

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## EXILE and RETURN

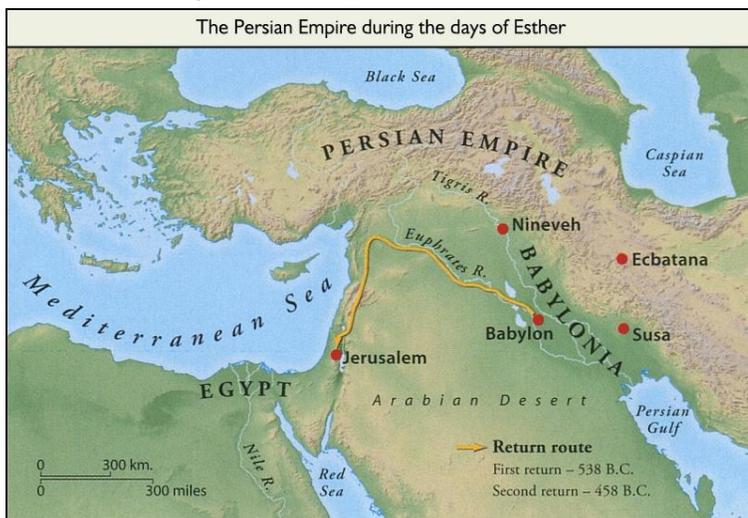
### GOD THE PROVIDER

#### *For Such a Time As This*

As we begin our study of God the Provider, we turn to the story of Esther, one of the individual's whose family did not return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Her story relates an amazing chain of events where we see firsthand how the LORD provides (in Hebrew Yahweh-Jireh) for His people although His name is never mentioned in the story. In the Bible, the book of Esther comes after the book of Nehemiah, but the events it describes took place about 30 years before Nehemiah's story. Halley's Bible Handbook gives a timeline of the events.

- The first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Twenty years later the temple was completed (*Ezra 1-6*).
- The story of Esther takes place about 40 years after the temple was rebuilt. She became queen of Persia in 478 B.C. and saved the Jews from being massacred in 473 B.C.
- Fifteen years after Queen Esther saved the Jews, Ezra went to Jerusalem (458 B.C.), and 13 years after

that Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.



This map shows the Persian Empire during the days of Queen Esther. Shushan (aka Susa) Palace became the winter residence of Persian kings. After the Medes and Persians capture Babylon, we read that Daniel was in Shushan the palace when he had the vision recorded in *Daniel 8*. Shushan is the same place that Nehemiah began his public ministry. Shushan is located in modern day Iran.

Xerxes was the Persian king who reigned from 486-464 B.C. It is believed that he is King Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther. Ahasuerus was a title meaning 'high father' used similar to the way the Egyptians called each of their rulers Pharaoh.

Ahasuerus was holding one of the drinking parties for which history tells us he was famous. Vashti, his queen, refused to parade before the king's all-male party. Whatever her reason, Vashti's action was a breach of protocol that placed Xerxes in a difficult situation. He made the command to dethrone Vashti and could not reverse it; therefore, his servants suggested he take another queen. *Esther 2:3 (ESV)*<sup>3</sup> *And let the king appoint officers ... to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel ...*

We are not told if the young women were given a choice but it is assumed that they were not. They became concubines in the king's harem – waiting for the king to call. One of those young women brought to the palace due to Vashti's fate was Hadassah – a Jewish orphan who had been cared for by her cousin Mordecai.

The word providence speaks of outside influence. God's Word in this book that does not mention His name reveals that our Sovereign God orchestrates the affairs of humanity by His direct and indirect intervention. This doesn't mean that God approved of the king's harems or of his sensual abuse of women. However, it does mean that God can use even sinful situations to accomplish His purposes. Unknown to Hadassah and Mordecai God was aligning human events to ensure the preservation of God's people who remained in Persia.

With her entrance into the harem Hadassah's name was changed to Esther. Esther may have been in the harem for as long as four years before she was called before the king. Esther pleased the king enough that he crowned her queen. The queen held a more influential position than a concubine, and she was given more freedom and authority than others in the harem. But even Queen Esther would have few rights. Apparently, her Jewish heritage was never discussed.

God had promised to bless and preserve the nation of Israel. On the other hand, the LORD had promised to blot out the Amalekites. Amalekites were descendants of Esau. They were the first to war against the Israelites after they came out of Egypt. God said to Moses in *Exodus 17:14 (ESV)*<sup>14</sup> ... *I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.*” Even though the Israelites won the first battle, fighting continued between the Israelites and the Amalekites after Israel settled in Canaan. Because of their atrocities, God commanded Saul to exterminate the Amalekites. King Saul was disobedient and did not kill their king, Agag, instead the prophet Samuel killed him. It is believed that the names Amalekite and Agagite are synonymous for the same people group. Here in Shushan we find an Agagite serving as the prime minister of Persia – Haman.

