

# Esther 1:1-4

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*The Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) hosts a lavish banquet in the capital city of Susa, a banquet which lasts half a year for the lords and princes in his kingdom.*

The Book of Esther begins by informing its reader of the time in which these events occurred: *Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus is identified as being the ruler who reigned over a vast territory that extended from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces (v 1).*

Historically, Ahasuerus is also known by the Greek name Xerxes I. He ruled the Persian Empire. Historians date his reign from 486 to 465 BC. The Persian Empire was vast and encompassed modern-day *India* in the east to *Ethiopia* (also known as Cush) to the west, suggesting the King's wide-ranging power and influence. ([See Map](#))

The story begins with the introduction *in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa (v 2). Susa is a capital city, where King Ahasuerus had an administrative headquarter. Susa was one of the four capitals of the Persian Empire. It served as a winter residence for Persian monarchs. (See Map)* By emphasizing the *throne* at the *citadel in Susa*, the narrative underscores the king's centralized power and the importance of *Susa* as a political center for the vast Persian Empire.

King Ahasuerus, in the vastness of his reign, holds a grand banquet to display his magnificence and majesty. *In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, (v 3), signaling not only Ahasuerus's desire to show off his wealth (as will be detailed in verses 6 and 7) and influence but also his political motivations, to consolidate power and prepare for the looming invasion of Greece. Gathering the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of his provinces* indicates a congregation of the empire's most influential and powerful figures. Media and Persia were the two principal powers merged under the Achaemenid dynasty that made up the Persian Empire.

Daniel predicted the rise of the kingdom of the Medes and Persians (see our commentary on [Daniel 7:4-6](#)). Darius the Mede conquered Babylon—it fell in one night, as God announced through the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5:26-31).

The Medes were initially more dominant until Cyrus the Great, a Persian, established the dynasty's vast expansiveness. When Babylon fell, it was “given over to the Medes and Persians” according to Daniel 5:28. That the Medes are mentioned first shows its initial dominance. By the time of Cyrus, he is called “king of Persia” showing that power had shifted to Persia (2 Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1).

Verse 4 illustrates the extent of King Ahasuerus's *majesty. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days (v 4).*

Half a year of celebration and exhibition of his splendor could be seen as pointing to the unparalleled wealth and grandeur of the Persian Empire at this time. Xerxes I is generally credited with spending down the wealth of Persia and substantially weakening it with his spendthrift ways (like giving a 180 day party). The Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great of Macedonia (and Greece) about 130 years after the death of Xerxes I.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) led a massive invasion of Greece which was repelled in a stunning defeat. This is generally believed to have occurred in 480 BC. Xerxes I/Ahasuerus is believed to have ascended to the throne in 486 BC. That this story is set in the third year of the reign of Xerxes I/Ahasuerus infers that at the time of this story Xerxes I would have been planning and ramping up to invade Greece.

Seven years earlier, the father of Xerxes I/Ahasuerus had invaded Greece and was repelled by the Athenians in the battle of Marathon in 490 BC. ([See Map](#)) That Persian invasion of Greece had depended upon surprise, but the Greeks were able to rally quickly and repel it. The modern “Marathon” race memorializes the legend of a Greek soldier who ran from Marathon to Athens in order to inform the Athenians that they had defeated the Persian invasion.

It seems that a primary mission of Xerxes I was to “right this wrong” (in his mind) of Persia losing to Greece and make a proper and successful invasion of Greece. This time rather than an amphibious expedition, Xerxes conducted a campaign to march a land-based army to invade Greece. This occurred roughly ten years after Marathon, in 480 BC.

That Xerxes/Ahasuerus is in the *third year of his reign*, or approximately 483 BC when he conducts this lavish festival means that this 180 day banquet could be part of his preparation to invade Greece, which will occur three years hence. Perhaps he felt he needed to secure the full loyalty of his primary rulers and army officials (*princes* and *army officers*) before embarking on such an ambitious campaign. There are also accounts of various rebellions in his empire, so this massive festival could have had a number of political purposes.

Xerxes I/Ahasuerus is believed to have substantially raised taxes on his subjects in order to finance the great war against Greece, as well as to fund his ambitious building projects. Perhaps this lavish largess upon the *princes* and *army officers* of Persia was intended to not only secure their loyalty but also to give them enthusiasm to greatly escalate their efforts to extract taxes from the subjects of the Persian empire.

Xerxes I/Ahasuerus also conscripted soldiers for his military campaign, so it could be that a goal of this extravagant festival was to gain the support of his subordinate rulers to enforce the drafting of an army to march against Greece. Unfortunately for the conscripts, hardly any of them ever saw their home again.

The war Xerxes I/Ahasuerus waged against an alliance of Greek city states in 480 BC (three years after this lavish banquet) created a number of legendary moments that have been remembered in history. Chief among these is the stand made by a band of Greek soldiers at Thermopylae, where 300 Spartans led a group of Greeks in a fight to the death to defend the Thermopylae pass into Greece against the Persian invaders. The Battle of Thermopylae is

recorded by the Greek historian, Herodotus, and described in his epic work, “The Histories”— (Book 7. 200-238). This battle is sometimes referred to as the “Greek Alamo.” This battle is even referenced in popular culture, and was the subject of the movie “300.” ([See Map](#))

Although greatly outnumbered, Greece managed to defeat the invading Persians. The key event was a Greek naval victory that substantially diminished Persia’s ability to supply its invading army. Ironically, Xerxes I/Ahasuerus had perched himself nearby expecting to observe his navy strike a decisive blow against the Greeks, whom he believed would attempt to escape by sea (due to a misinformation tactic deployed by the Greek general Themistocles). Themistocles ordered the city of Athens to evacuate, which allowed Xerxes’ army to burn the city with little opposition. Then, Xerxes directed his navy into the Bay of Salamis, intending to bottle up and destroy the retreating Greek armada.

But instead of encountering an armada of refugees, when dawn broke the Persian navy met a fleet of Greek triremes in battle array. ([See image of a trireme](#)) The more mobile and rowing-powered Greek navy then proceeded to demolish the Persian fleet which had been designed to sail in open waters, and was not sufficiently equipped to match the Greek trireme’s capacity to maneuver in the Bay of Salamis. The Battle of Salamis ([See Map](#)) is also recorded by Herodotus in “The Histories”— (Book 8. 40-103)

At this point in the biblical story, these events are still three years in the future, and no doubt Xerxes I/Ahasuerus fully intends his plan to be successful. Whatever the motivations might have been, it seems apparent that this extensive display lavished upon his supporters was intended to ensure loyalty and perhaps even awe among his subjects and military officers.

These initial verses of the Book of Esther set the stage for a tale of intrigue and deliverance, rooted in the opulence and politics of a mighty empire.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup> Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, <sup>2</sup> in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa, <sup>3</sup> in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence. <sup>4</sup> And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.**