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Cover: Stone relief of Persian and Medean guards, from the stairway of the Tripylon at Persepolis. From *The Arts of Iran* by R. Ghirshman, fig. 236. Source: Antonello Perissinotto.

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## Archaeology and the Book of Esther

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Some biblical books, by their very nature, demand that the biblical archaeologist supply whatever information and insights his particular discipline can provide. Discussions of stories in Genesis, such as the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:4-3:24), the Flood (6:1-8:18), or the rather strange inheritance and marriage practices of the Hebrew patriarchs (15:1-6; 16:1-6; 30:1-13), usually prompt the archaeologist to observe that the much older Sumerian, Babylonian, and Nuzi documents have illuminated these biblical stories, shedding new light on their origins and context. Or, consider the Book of Joshua, with its fascinating story of the fall of Jericho and the

subsequent conquest and distribution of the Land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel. The book inevitably raises the question of what light archaeology can shed on all this, i.e., when did Jericho fall, and to whom; what other Canaanite cities do or do not show clear evidence of being destroyed in or around that time? And certainly if our insight into the national and international situation of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel were based solely on the content of I and II Kings and the prophetic books, with no archaeological evidence from Palestinian tells or from the records of the Babylonians, Assyrians, or Egyptians themselves, then our knowledge of that particular biblical period would be almost skeletal.

Some other books of the Hebrew Bible also fairly cry out for all the help that the archaeologist can provide; but such is not the case with the Book of Esther. At least, not at first glance. Even though the Book of Esther claims to be a strictly historical account, ever since the work of J. S. Semler in 1773, that claim has increasingly been rejected, to the point that in the twentieth century only a handful of critical scholars have strenuously argued for the book's historical accuracy.<sup>1</sup>

#### Ancient Misgivings about the Religious Authority of Esther

Moreover, the book's sacred character and canonicity, as well as its religious value, have been matters of considerable dispute among both Jews and Christians. Whereas, for instance, the great Jewish medieval scholar Maimonides (1135-1204) ranked Esther immediately after the Pentateuch in importance, Martin Luther, another medieval scholar, declared, "I am so hostile to this book [II Maccabees] and to Esther that I would wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety" (*Table Talk*, XXIV). Such a polarization of view point was not a medieval phenomenon alone but has been characteristic of the book almost from its beginnings.

The festival of Purim was definitely not celebrated by the Jewish sect of Qumran as part of their sacred calendar; and so, not surprisingly, the Book of Esther, which had as its *raison d'être* the establishment of Purim, has not been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Moreover, according to the Talmud, some Jews continued to reject the book as late as the third or fourth century A.D. (*Megilla* 7a; *Sanhedrin* II).

In the first five centuries of the Christian Church, Christians were even more sharply divided over the question of Esther's canonicity, as can be seen from an examination of the Lists of Canonical Books according to various Church Fathers (see Fig. 1).

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1. For example, J. Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History* (1923); and J.B. Schildenberg, *Das Buch Esther* (1941).

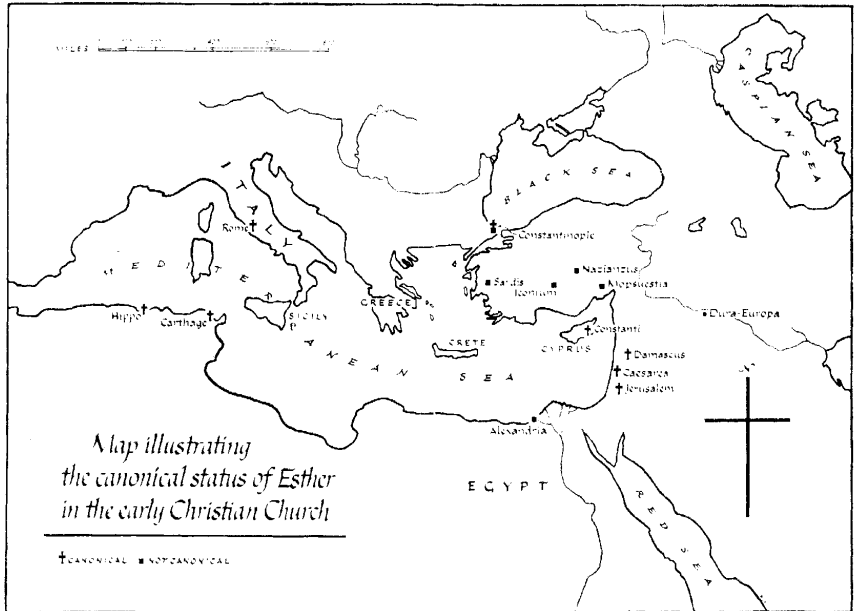


Fig. 1. Sketch map illustrating the canonical status of Esther in the early Christian Church. From the book *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Copyright, 1971, by C.A. Moore. Published by Doubleday and Company, Inc.

