

Which Persian monarch was the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther?

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Among Bible scholars who accept the book of Esther as historical, it is generally believed that the Ahasuerus of Esther was Xerxes I. The primary reason is an apparent word association between the name Ahasuerus and the Old Persian word *xshayârshâ*. However, there are a number of reasons for equating Ahasuerus with Darius I (Hystaspes), the father of Xerxes I, including the fact that Darius spent considerable time in Susa, where he built a significant palace, whereas Xerxes did not spend much time in Susa, but in Persepolis. Events in the life of Darius can be correlated with dates for events given in Esther more closely than the events in the life of Xerxes.

The name Ahasuerus, used to designate a Persian monarch, appears only in the Hebrew Bible. It occurs many times in the book of Esther and only in two other places (Daniel 9:1 and Ezra 4:6). The Ahasuerus mentioned in Daniel 9:1 cannot be the same Ahasuerus as the one mentioned in Esther, since the Ahasuerus of Daniel 9:1 was the *father* of Darius the Mede. Whereas the rule of the Ahasuerus of Esther is later (either 522–486 BC or 486–465 BC, as traditionally dated¹). The Ahasuerus mentioned in Ezra 4:6 is also probably not the king mentioned in Esther. He is probably Cambyses II, the son and successor of Cyrus.²

Who was the Persian king mentioned in the preface of the book of Esther (and throughout the book) by the name Ahasuerus? He was a king of the Persian Empire at its peak, since he was the ruler of 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). Various Persian monarchs have been proposed since before the time of Christ (e.g. in the Apocrypha and LXX, which translates ‘Ahasuerus’ as Artaxerxes). Statements in Esther relating to the extent of the Persian territory (1:1), establishment of Susa as a residence for the royal throne (1:2), appointment of seven princes (1:14), and taxation of the coastlands/islands (10:1) rule out monarchs *prior* to Darius I.

The overwhelming consensus among most modern commentators is that Ahasuerus was the Persian monarch named Xerxes I (reigned 486–465 BC), the son of Darius I (reigned 522–486 BC)—a different Darius from the one mentioned in Daniel (5:31; 6:1ff; 9:1; 11:1). Some commentators state that there can be no doubt about this identification. The translators of the NIV assume this identification and include the name Xerxes in the translated text of Esther. This view appears to have first been suggested by Joseph Scaliger (1540–1609), a Dutch scholar, in his work on historical chronology.³ James Ussher (1581–1656) took a different view than that of Scaliger, and understood Ahasuerus to be the father of Xerxes I—i.e. Darius I.

There are primarily three arguments presented in favour of Xerxes being the monarch of Esther:

1. The extra-biblical events recorded about Xerxes’ reign⁴ can be correlated with the dates of Ahasuerus’s reign given in Esther. It has been suggested that the feast recorded in chapter 1 falls within the period of Xerxes’ preparation to avenge his father’s defeat at the Battle of Marathon (490 BC) against the Greeks. The feast may have included planning sessions with the leaders (subject kings and satraps) of the provinces called to Susa, and provided an opportunity to solicit financial support for the costly undertaking of staging a fleet and army to attack Greece. However, when Xerxes was in Persia he spent most of his time in Persepolis, not Susa, where the events of Esther take place, over a 10-year period. The use of Susa as a royal residence declined after Darius I until the time of Artaxerxes II.⁵ There is no evidence that Xerxes spent much time in Susa.⁶ After Xerxes’ navy was defeated at Salamis and he returned to Persia, he could have then married Esther in the seventh year (2:16) of his reign (479 or 478). However, the fact that he would have been away in Greece the year before (2:12) presents a difficulty for explaining how he agreed to the decision to collect virgins for his harem (2:1–4).
2. It has been suggested that Herodotus refers to Xerxes’ capricious and tyrannical nature, and that this is consistent with the nature of Ahasuerus described in Esther. However, Herodotus was a Greek, with no love for the Persians. He attributes harshness to many enemies of the Greeks.⁷ And, the same character traits attributed to Xerxes can be attributed to other Persian (and before them, Babylonian; and after them, Greek and Roman) monarchs. Such is the nature of man that when he is allowed to have absolute power and is permitted to be worshiped as a god, he will behave in a tyrannical manner—one only needs to consider Kim Jong-un, the ‘supreme’ leader of North Korea to see this reality.

