**ESTHER**

**INTRODUCTION**

**A. Background to the Book of Esther**

The book of Esther is one of the most fascinating stories in the Old Testament. It is difficult to know whether to study Ezra first or this book of Esther. Chronologically speaking, Esther's period belongs to the sixty years in the middle of the book of Ezra, namely, between Ezra6 and Ezra 7. Yet it seems easier to study each book separately and to begin with Esther. Like the earlier book of Daniel, Esther gives an interesting portrayal of Jewish life in exile. In order to understand the setting of the book of Esther we need first to summarize the events which took place between the last chapters of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles and Ezra 6:22, when Esther's period begins. This involves a glance at secular history. The Jewish captivity falls into three periods.

**1. The three periods of Jewish exile**

**a. First period-the Jews under the Babylonian Empire**

The Jews were captives in Babylon under five Babylonian emperors.

Nebuchadnezzar (606-562 B.C.) - Daniel 1-4

Evil-Merodach (562-559 B.C.) - 2 Kings 25:27

Nergal-Sharezer (559-555 B.C.) - Jeremiah 39:3, 13

Labashi-Marduk (555 B.C.) - for nine months only

Nabonidus ( 553-536 B.C.)- whose eldest son (Belshazzar of Daniel 5) shared the government as viceroy.

The end of the Babylonian Empire is described in Daniel5. At that time, a new, powerful empire was beginning to arise on the horizon. It combined the *kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians* but finally became one empire under

a Persian, Cyrus, whose name was given by Isaiah at least two hundred years before he came upon the pages of history (Isaiah 45:1-5). Cyrus had already enlarged this Persian Empire from the river Indus (India) to the Nile in Egypt, but for a long time Babylon still maintained its independence.

Babylon was surrounded by walls of tremendous height, and the city could only be taken by a stratagem. At the time of Daniel 5, the emperor of Babylon was absent, and the capital was left in charge of Belshazzar. During the great festival described by Daniel, Belshazzar was guilty of an act of extreme profanity. He deliberately used the sacred vessels from the old Jerusalem temple for his drunken orgies, while he brazenly extolled his gods of gold and silver (Daniel 5:1-4). At that time a mysterious hand was seen writing upon the wall of the palace. Belshazzar sent for Daniel, who interpreted it as God's announcement of immediate judgment upon Babylon, her people, and rulers. *At that very time,* Babylon's enemy, the general of the Persian army, was already drawing off the waters of the river Euphrates which ran through Babylon. He thus made an entrance for his soldiers who captured the city and killed Belshazzar that same night (Daniel 5:30). From then on, the Israeli captives lived under the more beneficent rule of Persia.

**b. Second period - lsrael under the Persian Empire - Daniel 6-11**

Probably Cyrus (or his army general**)** heard of Daniel's prophecy. In any case, Daniel was already known for his gifts of wisdom and for his godliness. It seems that the Persian emperor Cyrus set a governor or viceroy over the Province of Babylon. Secular history suggests that either Cyaxares (king of Media) or Cyrus' general Gobryas (who actually conquered Babylon) was the king (under the emperor Cyrus) called in Scripture Darius the Mede (Daniel 6:1; 9:1; 1l-:1). This king (with Cyrus) divided the empire into 127 provinces over which they placed three presidents, of whom Daniel was first (Daniel 6:L-3).

During the rule of Cyrus, Daniel studied Bible prophecy. As he was reading the prophecies of Isaiah 45:1-4; Jeremiah 25:11-I2; 29:16-21, he realized that the seventy years from the time of the first Judean captivity, when Daniel himself was deported (2 Kings 24:l-2; Daniel 1:l--6), were almost completed (Daniel 9:2-3). Therefore, Daniel set himself to pray that God would fulfill His promise to have mercy on His people and that they should return to their land. Ezra l-6 records God's answer to Daniel's prayer, along with the fulfilment of both prophecies of Jeremiah 25 and Isaiah 45.

After two years Darius the Mede died, and Cyrus took over the entire Medo-Persian Empire. One may imagine Daniel being presented to him. Josephus states that Cyrus was shown the remarkable prophecy of Isaiah 44:24-45:6. One can picture the great astonishment of Cyrus to find himself mentioned by name in advance on that two hundred-year-old parchment and described as breaking in pieces the "brazen gates" of Babylon, receiving riches of wealthy nations, and being appointed by God to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Isaiah 44:28).

**c. Third period-the first Jewish return to Palestine under Cyrus - Ezral-6**

Cyrus issued a decree in 536 B.C. permitting every Israelite who so desired to return to Palestine under their leader Zerubbabel (a descendant of David). Of course, this involved all Israelites (the northern kingdom of Israel as well as the southern kingdom of Judah), for all the tribes were now captives under the rulership of Persia (Ezra l-2).

Ezra records that only a remnant (about fifty thousand in all) were moved in their hearts by God to respond to this decree. The main bulk of the nation remained in the comforts of Persian civilization under captivity while this remnant encountered the hardships and deprivations of freedom in their own land in its wilderness state.