#### A Résumé of the Story of Esther

King Xerxes (the one who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia [see Fig. 2]) in the third year of his reign held for the important people of his realm a lavish celebration (lasting 180 days!) at his magnificent palace at Susa. Right after that, when Queen Vashti refused the king's command to appear before the male revelers to show off her much-rumored beauty (this particular party had been going on for seven hard-drinking days), the king dethroned her on the spot and sent a formal dispatch throughout his empire, commanding every man to be master of his own house. (Chap. 1.)

Some time later, at the suggestion of his pages, an empire-wide search was undertaken for a new queen. Among the many beautiful maidens brought to the court was the Jewess Esther (or Hadassah), the adopted daughter of Mordecai, a Jewish exile who sat at the King's Gate at the acropolis of Susa. In the seventh year of Xerxes' reign, Esther became his queen, but without revealing to him that she was Jewish. Just about that time Mordecai foiled an

assassination plot against the king, and this service to Xerxes was duly recorded — and promptly forgotten by the officials. (Chap. 2.)

Being a Jew, Mordecai refused to do obeisance to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, Xerxes' favorite noble. Haman, however, determined to get his revenge against Mordecai and his people. By maligning the Jews as disrespectful and disobedient to the king, Haman persuaded Xerxes to let him announce an empire-wide pogrom against the Jews, to take place eleven months from then, namely, to annihilate all Jews, regardless of sex or age, on the 13th of the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions. (Haman had established the particular date by casting *pâr*, or "lot", as the Jews call it.) (Chap. 3.)

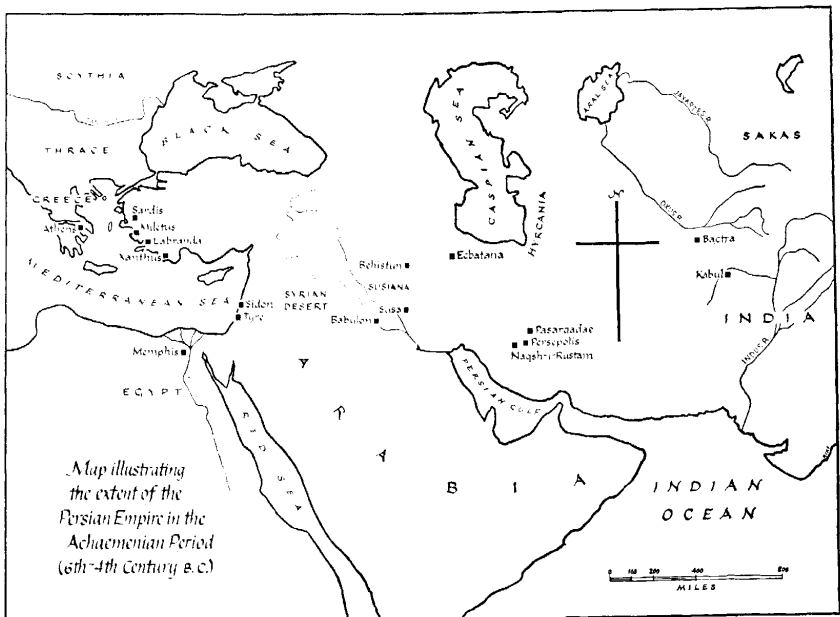


Fig. 2. Sketch map illustrating extent of the Achaemenian Empire. From the book *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Copyright, 1971, by C.A. Moore. Published by Doubleday and Company, Inc. According to Esther 1:1, King Xerxes reigned from India to Ethiopia.

Dressing himself in sack cloth and ashes after he had learned of this royal edict, Mordecai sent a copy of the dispatch to Queen Esther, demanding that she intercede with the king for her people. Reluctant to do so at first because anyone who approached the royal throne unannounced was immediately put to death (unless the king granted him immunity by elevating his scepter), Esther was finally persuaded to take the risk [see Fig. 4.]. At her request, the Jews were to fast for the next three days. (Chap. 4.)



Fig. 3. Stone relief showing a Chorasmian with a horse wearing a crown, from the last stairway of the apadana at Persepolis. From *The Arts of Ancient Iran* by R. Ghirshman (1964), fig. 231. Source: Antonello Perissinotto.

