

THE KING OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The Book of Esther begins with a great feast “in the 3rd year of the reign of Ahasuerus” (Esther 1:3). Although at one time or another nearly every monarch from Cyaxares (624–586 BC) to Artaxerxes III Ochus (358–338 BC) has been declared as the Medo-Persian ruler in question, in nearly all theological circles today it is conceded almost beyond question that the man is Xerxes I of Thermopylae (486-465 BC). This identification was initially offered by Scaliger, the first modern chronologer.

The proofs offered are: (1) a supposed congruity of the character of Ahasuerus with that of Xerxes as portrayed by Herodotus and other classic writers and (2) a philological conjecture. These will be examined in that which follows, comparing secular data with Scripture. The secular will not be taken as judge but merely as a witness. If the secular fits, it will be incorporated, but the framework will be based upon the Scriptures which, in context, are the only and final authority on the matter, not the reverse.

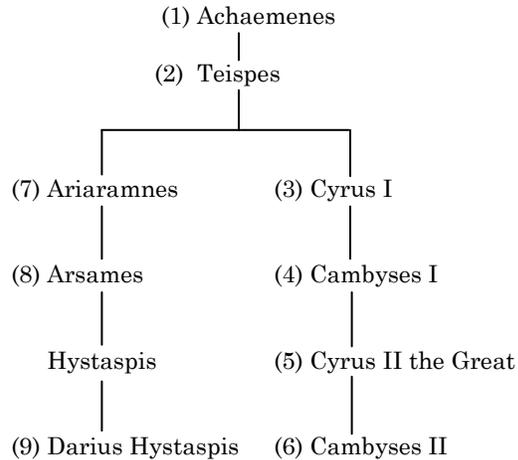
Before proceeding, it should be noted that although the duration of the Persian Empire is probably accurately established, it is not based upon eye witness accounts. Secondly, the exact listing of kings and the lengths of their reigns are not absolutely verifiable and thirdly, the same Persian monarch may have had two or more different titles or “throne” names.

Profane literature will now testify as to the identity of this Ahasuerus. It shall be shown that this material declares him to be Darius Hystaspis (of Marathon, the Great or Darius I), and not Xerxes, as is commonly believed. Darius I, a kinsman of Cyrus II (The Great, the Cyrus of Scripture), recorded: “Eight of my family have been kings before me. I am the ninth. In two branches have we been kings”.¹

1. BRIEF HISTORIC BACKGROUND

As one can see, both are related to Teispes. Darius was an officer in the famous “Ten Thousand Immortals”, the special elite portion of

the Persian army, as well as spear-bearer² and personal bodyguard to Cyrus’ son, Cambyses II. Cambyses had contracted the murder of his brother, Smerdis, to secure the throne. Leaving Patizithes in control of the government, he embarked on a campaign into Egypt and succeeded in conquering that empire in the fifth year of his reign (525 BC). He then invaded Ethiopia, but the swamps, deserts, etc. frustrated his attempts for its complete annexation.



During the latter campaign, Patizithes usurped total control placing his brother Gomates on the throne in the year 522 BC.³ These brothers were Magians, a priestly cultic caste similar to the Druids and often referred to as the “*magi*”. It was proclaimed to the populace that Gomates (identified by the Behistun Inscription and Ctesias) was actually Smerdis; hence his name commonly appears in the literature as “Pseudo-Smerdis”.⁴ These *magi* ruled seven months.

When Cambyses learned of this betrayal, he intended to return and retake his throne. History here gives differing accounts.⁵ Some authorities say he was murdered on the way back to Babylon; others that he died of an infected wound en route. Still others insist that he committed suicide, fearing either the assassin

¹ *Sculptures and Inscriptions of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistun, in Persia*, (London: British Museum, 1907). This quote, taken with the Cylinder Inscription of Cyrus (*ANET*, *op. cit.*, p. 316), yields the genealogy of Darius as given on page 1. See Anstey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology*, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

² Olmstead, A.T., *History of the Persian Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 107.

³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4 Vols., Loeb Classical Library, III, 65.

