; the mighty men therein, the potentates thereof; or the "army", the principal officers of it:

the nobles and princes of the provinces being with him. The first word Aben Ezra declares his ignorance of, whether it is Hebrew or Persian; Jarchi interprets it governors; and the persons intended by both seem to be the deputy governors of the one hundred and twenty seven provinces who were present at this feast. Xerxes, having reduced Egypt, meditated a war with Greece, to which he was pressed by Mardonius, a relation of his; upon which he summoned the chief men of his kingdom, to have their advice

about it ^{f31}, which perhaps was taken at this time; for it was in the third year of his reign he resolved upon the war, and began to make preparations for it; and it was usual, at banquets and feasts, that the Persians debated their most important affairs ^{f32}.

Ver. 4. *When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom*, etc.] Xerxes was the fourth king of the Persian monarchy, and was “far richer than all” that went before him, all their riches coming into his hands, (^{2710B}Daniel 11:2), and now that prophecy began to be fulfilled, “that by his strength, through his riches, he should stir up all against the realm of Grecia”; which he began to do in the third year of his reign, and for which these his nobles might be called together, as to have their advice, so to animate them to come in the more readily into the expedition, by showing them the riches he was possessed of; for to none of the kings of Persia does this largeness of riches better belong than to Xerxes:

and the honour of his excellent majesty; the grandeur he lived in, the pomp and splendour of his court; he was the most grand and magnificent of all the kings of the Medes and Persians ^{f33}:

and this he did many days, even an hundred and fourscore days; to which seven more being added, as in the following verse, it made one hundred and eighty seven, the space of full six months; though some think the feast did not last so long, only seven days, and that the one hundred and eighty days were spent in preparing for it; but the Persian feasts were very long, large, and sumptuous. Dr. Frye ^{f34} says, this custom of keeping an annual feast one hundred and eighty days still continues in Persia. Cheus ^{f35}, a Chinese emperor, used frequently to make a feast which lasted one hundred and twenty days; though it cannot be well thought that the same individual persons here were feasted so long, but, when one company was sufficiently treated, they removed and made way for another; and so it continued successively such a number of days as here related, which was six months, or half a year; a year then in use consisting of three hundred and sixty days, as was common with the Jews, and other nations, and so the Persians ^{f36}.

Ver. 5. *And when these days were ended*, etc.] The one hundred and eighty, in which the nobles, princes, and great men of the kingdom were feasted:

the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small; of every age, rank, state and condition of life; these were the common people, whether inhabitants of the city or country people there on business, whether natives or foreigners; according to the Targum, there were Israelites there, but not Mordecai and his family; yea, it is said in the Midrash ^{f37}, that they were all Jews, and that their number was 18,500; but this is not probable; it is very likely there were some Jews among them, as there were many in the army of Xerxes, when he made his expedition into Greece, according to the poet Choerilus ^{f38}; which is not to be wondered at, since there were so many of them in his dominions, and they men of valour and fidelity, and to whose nation he was so kind and favourable: and this feast was kept

seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace; which no doubt was very large, and sufficient to hold such a number as was assembled together on this occasion, when there was not room enough for them in the palace. There is in history an account of a Persian king that supped with 15,000 men, and in the supper spent forty talents ^{f39}.

Ver. 6. *Where were white, green, and blue hangings*, etc.] Or curtains of fine linen, as the Targum, which were of these several colours; the first letter of the word for “white” is larger than usual, to denote the exceeding whiteness of them. The next word is “carpas”, which Ben Melech observes is a dyed colour, said to be green. Pausanias ^{f40} makes mention of Carpasian linen, and which may be here meant; the last word used signifies blue, sky coloured, or hyacinth:

fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings, and pillars of marble; these pillars are said, in the Targum, to be of divers colours, red, green, and shining yellow and white, on which the silver rings were fixed, and into them were put linen strings of purple colour, which fastened the hangings to them, and so made an enclosure, within which the guests sat at the feast:

the beds were of gold and silver; the couches on which they sat, or rather reclined at eating, as was the manner of the eastern nations; these, according to the Targum, were of lambs' wool, the finest, and the softest, and the posts of them were of gold, and their feet of silver. Such luxury obtained among the Romans in later times ^{f41}:

these were placed in a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble; which, according to some, are the porphyrite, Parian, alabaster, and marble of various colours; the marble of the Persians is of four colours, white, black, red and black, and white and black ^{f42}; but others take them to be precious stones, as Jarchi and Aben Ezra; the first is by the Targum interpreted crystal, by others the emerald, one of which Theophrastus ^{f43} speaks of as four cubits long, and three broad, which might be laid in a pavement; the third is, by Bochart ^{f44}, supposed to be the pearl; and in the Talmud ^{f45} it is said to be of such a nature, that if placed in the middle of a dining room, will give light in it as at noonday, which seems to be what is called lychnites; to which Lucian ^{f46} ascribes a like property: nor need all this seem strange, since great was the luxury of the eastern nations. Philostratus ^{f47} speaks of a temple in India paved with pearls, and which he says all the Barbarians use in their temples; particularly it is said ^{f48}, that the roofs of the palaces of Shushan and Ecbatana, the palaces of the kings of Persia, shone with gold and silver, ivory, and amber; no wonder then that their pavements were of very valuable and precious stones: and from hence it appears, that the “lithostrata”, the word here used by the Septuagint, or tesserated pavements, were in use four hundred years before the times of Sylla, where the beginning of them is placed by Pliny ^{f49}; there was a “lithostraton” in the second temple at Jerusalem, by us rendered the pavement, (~~4813~~ John 19:13), perhaps the same with the room Gazith, so called from its being laid with hewn stone. Aristeas ^{f50}, who lived in the times of Ptolemy Philadelphus, testifies that the whole floor of the temple was a “lithostraton”, or was paved with stone: it is most likely therefore that these had their original in the eastern country, and not in Greece, as Pliny ^{f51} supposed.

Ver. 7. *They gave them drink in vessels of gold, the vessels being divers one from another*, etc.] In the pattern and workmanship of them, though of the same metal, which diversity made the festival the more grand; earthen cups, with the Persians, were reckoned very mean; when a king would disgrace a man, he obliged him to use earthen cups ^{f52}. The Targum represents these vessels to be the golden vessels of the temple at Jerusalem Nebuchadnezzar carried away; which could not be, since they had been delivered by Cyrus to Zerubbabel, (~~4807~~ Ezra 1:7-10),

and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king; such as the king was able to give, the best he had, and that in great plenty; the wine the kings of Persia used to drink, as Strabo ^{f53} relates, was Chalybonian

wine, or wine of Helbon, as it is called, (³²⁷⁸Ezekiel 27:18), but by the wine of the kingdom, as it may be rendered, is meant wine of the country; the wine of Schiras is reckoned the best in Persia ^{f54}.

Ver. 8. *And the drinking was according to the law, none did compel*, etc.] According to the law Ahasuerus gave to his officers next mentioned, which was not to oblige any man to drink more than he chose; the Targum is,

‘according to the custom of his body;’

that is, as a man is able to bear it, so they drank: some ^{f55} read it, “the drinking according to the law, let none exact”; or require it to be, according to the custom then in use in Persia; for they were degenerated from their former manners, and indulged to intemperance, as Xenophon ^{f56} suggests: the law formerly was, not to carry large vessels into feasts; but now, says he, they drink so much, that they themselves must be carried out, because they cannot go upright: and so it became a law with the Greeks, at their festivals, that either a man must drink or go out ^{f57}; so the master of a feast, at which Empedocles was, ordered either that he should drink, or the wine be poured on his head ^{f58}; but such force or compulsion Ahasuerus forbad: and thus with the Chinese now, they force none to drink, but modestly invite them ^{f59}:

for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man’s pleasure; to let them have what wine they would, but not force them to drink more than was agreeable to them.

Ver. 9. *Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women* etc.] For it was not customary with the Persians, nor other eastern nations, to admit of women to their festivals ^{f60}, but they feasted by themselves. Who Vashti was is not known with any certainty. Bishop Usher, who takes Ahasuerus to be Darius Hystaspis, thinks Vashti was Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus, whom he married. The Targumist says, she was the daughter of Evilmerodach, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Her name seems to be the same with Vesta, a deity worshipped by the Persians, as Xenophon ^{f61}, and signifies vehement fire, which was in great veneration with them; and therefore this queen is most likely to be of Persian original: she kept her feast

in the royal house which belonged to Ahasuerus; her guests not being so many, there was room enough in the king’s palace for them, and where it

was more decent for them to be than in the open air in the garden, and exposed to the sight of men.