On the third day, Esther, dressed in her finest, appeared before the king unsummoned, and was immediately granted immunity. All she asked, however, was for him and Haman to be her dinner guests later that day. And even at the dinner itself, when Xerxes asked her what favor he could do for her, Esther demurred, promising that she would do so at their dinner together the next day. Leaving the palace after dinner, Haman was jubilant — until he saw Mordecai the Jew at the King's Gate, still refusing to do obeisance or even acknowledge him! When Haman got home and told his wife, she suggested that he build an enormous gallows (75 feet high) and then early the next morning go to ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai on it. (Chap. 5.)

That night, because the king couldn't sleep, his daily record book was read aloud to him, and so Xerxes learned of how Mordecai had saved his life. Just at that point Haman arrived to ask Xerxes' permission to hang Mordecai. "What honor," asked the king of Haman, "should be done for the man whom the king especially wants to honor?" Thinking that Xerxes was really referring to him, Haman answered, "Give that man a royal robe and a crowned horse [see Fig. 3] on which the king himself has ridden, and have one of the most noble princes personally lead that man through the city." Whereupon, the king said, "Do exactly as you have advised to Mordecai the Jew!" With heavy heart Haman did as the king had commanded. (Chap. 6.)

Later that day, as the king and Haman were dining with Esther, Xerxes again asked her what her petition was. "My people and I," she cried, "we've been sold, not into slavery but for total destruction and annihilation!" When Xerxes learned that the villain in all this was Haman, he was furious and bolted into the adjoining garden. Whereupon Haman, prostrating himself on Esther's couch, begged her to intercede for him with the king. Re-entering the room and seeing this violation of harem prohibitions, Xerxes ordered Haman's immediate execution. And so Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. (Chap. 7.)

After the king had already given Esther Haman's estate and had invested Mordecai with the powers previously conferred on Haman, Esther again appeared unsummoned before the king, begging him to revoke the edict authorizing the pogrom against the Jews. Unable to do that because of the irrevocable character of the Law of the Medes and Persians (see cover), Xerxes did the next best thing, that is, he allowed Mordecai to issue a new empire-wide edict, permitting the Jews on the 13th of Adar to defend themselves against their enemies and to plunder their possessions. Not surprisingly, a lot of pagans soon befriended the Jews, and some even converted to Judaism. (Chap. 8.)

Thus, on the 13th of Adar the Jews ably defended themselves, killing 75,000 enemies throughout the empire, as well as 500 in Susa itself, plus the

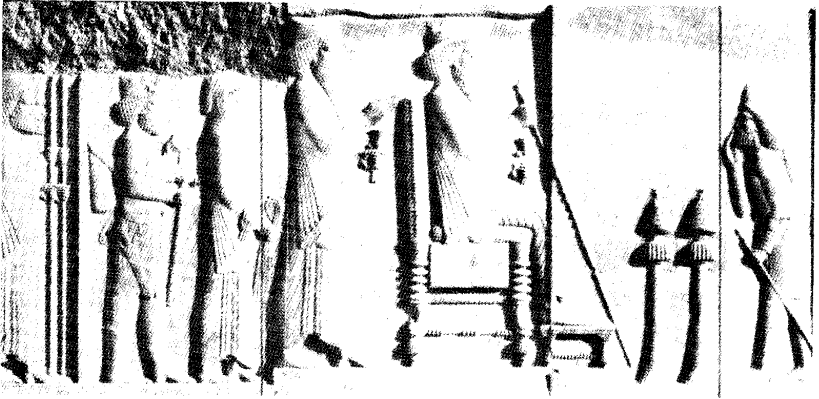


Fig. 4. Stone relief showing Darius and his son Xerxes giving audience at Persepolis. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

"All the king's courtiers, and even the people of the king's provinces, are well aware that there is one penalty for every man or woman who approaches the king inside the inner court without having been summoned: to be put to death, the one exception being that person to whom the king extends the gold scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for the past thirty days!" (Esth. 4:11)

ten sons of Haman. (They did not, however, plunder.) Later that same day, at Esther's request the king granted that the ten sons of Haman be exposed on the gallows and that the 14th of Adar be also used by the Jews in Susa for eliminating the remaining pockets of resistance to them. Consequently, while on the 14th of Adar the Jews elsewhere in the empire were celebrating their victory over their enemies, the Jews in Susa were still fighting and so had to celebrate their victory the next day.

Thus, at the instigation of Mordecai and Queen Esther Jews throughout the empire were encouraged to commemorate forever this great victory by celebrating the Festival of Purim (the Festival of Lots), on both the 14th and 15th of Adar, making them days of feasting and rejoicing, for sending delicacies to one another and giving alms to the poor. (Chap. 9.) As for Xerxes, he continued to be a great king, thanks in no small part to Mordecai, who ranked second to the king and served well his sovereign and his people. (Chap. 10.)

