

# Route 66

## *Esther: God Is in Control*

Part 17 - September 6, 2009

The book of Esther is the only book of the Bible written as a comedy! Many Jewish scholars contend that “Esther” must be read as a dramatic comedy in order to be fully appreciated. And to this day “Esther” is celebrated annually by the Jews *as* a dramatic comedy (on the fun-filled Feast of Purim [POOR-ihm]).



Cyrus the Great

When the Persians came into power in Babylon in 539<sup>BC</sup>, King Cyrus helped the Jews return home and rebuild the temple. And about 50,000 took him up on his offer. However, the vast majority stayed behind, and would've been completely exterminated if it wasn't for Esther. “Esther” is the story of God's hand on those who stayed behind. And it takes place about 80 years after the 50,000 went home.

Last week, Nehemiah (cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes), rebuilt Jerusalem's walls with Artaxerxes' support. And before that, Ezra returned with 7,000 Jews - again thanks to Artaxerxes. Well, Esther was King Artaxerxes' stepmother!

She was queen to his father, Xerxes [ZUHRK-seez]. And, she likely had great influence on the employment of Nehemiah, as well as his and Ezra's royal support and supplies.



Xerxes as portrayed in, “300”

And oh, I made a huge mistake last week! The movie, “300” (the Speedo-wearing king), that wasn't *Artaxerxes*; it was his father, *Xerxes*. I mixed up my Xerxes! So, the story of Esther flashes back to the reign of King Xerxes (and *his* Speedo), when Esther was just a young, innocent woman.



Last week we saw the Citadel of Susa [SUE-suh], Iran. Esther's story not only begins on these very grounds, but right ... here! This is the Royal Courtyard of the Great Hall at Susa.



At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. ... in the enclosed garden of the king's palace ... - *Esther 1:2-3a;5b NIV*

They hung white and blue linen, fastened with purple cords and silver rings on marble pillars. There were gold and silver couches on a mosaic pavement, inlaid with moth-of-pearl. In short: it was quite gaudy. Well, they feasted and drank ... and drank ... and drank, for seven days.

On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him ... to bring before him Queen Vashti [VASH-tigh] ... - Esther 1:10-11 NIV

He wanted to show off her beauty to his drunken buddies. But, Vashti refused to come. Xerxes was furious. He controlled 127 provinces but he couldn't control his own wife! So, he counseled with his wise men, who immediately panicked! "This is horrible! When her conduct is known, there'll be no end to the disrespect. Every time a man tells his wife what to do, she'll say, 'The king's own wife doesn't obey - why should I?'"

They counseled King Xerxes to make an irreversible edict to banish the queen from his presence ... forever; and to replace her with someone more deserving (and much more *submissive*). They proposed that each province should send its most beautiful virgins to the harem where they'd be given beauty treatments. And the king would sleep with each before choosing his favorite.

And in the most unnecessary verse in the entire Bible, it says:

This advice appealed to the king ... - *Esther 2:4 NIV*



Esther by Del Castagno, 1450

And so, Esther was taken (by no choice of her own) to the harem. Esther was an orphan, who'd been lovingly raised by her cousin Mordecai [MAWR-duh-kigh]. Mordecai followed her to the palace, where she underwent twelve months of beauty treatments in a type of finishing school.

Mordecai paced outside the harem every day to check on Esther. But no one knew they were related, or that Esther was a Jew. Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her, not to mention the King, who put a crown on her head and made her his new queen.



"Darius Gate" at Susa, Iran

Meanwhile, Mordecai (who was also quite likable) became an advisor to the royal court, and would sit at the king's gate.

During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate ... two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. - *Esther 2:21 NIV*

However, Mordecai learned of the plot and told Queen Esther, who reported it to king Xerxes and gave the credit to Mordecai. It was investigated, found true, and the perpetrators were executed.

Now, in Susa, there was a dirty rat named Haman [HAY-muhn]. He was second in command and he demanded that everyone kneel before him. But, Haman was an Agagite (*Esther 3:1*), a direct descendent of Agag [AY-gag], king of the Amalekites. So, Mordecai refused to bow.

The Amalekites were the first to attack Israel after they crossed the Red Sea (*Ex 17:8*) and killed all who lagged behind (*Deut 25:17-18*); and God had instructed Saul to destroy them (*1 Sam 15:3*).