Ver. 10. *On the seventh day*, etc.] Of the feast, the last day of it, which the Rabbins, as Jarchi observes, say was the sabbath day, and so the Targum:

when the heart of the king was merry with wine; when he was intoxicated with it, and knew not well what he said or did; and the discourse at table ran upon the beauty of women, as the latter Targum; when the king asserted there were no women so beautiful as those of Babylon, and, as a proof of it, ordered his queen to be brought in:

he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bightha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains, that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king; or “eunuchs”, as the word is sometimes rendered; and such persons were made use of in the eastern countries to, wait upon women, and so were proper to be sent on the king’s errand to the queen.

Ver. 11. *To bring Vashti the queen before the king*, etc.] Not against her will, or by force; but they were sent to let her know it was the king’s pleasure that she should come to him immediately:

with the crown royal; that is, upon her head, to make her look the more grand and majestic:

to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look upon; which was not wisely done, neither was it comely nor safe.

Ver. 12. *But the queen refused to come at the king’s commandment by his chamberlains*, etc.] Even though he sent by them again, as the Targum; and so says Josephus^{f62}; which might not purely arise from pride in her, and contempt of him, but because she might conclude he was drunk, and knew not well what he did; and therefore had she come at his command, when he was himself and sober, he might blame her for coming, nay, use her ill for it, and especially if she was to come naked, as say the Jews^{f63}; and besides, it was contrary to the law of the Persians, as not only Josephus^{f64}, but Plutarch^{f65} observes, which suffered not women to be seen in public; and particularly did not allow their wives to be with them at feasts, only their concubines and harlots, with whom they could behave with more indecency; as for their wives, they were kept out of sight, at home^{f66}; and therefore Vashti might think it an indignity to be treated as an harlot or concubine:

therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him; which was the more fierce, as he was inflamed with wine.

Ver. 13. *Then the king said to the wise men that knew the times,* etc.] Astrologers, as Aben Ezra, that knew the fit time for doing anything; or that had knowledge of ancient times, historians, well read in history, and knew things that had happened similar to this:

for so was the king's manner towards all that knew law and judgment; it was customary with him in any case of difficulty to have the opinion and advice of those that were expert in the law, and well understood right and wrong. These are called by Herodotus ^{f67} the king's judges.

Ver. 14. *And the next unto him,* etc.] That sat next to the king, and was the chief in dignity and authority under him:

was Carshena; and so everyone in their rank and order, as next mentioned:

Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan; who, according to the latter Targum, were of different countries; the first of Africa, the second of India, the third of Idumea, the fourth of Egypt, the fifth of Resen, (^{<01012>}Genesis 10:12) which is framed out of Marsena, who is dropped, and the last of Jerusalem, said to be Daniel; though the former Targum makes him to be Haman:

the seven powers of Persia and Media; which custom of having seven counsellors with the kings of Persia arose from the seven princes that slew Smerdis the pretender, and made Darius Hystaspis king, the father of Xerxes:

which saw the king's face; were intimate and familiar with him, often in his presence; yea, might go into it when they pleased, without the ceremony of being introduced; which privilege the above persons reserved to themselves, when they placed Darius on the throne, as Herodotus relates ^{f68}.

and which sat the first in the kingdom; next to the king, and were assisting to him in the administration of government, (see ^{<15074>}Ezra 7:14).

Ver. 15. *What shall we do unto the Queen Vashti, according to law,* etc.] The king desired to know what law was provided in such a case as her's, and what to be done according to it:

because she hath not performed the commandment of the king by the chamberlains? as this was the crime, disobedience to his commands, he would have those who had knowledge of the law consider what punishment was to be inflicted on her for it, according to former laws, usages, and customs, or as reason and justice required; and it being a festival, and they heated with wine, was no objection to a consultation on this head; for it was the manner of the Persians at festivals, and when inflamed with wine, to consult and determine about matters of the greatest moment ^{f69}; yea, reckoned their counsels and decrees firmer than when made when they were sober ^{f70}; so the ancient Germans ^{f71}.