Is this story essentially true? It certainly could be. Apart from a few improbable details, such as the irrevocability of the Law of the Medes and Persians (Esth. 1:19; 8:8) or the king's willingness to have Jews wage civil war within his own capital city (9:12-16), the story is believable enough. Unlike some biblical books, Esther has no supernatural elements that might strain the imagination of some of its modern readers. (In fact, while the Persian king is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses, God is not mentioned at all, a fact which has occasioned considerable debate among scholars.)



Fig. 5. Achaemenian gold drinking cup in the form of a winged lion (fifth century B.C.). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, New York. According to Esth. 1:7, at the king's drinking party "the drinks were served in gold goblets, with no two alike."

#### Evidence of the Ancient Classical Writers

But to say that the story is believable does not necessarily mean that it is true or that most of it actually happened. The best way to establish the essential historicity of the story would be, of course, to have extra-biblical confirmation of it. Thus, since the time of the French Enlightenment, if not before, students of Esther have been quick to point out that a number of details in Esther find confirmation in, or essential agreement with, materials of the ancient classical historians, especially Herodotus, *History of the Persian Wars*; Ctesias, *Persica*; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*; and Strabo, *Geography*.

Much of what the author of Esther says about King Xerxes corresponds fairly well with what the classical writers had to say about such things, for example, as to the extensiveness of Xerxes' empire (Esth. 1:1.20), his nasty and at times irrational temper (1:12; 7:7-8), or his extravagant promises and munificent gifts (5:3; 6:6-7). Moreover, there are a large number of incidental "details of fact" in the Esther story which also seem to find confirmation in the classical writers: the Persian kings did have rousing drinking



parties, with magnificent drinking goblets [see Fig. 5] and lavish entertainment (1:4-7), seven princely advisers (1:14), a very efficient postal system (3:13; 8:10), to give but a few of a large number of examples. And finally, there appears in Esther a score of words which are identified as Persian by classical writers.<sup>2</sup>

This confirmatory evidence from classical historians is, of course, still secondary in character and far from being conclusive proof, especially since one cannot discount the possibility that the author of Esther may have had access to these classical histories and used them to make his own story more authentic. But so long as the ancient Near Eastern peoples could not speak for themselves, the classical writers had to serve as the "objective" or impartial witnesses in extra-biblical matters.

#### Some Persian Epigraphic Materials

Once the inscriptions and clay tablets of the ancient Babylonians and Persians could be read, thanks to G. H. Rawlinson's decipherment of the cuneiform inscriptions on the Behistun Rock in the Zagros Mountains in 1854, then these ancient peoples could speak for themselves; and biblical scholars were flooded by new evidence, although exactly where that tide of archaeological evidence has carried them has been a matter of some dispute.

Though rather limited in number, the epigraphical materials immediately relevant to Esther are instructive. *ʾḥšwrwš* (Ahasuerus), the king in Esther, is, linguistically speaking, the Hebraic equivalent of the Old Persian *Khshayarsha*, i.e., Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.), the monarch so memorably portrayed by Herodotus as the Persian king defeated by the Greeks at Thermopylae and Salamis (480 B.C.) and at Plataea (479 B. C.) We know, however, from cuneiform tablets and inscriptions of the Persians themselves that the failures of Xerxes against the Greeks must be counterbalanced by his great successes elsewhere, notably, by his wartime accomplishments against Egypt and Babylon, and his peacetime efforts at Persepolis [see Fig. 6]. It was at his magnificent palace at Persepolis, for instance, that archaeologists discovered a foundation stone that, in effect, confirms, or agrees with, Xerxes' titles and territorial claims in Esther:

I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of (all) countries (which speak) all kinds 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.

Thus speaks king Xerxes: These are the countries — in addition to Persia — over which I am king under the 'shadow' of Ahuramazda, over which I hold sway, which are bringing their tribute to me — whatever is commanded them by me, that they do and they abide by my law(s) —:

2. For more detailed information on this, as well as on many other matters in the present article, see the writer's *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (1971) (Anchor Bible).

Media, Elam, Arachosia, Urartu, Drangiana, Parthia, (H)aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, Sattagydia, Sardis, Egypt (*Misir*), the Ionians who live on the salty sea and (those) who live beyond . . . the salty sea, Maka, Arabia, Gandara, India, Cappadocia, Da'an, the Amyrgian Cimmerians . . . (wearing) pointed caps, the Skudra, the Akupish, Libya, Banneshu (Carians) (and) *Kush*. (J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* [1955], pp. 316-17; italics added.)

