

**DHW**  
**BIBLE STUDY CLASS**

**ESTHER**

**LESSON 1**

***INTRODUCTION***

The book of Esther is another one of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament that is inspired by God and is therefore infallible, inerrant, completely reliable and trustworthy. Although the name of God is not mentioned even once in the ten chapters of the book, it is not a legitimate basis for rejecting its canonicity.<sup>1</sup> Many political leaders and nations in the world do not mention God or even reject Him, but that does not change the fact that He exists and He is very much involved in the affairs of men (Isaiah 45:15)<sup>2</sup>. So in the book of Esther, in every turn of events, the unseen hand of God was working out the purpose and plan of

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “the canon of Holy Scriptures” is an expression designating the divine origin of each of the sixty-two books of the Bible. God only canonized the sixty-two books of Holy Scriptures, and men “simply recognized what had already long since been canonized by God through the inspiration of the the original text.” Further reading: R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p.155; and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp.277-279.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 45:15 Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.

His will. Indeed, if it had not been for God, who played a vital part in the flow of events as historically recorded, the book would not be easily understood. The inspired divine writer of the book is unknown. Some have suggested Mordecai. Others think that the writer was a Persian Jew who had returned to Judaea, and wished to commemorate the celebration of Purim with the children of Israel to remember God’s deliverance. Whatever the case may be, the identity of the writer is not as important as the fact that someone whom God had inspired had written the record. Today, we can understand why the Israelites yearly celebrate the Festival of Purim (February-March). Besides explaining the origin of Purim, the most instructive teaching of Esther is that of the providence of God sovereignly working over nations and individuals. A prayerful and careful study of the book should bring comfort and joy, increase confidence and courage, and change our small view of God into awesome amazement.

The events in the book, unlike all the other books of the Old Testament, happened altogether in Persia. It took place during the period when the Medes and the Persians were the joint masters of the world under Cyrus the Great who toppled the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. and established the Medo-Persian Empire which became the largest in the world. After him, Cambyses, his son, succeeded him (530-522 B.C.), followed by his son Darius I, who ruled the empire from 522-486 B.C. Darius I continued the policy of his

grandfather Cyrus the Great by allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. For this reason, he was warmly mentioned by the Jews (Ezra 4-6). After his death, his son Ashasuerus (Xerxes, 486-465) became the king of the Persian Empire. His military expedition against Greece (480-479) ended in a dismal failure. He was killed in a conspiracy in 465 B.C.<sup>3</sup> The events in Esther took place during the period of his reign.

The following is a suggested outline of chapter one:

1. King Ahasuerus gives two banquets for his dignitaries (1:1-8)
2. Queen Vashti refuses to entertain the dignitaries at King Ahasuerus' command (1:9-12)
3. King Ahasuerus banishes Vashti on the advice of his counsellors (1:13-20)
4. King Ahasuerus issues a decree that every man shall assume rule in his own house (1:21-22).

### **STUDY THE WORD**

#### **King Ahasuerus Gives Two Banquets**

The opening phrase. "now it came to pass" is very significant for it clearly means that the things written in the book were actual and real people, places, and events. This piece of evidence is enough to invalidate all arguments against the historicity of the records. King Ahasuerus began his

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<sup>3</sup> He was succeeded by his son, Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.).

reign over the vast Medo-Persian empire stretching from India in the east to Ethiopia in the west comprising a total of 127 provinces. This opening statement establishes the identity of Ahasuerus.<sup>4</sup> King Ahasuerus had a number of palaces, one was in Persepolis, his summer stronghold, and the other was in Shushan (Greek, Susa), his winter palace which was a beautiful city. It was in Shushan where the events recorded in Esther took place. Archaeologists

discovered an ancient inscription in the royal palace of Persepolis which not only shows the extent of Ahasuerus' kingdom, but also his arrogance. He said of himself: *I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of [all] countries [which speak] all kind of languages, the king of this [entire] big and far-reaching earth—the son of King Darius, the Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan descent.*<sup>5</sup>

In the third year of his reign (483 B.C.), Ahasuerus threw a banquet (literally, a drinking feast) inviting all his "princes and servants" to gather in his magnificent and beautiful palace in Shushan. The purpose of this feast is not explained. Many Bible scholars think that one of the reasons he called them was to discuss with them the plans for the invasion of Greece, which was

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<sup>4</sup> He should not be confused with Ahasuerus of Daniel 9:1.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Prime, *Unspoken lessons about the unseen God*, Welwyn Commentaries (Darlington Evangelical Press), p.25.

launched in the beginning of 481 B.C. (about two years later). This could explain the long duration of the banquet which lasted 180 days. At the same time Ahasuerus wanted to impress all his guests, the “nobles and princes of the provinces,” by displaying the power, riches, and glory of his kingdom—the Medo-Persian Empire.