Ezra 1-4 includes in God's "Who's Who" the illustrious names (by families) of that first little band of fifty thousand who returned and rebuilt the foundations of the temple in Jerusalem before anything else (Ezra 3). Ezra also records the terrible opposition from the pagan Samaritans entrenched in the land of the former northern kingdom of Israel. This opposition at first was so successful that the Persian emperor who followed Cyrus actually ordered the returned Israelites to cease the work (Ezra 4:1-24). This brings us now

to the period of Esther.

Note: Kings of Persia mentioned in Scripture:

Cyrus the Great (539-529 B.C.) – Ezra 1-4; Daniel 10:1; Isaiah 44-45

Cambyses (529-521e.c.), the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6

Guamata (only seven months), probably the Artaxerxes of Ezra 4:7

Darius I (Hystaspis) (521-486 B.C.) ordered the rebuilding - Ezra 5-6

Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.), the Ahasuerus (Hebrew translation) of Esther

Artaxerxes (Longimanus) (465-424 B.C.) - Ezra 7:1 ; Nehemiah 2:1; 5:14

Darius II (Nothus) (424-404 B.C.) perhaps belongs to Nehemiah 12:22

**2. Esther's period in Persia between first and second return of exiles to Palestine**

Xemes I seems to be the "Ahasuerus" who married the Jewish Esther in Persia after the first fifty thousand Jews had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:14-15). This would make Esther's period fall before the second and third group left during the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus, who was possibly Esther's own son or stepson (Ezra 7:1, 6-8, 11-12;8:1-36; Nehemiah 2).

**B. The Historical and Spiritual Value of the Book of Esther**

**1. The historical value**

The writer of Esther was probably Mordecai himself. The book of Esther throws valuable light upon the state of the Jews under the Persian Empire. All of them (including those of the northern kingdom of Israel) from this time (even into our own day) were called "Jews" (Esther 2:5). They were settled throughout the 127 provinces of the huge empire of Persia. However, they never lost their national identity. In every place they settled, they still chose to live according to God's laws and His Word. As Hosea had previously prophesied, when they actually lived in the midst of the gross paganism (which they had wanted when in their own land), *they despised it.* God took the names of Baal out of their lips (Hosea 2:17), Israel had learned her lesson. Never again, throughout all centuries and under every kind of pressure, did Israel worship idols of wood and stone (Esther 3:8). During their captivity there were many converts to their faith (Esther 8:17). In spite of their limitations as captives and foreigners, by God's special providence many Israelites rose to high positions of influence in the Gentile world. Such were Daniel and his friends and also

Ezra and Nehemiah. In this book, Esther became the queen of Persia. God caused her to "come to royal position for such a time as this" (Esther 4:1. Esther's kinsman Mordecai also received the highest position in the land, enabling him to help his own people (Esther 10).

**2. The spiritual value**

Purposely, it seems, the name of God is not mentioned in this book. For Esther describes the hidden workings of the providence of God to preserve His own people in the midst of an overwhelming flood of anti-Semitism. However, in the book of Esther the hatred of the Jews was of because of their race but because of their worship of God and refusal to compromise on that issue (Esther 3). Today we are apt to call such events, as recorded in Esther 1:19 (which led to Esther 2:LG and resulted in the preservation of the entire race - Esther 7:t-5;8:3-14; 9), "coincidences," "as it happened," or "as luck would have it." However, the child of God recognizes no such thing as luck! The child of God recognizes the living God behind the scenes of history, seeing the hand of God behind seeming coincidences like that described in Esther 2:21-23; 6:1-3. God's eyes 'range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chronicles 16:9).

**3. The present value**

The book of Esther is a perfect illustration of God moving behind *our* circumstances and the history of our day to bring His purposes to fulfilment. We, too, like Mordecai and Esther and like Christ Himself, are called to choose to lay down our lives for God and "for our brothers" (1 John 3:16). We are called to seek first the furtherance of God's kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:32-33). In measure as we do this, we, too, shall experience that whatever persecution comes, God's people in every age are indestructible (from the viewpoint of eternity) (Matthew 16:18). God overrules all events of history so that they work together for good to them who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

**C. Outline and Exposition of the Book**

The theme and subject of the book of Esther might be expressed by the title "The Providence of God in the Preservation of His People."

Outline of the book study:

**I. ESTHER’S CORONATION (1—2)**

A. The dethroning of Vashti—1

B. The crowning of Esther—2

**II. HAMAN’S CONDEMNATION (3—7)**

A. Haman’s intrigue—3

B. Mordecai’s insight—4

C. Esther’s intercession—5—7

**III. ISRAEL’S CELEBRATION (8—10)**

A. A new decree—8

B. A sure defense—9

C. A great distinction—10

**Discussion Question:**

1) Having read the introduction to the book of Esther, what aspect is interesting to you?

2) What do you want to learn from this book which is part of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament?

3) Do you have the eyes of faith to see God working in your behalf even behind your circumstances today?