

## Book of Esther

**Title:** The Book of Esther is also known as the Volume of Esther (*Megillah Esther*), and is often referred to simply as *the Megillah*. It is the story of the origins of the Festival of Purim, a celebration of the Jewish people's relief from oppression in the Persian Empire.

**Author:** the book is variously attributed to Ezra, or Mordecai, or to some Jewish historian who was personally familiar with the Persian court. But all agree that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

**Date:** Spinoza thought it was written long after the reign of the Maccabees (175-135 BC). The spellings and other factors make it unlikely that Spinoza was correct, and equally unlikely that it was written later than 300 BC. It was certainly written no earlier than 465 BC. If the author was Ezra, the time would have been c. 450 BC. That's probably pretty close, based on the author's detailed descriptions of the winter palace at Shushan (Susa) and the culture of the times. If the Mordecai mentioned in Ezra 2:2 is the same as here, then perhaps it was Mordecai who told Ezra of these events, which Ezra then recorded.

**Setting:** The events span a 10-year period around 478 BC during the reign of the Persian King Xerxes in present day Iran. The Persian Empire was founded by Cyrus in 539 BC. It dominated the entire Middle East for 200 years. Cyrus conquered the Medes, Ninevah, Babylon, Armenia, and Lydia. Persia dominated the lands from India north to the Caspian Sea, southwest to Egypt, and northwest to present-day Istanbul in Turkey. Under Darius I, Persia built a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea, occupying the land east of the Nile down to Ethiopia. Xerxes was defeated only by the Greeks at Salamis, and this was just before the events of Esther's life.

**Sidebars** - There is no historical record of a Persian queen named Vashti, but Xerxes did have a queen named Amestris, possibly Vashti's Greek name. The Hebrew word for queen, *malkah*, may also refer to the principal wife in a harem. Esther became the king's favorite wife. Her adoptive father, Mordecai, had Esther withhold her Jewish identity. She took the Persian name *Ishtar* (Esther) in place of *Hadassah*. It is the name of a Persian goddess, just as Mordecai is the name of a Persian god, *Marduk*.

Curiously, there is no mention of God in the entire book of Esther. Either the author treated the Jews who didn't return to Israel as cut off, or more likely, the book was written to Persians to explain to them the origins of the celebration of Purim.

**Theme:** *God is completely sovereign and we are completely responsible* – God promised Abraham that he would curse those who cursed Israel. Thus Haman, trying to destroy the Jews in Persia, was destroyed by the courage and devotion of Mordecai and Esther. ***We have been called to arise in our generation to fulfill God's purposes for his people and for his glory.***

**Key verse: Esther 4:14** *“For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”* Esther is challenged to acknowledge and to embrace her duty to help preserve Israel.

**Captivity Timeline** – all dates BC<sup>1</sup>

627 Jeremiah begins to prophesy  
 626 Nabopolassar becomes king of Babylon  
 622 Revival in Judah  
 619 Habakkuk begins to prophesy  
**612 Nineveh falls**  
 609 Neco II becomes pharaoh of Egypt  
 609 Jehoahaz becomes king of Judah  
 609 Jehoiakim becomes king of Judah  
 605 Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Babylon  
**605 The Babylonians invade Judah**  
**605 Daniel** begins to prophesy  
 597 Jehoachin becomes king of Judah  
 597 Zedekiah becomes king of Judah 593  
 Ezekiel begins to prophesy  
**586 The Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and the Temple**  
 586 The Jews deported to Babylon  
 586 Gedaliah becomes governor of Jerusalem  
 586 The rabbis preempt the priests as the holders of divine truth  
 563 Buddhism founded by Siddhartha  
 553 Belshazzar becomes regent in Babylon  
 550 Cyrus becomes king of Persia  
 550 The temple of Artemis erected at Ephesus  
 550 Confucius begins to teach  
**539 Babylon falls to the Medes and Persians**  
 539 Darius the Mede rules in Babylon  
 538 Zerubbabel and Joshua lead a small party back to Palestine  
**536 The Temple started in Jerusalem**  
 530 Cambyses becomes king of Persia  
 521 Smerdis becomes king of Persia  
 521 Darius I Hystaspes becomes king of Persia  
 520 **Zechariah** begins to prophesy  
 520 **Haggai** begins to prophesy  
 520 Construction of the Jerusalem Temple resumed  
**516 The Temple completed**  
 509 The Roman Republic founded  
 486 **Xerxes** (Ahasuerus) becomes king of Persia  
 484 Herodotus the historian born  
 483 Xerxes displays his wealth for 6 months, throws a banquet – Vashti refuses to come  
  