After this one-hundred-eighty-day banquet, he gave another drinking feast to his nobles, officials and servants, who served him in the palace of Shushan. This banquet was held in the open-air garden grounds of the royal palace, and it lasted for only seven days. The divine writer spared no effort in describing the splendour, beauty and opulence of the palace court in great details (vv. 6, 7). Customarily “the drinking was according to the law” (v.8) meaning that the king would limit the consumption of wine. But in this instance, no one was forced to keep the law, instead the king gave them the freedom to drink as much as they desired to their hearts content and enjoyment. One can imagine how many would be drunk.

### **Queen Vashti Refuses to Entertain the Dignitaries at the King’s Command**

In the meantime Queen Vashti also hosted a banquet for the womenfolks in the royal palace. Culturally, Ahasuerus should have got Vashti to accompany him to attend the banquets. Again no explanation is given. Nonetheless, Vashti exercised

her liberty to have a feast for the womenfolks in the royal palace. On the seventh day of the second banquet hosted by King Ahasuerus, his heart was “merry with wine” (high on alcohol). With that kind of stimulation, Ahasuerus ordered his seven closest eunuchs, namely, Memucan, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, to fetch Queen Vashti, who was a very beautiful lady. The king wanted Vashti to parade and to show off herself wearing the royal crown before him, the princes and people (all males) in the banquet. King Ahasuerus probably considered her the crowning glory of all his possessions. He wanted to show off that he had the most beautiful woman in the land. She was to him something of a prized catch. The ancient Jewish rabbi intimated that Ahasuerus’ proposition was for Vashti to parade unveiled (naked), wearing only her royal crown (v.11a). This was an absurd proposition on the part of the king. He had no respect for his queen-wife, telling his wife to perform such an act in a room filled with drunken men who were no strangers to her. Ahasuerus was not sensitive to his wife’s feelings. Surely Vashti would have been willing to appear before him alone in their royal chamber. As king and husband to Vashti, Ahasuerus had failed in his responsibility and duty to protect and honour her by his action.

Vashti flatly and firmly refused to yield to the king’s command. This was a brave response. However, she was morally right in her stand. It was not easy for her to arrive at that

decision. The consequences of disobeying the king's command was serious. For one thing, she might be executed. If she was not executed, she might be humiliated or demoted. She must have thought through that these were the grave consequences of her uncompromising action. It would be a costly price to pay for her to keep her dignity and integrity. When Ahasuerus was told of Vashti's decision not to appear at the banquet, he was furiously angry. He was snubbed by his queen in the presence of his servants in the royal palace.

### **King Ahasuerus Banishes Vashti**

In his anger, Ahasuerus' natural reaction was to deal severely against Vashti. He consulted his "wise men" or counsellors who "knew about the times"—men who read the signs of the stars: magi or astrologers. In addition, they were also experts in the laws and traditions of Persia. Their names were: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, who were also princes of Persia and Media, and had direct access to the king. They were probably the seven counsellors mentioned in Ezra 7:14.<sup>6</sup> Ahasuerus asked his "wisemen": *What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she had not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?* It is interesting that Ahasuerus wanted

the matter to be dealt with according to the law. Apparently, he was ignorant of which law to apply to deal with the problem. Instead of seeking reconciliation with Queen Vashti, he was more revengeful. Vashti was not in breach of any law of the kingdom but her refusal to obey the king's crazy and foolish commandment was more of a domestic problem. It would have been proper had he dealt the matter personally with his wife. But when one is furiously angry, one cannot think right.

Memucan answered the king. He seemed to be the main spokesman on behalf of the other six counsellors. This Memucan should not be confused with the Memucan who is mentioned in verse ten; the former was a prince and counsellor who had direct access to the king whereas the latter was merely a eunuch associated with keeping the king's harem. Memucan, the wise counsellor went straight to the point without wasting a lot of words. He began by presenting the problem that the wrong done by Vashti the queen was not to the king only but to all the princes and people of the entire empire. And then he concluded by giving a solution as to how the problem could be resolved. He proposed to the king that a royal commandment be issued by the king, and let this law be included in the laws of the Persians and Medes that Vashti (note title omitted) should make no appearance before the king. The king should give her royal position to another who would be better than she in every way—beauty, intelligence,

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<sup>6</sup> Ezra 7:14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which *is* in thine hand;

and submissiveness. (vv.16-19). Memucan did not propose Vashti's execution but that since she refused to come before the king when summoned, she might as well forget about her coming to the king again in future.