It should perhaps be noted in passing that these territorial claims are essentially confirmed also by Herodotus, *History* III.97, VII.9, 65, 69f.

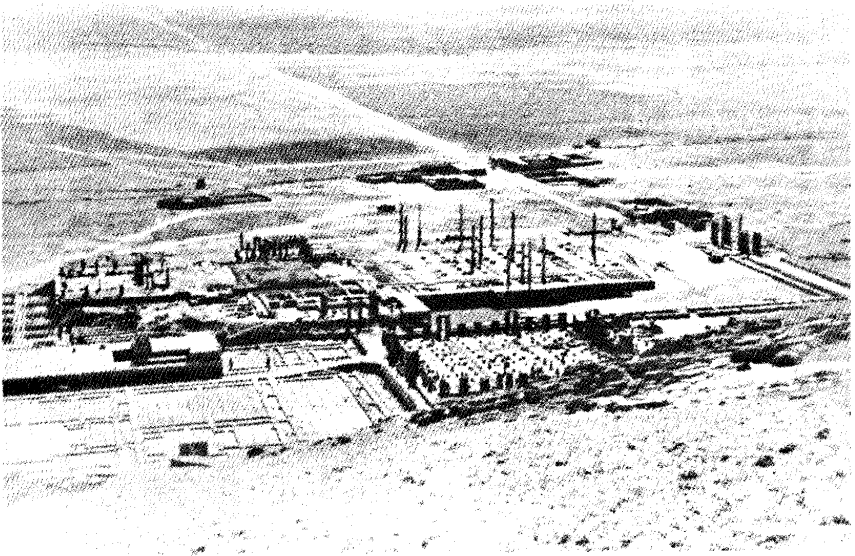


Fig. 6. Aerial view of Persepolis. From *The Art of Ancient Iran*, by R. Ghirshman, fig. 199. Source: Photo Vahe.

Describing Xerxes' pavilion at Susa, the author of *Esther* wrote in 1:5-6:

Now when all that was over, the king gave a week-long party for all the men staying in the acropolis of Susa, for both the important and the unimportant alike, in the courtyard of the king's pavilion. The courtyard was decorated with white and violet cotton curtains, which were fastened by linen and purple cords to silver rings and marble columns; and couches of gold and silver were on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones.

That pavilion, as well as its magnificent palace and acropolis, now lies in ruin [see Fig. 7], thanks to the ravages of war, time, the elements and, last but not least, the primitive excavation techniques of early Near Eastern archaeologists who, understandably for the times, were in those days concerned with finding objects and structures but not with rigorous attention to stratigraphy; for example, see M.A. Dieulafoy, *L'acropole de Suse*, 4 vols. (1893). The extravagance of the palace's architecture and the lavishness of its appointments are tantalizingly suggested to us by a foundation record found there, dating from the time of Darius, Xerxes' father:



Fig. 7. Aerial view of Susa. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

This is the *hadish* place which at Susa I built. From afar its ornamentation was brought. Deep down the earth was dug, until rock bottom I reached. When the excavation was made, gravel was packed down, one part sixty feet, the other part thirty feet in depth. On that gravel a palace I built. And that the earth was dug down and the gravel packed and the mud brick formed in molds, that the Babylonians did. The cedar timber was brought from a mountain named Lebanon; the Assyrians brought it to Susa. Teakwood was brought from Gandara and From Carmania. The gold which was used here was brought from Sardis and Bactria. The stone — lapis lazuli and carnelian — was brought from Sogdiana. The turquoise was brought from Chorasmia. The silver and copper was

brought from Egypt. The ornamentation with which the wall was adorned was brought from Ionia. The ivory was brought from Ethiopia, from India, and from Arachosia. The stone pillars were brought from a place named Abiradush in Elam. The artisans who dressed the stone were Ionians and Sardians. The goldsmiths who wrought the gold were Medes and Egyptians. Those who worked the inlays were Sardians and Egyptians. Those who worked the mud brick (with figures) were Babylonians. At Susa here a splendid work was ordered; very splendid did it turn out. Me may Ahuramazda protect, and Hystaspes, who is my father, and my land. (A.T. Olmstead, *The History of the Persian Empire* [1948], p. 168.)

Such inscriptions as the above, while interesting, do very little to "prove" the essential historicity of the Esther story. After all, one would naturally expect a great king like Darius or Xerxes to have an extensive empire, complete with magnificent palaces at both Susa and Persepolis. If the Esther story is to be accepted as fact, then more specific epigraphic material is necessary, that is, something that would attest either to the existence of pogroms against the Jews in the otherwise tolerant Achaemenian empire or, better yet, to the actual existence of either Esther or Mordecai.

