

## Lesson 13

Last week we began looking at the book of Esther, and the first thing we noticed about the book is that it is a strange book, and we listed a number of reasons why it is a strange book. We also saw that it is an incredibly meaningful book, and particularly so to those facing persecution. As we ended, we were looking at two approaches to the book – one approach that views the book as an accurate historical record (the approach that I believe is correct), and the other approach that views the book as partly or wholly fictional.

At the end of class we had just reached the primary reason why most commentators today reject Esther as history, and that reason is this: the Greek historian Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was Amestris whereas Esther does not mention Amestris, but instead mentions two queens: Vashti and Esther herself, neither of which was mentioned by name by Herodotus. How is this explained?

(1) 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 it could be the other way around.

(2) 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. Thus, Xerxes could have had three queens: Amestris, Vashti, and Esther.

But why then are two of those three 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 his 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.

(3) 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. Xerxes was tricked into giving this robe to his niece and daughter-in-law, with whom he was seeking to have an affair (yes – niece, daughter-in-law, and mistress!). 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 most of you 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.

But 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? Last week 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, plus 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 7 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? And 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 7 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.

Although 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.)

Aside: When we get to Chapter 1, one thing we will see is that Vashti is seen as a hero by feminist commentators, whereas Esther is viewed with disdain by the feminists as “a stereotypical woman in a man's world.” Esther does not need us to defend her against such critics, but we should pause to note one thing about her. Most other women in the Bible are renowned because they were the

mothers of sons who became great in Israel (Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah). The only other book in the Bible named for a woman is Ruth, whose role in history was to give birth to an ancestor of King David. Esther is different. We are not told that she had any children, and certainly none that were famous in Israel. Esther is renowned solely because of her courage. There aren't too many women in the Bible who fall in that category, although Deborah may be another example.

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.

If Vashti was Amestris, here is likely what happened (combining what we know from the Bible with what the Greeks tell us). The peace envisioned by Cyrus had been shattered in the last years of Darius' reign by revolts in Egypt and in Babylon. After quelling these revolts, Darius' son Xerxes held a banquet early in his reign, at which time Amestris/Vashti was deposed. The purpose of this banquet was to plan the invasion of Greece. The war (which explains the time lag between Esther 1 and 2) began well but ended with a major naval defeat at Salamis in 480. The king returned home, seeking comfort among members of his harem. This was the year of Esther's marriage to the king. If this is what happened then there would have been about four years or more between the deposition of Vashti and the installation of Esther as queen, which would coincide with the four years Xerxes was absent from Persia on the expedition against the Greeks.

If Vashti was Amestris, then suddenly Herodotus turns from a potential problem into a confirmation of the Biblical account. And perhaps our questions about her motivation and her punishment become easier to answer.

Why, for example, was she demoted rather than killed for such an affrontery? (History tells us that Xerxes had a nasty and at times irrational temper, so we might have expected a much worse fate for this queen.) A careful review of the dates suggests that Amestris was most likely pregnant with the future king Artaxerxes at the time of this event. That fact might also tell us why the queen would have been particularly reluctant about being paraded in front of men at a drunken feast.

But if they are the same person, why two different names? There may have been three different names! The book of Esther may be giving us the Hebrew form of a Persian name, with Herodotus giving us the Greek form of the same Persian name. And neither the 'V' sound in Vashti nor the 'Sh' sound occurs in Greek, which could explain how Vashti became Amestris in the Greek history. Also, Vashti means beautiful or best, and so it may have just been the king's nickname for Amestris. After having studied Daniel, we should not be surprised at all to find someone with two different names! Xerxes himself has a different name in the book of Esther, and such could have been true of Queen Vashti. Esther herself has two names in this book.

And why doesn't Herodotus mention Esther? We have already given a likely reason – Herodotus was interested only in those queens who bore sons in the royal line. Another likely reason is that Herodotus' history ends shortly after Xerxes' campaign to the West, which comes at just about the time the events in Esther take off.

So what can we then conclude about the Amestris problem? It is not a problem at all. In fact, if Vashti and Amestris are the same person — and they fit together well with what the secular Greek histories tell us — then Herodotus moves from the problem category into the confirmation category. We will have much more to say about Vashti when we get to Chapter 1.

What about the other so-called historical problems we mentioned last week? They are likewise easy to explain.

The fact that Esther did not come from one of the seven select families on Herodotus proves nothing. Neither Xerxes' own mother nor Amestris came from one of those seven families.