We see that Memucan made a mountain out of a mole hill in order to please the king. Actually, he should have told the king that there was no law in the Medo-Persian judicial system which was applicable to the situation; and advised that the best solution would be for the king to be reconciled with the queen. He would be taking a great risk if he had done that; for if the king was not pleased with this suggestion he would either be sacked or even be executed. In his ingenuity, he threw himself and on behalf of his fellow counsellors on the side of the king for obvious reason—his own survival and self-interest

### **King Ahasuerus Issues a Decree Establishing the Authority of Man in the Home**

Memucan's explanation and the solution to the problem pleased King Ahasuerus. The king ordered that Memucan's advice be carried out. The law makers were told to write the law which was to be written in the languages of all the provinces and the people. Generally, the official languages were Persian, Elamite, Babyloanian, and Aramiac.<sup>7</sup> The written document was sent by express

mail. The Persians had developed a highly efficient way of sending mails through a relay of ponies and camels throughout the empire. Medo-Persian law once enacted and ratified was irrevocable, even the king could not revoke it.

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

The study of Esther 1, if it is not followed by a purpose of heart to discover the knowledge of God and His will, will be merely an academic exercise. The knowledge of God and His will should motivate us to change our beliefs and behaviour to please and glorify God and love our neighbours. One of the lessons we learn in this chapter concerns wastefulness. We are impressed by Ahasuerus' power and wealth but the way he squandered them for his own appetites and pleasure is unsavoury. Instead of using his excess riches to alleviate the poor and needy, he indulged in throwing an extremely lavish banquet which lasted for six months. Ahasuerus' behaviour should be revolting to us. The world today is not far different from that of Ahasuerus. How much time do we spend on new cars, on latest home improvements, on the kind of school we send our children to instead of stressing on the kind of education they would be exposed to? Ultimately, it is empty. We are reminded of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 8:36): *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

Another thing is the consumption of alcohol. King

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Vos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p.152.

Ahasuerus allowed a free flow of wine for all his guests. He himself was drunk as evidenced by his foolish and insensitive order to Queen Vashti, his wife, to parade before his rowdy and drunken guests. Alcohol is a drug which is capable of inflating one's so-called self-confidence. How many families have been broken because of alcoholism! The Word of God warns against drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1): *Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.* The best way to avoid drunkenness is not to drink alcohol at all. The Christian position on its consumption is either abstinence or great moderation. Our Lord Jesus Christ made wine but He was not a wine drinker.

We should approve Queen Vashti for her uncompromising and firm stand against the stupid order of her husband, King Ahasuerus. She held to her principles of proper decorum and demeanour. She was prepared to pay the cost of her royal position, the comfort and luxury she enjoyed in the palace, or even at the risk of being executed. We as Christians should emulate her stand in terms of our Christian beliefs and values. Daily we are being bombarded by the things of the world through newspapers, magazines, television, computer, and the masses both great and small in our workplaces and schools. How do we fare in the midst of a world which is unchristian in every aspect of life? We ought to be of sterner stuff like that of Vashti. Moreover, we would sacrifice for values that have eternity in view.

Esther 1 does not mention the name of God. God was nowhere to be found but that did not mean that He was not seeing and working. As we read further on in the chapters that follow, we will realize that God was present in chapter 1 working out His plans. Ahasuerus' order to Vashti to appear before him and a company of drunken male guests is unimaginable. The same applies to Vashti's uncompromising stand and her preparedness to face the dire consequences. Memucan came up with a brilliant proposition to the king to replace Vashti with another lady who would be more worthy and better than Vashti. In all these situations, each of them could have acted and responded differently: Ahasuerus could have sought reconciliation rather than revenge; Vashti could have just acceded to the king's summon and showed off her beauty; and Memucan would have no fear and no need to counsel the king. The fact of the matter is that God was working through the foolishness of Ahasuerus, the reaction of Vashti, and the fear of self-seeking officials. This is a comforting and encouraging truth that God is powerful and wise to work out His plan and purpose to the glory of His Name in order to bless His children. However, we must not expect that just because we are right with God, we will be exempt from all troubles and hardships. God will give us grace when we take our stand in the face of possible difficulties and danger.

AMEN