#### On the Historicity of Esther and Mordecai

To date, there is no extra-biblical evidence for the persecution of Jews in Susa in the time of Xerxes. That "fact", say some scholars, may only reflect the incompleteness of our extant archaeological evidence. After all, they argue, were it not for the chance discovery of the Elephantine papyri, we would have known nothing about the strong Egyptian hostility to Jews living in Elephantine, Egypt in the 5th century B.C. Needless to say, such an argument from silence is not very persuasive.

The really crucial question is whether there is any extra-biblical evidence for either Queen Esther or Mordecai. Concerning Esther, or Hadassah as she is called in Esther 2:7, the answer is clear; not only is there no evidence for her actual existence, but there is strong evidence against it; the queen of Xerxes then was Amestris (so Herodotus, *History* III.84).

With respect to the historicity of Mordecai, however, the situation is, archaeologically speaking, problematic. A priori, there is of course no serious objection to Jews like Mordecai attaining positions of prominence and wealth in the days of the Achaemenian empire, as is clear, for instance, from the archives of the Murashu sons of Nippur, Babylonian bankers and brokers during the reigns of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.) and Darius II (423-404 B.C.).<sup>3</sup> More importantly, Mordecai is an authentic personal name,

3. For details, see S.H. Horn, *Biblical Research*, 9 (1964), 22-25; and M.D. Coogan, *BA*, 37 (1974), 6-16.

appearing in a 5th century Aramaic document as *Mrdk*, as well as in a variety of forms in treasury tablets found at Persepolis (*Mar-du-uk-ka*, *Marduk-ka*, and *Mar-du-kan-na-sir*).<sup>4</sup>

Most relevant of all is an undated text, coming probably from either the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes I, where mention is made of a man named Marduka, who served as an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa (A. Ungnad, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 58 [1940/41], 244). This Marduka could be the biblical Mordecai because, in all likelihood, Mordecai was an official of the king *prior* to his being invested in 8:2 with the powers previously conferred on Haman (cf. also 8:15; 9:4; and 10:2). The reason for our saying this is that Mordecai is regularly described as one who "sat at the King's Gate" (2:19; 5:13; 6:10); and according to Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII.1, 6 and Herodotus, *History* III.120, Persian officials had to stay at the gate of the royal palace (see Fig. 8). On this matter the Greek version of Esther is even more explicit; for at the time Mordecai learned of the conspiracy against the king, he was already "serving at the court of the king" (so A 2, 16<sup>5</sup> and 2:21 of the LXX).

While at first glance all of this seems rather persuasive, if not conclusive, we must be careful not to draw too hasty a conclusion and, without some reservations, identify the accountant Marduka with Mordecai. There is, for instance, no evidence that our Marduka was a Jew; yet that ethnic/religious designation was evidently a regular part of Mordecai's title, i.e., "Mordecai the Jew" (5:13; 6:10; 8:7; and 9:31). More importantly, the inscription mentioning Marduka is undated; and the possibility exists that it is erroneously dated to the first twenty years of the 5th century B.C. And finally, while Ungnad believes that "it is improbable that there are two Mardukas as high officials in Susa" (ZAW 59 [1942/43], 219), the plain truth is that we have no idea of how common the name Marduka was at that particular time and place. All in all, since the epigraphic evidence concerning Marduka certainly prevents us from categorically ruling out as pure fiction the Mordecai episodes in the Book of Esther, it is safest for us to conclude that the story of Mordecai may very well have to it a kernel of truth.

#### Sources for the Story of Esther

As for whether Esther's role was originally a part of Mordecai's story, there is no relevant archaeological data; but there is some literary evidence, namely, the phenomenon of "twoness" — two banquets (Esther 1:3,5); two

4. On *Mrdk*, see G.R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.* (1955), p.10, n.2. On variations of *Marduka*, see G.G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (1948), p. 84.

5. A 2, 16 refers to verses 2 and 16 of Addition A of the Greek Esther. The Septuagint text of Esther has six large additions (Add's), which have no counterpart in the Hebrew text of Esther, namely, Add A (Mordecai's dream and his discovery of a plot against the king); Add B (Text of the king's first letter); Add C (The prayers of Mordecai and Esther); Add D (Esther appears before the king unsummoned); Add E (Text of the king's second letter); and Add F (The interpretation of Mordecai's dream).