3. Roland G. Kent, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, translated many of the cuneiform inscriptions from the period (e.g. on pillars, stone slabs, walls, and statues in the ruins of Susa and Persepolis). In the cuneiform, Xerxes refers to himself as, *xshayârshâ xshâyathiya*,⁸ which is translated by Kent as ‘Xerxes the King’. It is claimed by some OT scholars that the name Ahasuerus is a Hebrew approximation of the Old Persian *khshayarsha* (*xshayârshâ*). However, a previous Persian (or Median) monarch, named Cambyses I, was also called Ahasuerus in the biblical text (Daniel 9:1). He was the father of Darius the Mede (likely, Cyrus the Great). There is no evidence that his name was Xerxes.⁹ It is likely that the Ahasuerus mentioned in Ezra 4:6 is also a different one than is mentioned in Esther.¹⁰ The term *ahasuerus* (if it is a transliterated approximation of the Old Persian *xshayârshâ*) is believed to mean ‘mighty man’ or ‘mighty eye’ from ‘*aha*’ and ‘*suerus*’; which can equate to ‘*arta*’ and ‘*xerxes*’ (‘Artaxerxes’), as the name Ahasuerus is translated in the Septuagint in Esther 1:1. If this is the case, then Ahasuerus could be translated into English as ‘Artaxerxes’, but not as ‘Xerxes’. It may be that some of the OT writers used the name Ahasuerus as a generic name for any Persian monarch. The writer of Esther demonstrates this with the statement “in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned ...” (1:1). This is equivalent to saying, “in the days of the king, the king who ruled ...”. There had never been a Xerxes in the Medo-Persian Empire prior to Xerxes I. From a Jewish perspective, the name Ahasuerus appears to have been a title for the Persian monarchs rather than their personal names, as the name Pharaoh (the Hebrew equivalent of the Egyptian ‘*pr-‘o*’ meaning ‘great house’) was used in the OT to refer to many Egyptian kings, regardless of their personal names. We use the appellation ‘Caesar’ in a similar way.

The other likely possibility for Ahasuerus is the monarch Darius I Hystaspes¹¹ (reigned 522–486 BC), the father of Xerxes I. There are a number of reasons for accepting this identification:

1. 1 Esdras 3:1–2 (in the Apocrypha) uses the name Darius as the king who reigned over 127 provinces from Egypt to Ethiopia; as did the Ahasuerus of Esther (Esther 1:1–3).

2. Equating Ahasuerus with Darius I, rather than with Xerxes I, is supported by the association of the name Artaxerxes with Darius I in Ezra 6:14. If we translate the ‘and’ as ‘even’,¹² then Artaxerxes is Darius I, which supports the suggestion of Roland Kent that the name Ahasuerus is a Hebrew approximation of the name Artaxerxes.

3. The timing of events in the life of Darius I, from extra-biblical sources, can be correlated with the dates in Ahasuerus’s reign given in Esther:

- With the help of six princes (possibly six of the seven mentioned in 1:14) Darius seized power from the usurper Gaumata and ascended the throne in 522 BC.¹³ He was occupied during the first few years of his reign with subduing revolts in the provinces and reconquering the empire founded by Cyrus.
- During this time he married Atossa (Vashti; Bishop James Ussher, in his *The Annals of the World*, equates Atossa with Vashti¹⁴), a daughter of Cyrus, and fathered a son (Xerxes) by her (518 BC¹⁵).
- Darius built a significant palace in Susa (figure 1)¹⁶ and appears to have been in the city in 519 BC¹⁷ in the third year of his reign, which correlates with Ahasuerus being in Susa in the third year of his reign (1:3).
- After the deposition of Vashti, Darius had to leave Susa to deal with a rebellion in Babylon. He conducted a siege of Babylon and recaptured it (519 BC). After his return from Babylon he again spent some time in Susa. During this stay, a decision was made to collect virgins



Figure 1. Wall frieze from Darius's palace in Susa where Esther lived

Table 1. Correlation of events in the Life of Darius I with events in the Book of Esther

Verse Reference	Event in the Book of Esther or Life of Darius	Year of Ahasuerus's Reign	Month(s)	Day(s)	Date (bc)
	<i>Darius seized power from the usurper Gaumata</i>				522
	<i>Darius married Atossa, daughter of Cyrus</i>				521
1:3–4	Ahasuerus held <i>banquet</i> that lasted 180 days	3			520–519
	<i>Darius began building the palace in Susa</i>				519
1:19	Vashti deposed	3			519
	<i>Darius left Susa to subdue a rebellion in Babylon</i>				519
	<i>Xerxes I born to Atossa</i>				518
2:16	Esther declared queen	7	10		516
	<i>Darius left Susa to invade Scythia and 'India'</i>				515
3:7	Haman had the lots cast against the Jews	12	1	1	511
3:12	Haman issued his decree	12	1	13	511
3:13	Date planned for the annihilation of the Jews	13	12	13	510
8:9	Mordecai issued his decree	12	3	23	511
8:12; 9:1	Date upon which the Jews could defend themselves	13	12	13	510
9:6–22	Sons of Haman executed; Purim celebrated	13	12	14, 15	510

for his harem (2:1–4), and a year later (2:12) Esther was brought to him and appointed queen (516 BC).