 480 The Greeks defeat Xerxes at Salamis  
 479 The Greeks defeat Xerxes at Thermopylae

479 Esther chosen among all the virgins  
 478 **Esther** becomes “queen” of Persia  
 474 Haman’s plot to exterminate the Jews  
 473 Jews are delivered - Feast of Purim  
  
 469 Socrates born  
 464 Xerxes murdered by his vizier Artabanus  
  
 464 Artaxerxes Longimanus becomes king of Persia  
 458 **Ezra** takes a small contingent of Jews back to Palestine  
 447 The building of the Parthenon commenced  
 445 **Nehemiah** takes a small contingent of Jews back to Palestine  
 443 Nehemiah and Ezra read the Scriptures to the Jews  
 443 The beginnings of the Midrash; the Sopherim (Scribes) flourish  
 436 **Malachi** begins to prophesy  
 423 Darius II becomes king of Persia  
 404 Artaxerxes II becomes king of Persia

<sup>1</sup> Remember, any chronology is an approximation based on a combination of archeological, historical, and biblical evidences  
 Source: [http://www.bible-history.com/jesus/jesusHistorical\\_Time\\_Chart.htm](http://www.bible-history.com/jesus/jesusHistorical_Time_Chart.htm)

## 1. God positions his servants

*Chapter 1* – Queen Vashti does not obey the king’s notice to appear before him and is thereby divorced; this results in a royal decree throughout the empire that all wives will honor their husbands.

*Chapter 2* – A beauty contest is held to select Vashti’s replacement. Mordecai had been raising his uncle’s daughter Hadassah (i.e. Esther) as his own, warning her not to reveal her ethnicity. Esther is gathered up with the other beauties and is selected to replace Vashti. Mordecai warns Esther of a plot against the king which she conveys to the king “in Mordecai’s name” and it is recorded in the chronicles.

## 2. Opposition arises from evil intent

*Chapter 3* – Haman the Amalekite is appointed second-in-charge in the empire. Haman requires everyone to bow down to him, but Mordecai refuses because he is a Jew and bows only to God. Haman learns of this and plots to destroy all the Jews throughout the empire by having the king issue a decree.

*Chapter 4* – Mordecai and all the Jews begin to mourn in sackcloth and ashes when they learn of the decree. Mordecai petitions Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of the Jews but she is afraid. Yet she resolves to do what she must to save her people, even if it costs her life.

## 3. Opportunity is created to save

*Chapter 5* – Esther prepares herself to be seen by the king, find his favor, and be summoned into his presence. The king offers her anything she wants, “up to half the kingdom.” Before making her desires known, she begs him to attend a private banquet she is preparing for him, and to invite Haman. Haman doesn’t know Esther’s identity and orders a gallows be built for Mordecai who will not bow to him.

*Chapter 6* – The king has a restless night and reads the chronicles of Mordecai who saved him from the plot. He decides to honor Mordecai and asks Haman how to honor someone. Haman, thinking he is the one to be honored, lays out an elaborate celebration – but then is told to fetch Mordecai for the honor.

*Chapter 7* – At the banquet, Esther reveals her heritage to the king and the plot to destroy her and her people. The king is enraged and orders Haman hanged on the gallows built for Mordecai.