The 127 satrapies of Esther 1:1 are apparently smaller units than those 20 satrapies under discussion by Herodotus. For example, Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 1:3; 7:6 discuss the province of Judah, which was a subcategory of a larger satrapy.

What about the irrevocable laws of the Persian kings? Historians tell us there is no evidence for such a thing – is that correct?

First, as we mentioned last week, Esther and Daniel are evidence for such a thing – in fact, those two books should be very compelling evidence to an honest historian.

The book of Esther shows a very thorough knowledge of Persian names and the details of the Persian court and palace. The book agrees very well with what we know about King Xerxes from other sources – the greatness of his empire, his quick and sometimes irrational temper, his almost unlimited promises and generous gifts, his drunken feast, and even his efficient postal system (3:13 – “Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces”). The kingdom of Xerxes was known for extending from India to Cush as Esther tells us. The architecture of his palace in Esther matches the excavated palace of Artaxerxes II at Susa, a palace modeled after the one built by Darius and used by Xerxes.

Second, Herodotus does give us some evidence for this rule. We earlier discussed the event in Herodotus in which Xerxes gave Amestris' robe to his niece and son's wife. Herodotus tells us that Xerxes tried to get the robe back but he could not because he couldn't go back on his word. Xerxes offered whole cities, gold, and even his army to get the cloak back, but to no avail. Then, at his own birthday party, Amestris held him to his word again, gaining the right to have his brother's wife mutilated. Here is how Herodotus describes the event:

“He (Xerxes) accordingly offered her (his son's wife) cities instead (of the robe Amestris had given him) and gold in abundance and an army for none but herself to command. Armies are the most suitable of gifts in Persia. But as he could not move her, he gave her the mantle; and she, rejoicing greatly in the gift, went flaunting her finery. Amestris heard that she had the mantle, but when she learned the truth, it was not the girl with whom she was angry. She supposed rather that the girl's mother was guilty and that this was her doing, and so it was Masistes' (the king's brother) wife whom she plotted to destroy.”

“Xerxes considered it a terrible and wicked act to give up his brother's wife, and that too when she was innocent of the deed; for he knew the purpose of the request. Nevertheless, since Amestris was insistent and the law compelled him (for at this royal banquet in Persia every request must of

necessity be granted), he unwillingly consented, and delivered the woman to Amestris.”

Did you notice that phrase near the end? “The law compelled him.” That is not lifted from the Bible – that is lifted from Herodotus – and it agrees with what we see in the Bible! Herodotus himself confirms the irrevocable nature of the Persian laws. Who else but the king could revoke his own law, and if the king was “compelled” by the law as Herodotus tells us, then doesn’t that tell us that not even the king could revoke his law?

What about the objection that there is no evidence outside the Bible for the notion that anyone who came before a Persian king without being summoned risked summary execution? Archaeologists have uncovered an image of a Persian king (likely either Darius with the crown prince Xerxes standing behind him or Xerxes himself with the crown prince Artaxerxes standing behind him). The king in that image is sitting on his throne and holding a long scepter in his right hand. And who is standing just behind the king and the crown prince in that engraved image? A soldier holding a large ax. That image could be used as an illustration of the throne room scene in Esther – that is how perfectly it aligns with the text of Esther.

Finally, one of the main objections raised by some against Esther is that, they say, it contains events that are just too improbable to be true. Esther is in the right place at the right time when Vashti is deposed and when Haman’s evil plans come to light. When the king cannot sleep and asks for historical records to be read, the page happens to fall at the page highlighted Mordecai’s role in foiling a plot against the king. As the king considers what to do, Haman just happens to be standing outside. How do we answer those who argue such coincidences are too unlikely to be true?

First, as we have already said, such comments forget that although God is not mentioned in Esther, God is nevertheless present in Esther – and with God all things are possible. Esther and Joseph have much in common, and one such thing is that the life of each gives us a wonderful example of God’s providence. How does God work in our world today – an age in which miracles have ended? The answer is that God works behind the scenes – and that is exactly how we see God working in the book of Esther. When we are blessed by unlikely or improbable events – we should thank God rather than thank our lucky stars!

As we move through the text, we will see that the book of Esther has much to say about coincidences and luck. Are the events in the book just lucky coincidences, or is a greater power involved? The answer seems clear in Esther – each of the incidents regarded by itself might well appear to be the result of chance, but when taken together the element of chance disappears. They all converge to one point, and their design is evident. If I flip a coin and get 4 heads in a row, you may think I am lucky. But if I flip that coin and get 40 heads in a row, you will no longer be thinking that luck has anything to do with it – you will suspect I have a two-headed coin and that I have intentionally designed things so that particular outcome would occur.