⁴ Pseudo-Smerdis is in all likelihood the Artaxerxes of Ezra 4:7–23 as the implication of the word “kings” in Ezra 4:13, 22 implies a plural reign.

⁵ Carlton J.H. Hayes and James H. Hanscom, *Ancient Civilizations*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968) p. 175.

had not carried out the deed or that Smerdis had somehow come back to life.

Regardless, as Cambyses had no son, Darius, his 28-year-old⁶ captain and distant relative, moved to claim the kingship. This seizure was greatly facilitated by the fact that Darius was related to Cyrus. He took charge of the whole army and marched toward Babylon. Upon nearing the seditious city, six young Persians from noble families having learned of his arrival met Darius and pledged their support, forming a seven family pact.

Darius entered Babylon and slew the brothers. These six Persian families, linked to each other by intermarriages, became established as counselors to the king with special privileges. They even bore the right to rule their estates as semi-independent princes for the duration of the Persian Empire.

2. SECULAR DATA IDENTIFYING AHASUERUS

Firstly, Esther 1:14 refers to “The seven princes of Persia and Media”. As the Book of Esther mentions Persia *before* Media (1:3,18,19), this Ahasuerus *cannot precede* Cyrus’ first year as sole king over the expanded empire (536 BC) for during Darius the Mede’s short reign⁷ (539–537

⁶ *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1981), vol. VII, page 718, referencing Ctesias. Ctesias of Cnidus (fl. 401–384 BC): a Greek physician to Artaxerxes Mnemon, he resided at court for 17 years in Susa. Using the Persian Royal Archives, he wrote *Persica*, a history of Assyria & Persia in 23 books. Like most ancient authorities, Ctesias often exaggerates and is not always reliable. He gives Darius’ life span as 73 years. This would give him 44 years (73 – 28) of sole reign. See: H.S. Gehman, (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, (Phil., PA: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 210 (Darius #2).

⁷ Darius the Mede, son of Ahasuerus, was the uncle of Cyrus (II) the Great (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, I, ii, 1 [not Grandfather? Herodotus, *op. cit.*, I, 107–108]). He was Cyaxares II, son of Astyages (Jos., *Antiq.* x. 11. 4 = the Ahasuerus of Dan.9:1). Belshazzar, son and pro-*rex* of Nabonidus, king of the Babylonian empire, was on the throne in the capitol city, Babylon, during the prolonged absence of his father. A great pagan feast was being held in the besieged city celebrating the impregnability of its famed walls. As the prophet Daniel predicted when he interpreted the cryptic message scrolled miraculously upon the wall by a bodiless hand, the confederate armies under the Median and Persian leadership of Cyrus entered Babylon that selfsame night, 16 Tishri, 539 BC (6 October, 539, Gregorian). Belshazzar was slain and Cyrus placed his 62-year-old relative, Darius the Mede, on the throne to rule over Babylon while he personally continued his military conquest at the head of his armies, annexing the remainder of the empire (Dan.5:30–31; note: Darius was “made” king, Dan.9:1).

BC) the Medes were named *before* the Persians (Dan. 6:8, 12, 15). During Cyrus’ “first year”,⁸ the Persians gained political ascendancy over the Median constituency and were thereafter consistently mentioned *ahead* of the Medes.

Secondly, Darius the Mede had set 120 princes over the kingdom (Dan. 6:1). At the time of Esther, King Ahasuerus’ Medo-Persian Empire, extending from India to Ethiopia, had increased into 127 provinces or “satrapies” (Esther 1:1). These satrapies constitute a major key as to the correct identity of Esther’s “Ahasuerus”.

Although today’s standard chronologies would have Esther the wife of Xerxes (485–464 BC), by the *beginning* of his reign the Persian Empire had begun to *lose* satrapies.⁹ Therefore, the name “Ahasuerus” must refer to a monarch *after* Darius the Mede, but *before* the reign of Xerxes (see below). Conventional chronological schemes have completely ignored this problem choosing instead to give preference to and place reliance upon a tenuous etymological identification, the merit of which will be presently examined.