- He then left for a couple of years to invade Scythia and to expand the empire along the banks of the Indus River (1:1) in 515 BC.
 - After his return, Haman put forward his proposal to eliminate the Jews. Esther had not been called into Ahasuerus’s presence since he had returned from his conquests.
4. The extent of the Persian Empire was at its greatest during the reign of Darius I. According to Thucydides,¹⁸ Darius subjugated the islands of the Aegean Sea. In an inscription at Susa, Darius said, “By the grace of Ahuramazda, here are the peoples I have conquered outside Persia. They obey me; they bring me *tribute*. What I order them to do, they accomplish. They respect my law: ... the *Greeks who guard the sea*”¹⁹ According to Herodotus, a taxation of the coastlands/islands was imposed by Darius I: “Later in his reign the sum was increased by *the tribute of the islands*, and of the nations of Europe as far as Thessaly. The Great King stores away the tribute which he receives after this fashion—he melts it down, and, while it is in a liquid state, runs it into earthen vessels, which are afterwards removed, leaving the metal in a solid mass. When money is wanted, he coins as much of this bullion as the occasion requires.”²⁰ Esther 10:1 refers to such a tribute. However, this territory was lost by Xerxes I after his

defeat by the Greeks in 480 BC after the Battle of Salamis, *before* the book of Esther would have been composed, if the monarch of Esther was Xerxes I.

- 5. According to Herodotus, it was Darius I who, on his arrival at Susa, founded the council of the seven princes of Persia (1:14).²¹
- 6. There is no evidence that Amestris, the wife of Xerxes I, was ever deposed or viewed unfavourably by Xerxes. She continued to have significant influence when her son, Artaxerxes I, became king. In contrast, there may be an indication that Atossa was deposed or viewed with less favour by Darius I. Darius married Atossa, the previously twice-married daughter of Cyrus, for political reasons—to consolidate his claim to the throne. Atossa was one of the many wives of Darius, and, according to Herodotus, not his most favoured. His most favoured wife was the virgin Artystone—Herodotus states that she was a younger daughter of Cyrus²² but Ussher suggests that she was Esther (2:17), whose Jewish origin was concealed by the Persian chroniclers. Darius honoured Artystone by making a golden statue of her.²³ Even though Atossa was the mother of Xerxes, she is rarely mentioned in the *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*,²⁴ but Artystone (Irtašduna, in the *Fortification Tablets*) is mentioned as an influential woman who owned great estates (8:1).²⁵ This may indicate that Atossa had lost favour with Darius, as the book of Esther indicates of Vashti (1:19–22).