What is the answer regarding the lucky coincidences in our own lives? While it is true that time and chance happens to us all (Ecclesiastes 9:11), not everything that happens to us comes by chance. If God by his providence is actively working in this world, then we need to look for his hand and for his open doors. The pagan may believe that all we do and all we are is governed by chance, but the Christian knows better. Rome worshiped the god of fortune, but we know better.

Esther can teach us to recognize God's providence in our own lives.

I am reminded of a story I once read in a book about prayer. The author told about how he was trying to get to sleep one night in advance of a sermon on prayer he was scheduled to deliver the next day, but he was being kept awake by a barking dog next door. He prayed for the barking to stop, and (to his surprise) it did so at once. He was then unable to sleep for wondering whether the dog had stopped barking on account of his prayer!

Getting back now to our responses to someone who complains that the events in Esther are too improbable to be true, second, it should go without saying that fact is very often much stranger than fiction. As the saying goes, you just can't make this up!

Third, those who complain that the events in Esther are too improbable to have occurred appear to know about as much about mathematics as they do about theology! There is a difference between you picking a winning lottery number ahead of the drawing and you hearing a news report on the winning number after the drawing – one has an almost zero chance of occurring, whereas the other happens every week. We are not looking in Esther at an event randomly plucked from history and that happens to be filled with coincidences; instead we are looking at an event chosen after the fact because it was so interesting that God put it into the Bible. Also, as we already noted, the events in Esther are not random – but rather are being directed by God working behind the scenes. (I have the same problem with those who takes the Messianic prophecies, assign probabilities to them, and then argue that Jesus must be the Messiah because it is so unlikely anyone would have satisfied all of the prophecies just by chance. That is bad theology and bad math!)

And one final note on this point – those modern scholars who believe the events in Esther are so unlikely most likely believe that they themselves evolved through random mutations from single cell creatures that somehow sprang into existence from lifeless matter due to nothing but random chance after a giant explosion. When viewed alongside that fairy tale, Esther looks like the Wall Street Journal!

Honest historians and commentators concede many historical accuracies in Esther, and for that reason few today would argue that Esther is a complete fiction. Instead, most modern scholars view it as a historical novel.

We, of course, will take the position that Esther is not any sort of a novel, but instead is a historical narrative describing actual events and actual people – and we will do so for at least five reasons:

1. There is no indication that the book is intended to be taken in any way other than as a straightforward narrative of events as they occurred. It goes to great lengths to include places, names, events, and many historical details. If this book is not a history, then how can we distinguish it from the other historical books in the Bible?

2. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that Esther is an accurate witness to Persian affairs and Persian culture.

3. Although we have no record of Jesus ever mentioning Esther, Jesus' view of the Old Testament is that it is an unquestionably reliable guide to past events. He mentions Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, and many other persons and incidents from the

Old Testament. “It is not too much to say that Jesus accepted without reservation the entire historical fabric of the Old Testament, including those aspects of it most troublesome to modern minds.” The Creation? The Flood? Jonah and the fish? Jesus believed in them all, and he knows because he was there!

4. The Bible is the inspired word of God. Although there are within it some fictional accounts that are intended to teach a lesson (parables, for example), they are always clearly indicated as such (“Then he began to speak to them in parables”). Esther has no such indication, and so we must take it for what it claims to be – a true history of actual events. The first words in the book are “Now it came to pass,” not “Once upon a time.” The book ends in 10:2 with “And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?” Esther presents itself as history because that is exactly what it is – history.

5. The message of Esther is tied to its historical nature. The basis for the celebration of Purim is the historical event in which the Jews were delivered from their enemies. If Esther does not report this historical incident accurately, then Purim is based on fiction. Also, a major theme of Esther is that of reversal in which God works on behalf of his people to turn evil into good. What does it say about that theme if the events on which it is based are mere fiction? What sort of confidence or comfort would that provide? “God is working on your behalf, and if you don’t believe me, let me tell you a fairy tale!” That makes no sense at all! If Esther is not history, then the message of Esther is meaningless!

## **What is the Historical Setting of Esther?**

We discussed the history of Persia in our introductory lessons on Ezra, and we won’t repeat that here. But we will consider the history of Xerxes, the Persian king at the center of these events.

The events in Esther took place during the reign of Xerxes, who in Hebrew is called Ahasuerus. Xerxes was king of Persia from 486 until 465 BC. He was preceded by Darius the Great (who was king when the second temple was completed) and was followed by Artaxerxes (who was king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned).