THE PERSIAN KING LIST FOR THE PERIOD UNDER DISCUSSION

2 yrs	9 yrs	8 yrs	36 yrs	21 yrs	41 yrs
Darius the Mede	Cyrus the Great	Cambyses II	Darius I Hystaspis	Xerxes I	Artaxerxes Longimanus

Indeed, it is most illogical that after spending four years with Darius planning to again invade

⁸ Henry Browne, *Ordo Saeclorum*, (London: John Parker Pub., 1844), p. 173. That is, the first year of his sole reign over his newly enlarged empire (536 BC), not the first year in which Cyrus became a sovereign. When Cambyses I died in 559, Cyrus inherited the throne of Anshan, a Persian kingdom but vassal of the Medes. Cyrus became king over all of Medeo-Persia in 550. Scripture makes no reference to these earlier accounts as they had no bearing upon Israel. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539, placed his uncle on the throne while he continued at the head of the army, annexing territory. In 536, Cyrus returned to resume control of the government. Thus 536 is his “first year” in the connotation that: (a) Cyrus’ kingdom more than doubled in extent, his power and prestige soared proportionately, and (b) it was Cyrus’ first year as suzerain over the Jews. Xenophon indicates this reign over Babylon was 7 years by recording that Cyrus went from Babylon to Susa every spring and that he made this trip 7 times (*Cyropaedia*, VIII, vi, 22 and VIII, vii, 1).

⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, *op. cit.*, VII, 4. After the Persian defeat by the Greeks at Marathon, not only were the Ionian states in revolt, Egypt also revolted. When Xerxes ascended the throne, the empire was beginning to crumble; the number of provinces began to diminish.

Greece to avenge his father's humiliating 490 BC defeat at Marathon, Xerxes would spend half of his 3rd year as king in a drunken orgy prior to *departing* for Greece in his 5th year (481 BC). However, it makes perfect sense that after putting down 19 revolts in a single year (the last weeks of 522 into December of 521, his 1st official year), Darius would have spent his second year (520) organizing his newly acquired vast empire with men whom he could trust, etc. Having so secured his kingdom, it is altogether logical that he would set aside a large portion of his 3rd year celebrating – exactly as we find Ahasuerus doing in the first verses of Esther.

If this king is Xerxes, why does the Book of Esther say nothing of his 480 BC defeat at the hands of the Greeks in his 6th year? The simple answer is – because he is not Ahasuerus. But if Ahasuerus is Darius and as the first 9 chapters only involve the first 13 years of its king, Greece would not be mentioned for Darius had no military involvement with the Greeks until the 499 BC Ionian Revolt in the 23rd year of his reign. Thus, we find that Esther fits the historical facts regarding Darius, not Xerxes.

Furthermore, Esther 1:1 declares: “This is (that) Ahasuerus which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia over 127 provinces”.¹⁰ During the fifth year of his reign, all Egypt had submitted to Cambyses (525 BC) and he also subdued the Ethiopians, at least in part.¹¹ Having already inherited Cambyses' conquests in Egypt and Ethiopia, Darius I Hystaspis invaded and conquered India (506 BC).¹² Therefore, the

¹⁰ This statement proves that Ahasuerus was a throne name and that more than one Persian monarch bore that title. Although this author had already discovered and put in writing much of that which follows in identifying Ahasuerus, upon finding Anstey's excellent summation in which he had uncovered and organized even more references, his discoveries were checked and added to my original research. Therefore, much of the credit for this disclosure rightly belongs to that indefatigable scholar as well as to Ussher from whom Anstey often drew. Whereas Anstey's association of Darius I Hystaspis as being the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:1–21 and Neh. 2:1, 5:14, 13:6 is deemed by this study to be totally faulty, his carefully documented research with regard to the Artaxerxes in Esther is that of a chronologer *par excellence*. See: Anstey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology*, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–243 and James Ussher, *Annals of the World*, revised by Larry & Marion Pierce, (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2003), page 134 (page 119 in the 1658 edition).

¹¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, *op. cit.*, III.

¹² *Ibid.*, III and IV.