Fig. 8. Gate of King Xerxes at Persepolis. From *The Arts of Ancient Iran*, by R. Ghirshman, fig. 203. Source: Noel Ballif. Like other Persian officials, Mordecai "sat at the King's Gate" (Esth. 2:21).

lists of seven names (1:10, 14); the "second house" mentioned in 2:14; a second contingent of virginal candidates in 2:19; Esther's two dinners with the king (5:5; 7:1); and Esther's twice risking her life by appearing before the king unsummoned (5:2, 8:3). This "twoness" is probably the result of the union, or conflation, of several *separate* stories: 1) a historical story centering around Mordecai and involving court intrigues and the persecution of Jews in Susa; 2) a story about Hadassah, a Jewess who became a favorite of the king and played an intercessory role in saving her people on a particular occasion; and 3) the Vashti story, an apocryphal harem tale, such as is so common in *A Thousand and One Nights*.

It is impossible to say from where the author of Esther took these stories; but H. Bardtke (*Das Buch Esther* [1963], pp. 248-52) is probably correct in thinking that they came from some Jewish midrashic source, possibly *The Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia*, the work mentioned in Esther 10:2.

#### On the Origins of Purim

To date, archaeology has actually contributed very little to our understanding of the origins of that festival which is the *raison d'être* of the Book of Esther, the festival of Purim. While it is clear, for example, that the word *pûr* in Esther 3:7 and 9:24 represents the Babylonian word *pûru*, meaning "lot," and, secondarily, "fate" (J. Lewy, *Revue Hittite et Asiatique*, 5 [1939], 117-24), the explanation for the festival's name in Esther 9:26 has struck many scholars as strained and unconvincing, namely, "That is why these days are called 'Purim', from the word *pûr*, " *pûrim* being the hebraized plural of *pûr*.

There are at least three reasons why so many scholars think that Purim was not actually the original name of the festival. First, in the earliest allusion to the events of Purim outside the Book of Esther itself, the 13th of Adar is identified, not as "the day before Purim" but as "the day before Mordecai's day" (II Macc. 15:36). This observation might have little weight were it not for the second reason: in the Greek version of Esther, as well as in the Greek text of Josephus, the festival in Esther 9:26 is called *Phrourai*. Inasmuch as Josephus himself was a Palestinian Jew of the first century A.D., one would certainly expect Josephus to know the name of the festival! Finally, the very secular character of the Purim celebration suggests a pagan origin. Not only is God not mentioned in the Esther story, but in their celebration of Purim Jews were allowed, according to the Talmud, *to drink to excess*, i.e., until they were unable to distinguish between "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman" (so *Megilla* 7b)! Many scholars believe, therefore, that the word *pûrim* represents a later folk etymology for a judaized pagan festival, that is, *pûrim* (the Heb. plural of *pûr*, "lot") was a name supplied by Babylonian Jews to a Jewish festival which had been initially pagan in both origin and character.

Just exactly what the pagan festival might have been we cannot say. Virtually every imaginable Babylonian, Persian, and Greek festival has been thought by someone or other to be the most likely pagan candidate.

Personal Names as Evidence

We have every reason to expect archaeological data to illuminate the origin and meaning of the personal names in the Book of Esther, including such minor characters as the seven eunuchs named in 1:10, the seven princely advisers in 1:14, and the ten sons of Haman in 9:7-9. The likelihood of archaeology being of direct and decisive help here is increased by the well-known fact that, thanks to the countless personal names appearing on thousands of clay tablets, inscriptions, papyri, and the like, scholars now know hundreds and hundreds of good Babylonian, Persian, and Greek personal names. Moreover, present-day scholars are sometimes able to assign certain names to the particular half-millennium or century when they were especially popular. When it comes to good, hard data about ancient names, there is for the biblical archaeologist an embarrassment of riches.

Nonetheless, with respect to the Old Testament in general and to Esther in particular, there are some formidable problems in even the matter of personal names. In the Old Testament, when the Hebrew spelling of a non-Jewish name differs from the Greek spelling in either its consonants or vocalization, scholars can not automatically assume, as they once did, that the Hebrew has preserved more accurately the non-Jewish name. From their studies of of Babylonian, Assyrian, and Egyptian inscriptions, scholars know for an incontestable fact that sometimes the rendering of the non-Hebrew name has been more accurately preserved in the Greek version — the Septuagint — than in the Masoretic text.

The nub of the problem in Esther, then, is that we are not always very confident about the accuracy, or essential correctness, of the Hebrew spelling of many of the non-Hebrew personal names. Consider, for example, the names of our hero and heroine. While agreeing that the Hebrew *Mord<sup>a</sup>kay* represents a more corrupt spelling of *Marduka* than does the Greek *Mardochoaios*, scholars do not agree on whether the Hebrew 'str, "Esther", derives from the Persian *stara*, "star," or from the Babylonian *Ishtar*, the goddess of love.