## 4. God delivers through concerted action

*Chapter 8* – Esther is granted the house of Haman and she places Mordecai in charge of it. She then pleads with the king to repeal the decree. The king tells her to write her own decree in his name. The decree gives the Jews the right to defend themselves. The Jews feast in every town in celebration.

*Chapter 9* – On the eve that the first decree was to be executed, the Jews rise up against their enemies and defeat them, for their enemies fear Mordecai who now rules over the house of Haman. Mordecai declares that there will be an annual *Feast of Purim* among the Jews to celebrate this rest from their enemies. On these two days of feasting, they are to send presents to one another and give gifts to the poor.

## 5. Favor is Bestowed and Glory is Revealed

*Chapter 10* – Mordecai becomes second-in-charge in all of Persia, as Joseph did in Egypt. He earned the king’s favor and that of all the Jews. He was a man who sought the good of his people, and spoke peace to all his seed (i.e. his countrymen).

**Theme:** God is completely sovereign, and we are completely responsible. We have been called to arise in our generation to fulfill God's purposes for his people and for his glory.

1. God positions his servants
2. Opposition arises from evil intent
3. Opportunity is created to save
4. God delivers through concerted action
5. Favor is bestowed and glory is revealed

### ***Arising in our own Generation***

In his book, *Trusting God, Even When Life Hurts*, Jerry Bridges makes this profound statement: "God never glorifies himself at the expense of his people, and he never does good to his people at the expense of his glory." Esther is the story of God doing good to his people and for his own glory. Yet each person in the story had a role to fulfill, even Haman. Each of us, and all of us, are called to God's glory.

Jesus literally told his disciples, "Whoever intends to follow in my footsteps: deny himself, take up his cross according to the day, and join me on this road." (Mt 16:24 also Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23) "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Lu 14:27

The word translated "come after" is the same word translated "arise." It refers to someone who appears or becomes known *publicly*, someone who comes forth and shows himself, and thus finds a position or a place of influence in his or her generation.