Haman is enraged. And when he discovers that Mordecai is a Jew, he decides it's time to exterminate them, once and for all! So, He chose a date by casting lots (about a year later, March 7th). He told King Xerxes that the Jews were strange, rebellious ... and rich; and that by destroying them he could rid the kingdom of riffraff *and* put 375 tons of silver in the king's treasury.

This is how he got Xerxes to issue an *irrevocable* death decree!

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and little children – on a single day ... and to plunder their goods. - *Esther 3:13 NIV*



And you think you have troubles! The book of Esther has a single theme and a singular message: God is in control! He's the ultimate master chess player on a world-wide game board, skillfully orchestrating circumstances until the last *free-will* move of His opponents can be check-mated. You see: our free will accomplishes His sovereign will.

It doesn't matter if you're a powerful, pagan king, a powerless, young maiden, an oppressed people, or a dirty rat named Haman. You can work with Him or against Him, but His will will be done.

The direct descendents of the coming Messiah are in jeopardy!

Mordecai sends a copy of the edict to Queen Esther and urges her to go to the king and plead for her people. But, two things: Esther was chosen because she was the *opposite* of Queen Vashti. She has a submissive, non-confrontational nature. And, if you approach the throne without being summoned, you're put to death ... unless the king extends his gold scepter. (This would sure cut down on people wasting your time!)



Throne Hall doorway, Susa

This post hole once supported the 65' tall throne hall doors!

Esther needs courage that only God can give. So, she asks Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa to fast with her for three days and three nights.

When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. - *Esther 4:16b NIV*

Well, she goes before the king and he is delighted to see her and he extends his scepter and asks what her request is.

And she invites him to a banquet that day – just him and Haman. Now, the way to king's favor is through a feast, so, to put Xerxes in the best, most receptive mood possible, Esther invites them to “round two” of the feast the following day. Haman is absolutely beside himself!

This can't be told any funnier than just reading it straight from the Word of God:

Calling together his friends and Zeresh, [ZEE-resh] his wife, Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him ... “And that's not all,” Haman added. “I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. ... But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate.” His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, “Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy.” This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built. That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed ... two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. “What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?” the king asked. “Nothing has been done for him,” his attendants answered. ... Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai ... When Haman entered, the king asked him, “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Now Haman thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?” So he answered the king, “For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, ‘This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!’” “Go at once,” the king commanded Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.” So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!” Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief ... - *Esther 5:10b-6:12 NIV*

The Lord simply laughs at the enemy's attempts to thwart His plans; and in Esther, He invites us to laugh along with Him!

Xerxes and Haman go to dinner. The king knows Esther wouldn't put her life on the line for a banquet, so he promises to give her whatever it is that she wants, up to half his kingdom.

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. - *Esther 7:3-4a NIV*

Cue one of the greatest spit-takes in the Bible!

The king says, "Who has dared to do such a thing?!" And Esther said, "The man slinking under the table."

The king storms out! Haman turns to Esther, who's reclining on a couch, to beg for his life. But as he goes to her he falls *onto* the couch just as the king reenters with some men.

The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" - *Esther 7:8b NIV*

Apparently jumping on top of the queen violated some ancient protocol!

The king's eunuch says, "You know, there's a 75' gallows next to Haman's place; he was gonna hang that guy who saved your life."

- All sin carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction

So, the king hanged Haman, gave Esther Haman's estate, and made her cousin Mordecai his new second in command.

Q: But what do you do about that irrevocable death decree?

A: Write another irrevocable decree on behalf of the Jews!

And when the day came, the nobles and governors and officials of the king's 127 provinces helped the Jews defend themselves and defeat all those who conspired to do them harm. Haman's ten sons were killed along with 500 men in Susa, and 75,000 throughout the kingdom. Xerxes then allowed one more day of "house cleaning" in Susa – and another 300 were put to death.

Mordecai recorded these events and called on Jews everywhere to celebrate the day their sorrow was turned into joy – and to call it "Purim" which refers to the lot that Haman had cast.

Jews still gather and celebrate, with costumes, food, treats, and gifts. It's a combination Mardis Gras/Halloween/Christmas. And they read the story of Esther – and laugh! And the children twirl noisemakers and "boo" and "hiss" to drown out Haman's name.