Ahasuerus of Esther cannot be a Persian *before* Darius Hystaspis (Darius of Marathon) because it was not until Darius that the Empire extended from “India unto Ethiopia”. These hard facts are decisive, yet there is more:

And King Ahasuerus laid a *tribute* upon the land and upon the Isles of the Sea (Est. 10:1).

During 496 BC, the fleet of Darius conquered Samos, Chios, Lesbos and the rest of the islands of the Aegean Sea.¹³ Herodotus says that Egypt, India, the Island of Cyprus and the Islands of the Erythraean Sea paid tribute to this Darius Hystaspis.¹⁴ He also says that “The Ethiopians bordering upon Egypt, who were reduced by Cambyses” paid no fixed tribute but like others, brought gifts regularly to Darius Hystaspis:¹⁵

The Ethiopians paid no settled tribute, but brought gifts to the King. Every 3rd year the inhabitants of Egypt and Nubia brought 2 quarts of virgin gold; 200 logs of ebony, 5 Ethiopian boys and 20 elephant tusks.

When compared to the previously cited Esther 10:1 passage, this secular data testifies and declares that Ahasuerus is Darius Hystaspis. Moreover, upon being chosen as his royal residence, Susa (or Shushan) was embellished and extended by Darius Hystaspis (521 BC).¹⁶ There he built his palace and kept all his treasures within.¹⁷ These data militate against Cambyses, or anyone before him, as being the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther for the palace therein *was* at Shushan (Esther 1:2).

This excluding determination is especially legitimate when coupled with Esther 1:14 concerning the “seven princes of Persia”. It was Darius I who established the Persian tradition of having a council of seven wise and powerful men at court to serve and assist the king. This custom was a continuation of the policy resulting from the Persian noblemen's aiding Darius in procuring the throne from the Magians. Obviously then, no monarch prior to Darius Hystaspis could be the “Ahasuerus” in question.

Moreover, Thucydides (571–396 BC) tells us that Darius Hystaspis used his Phoenician fleet to

¹³ *Ibid.*, VI.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 89–97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 97.

¹⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. XX, Loeb, VI, p. 27.

¹⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, *op. cit.*, V, 49.

subdue all the islands in the Aegean Sea,¹⁸ and Diodorus Siculus relates that they were all lost again by his son Xerxes immediately after his 479 BC defeat to the Greeks – well *before* the 12th year of his reign.¹⁹ Yet it was *after* the 12th year of the reign of Ahasuerus of Esther that he imposed a tribute upon the Isles (Esther 3:7, 12, 13; 9:1, 21; & 10:1 – chapt. 9 is March of 509 BC, his 13th year). Further, as Ussher pointed out, the terms of the 387 BC “Peace of Antalcidas” recorded by Xenophon shows that, except for Clazomene and Cyprus, Xerxes’ successors held none of these islands.²⁰

All of this external secular data tells us that the Ahasuerus of Esther is *not* Xerxes, and it harmonizes with the internal evidence contained in Scripture. Neither Cyrus nor Cambyses ever imposed tribute, although they did receive presents. Polyaeus writes that Darius I was the first of the Persians to impose a tribute on the people.²¹ This act led Herodotus to pen that the Persians called Cyrus a father, Cambyses a master, but Darius a huckster, “for Darius looked to make a gain in everything”.²²

This description of Darius is consistent with Haman’s behavior in the account. Being aware of this aspect of his king’s character and in order to secure approval to massacre all the Jews within the empire, Haman offered to pay the monarch 10,000 talents of silver to offset the expenses that would be incurred in his proposed plan (Esther 3:9). Esther also seems aware of this trait as she mentions in her petition that the king would lose revenue if the exterminations were carried out (Esther 7:4).

Although the Old Testament Apocrypha is not the inspired Word of God, hence is neither authoritative nor trustworthy, it does reveal how the writers of that time interpreted the story of Ezra. The first Book of Esdras (c. 140 BC) recites verbatim Esther 1:1–3, the only change being that of replacing the name “Ahasuerus”

with “Darius” (1 Esdras 3:1–2). This Darius is later firmly identified as Darius Hystaspis by relating that it was in the sixth year of this king’s reign that the Temple was completed (1 Esdras 6:5, cp. Ezra 6:15).