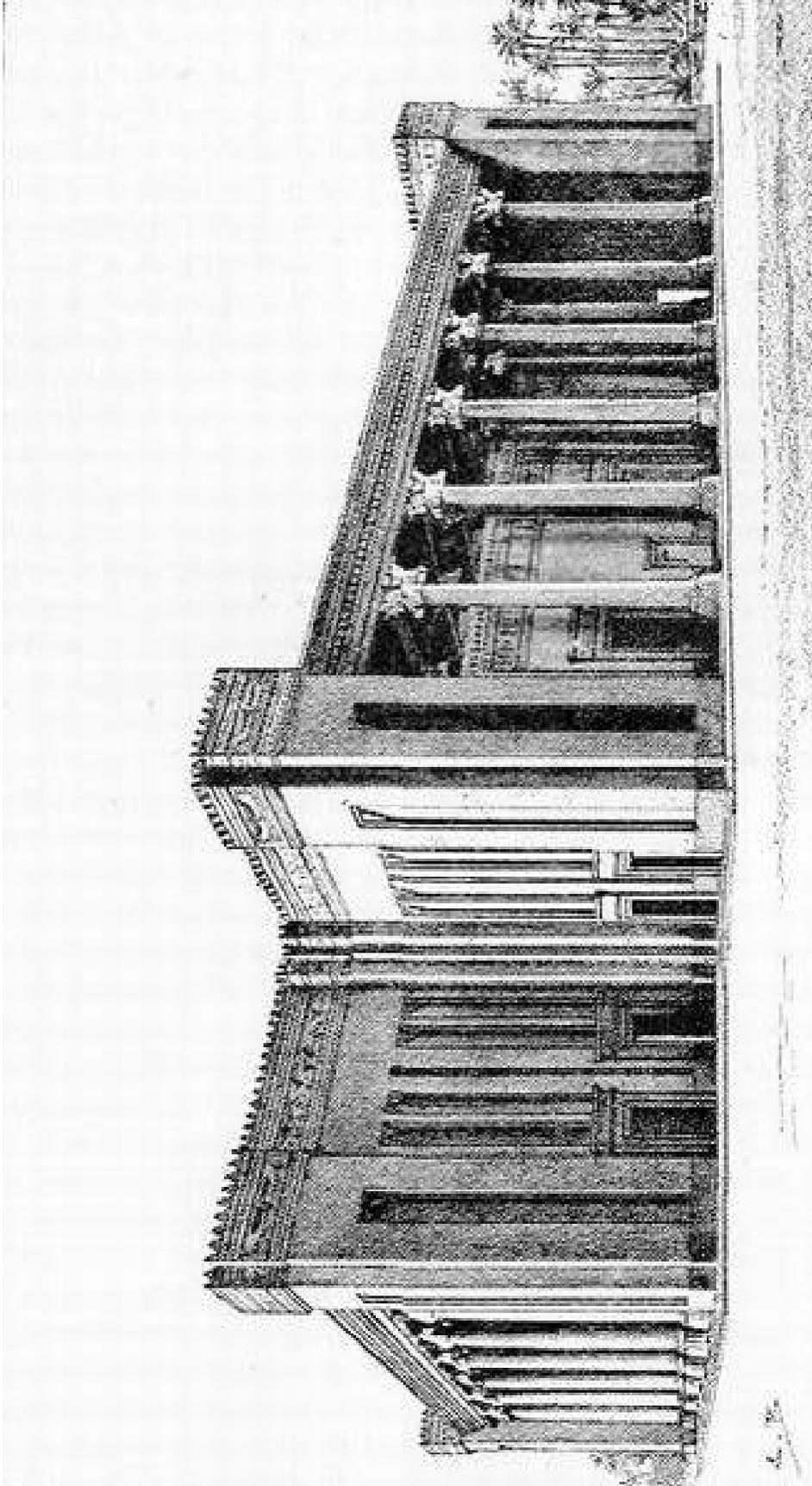
**Willing Sacrifice** - This is what characterized Esther: she was both raised up by God, and she arose to do her duty. She bore her responsibilities in her position, and was exalted for doing it. Esther bore her own cross in order to arise as a savior in her generation. Thus she was a type of the Christ to come; she was someone willing to lay down her life for her people. Mordecai likewise put his own life at risk by not bowing down to Haman, so that he would not give honor where no honor was due.

**Obedient Spokesman** - In the Old Testament (Deut. 18:15-18), Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet from among his people: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." In the same way, Mordecai and Esther spoke for their people. Moses spoke for them in Egypt. Christ speaks for them today. And we too have been given the words of God so that we may speak peace to our own generation.