Just exactly how complicated and confusing all this can be is evident, for example, from an examination of the name of Haman's son mentioned in Esther 9:7, namely, Pharshandatha. The Hebrew form, *pharshandata'*, is variously rendered in the three most authoritative Greek manuscripts of the Book of Esther: Sinaiticus has *Pharsannestain*; Alexandrinus has *Pharsanestain*; and Vaticanus, ordinarily the most authoritative of the three manuscripts, divides the word into two names, *Pharsan* and *Nestain*! Nor are



such uncertainties and contradictions peculiar to this particular name; such puzzling variations are repeated time and time again for many, if not most, of the non-Jewish names in Esther. It goes without saying that unless we can be reasonably certain about the correctness of the spelling of a foreign name in the Bible, we can hardly identify with confidence its counterpart or cognate form in another language.

In light of all the uncertainties about the personal names in Esther, the only safe statement to make is that there is *a total absence* of Greek names and a number of names could very well be Persian or Iranian.<sup>6</sup>

#### More Illumination of Detail and General Background

Regardless of whether the story of Esther is fiction or fact, the interpretation of archaeological data continues to clarify "details of fact." By proving, for instance, that certain "incense" burners found at Hureida in Hadramaut and at Lachish and Gezer in Israel were actually secular cosmetic burners, W.F. Albright<sup>7</sup> showed that Hebrew *bbśmym* in Esther 2:12 really means "with cosmetic burner," not "with perfumes." Thus, we should now translate Esther 2:12b as "(for this was the prescribed length for their treatment: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months fumigation with other cosmetics for women)." Like the semi-nomadic Arab women of the eastern Sudan in the last century, women like Esther long, long ago fumigated themselves, saturating their hair, skin, and pores with fumes from cosmetic burners.

One thing is indisputably clear: the more one learns about the setting and general background for the story of Esther, the more fascinating and exciting the story itself becomes. In so many, many ways Esther's world was different from ours. Apart from visiting the national museum and the archaeological sites of Iran itself, the present writer knows of no better way for the reader to enter into Esther's world — to see and "feel" the glory that was Xerxes' and to understand Esther's fear of him — than to peruse the superb volume by R. Ghirshman, *The Arts of Ancient Iran from Its Origins to the Time of Alexander the Great* (1964), pp. 129-274, which abounds in magnificent photographs of Achaemenian art and architecture in general, and of Persepolis in particular.

#### In Summary

Where do all these lines of existing archaeological evidence take us with respect to the historicity of the story of Esther? The answer seems clear enough. The familiarity of the author of Esther with Persian history, customs, government, personal names and vocabulary does not establish the

6. For details, see L.B. Paton, *Esther* (1908), pp. 66-71; H.S. Gehman, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 43 (1924), 321-28; and J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Muséon*, 66 (1953), 105-8. For a chart containing all the personal names in Esther, along with their variant spellings in the Greek and other ancient versions, see the writer's *Esther*, pp. xlii-xliii.

7. H.N. Bream, R.D. Heim, and C.A. Moore, eds., *A Light Unto My Path* (1974), pp. 25-32.

essential historicity of the Esther story. After all, it is important to remember that the writings of the Persians and the ancient classical historians also contradict, or disagree with, various "details of fact" in Esther. According to Herodotus' *History*, for example, there were only twenty satrapies in Xerxes' empire (III.89), Amestris was queen between the 7th and 12th years of Xerxes' reign (VII.114; IX.112), Persian queens could be picked from only one of seven noble Persian families (III.84).

At the very least, then, the very pronounced Persian elements in the story of Esther provide setting and local color, reflecting the background, or setting, of the originally separate stories. And at the very most, the Persian elements provide the very real possibility that some of the plot in the story of Esther is true. The Book of Esther is an *historical* novel. Just as a beautiful pearl results from successive layers of a colorful, lustrous substance being added to a solid grain of sand, so the Book of Esther may very well have a solid, historical core — the story of Mordecai, and possibly even the story of Esther — to which have been added a number of legendary and fictional elements, notably, the harem tale about Vashti and, quite possibly, the "historical" basis for what was once a non-Jewish festival, the festival we now call Purim.

## Archaeology at the Albright Institute

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The former American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, now the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, is a landmark in that city. Located just a short distance north of the Old City, the present three-building complex was erected as the permanent home of ASOR between 1925 and 1931. For the past fifty years it has served as the center of practically every aspect of archaeology conducted under American auspices. The parent organization, ASOR, actually came into existence at the turn of the century, but twenty-five years passed before the School had a home of its own. During those initial years the annual directors who administered the affairs of the



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