

Who was Xerxes in the Bible?

The name Xerxes does not appear in the Hebrew text of Scripture. However, it does appear throughout the book of Esther in the NIV and NASB. In the Hebrew text, the king's name is Ahasuerus (preserved in the KJV and ESV). Nothing is known of a king named Ahasuerus from secular sources, and the names of all the Persian kings from this time period are known. Most commentators equate Esther's king with Xerxes I (485–465 BC), son of Darius I, the fourth emperor of the Achaemenid Empire—thus the translation in some modern versions. (There is some evidence to show that the Hebrew name Ahasuerus can be easily derived from the Persian name.) The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the name Artaxerxes, which further complicates the issue, for there were two Persian rulers by that name: Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC) and Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC).

The details on the life of Xerxes found in the book of Esther are not corroborated by any secular sources. While there are many detractors who simply view Esther as fiction, for those who accept the historicity of the book of Esther, Xerxes I is the most likely candidate to fill the role of Ahasuerus. What we know of the character of Xerxes I fits with what we see in the book of Esther. Xerxes had a summer palace in Susa. He was known for his drinking, lavish banquets, harsh temper, and sexual appetite. Esther mentions a foiled plot against his life, and we know from secular history that, later, in 465, Xerxes was assassinated by the head of his bodyguard.

The most likely scenario is that the episode of Xerxes' life involving Esther took place after Xerxes' disastrous invasion of Greece in 480 BC. Xerxes' forces paid a heavy toll at the pass of Thermopylae at the hands of the fabled 300 Spartans and were defeated at Salamis. Returning home, Xerxes turned to domestic affairs.

King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) plays a prominent role in the book of Esther. In chapter 1 he gives a great banquet for his nobles and, after several days of eating and drinking, orders that Queen Vashti appear at the banquet so the men there might see her great beauty. Vashti refuses to attend, so the king deposes her.

In Esther 2 Xerxes begins to regret his decision to oust the queen, and he decides to find a new queen. The queen of Persia was not simply the wife of the king. The queenship was an honorary/political position. The king was a polygamist with many wives and concubines in his harem, but the queen was a special wife occupying a favored position. A call is sent out throughout the kingdom for all beautiful virgins to be gathered into the harem so that the king could choose a new queen from among them. As a member of the harem, a woman would technically be the property of the king—either a wife or a concubine. Each of the women would spend a night with the king. After their night together, each woman would be moved to the “other side” of the harem and would never see the king again, unless he called for her. When he found the “right one,” Xerxes would name her queen, although she would not be his exclusive wife or sexual partner. A woman whom Xerxes never called again would live her life in the harem as a pampered prisoner with no possibility for a real marriage or family of her own.

A Jewess named Esther, who was raised by her cousin Mordecai, was one of the women rounded up for Xerxes. She was eventually named queen, but she kept her nationality a secret. Mordecai is anxious for Esther and loiters day after day near the harem quarters to monitor how she is doing. In so doing, he overhears a plot to kill the king. He reports it to Esther, who reports it to the king, and the plot is foiled.

In Esther 3 one of Xerxes’ chief advisers, Haman, is angered that Mordecai will not bow

down to him, so he hatches a plot to kill not only Mordecai but all of the Jews. Haman convinces King Xerxes to authorize the extermination; however, it appears that the king does not know the identity of the people that Haman plans to wipe out—only that they are enemies of the state. He trusts Haman to handle the details. In chapter 4 Mordecai informs Esther of the danger the Jews are in and convinces her to intercede with the king. The problem Esther faces is that Xerxes has not called for her for some time and, if she approaches him without being summoned, she risks death. At this point, neither the king nor Haman knows Esther's nationality or her relationship to Mordecai. Mordecai encourages Esther to take the risk, saying that perhaps she has been made queen "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

In Esther 5 the queen approaches Xerxes, and he extends his scepter to her, signifying that he welcomes her into his presence. Instead of explaining her predicament, however, Esther invites the king and Haman to a private banquet. At the banquet Esther again puts off addressing the issue; instead, she asks the king and Haman to come to another banquet the next day, which they agree to do. Haman is so overjoyed and emboldened by the special attention he's receiving from the queen that he decides to have Mordecai hanged in advance of the general slaughter of the Jews.

In Esther 6 the king cannot sleep, so he has the royal annals read to him. When the account of the foiled plot against his life is recounted, Xerxes asks if Mordecai has ever been honored for saving him. When he finds that Mordecai has never been rewarded, Xerxes decides to remedy the oversight. At that moment, Haman enters, and the king asks him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" (Esther 6:5). Haman thinks the king is referring to him, so he proposes a lavish public display: "For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has

worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" The king thinks it is a splendid idea to be carried out immediately and tells Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned" (verses 7-9). So, in what some would call a strange "twist of fate," Haman has to publicly honor Mordecai. After his humiliation, Haman hurriedly prepares for the banquet with Esther and the king, as Haman's family laments that certainly fate is against him now.

In Esther 7, at the second banquet, Xerxes asks Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled" (Esther 7:2). Esther begs for the life of herself and her people. The king is enraged and asks who would dare plot such a thing. Esther answers, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" (verse 6). The king rushes from the room in a rage, and Haman throws himself upon the couch where Esther is reclining to plead for his life. At that moment, the king returns and misinterprets Haman's actions: "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" (verse 8). Haman is whisked away and hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

In Esther 8 the house of Haman is given to Esther, and his position in the court is given to Mordecai. Even though Haman is out of the way, the plot to kill all the Jews is still afoot. It appears that the king's edict called for citizens of Persia to kill Jews on a certain day and confiscate their property. The edict, which could not be rescinded,

is modified to allow the Jews to defend themselves, and in chapter 9 they are able to withstand the attack, and many of their enemies are killed.

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, but He is conspicuous by His absence. In Esther we do not see any miracles or divine intervention. However, we do see an abundance of providence, which is God's control and provision through "natural" means. It is clear that the writer of the book intends us to see God's unseen hand behind every detail and ironic twist of "fate." Although Xerxes is the king, he is not ultimately in charge. The king of Persia is little more than a bit player in God's all-encompassing drama. The story of Xerxes is an excellent example of Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."