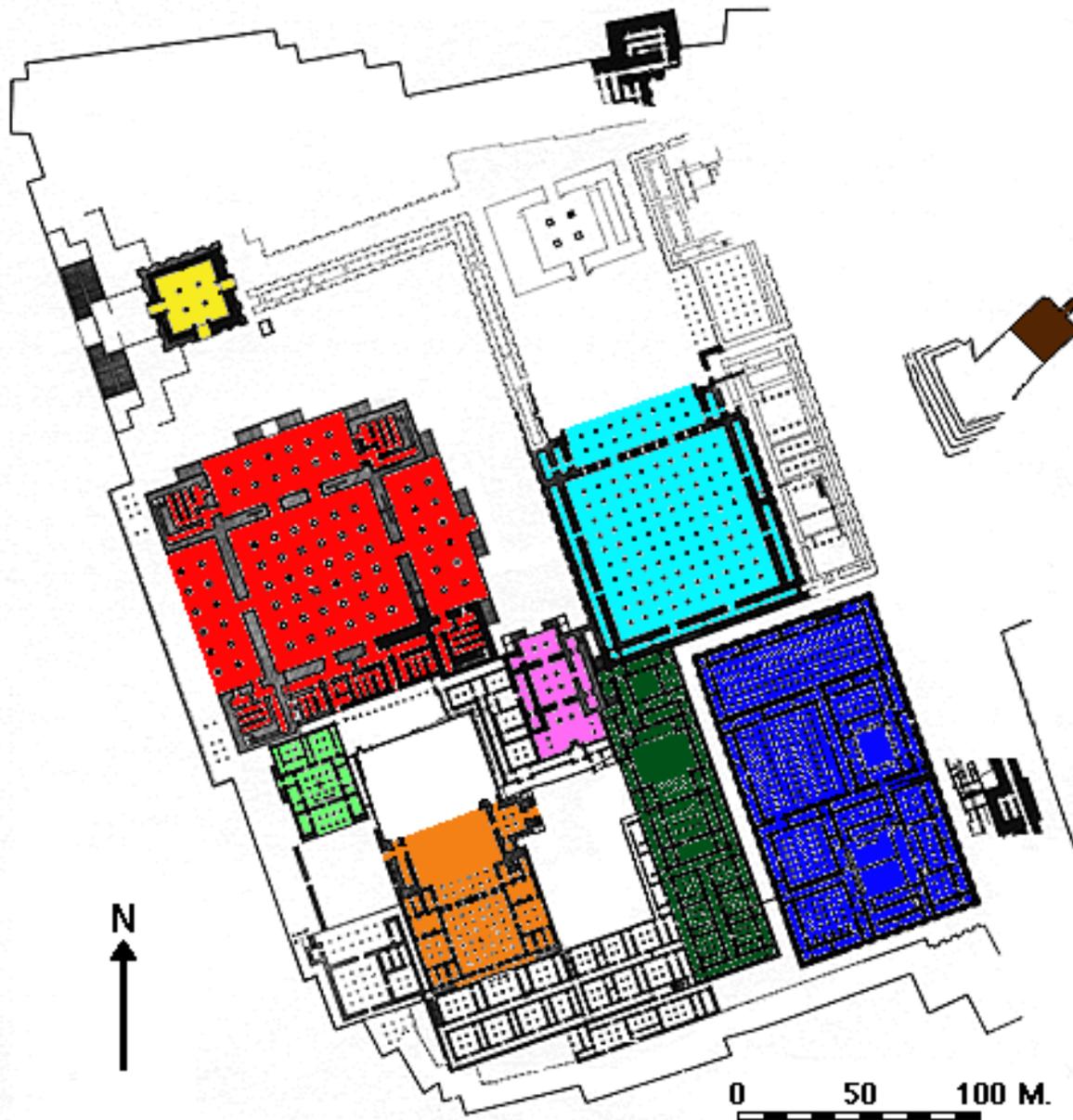
**The Tension** - Christ provokes us to intentionally "come after" him, and to stand where he stood. Yet it is God who raises us up to do that. This is where we find the tension between our responsibility and God's sovereign provision. Through Esther and Mordecai, God made it possible for the Jews to defend *themselves* without reprisal – even so, it was God who provided for the deliverance of his people.

**The Quest** - How have we, as a Church, been gifted and called to arise in our generation? What current opportunities do you see for this local Church body? How can you personally contribute to that calling?





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| <span style="color: red;">■</span> Apadana      | <span style="color: lightgreen;">■</span> Palace of Darius | <span style="color: orange;">■</span> Palace of Xerxes   |
| <span style="color: cyan;">■</span> Throne Hall | <span style="color: magenta;">■</span> Council Hall        | <span style="color: darkgreen;">■</span> Harem of Xerxes |
| <span style="color: blue;">■</span> Treasury    | <span style="color: brown;">■</span> Artaxerxes Tomb       | <span style="color: yellow;">■</span> Gate of Xerxes     |



Xerxes' Palace, almost twice as large as that of Darius, shows very similar decorative features on its stone doorframes and windows, except for two large Xerxes inscriptions on the eastern and western doorways. Instead of showing the king's combat with monsters, these doorways depict servants with ibexes. Unfortunately, all the reliefs in this palace are far less well preserved than those of the Palace of Darius.

Source: [http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/PA/IRAN/PAAI/PAAI\\_Persepolis\\_Plan.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/PA/IRAN/PAAI/PAAI_Persepolis_Plan.html)