Ver. 16. *And Memucan answered before the king and the princes,* etc.] Who was the last, and perhaps the least and the youngest of the counsellors; it being appointed by the king, according to the latter Targum that when his counsellors sat, the least should give their counsel first; just as puisne judges, and the youngest peers with us, give their opinion in a case first:

Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus; he means, by setting a bad example to their wives, as after explained; it is an exaggeration of her crime, and made with a design to incense the king the more against her.

Ver. 17. *For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women,* etc.] It will soon be spread all over the king's dominions, and reach the ears of the wives of all his subjects, and become their general talk everywhere:

so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes: make light of their authority, refuse subjection to them, slight their commands, and neglect to yield obedience to them, and so not give them the honour that is due unto them:

when it shall be reported, the King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, and she came not; was disobedient to his commands, refused to go along with the chamberlains sent by the king to fetch her.

Ver. 18. *Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen,* etc.] From henceforward they will give a like answer to their husbands, when they lay

their commands upon them, as Vashti has to the king; they will tell them to their faces they will not obey their orders:

thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath; there will be in wives a general contempt of their husbands, which will cause discord and strife, quarrels, wrath and anger; contempt on one part, wrath on the other, and contention between both.

Ver. 19. *If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him,* etc.] Not only a proclamation made, but a law enacted and published by royal authority:

and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and Medes that it be not altered; for so it was, that when a law was made, and signed, and sealed, and registered among the laws of the kingdom, it remained unalterable, (^{<2788>}Daniel 6:8,15), this precaution Memucan took for his own safety; for had the king acted upon his advice, without passing it into a law in such form, he might change his mind, and recall Vashti, who would not fail of venting her wrath upon the counsellor, and so he be in danger of losing his life for it:

that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus; but be entirely divorced, never to be received any more:

and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she; or “to her companions”^{f72}; that was with her in the house of the women in the seraglio; one that was fairer, as the Targum, or of a better disposition than her; let her be made queen, and enjoy all the honour, and dignity, and marks of royalty Vashti did; her throne, her crown, and royal apparel, as it is interpreted in an ancient Jewish writing^{f73}.

Ver. 20. *And when the king’s decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire,* etc.] As it was proper it should, since the report of the queen’s deed would be made everywhere:

for it is great; the empire consisting of one hundred and twenty seven provinces, (^{<4700>}Esther 1:1), Aben Ezra and Abendana interpret it, “though” it is great, yet the decree should be published throughout; the latter observes, that this may respect the king’s decree; and so the Targum is,

“for his decree is great;”

it respecting a matter of great importance, and relating to a great personage, and would have great effect on the minds of persons, when it was observed that one so great was treated in this manner: and therefore

all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small; speaking respectfully to them, yielding a ready and cheerful obedience to all their commands; which would be done to princes and peasants, to high and low, to every rank of men.

Ver. 21. *And the saying pleased the king and the princes,* etc.] The king, and the other six princes and counsellors, approved of the proposal, and unanimously agreed to it:

and the king did according to the word of Memucan; passed a law according to his advice, and signed and sealed it, and registered it among the laws of the kingdom, not to be revoked.

Ver. 22. *For he sent letters unto all the king's provinces,* etc.] The one hundred and twenty seven provinces, (^{אֶרְצוֹת} Esther 1:1), which, according to the Targum, were written and sealed with his own seal; which is very probable:

into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; that is, these letters were written in the language, and in the characters in which that language was written, used in each of the provinces to which these letters were sent, that they might be easily read and understood by all: the sum of which was,

that every man should bear rule in his own house; be prince, lord, and master there, and his commands obeyed, not only by his children and servants, but by his wife also:

and that it should be published according to the language of every people; but as this is expressed, or at least implied, in the first clause of this verse, it should rather be rendered, “and that he should speak according to the language of his people”; and so is the latter Targum; it seems as if a man, who had married a woman in another country, in complaisance to her had neglected his own native tongue, and used hers in the family, by which means he lost, or seemed to lose, his authority in it: now, to guard against this, this part of the law was made; and, according to Jarchi, the husband was to compel his wife to learn and speak his language, if she was a

foreigner; to which agrees the first Targum, which paraphrases the whole thus,

“that a man rule over his wife, and oblige her to speak according to the language of her husband, and the speech of his people;”

and, in later times, Bahram Gaur forbid any other language, besides the Persian, to be used within his port, either in speaking or writing^{f74}.