In the Apocrypha account of “The Rest of Esther” as well as in the LXX, Ahasuerus is everywhere called “Artaxerxes”; however these are not necessarily attempts to identify him as the Persian king of Ezra chapter 7 and/or the Book of Nehemiah. Though there have been able, conservative Christian chronologers who have made this connection, two things must be remembered. First, “Artaxerxes” may here only be intended as an appellation meaning “king” (as “pharaoh” or “caesar”).

Secondly, none of these books is inspired. They do not contain God-breathed words, thus they are not authoritative and are only useful as incidental witnesses. Nevertheless, Sir Isaac Newton took the Book of Esdras to be the “best interpreter of the Book of Ezra” and thus, although he never refers to the Book of Esther anywhere in his discussion of the Persians, his chronology accepted Esdras to be correct in identifying the Ahasuerus of Esther as Darius Hystaspis.²³ Ussher and Bishop Lloyd made the same identification.²⁴

3. THE TESTIMONY OF MORDECAI’S AGE

The last and most pertinent data necessary in correctly identifying Ahasuerus is the direct *internal evidence* within the biblical story itself concerning the age of Mordecai. The erroneous identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes, compounded by other poor judgments, has caused most modern scholars to reject that Mordecai

¹⁸ Thucydides, *History of Peloponnesian War*, vol. I, Loeb, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980), Bk. I, Ch. 16.

¹⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, Book XI, 36–37 and Bk. XII (Loeb, vol. IV, 1968, pp. 221, 223, 375).

²⁰ Ussher, *Annals*, *op. cit.*, p. 134 (1658 = 119). Xenophon, *Hellenica*, Book V. i. 31–36 (Loeb, vol. II, pp. 21–25).

²¹ Polyaeus, *Stratagematum*, (Chicago, IL: Ares Pub., 1974), Bk. 7, Ch. 11, 3. (also called *Stratagems in War*)

²² Herodotus, *The Histories*, *op. cit.*, III, 89.

²³ Sir Isaac Newton, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended*, (London: 1728), pp. 368–370. When Newton calls Ahasuerus “Xerxes”, he means the Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6 and not the Ahasuerus of Esther. Newton so did because Xerxes succeeded Darius on the throne and the Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6 follows Darius in Ezra 4:5. By the same reasoning, he identifies the “Artaxerxes” that followed in Ezra 4:7–23 as being Artaxerxes Longimanus.

²⁴ Ussher, *Annals*, *op. cit.*, pp. 127–129 (1658 edition, pages 112–114). Josephus also calls the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther “Artaxerxes”, but he does not mean the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7 and Nehemiah. Josephus identified him as “Cyrus the son of Xerxes whom the Greeks called ‘Artaxerxes’”. In other words, Josephus makes Ahasuerus to be Artaxerxes I Longimanus. The point is, he does not corroborate the testimonies of “The Rest of Esther” and the LXX even though he refers to Ahasuerus as “Artaxerxes” because he does not intend the same “Artaxerxes” that they propose. See: Josephus, *Antiquities*, II, 6, 1.

was taken away from Jerusalem with Jeconiah in “the captivity” of 597 BC despite the clear declaration of Esther 2:5–6 which so proclaims.

This biblical assertion is rejected because, having already erroneously presumed that Ahasuerus is Xerxes, the acceptance of the verse as it stands would force Mordecai to be at least 114 years old (597 – 483 BC [the 3rd year of Xerxes; Esther 1:1–3]) at the beginning of the story (if he were a newborn when carried away). Moreover, Mordecai would have been a minimum of 123 at the close of the book when he became “prime minister” in the king’s 12th year (Esther 10:3, cp. 3:7). Though this would be possible, it is somewhat unlikely as only one man’s age has been reported in Scripture as being that great since the days of “the judges” (over 700 years!). Besides, as Esther is Mordecai’s first cousin (Esther 2:7), she would tend to be too old to fit the context of the story.

