

Esther

Who, When, Where

Written by Unknown.

It depends on which king we're talking about. We're pretty certain that Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name for Xerxes.

And if it is Xerxes then Esther takes place around 480BC. So while they're all in exile in Persia for 70 years. Before Ezra and Nehemiah.

Esther was queen of Persia.

Summary

This is a story of a Jewish girl who became queen of Persia. It's a story of how God uses seemingly coincidental events to deliver his people from annihilation.

Before You Read

Can you imagine a book of the Bible that doesn't mention God?

Key Verses

Esther 1:4

He displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even one hundred eighty days.

I've heard of showoffs, but showing off for 180 days straight!
Kings of Media and Persia were super wealthy. And super powerful, having conquered most of the known world.

Esther 1:12

But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the eunuchs. Therefore the king was very angry, and his anger burned in him.

That's an issue with very powerful people. They don't like to be turned down. And nobody would dare say no to a king of Media and Persia. Except it seems ... his queen.

Esther 1:17

For this deed of the queen will become known to all women, causing them to show contempt for their husbands, when it is reported, "King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she didn't come."

Why was it such a big deal that the queen said no to the king? Because she's a role model. If she can say no to the king, then other women can say no to their husband. And these guys didn't want that happening.
How will they stop it?

Esther 1:19

"If it please the king, let a royal commandment go from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it cannot be altered, that Vashti may never again come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate to another who is better than she.

So, first. In ancient Media and Persia, once something was decreed as a law. It was unchangeable. Even by the king.
So Vashti was permanently banished from the king's presence. And, she was to lose her entire estate and it was to be given to someone else.

A bit harsh? Or God's hand at work already?

Esther 2:2

Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king

These days this would be a TV series. But back then it was a revolutionary way to choose a new queen.

Esther 2:5-6

There was a certain Jew in the citadel of Susa, whose name was Mordecai ... who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.

Nobody important, just a certain Jew.

Who had just been swept up with the other captives when Nebuchadnezzar had brought them here years ago as the spoils of war.

Esther 2:7

He brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was fair and beautiful, and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.

So, he had raised his orphaned niece, Esther. (You can guess she's important right? The book is named after her). But she's a nobody captive from Israel, whose parents have already died.

So she's been selected as a candidate, but she hasn't told anyone she's a Jew, (on her uncle's advice, which she humbly obeys).

Esther was taken into the king's house, to be part of the TV series, er, the King's competition, for selection of his new queen.

Esther 2:14

In the evening she went, and on the next day she returned into the second women's house, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who kept the concubines. She came in to the king no more, unless the king delighted in her, and she was called by name.

So 12 months of preparation, then in to the king for one night, and then you're a concubine the rest of your life and never see the king again. Unless you pleased him, and he chooses to call for you.
You still want to be a candidate?

Esther 2:17

The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Wow. An orphaned Jewish prisoner, taken captive and brought to Susa... just became Queen of one of the biggest, richest, most powerful nations which ever ruled anywhere on Earth!

Esther 2:21

In those days, while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, who were doorkeepers, were angry, and sought to lay hands on the King Ahasuerus.

He just happened to be there. Right time. Right place. Not because God appeared to him and told him. He was just there.

Maybe God has more hand in things which happen in your life than you realise?

And he told Esther, who told the king on his behalf. And they were both hanged.
And as everything was in those days, the events were recorded in the king's chronicles.

Esther 3:1

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes who were with him.

So now the king has promoted Haman as #1 prince. A position of great honour and power in that kingdom.

Esther 3:2

All the king's servants who were in the king's gate bowed down, and paid homage to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai didn't bow down or pay him homage.

People would even bow down as Haman walked past. Except Mordecai, (because he's a Jew, he's only allowed to bow down to Yahweh).

The other servants kept warning him, day after day. (They know what it's like in this kingdom. Upset someone with power, and you'll most likely end up dead).

Esther 3:5-6

When Haman saw that Mordecai didn't bow down, nor pay him homage, Haman was full of wrath. But he scorned the thought of laying hands on Mordecai alone, for they had made known to him Mordecai's people. Therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even Mordecai's people.

So, not just proud and arrogant. He's so angry he's not satisfied with having Mordecai killed, he wants every Jew killed.

Sometimes when we get angry, we want more than punishment for those who anger us ... we want revenge.

Sometimes we just want to go way way over the top with our revenge.

Aren't we fortunate that Yahweh doesn't think like that!

Esther 3:7

In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, and chose the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

So, again, just by chance... they chose the 12th month. If the lot had come out to the second month instead, this would have been a very different story. And over much sooner.

But Yahweh, unseen, unworshipped, even disrespected, still controls the lot, even for people who don't even know he exists.

Esther 3:8

Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are different than other people's. They don't keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not for the king's profit to allow them to remain. If it pleases the king, let it be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who are in charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries."

If the king had any brains at all, he would have asked why Haman needed to pay money if all we're doing is getting rid of trouble makers.

But he naively trusted Haman. Didn't even ask who these people were. Or how many there were... just condemned them all to death on the say so of his favourite prince.

Esther 3:12

It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus, and it was sealed with the king's ring

And that makes it law. A law that can now no longer be changed, even by the king himself.

Esther 3:13

Letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to plunder their possessions.

They're sunk.
Every Jew in the country is going to die on the 13th of Adar.
And nobody could understand why. Presumably the Jews actually had a good reputation amongst the people. It was just Haman who had the problem.

Esther 4:4

Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her this, and the queen was exceedingly grieved.

You're the queen of the most powerful nation ever on the planet. And there is nothing you can do to save your own people, (including yourself if you own up to it), from total annihilation.

Esther 4:11

"All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, know, that whoever, whether man or woman, comes to the king into the inner court without being called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except those to whom the king might hold out the golden scepter, that he may live. I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

Esther can't even go in to the king to plead their case without risking her own death before she's even allowed to speak!