Mordecai, a Jew in the employment of the king, sat in the king's gate. When he saw proud Haman going about the palace, he refused to pay him homage. He would not bow his head or bend his knee to him and this maddened Haman. Since Mordecai was a Jew, he plotted to exterminate Mordecai's entire race residing throughout Persia. Because of Haman's conniving against the Jews, the people faced genocide.

**Read Esther 3:8-9 (ESV)**<sup>8</sup> *Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them.”*<sup>9</sup> *If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries.”*

The easily influenced King Ahasuerus agreed with Haman and letters sealed with the King's signet ring were sent out to destroy all Jews – men, women and children on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month. Once again the irrefutable Law of the Medes and Persians was brought into play against God's people. Remember King Darius had been duped into signing a law that was designed to destroy Daniel. Seek the Lord even when it seems He is hidden.

**Read Esther 4:1-3 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.* <sup>2</sup> *He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.* <sup>3</sup> *And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

The intensity of Mordecai's grief was severe. He may have felt responsible for the death sentence for all since Haman's anger toward him initiated the law in the first place. Mordecai had acted properly in not bowing to Haman. Mordecai put on sackcloth a very coarse, black material which caused chafing when worn next to the skin. He poured ashes on his head symbolizing his humility and acknowledging that we come from the dust of the earth. Sackcloth and ashes were used in times of national disaster. There were an estimated 15 million Jews in the eye of the storm caused by the evil Haman.

**Read Esther 4:4-7 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> *When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.* <sup>5</sup> *Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs... to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.* <sup>6</sup> *Hathach went out ...* <sup>7</sup> *and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.*

Esther is worried about her grieving cousin, but her position does not allow her to go out to the gate. He can't be brought in because sackcloth was associated with death and, therefore, considered unclean. Also, only happy folks were allowed around the king. Esther sent him clothes to replace the sackcloth possibly so Mordecai could come inside the gate when the mourning clothes were removed. Or, she might have sent the clothes since it was the custom of the Persians to send new garments to near relatives who were mourning over the death of loved ones. Esther may have not known about the edict and assumed someone had died. Hathach brought much different news than the death of a family member.

The Jews were under the sentence of death. It was the LAW. Today men without Jesus Christ are also under the sentence of death. God's law demands that death is the price for sin. **Romans 6:23 (ESV)** <sup>23</sup> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Consider Esther's attempts to comfort Mordecai. Esther offered clothing for Mordecai to make an outward change. But, he and all the Jews would remain under the sentence of death no matter how he dressed. People today try to change their death sentence with outward change: doing good works, church membership, or religious activities to remove the guilt of sin. God's plan to save us from sin is accepting His Son, Jesus, who paid the penalty for our sins! Recognize the role you play in the sovereign plan of God.

**Read Esther 4:8-14 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> *Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree ... that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king ... and plead with him on behalf of her people.* <sup>9</sup> *And Hathach ... told Esther what Mordecai had said.* <sup>10</sup> *Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say,* <sup>11</sup> *"All the king's servants and the people ... know that if any man or woman goes to*

*the king ... without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live .... I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”*<sup>12</sup>  
*And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.*<sup>13</sup> *Then Mordecai told them to reply ... “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.*<sup>14</sup> *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?”*

Some believe Esther’s hesitation came from the assumption she would be exempt from death’s penalty. That attitude would be similar to how many today believe they will be exempt from the curse of death – thinking we are all going to get to heaven somehow. Mordecai knew Esther could not count on being exempt from the law. I personally see Esther’s hesitation as hoping there was another way to escape death. People hope today that there are other ways to heaven than through Jesus. They complain Jesus’ narrow way is too hard.

Mordecai reminded Esther that if she was unwilling to be used by God, the LORD would use someone else to deliver His people. How sad to be called as God’s ‘first responder’ and then miss His service opportunity. ***Ephesians 5:15-16 (ESV)***<sup>15</sup> *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,*<sup>16</sup> *making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* The LORD had promised many generations before that He would make a great nation from Israel – not annihilate them. God keeps His promises.

Mordecai understood the Providence of God similar to the way Joseph understood it when Joseph spoke to his brothers regarding their sin against him. ***Genesis 50:20 (ESV)***<sup>20</sup> *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* Mordecai believed that Esther may have come into her position in history for this very moment – he called it *such a time as this*. Accept the risk associated with your purpose.

***Read Esther 4:15-17 (ESV)***<sup>15</sup> *Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai,*<sup>16</sup> *“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”*<sup>17</sup> *Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Esther’s words, “*if I perish, I perish*” remind us that doing the LORD’s will is not always easy. When Esther fully understood the tragedy her people faced, her own death became insignificant and she was willing to sacrifice her life. Esther – a female Jewish exile came to a position of unusual authority in a culture that valued neither women nor Jews. Next week, we will see how she became an unlikely conveyor of God’s salvation for His people. And what a picture of God’s salvation yet to come that would be offered to all through the unlikely vessel of a child born in a cattle stall!