The solution to the dilemma, accepted by nearly all, has been to impose an unnatural rendering of the Esther 2:5–6 passage compelling the verse to read as though it were Kish, Mordecai’s great-grandfather, who was carried away in 597 BC with Jeconiah rather than Mordecai himself. But this is neither true nor an accurate rendering of the Hebrew construction which affirms that it *was* Mordecai who was carried away with Jeconiah. Only by a tortured, forced grammatical construction could this sentence ever be applied to his great-grandfather Kish.

The entire matter is resolved by simply letting the Bible speak for itself. This excessive age problem is plainly due to a failure to accept the obvious which is that the Ahasuerus of Esther is actually Darius Hystaspis and not Xerxes. When this is seen, the age of Mordecai will be significantly reduced to a more reasonable and believable value (as will Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s, see fn. 26, p. 2). Moreover, it is the persistent insistence by most modern scholars that “Ahasuerus” is Xerxes that has caused the problem.²⁵

²⁵ After his defeat at Salamis (end of September) in 480 (his 6th year), Xerxes fled 400 miles in 45 days to the Hellespont (mid-November) – still 1,300 miles from Shushan. Now Esther was brought into the house of the women in the 6th year of Ahasuerus and into the king’s house in his 7th (Est.2:16; cp. vv. 8 & 12). Were Ahasuerus Xerxes, the search for the “fair young virgins” would have begun in 480 (his 6th year) or 481 – the very years Xerxes was at war in Greece – yet Ahasuerus was at the palace in Shushan at the beginning of the search (Est.2:4-5)! Again, the events in Esther do not fit well with the historical facts regarding Xerxes.

With the Ahasuerus of Esther as Darius I Hystaspis (of Marathon, the Great), his third year would fall in 519 BC. Thus, Mordecai could have been as young as 78 in the first chapter of Esther and ten years older (88) rather than 123 years old when promoted to prime minister during the 12th year (510 BC) of that Persian monarch (597 BC – 519 = 78 years; Esther 1:3, cp. 2:5–7, 3:7, hence 12 – 3 = 10 years inclusive).

Indeed, the Mordecai of Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7 should, in all likelihood, be identified as the Mordecai of the Book of Esther such that we have only one Mordecai, not two as is being taught today.²⁶ This is much more in line with other Bible ages for this period and unifies the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther into one continuous story with only one principal person named Mordecai (and as we shall soon see, probably only one Nehemiah and one Ezra, not two).

The sum of all the foregoing particulars is conclusive evidence offered both for the proper identification of the Ahasuerus of Esther as Darius Hystaspis and against his being Xerxes I or any Persian ruler after Xerxes I. Evidence has also been presented as to why Ahasuerus cannot be an occupant of the throne preceding Darius I Hystaspis of Marathon.

²⁶ A check of almost any recent Bible dictionary will identify the Ezra of Neh.12:1,7 as a chief priest and leader who returned with Zerubbabel in the first year of Cyrus as different from the one in the Book of Ezra who is also a priest (Ezra 7:1–12) and leader. Yet “both” men are clearly alive during the reign of the same Persian monarch, Artaxerxes (cp. Ezra 7:1,12,21 with Neh.2:1; 5:14; 8:1–4,9; 12:1). “Both” are contemporaries of Zerubbabel and associated with a Nehemiah who is a leader (Neh.8:1–4,9) and a Nehemiah who is associated with Zerubbabel (Neh.7:7).

It is equally dismaying to “learn” that the Nehemiah who returned from Babylon as a leader with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh.7:7) is not supposed to be the same Nehemiah of the Book of Nehemiah who succeeded Zerubbabel as governor under Artaxerxes. A further check will almost certainly “uncover” that the Mordecai of the Book of Esther will not be seen as the leader who returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2.2; Neh.7:7).

Apparently Nehemiah, Mordecai and possibly Ezra, as key Jewish leaders, were recalled to serve various Persian kings who followed Cyrus. The biblical narrative reveals the circumstances as to what became of them, how Nehemiah and Ezra, undoubtedly young among the leaders in the days of Cyrus and Zerubbabel, were subsequently allowed to return in the wisdom of their gray heads and be used by the LORD in Jerusalem while God’s purpose for Mordecai was for the good of His people back in Persia who had chosen not to return from the captivity.