Esther 4:14

For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Such a powerful verse.
If you remain silent, then God will save us some other way. But... it seems likely that Esther has become queen so she can do exactly this. And to at least plead for her people, if not save them.

How about you? What position has God put you in to do something for him? Are you willing to do it? Even if it does cost your life?

Or is he going to have to find someone else?

Esther 4:16

Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day. I and my maidens will also fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.

Esther's answer is equally amazing. Fast and pray for me, and then I'll do it. And if I perish, I perish.

Not a thought for her own safety. Humble Esther thinks only of her people and her family.

She could have kept her heritage secret. She had no parents. She could have lived out a long and happy life of pleasure as the Queen of Persia.

But she can see that Yahweh has brought her here for this moment. And if she dies... she dies... there's no way she's not going to try.

Esther 5:2

When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther came near, and touched the top of the scepter.

Whew.

Can you imagine how she felt at that moment, when she saw the sceptre held out to her. Imagine the timing ... if the King just happened to be in a bad mood... you're dead.

Esther 5:3

Then the king asked her, "What would you like, queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you even to the half of the kingdom."

Half the kingdom! But she's humble. She's patient. She's put herself into God's hands with days of fasting and prayer.
"Would you please come to a banquet I've prepared".

Huh? She was supposed to ask for the salvation of the people and she risked her life to get them for dinner?

Esther 5:9

Then Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart, but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he didn't stand up nor move for him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.

Haman is feeling pretty pleased with himself. He's the only one invited to the queen's banquet. And then there's the annoying pest Mordecai. And I still have to wait months to kill him.

Esther 6:1

On that night, the king couldn't sleep. He commanded the book of records of the chronicles to be brought, and they were read to the king

Another "coincidence"... such perfect timing that very night the king can't sleep and he gets someone to read to him... and "just happens" to pick the story of Mordecai!

Esther had already risked her life to save her people.

But, unknown to her, if she had just asked for that when the king extended the sceptre... he probably would have denied it. But all she asked for was for the king and Haman to come for dinner.

Do you still doubt that God's hand is behind these coincidences?

Esther 6:6

So Haman came in. The king said to him, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?"
Now Haman said in his heart, "Who would the king delight to honor more than myself?"

Boy was he in for a shock.

Arrrogance, puffed up self importance. Why do so many leaders suffer from this. Thinking that they are so much more important than everyone else, so much better.

But a true leader sees themselves as a servant to the others. A true leader would say in their heart. Wow, I wonder who that is. I am so fortunate to serve this people on behalf of such a good king.

Esther 6:10

Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry and take the clothing and the horse, as you have said, and do this for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Let nothing fail of all that you have spoken."

Crushed. Mordecai! The stinky Jew I was about to hang outside my house. The one I was just about to take revenge on.

He didn't think, "Really? Do I have Mordecai all wrong? The king wants to honour him, maybe I missed something about him. Thank goodness I found out, I was about to kill him!"

Esther 6:13

Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him."

He rushed home to have a whinge to his wife and close friends. I'm sure he expected them to all be on his side and to say how terrible and unfair that was.

But instead, they said, "if he's a Jew, you're ruined".

And Haman knew Mordecai was a Jew... And he didn't have to wonder for long whether they had spoken the truth... while they were still speaking the eunuchs came to take him away.

How the mighty have fallen.

God's hand at work, invisible in the background. Protecting his own people from who would destroy them. Remember the night the king just couldn't sleep... if that hadn't happened this meal would have gone very differently.

Esther 7:8

Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman had fallen on the couch where Esther was. Then the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in front of me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

Haman is panicking. And he gets caught all over the queen. And the eunuchs know about the gallows he built for hanging Mordecai.

And Haman ends up hanging, (dead), on the very gallows he thought he was going to use to take revenge against the man he saw as his Jewish enemy.

But who was actually God's hero.

Is there anything you have wrong in your understanding of God? In where you stand in God's order of priorities?

Are you ready to die for it?

Esther 8:11-12

In those letters, the king granted the Jews who were in every city to gather themselves together, and to defend their life, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to plunder their possessions, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

The king's law can't be changed. So even he can't cancel the permission everyone has been given to attack and kill Jews on the 13th day of Adar. (the day Haman chose by lot), ... So he gives the Jews permission to fight back, to destroy and kill those who attack them, and their children, and to take their possessions.

Would you still attack them after seeing how important they have become to the king who has absolute authority?

All because Yahweh had worked away silently in the background to protect and advance his people.

Esther 9:5

The Jews struck all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter and destruction, and did what they wanted to those who hated them.

What a turn around. The Jews were doomed and they were saved in a moment by people who were quietly, patiently, relying completely on Yahweh to deliver them from something impossible.

You scared in your ministry?

Don't be. He's got you covered.

Esther 9:16

The other Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, defended their lives, had rest from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they didn't lay their hand on the plunder.

They went from a hated and despised people, to most feared, and most powerful.
But they made it clear, it's not about the money. We are protecting ourselves as a people, not trying to get your wealth.

Make sure if you stand up for the church, it cannot be interpreted as a grab for money or power.

After You Read

What verses really stood out to you?

How would you summarize this book in a sentence or two? What is it about? What is God trying to say to us?

So, this was clearly a story of the hand of God delivering his people in an incredible way. Do you think he was trying to tell us something by not including "God" in this story?

Have you seen any "coincidences" in your own life which you could/would/should attribute to the hand of God?

How do you think Mordecai felt the day he was dragged off from Israel into captivity in Susa? Do you think he recognised it as the hand of God to save his people from certain death years later?

Have you ever had anything "bad" happen that later turned out to have been one of the events along a path to blessing?