Our main evidence from this era comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian, whose book *Histories of the Persian Wars* (490-480 BC) tells us about the Persian kings and their campaigns. Although he was a Greek writing about his Persian enemies and therefore not an objective source, his book does provide some evidence about Persian personalities and practices. For example, he describes Xerxes as tall and handsome, as an ambitious ruler, and as a warrior. It appears that Herodotus was fascinated by Xerxes because about a third of his book is taken up with his reign.

Herodotus describes Xerxes’ Greek expedition in 480-479, which ended as a dismal failure. But Xerxes also had some victories. He reconquered Egypt, which had rebelled under Darius, and he also suppressed a rebellion in Babylon. There is little doubt that Xerxes was able to amass the largest army and navy ever mustered in antiquity.

Xerxes’ greatest achievement may have been his completion of the palace complex that Darius began in Persepolis. It has been called a marvel of grandeur, beauty, and luxury. A foundation stone has been found that begins, “I am Xerxes, the great king.”

But Xerxes had a problem (according to Herodotus and according to Esther): he did not measure up to the moral quality of his predecessors (who weren't that high on the scale to begin with!). One historian notes that Xerxes inherited none of the good qualities of the previous kings, but only a love of opulent display that progressively sapped his moral fiber. Another wrote that Xerxes "had the weakness, tyrannical character, and love of luxury to be expected in a prince reared at court."

In 470, the Persian army again suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks, which ended their 50-year struggle with Greece. Persia maintained control over Egypt and Cyprus, but lost control over the Greek colonies of Asia Minor. Xerxes was killed in a conspiracy in 465 and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I, who is the king who later allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

## What is the theme of Esther?

As shown on the handout for Lesson 12, Esther has a remarkable structure that is built around the key event in Chapter 6 in which the tables are turned between Haman and Mordecai. For each thesis leading up to that event, there is an antithesis following that event.

Each of these thesis/antithesis pairs reinforces a central theme of Esther, which is the theme of reversal. That theme is seen most clearly in Esther 9:1, which has been called the guiding principle of the book:

"Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, **the reverse occurred**: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them."

That verse is a summary statement of the entire book, and it emphasizes that events had taken an unexpected and complete turnaround.

In a book that does not refer to God, this theme of reversal has the providence of God at its center. The reversals occur because the actions of powerful people are overturned by power from a different source. The tables get turned repeatedly in Esther, and God is the great over-turner of tables. He turns darkness into light. He turns mourning into rejoicing. He turns defeat into salvation. He turns death into life.

Is it an overstatement to say that this theme of reversal that we see so clearly in Esther is perhaps the theme of the entire Bible? (And, if so, what does that tell us about the importance of this oft-neglected little book?) Who overturned more tables than Jesus? "Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand." (Isaiah 52:15)

A second theme that we find in Esther is the theme of feasting. The word translated "feast" or "banquet" occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of Old Testament. The events in Esther open and close with feasting, and others feasts occur throughout. One of the central events in the book is the establishment of the feast of Purim (or "lots"), which is still celebrated by Jews today. Why the emphasis on feasting?

Perhaps the best explanation is that the interplay between feasting and reversal reflects the

interplay between God's providence and human behavior. Esther herself, for example, is propelled forward by the interplay of human behavior and God's providence. She begins as a pawn, and we see things happening to her rather than through her. But by the end, she is in control and acting with full authority (9:29). Why? Because at a decisive moment she decided to act, crossing that boundary between human behavior and God's providence. (4:15) That decision led to the reversals in the book, and God's providence worked through her decision. If she had made another decision, God's providence no doubt would have looked elsewhere, but she made that decision, and we can see the outcome. (God likewise works through our decisions today, and he will likewise turn elsewhere if we remain undecided.)

As we study Esther and see the providence of God in action, we are reminded of the events in the life of Joseph. As with Esther, those events are often viewed by some as too improbable to be true, but as with Esther, the answer to that objection is the providence of God.

In one way, this ancient tale of intrigue from the Persian court is the most modern book in the Old Testament. Why? Because in this book, God deals with his people as he deals with us today. Like the Jews of Persia, we have no earthly king, no earthly prophet, and no earthly kingdom. Like them, we live without miracles. Instead, what we see is God working behind the scenes to providentially provide for his people as they live in a hostile and pagan environment. What we see is God using those people to fulfill his plans. What we see in Esther is how God's providence works through human action, and we see how our inaction can hinder the providence of God.