4. AMBIGUOUS CONTRARY EVIDENCE

What then is the overwhelming evidence to the contrary upon which all modern scholarship has succumbed? As mentioned in the second paragraph at the onset of this subject, the first consideration is that of the descriptions passed down to our day by Herodotus (484–425 BC). Although Herodotus is reasonably authoritative for the period of the great Persian War with Greece (490–479 BC), his accounts of older periods are not always reliable. Vivid pictures are given in his writings concerning the first four Persian kings, i.e.,²⁷

1. Cyrus, the simple hardy, vigorous mountain chief, endowed with vast ambition, and with great military genius, changing as his Empire changed, into the kind and friendly paternal monarch, clement, witty, polite familiar with his people;
2. Cambyses, the first form of the Eastern tyrant, inheriting his father's vigour and much of his talent, but violent, rash, headstrong, incapable of self-restraint, furious at opposition, not only cruel, but brutal;
3. Darius Hystaspis, the model Oriental prince, brave, sagacious, astute, great in the arts of both war and peace, the organizer and consolidator as well as the extender of the Empire; and
4. Xerxes, the second and inferior form of tyrant, weak and puerile as well as cruel and selfish, fickle, timid, licentious and luxurious.

The first argument put forth by those who favor Xerxes as the Ahasuerus of Esther is that the character of Ahasuerus fits that of Xerxes as given by Herodotus and other classic writers. But this is highly subjective and hardly tenable or admissible in light of all that we have offered to the contrary. Indeed, were we to ask twenty or so historians, news commentators, etc. to describe the character of a certain world leader, what would we actually hear in reply? Widely varied opinions would issue forth. Much would depend upon the writer's ethical views, political affiliations, prejudices, etc.

When human beings judge others, there is no such thing as being purely objective. Moreover, Herodotus' descriptions are neither first nor secondhand information. They are hearsay portrayals gleaned from various sources over the course of his many travels.

²⁷ George Rawlinson (ed.), *History of Herodotus*, 4 vols., (London: 1858), Introduction.

Besides, from our knowledge of the classic literature there is nothing in the character of Ahasuerus which could not equally apply to Darius I Hystaspis. In fact, the money matters mentioned as well as his friendly attitude toward the Hebrews agree exactly with what one would expect from Darius the "huckster", the money-maker and organizer of the empire.

The second and supposedly conclusive argument that Ahasuerus is Xerxes is derived from the similarity between a name found on an inscription in a ruin with the name "Xerxes". A young student at the University of Gottingen, Georg Friedrich Grotefend, deciphered the inscriptions of Persian characters found among the ruins of the ancient Persian city, Persepolis. The name of the son of Darius Hystaspis was deciphered as "KHASHAYARSHA" which is the "old" Persian. Grotefend translated this into Greek as "Xerxes". When "KHASHAYARSHA" is transposed into Hebrew, it becomes almost letter for letter "AKHASHVEROSH", which is rendered "Ahasuerus" in English. Thus the "Ahasuerus" of the Book of Esther was established to be Xerxes.

At first glance this seems decisive. However, this is actually of no force when we recall that the word "Xerxes" in any form, regardless of spelling, simply means "SHAH" (king) and as such could be applied to *anyone* sitting upon the throne of Persia. Moreover, sound exegesis dictates that no etymology may ever take precedence over a clear context.

The opposite is quite popular today among both those who overemphasize lexical word studies and Greek dilettantes; however, it is the path to error. Etymology may *confirm* a context or even assist in clarification, but it is not an exact science and thus should be used as sole judge with extreme caution – and then only when there is nothing else available to consult. It must *never* be used to overturn clear context!

Finally, there is something amiss with the above etymological reasoning. "Ahasuerus" means "the mighty" (Aha) and "king" (Suerus). How does this suddenly reduce to "Xerxes" which means only "shah" or "king"? Actually it would seem that "Artaxerxes" would have been a more faithful rendering. The translators of the Septuagint certainly so concurred (Esther 1:1, etc., LXX). What, we ask, happened to "The Mighty" portion during the translation? Selah.