7. The names of the eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, who plotted against Ahasuerus (2:21) are given as Gabatha and Tharra in the Greek apocryphal portion of Esther (12:1), in the days of Mordecai (Mardocheus in the Greek). Mordecai informed *Artaxerxes* of the plot. This same Artaxerxes ruled over 127 provinces from Egypt to Ethiopia (apocryphal portion of Esther, 13:1), as did the Ahasuerus of Esther.
8. One of Haman's sons is named *Vaizatha* (9:9). Yamauchi refers to linguistic studies which concluded that the diphthong²⁶ 'ai' had shifted to 'e' between the reign of Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I. "This indicates that the name transmitted in Esther is strikingly old and authentic."²⁷ This is evidence that the book of Esther was written by a contemporary of Esther and not during the late Hellenistic era, as is often suggested. In addition, it suggests that Esther was composed in Hebrew during (or shortly after) the lifetime of Darius I rather than that of Xerxes I.
9. We are told that Mordechai was taken captive at the time of Jeconiah (597 BC) in Esther 2:6. If we date Ahasuerus as reigning from 486–465 BC, then Mordechai would have been at least 124 years old when he was promoted to prime minister (8:1–2) in Ahasuerus's 13th year (473 BC). However, if he was promoted by Darius I, he would have been about 88 years old; a more realistic age for an elder sitting at the king's gate (2:19).
9. Based on this suggested word association, the NIV translates Ahasuerus as Xerxes in Daniel 9:1. However, there is no evidence that the name, translated as Xerxes, was used by the Medes prior to the consolidation of the Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus. In addition, Xerxes I (518–465 BC) could not have been the father of the Darius (Cyrus) of Daniel, who was 62 years old in 539 BC (Daniel 5:31). The NIV translation introduces unnecessary confusion by translating Ahasuerus as Xerxes.
10. Spence-Jones, H.D.M. (Ed.), *Esther*, Funk & Wagnalls, London, p. 1, 1909; p. 45.
11. See, Jones, F.N., The identity of Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther; in: *The Chronology of the Old Testament*, Master Books, Green Forest, AK, pp. 199–205, 2009.
12. Austin, ref. 1.
13. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darius_I; see: Herodotus, *The Histories*, book 3, chapter 84; www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hdt.+3.84&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126, accessed 29 June 2016.
14. James Ussher, *The Annals of the World*, archive.org/stream/AnnalsOfTheWorld/Annals_djvu.txt; sections: 1009, 1027, 1035, accessed 29 June 2016.
15. If Xerxes was born in 518 BC (some place his birth in 520 BC), this could appear to present a problem for the identification of Ahasuerus as Darius, since Vashti was deposed before Xerxes was born. However, the banquet lasted 180 days (1:4). It may have been started in late 520 BC and continued into 519 BC. If Xerxes was conceived near the end of the banquet period, he could have been born after his mother was deposed as queen, in 518 BC.
16. Jean Perrot (Ed.), John Curtis (Introduction), *The Palace of Darius at Susa: The Great Royal Residence of Achaemenid Persia* (I. B. Tauris, 2013).
17. Perrot, ref. 16, pp. 411–412.
18. Thucydides, *History of Peloponnesian War*; bk 1, chapter 1, classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.1.first.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
19. Perrot, ref. 16, p. 283.
20. Herodotus, *The Histories*, book 3, chapter 96; mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/herodotus/Herodotus3.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
21. Herodotus, *The Histories*, book 3, chapters 70–71, 74, 76; mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/herodotus/Herodotus3.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
22. Herodotus, *The Histories*, book 3, chapter 88; mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/herodotus/Herodotus3.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
23. Herodotus, *The Histories*, book 7, chapter 69; www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hdt.+7.69&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126, accessed 29 June 2016.
24. www.livius.org/pen-pg/persepolis/fortification_tablets.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
25. www.livius.org/da-dd/darius/darius_i_4.html, www.livius.org/arl-arz/artystone/artystone.html, accessed 29 June 2016.
26. Diphthong: two adjacent vowel sounds occurring within one syllable.
27. Yamauchi, E.M., The archaeological background of Esther: archaeological backgrounds of the exilic and postexilic era, pt 2, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137(April–June):99–117, 1980; www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bsac/1980_099_yamauchi.pdf, accessed 29 June 2016.

Conclusion

This analysis of the historical evidence appears to indicate that Ahasuerus, the husband of Esther, was Darius I, not Xerxes I as is commonly believed today among Evangelicals.

References

1. Traditional dates for the Persian period are used in this article in order to correlate the dates provided in extra-biblical writings with the events in Esther. However, as David Austin has shown (Is Darius, the king of Ezra 6:14–15, the same king as the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:1? *J. Creation* 22(2):46–52, 2007, creation.com/images/pdfs/tj/j22_2/j22_2_46-52.pdf) the dates used to calculate the duration of the Persian period may be incorrect since they are generally based on Claudius Ptolemy's king records, which could be mistaken, since he wrote centuries after the Persian period. Austin's conclusions do not affect the *relative* correlation of dated events in the lives of Darius I and Xerxes I with the dates in the reign of Ahasuerus provided in Esther.
2. Easton, M.G., *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1893.
3. Tyrwhitt, R.E., *Esther and Ahasuerus: An Identification of the Persons So Named ...*, Burntisland, Scotland, p. 3, 1868.
4. Identifying exact dates for most of the events in the lives of Persian monarchs is difficult. Dates for specific events may vary, depending on the source consulted.
5. Perrot, J. (Ed.), *The Palace of Darius at Susa: The Great Royal Residence of Achaemenid Persia*, I.B. Tauris, pp. 22, 119, 2013.
6. Perrot, ref. 5, pp. 454, 461, 464.
7. Baragwanath, E., *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus*, Oxford University Press, 2008.
8. *Old Persian Texts*, www.avesta.org/op/op.htm.

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