

ESTHER AND HISTORY

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In his study of Esther for the Anchor Bible series, C. A. Moore divided the arguments against the historicity of the book into three groups.¹ The first category, carrying the least weight, consists of those aspects of the book which Moore considers improbable though not specifically contradicted by external evidence.² Moore's evaluation of the balance of the arguments against the historicity of Esther is,

Even more serious are certain statements in Esther which seem to contradict extrabiblical sources whose basic accuracy in the matter is not suspect. Some of these discrepancies or "contradictions" are quite minor, such as the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces in the empire mentioned in i 1, in contrast to Herodotus, who said there were twenty satrapies; Esther's arrival at the court of Susa in 480 B.C. (ii 16), a time when, according to Herodotus, Xerxes would still have been away fighting in Greece; and Mordecai as part of Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of 597 B.C. (ii 6), which would make him, and especially Esther, far too old to have accomplished everything attributed to them. Other contradictions are of a much more serious nature: according to ii 16 and iii 7, Esther was queen between the seventh and twelfth years of Xerxes' reign, but according to Herodotus, Amestris was queen then; moreover, again according to Herodotus (iii 84), Persian queens had to come from one of seven noble Persian families, a custom which would have automatically ruled out an insignificant Jewess.³

¹C. A. Moore, *Esther* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), pp. XLV-XLVI.

²He lists a series of seven points in this first category but notes concerning them, "Though improbable, these things may of course still have been true." *Ibid.*, p. XLV. Herodotus relates many more improbable things about Xerxes than Esther does. Although Moore qualifies his acceptance of Herodotus, he allows that work the role of serving as "a major criterion by which the possible historicity and authenticity of numerous 'facts' in Esther are to be judged." *Ibid.*, n. 52. Thus Herodotus' history should be scrutinized carefully to see what he really does say.

³*Ibid.*, pp. XLV-XLVI.

In evaluating these criticisms, the distinctively chronological ones have been selected for more detailed examination here, i.e., the date when Esther came to court, and the dates the Bible gives for the occasions when she was queen. Given the identification of Esther's Ahasuerus as Xerxes,⁴ it is obvious that the dates for Esther's activities must relate in some way or another to the dates of Xerxes' Greek campaign, and the two sets of data must be considered together. Moore's other criticisms will be touched upon briefly in conclusion, but our emphasis here is specifically upon the chronological ones because Persian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek sources offer a fairly detailed chronological outline of Xerxes' reign with which the dates from Esther can be compared.⁵ Aside from the Greek historians, however, in-

⁴ On linguistic grounds, it is no longer possible to maintain that Ahasuerus of Esther could have been Artaxerxes instead of Xerxes. The names of these two kings are now attested in seven languages from the ancient world, and it is unlikely they could have been confused, as is evident from the following table:

Greek:	Xerxes	Artaxerxes
Old Persian:	<i>Xšayārša</i>	<i>Arta-xšāça</i>
Elamite:	<i>Ikšerša</i>	<i>Irta-kšašša</i>
Aramaic:	<i>Ḥšy'rš</i>	' <i>Arta-ḥšaste'</i> (-š ^{te})
Hebrew:	' <i>Aḥašweroš</i>	' <i>Arta-ḥšaste'</i>
Akkadian:	(<i>a</i>) <i>ḥšī'aršu</i>	<i>Arta-kšatsu</i>
Egyptian:	<i>ḥšyṯrš</i>	<i>ṯrt-ḥšš</i>

Sources: Greek, Herodotus, *The Histories* (cf. 6:98 for Artaxerxes); Old Persian, R. G. Kent, *Old Persian* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 171, 182; Elamite, R. T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 701, 704; Aramaic, A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (London, 1923), Nos. 2, 6, and passim; Hebrew, Ezra 4:6, 7:1f.; Akkadian, G. G. Cameron, "Darius and Xerxes in Babylonia," *AJSL* 58 (1941): 322; Egyptian, G. Posener, *La première domination perse en Égypte* (Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, Bibliothèque d'Étude, 11, 1936), p. 163.

⁵ The chronological data in Esther can be tabulated as follows:

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1:3	Year 3	Xerxes makes a feast for the nobles.
1:4	180 days	Duration of the feast for the nobles.
1:5	end of feast I	Xerxes makes a feast for all Shushan.
1:5, 10	7 days	Duration of the feast for all Shushan.
2:1	prior to X/6	Xerxes orders the beauties of the kingdom assembled.

scriptional materials of a political or historical nature from Xerxes' reign are scant; consequently the limitations those sources place upon the historian should be noted.

Unfortunately, the vast store of resources available from the Persepolis Fortification tablets antedate the reign of Xerxes; therefore they offer no help with the history of his reign.⁶ Of the 85 Persepolis Treasury tablets published by Cameron, 66 come from the time of Xerxes, but they are of a selective administrative nature and offer only indirect information about the major events of his reign.⁷ Xerxes' royal inscriptions shed little light upon the concrete history of his time.⁸ The Incantation texts in Aramaic from Persepolis include 19 texts from Xerxes' reign, but they provide even less historical information than the Treasury tablets do.⁹ In spite of the extensive excavations by the French at Susa, the scene of the action in Esther, only one administrative text from the Achaemenid period has been found there, and it was mistranslated until Hallock corrected that translation in 1969.¹⁰ Perhaps the

2:12	12 months	Preparation period of the candidates for queen.
2:16	X/7	Esther goes in to Xerxes.
3:7	I/12	Haman engineers the decree against the Jews.
3:12	I/13	The decree is issued.
3:13	XII/13	Effective date of the decree.
8:9	III/23	The new decree is issued.
8:12	XII/13	Effective date of the new decree.
9:1-21	XII/13-15	Fighting, resting, and institution of Purim.

⁶ Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*.

⁷ G. G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (Chicago, 1948), esp. Table I, pp. 14-15.

⁸ For Xerxes' royal inscriptions see Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 148-153. Another royal inscription of Xerxes has been found recently in Iran; see B. Gharib, "A Newly Found Old Persian Inscription," *Iranica Antiqua* 8 (1968): 54-69. Although the text of this new inscription is fairly long, it is self-laudatory and sheds little light upon the historical matters under consideration here. It does, however, contrast sharply with the picture of Xerxes' character drawn by the classical writers and in Esther, as might be expected.

⁹ R. A. Bowman, *Aramaic Ritual Texts from Persepolis* (Chicago, 1970), p. 58.

¹⁰ *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, p. 25.

renewed excavations there will find the Achaemenid-period tablets that have eluded the excavators thus far. Babylonian contract tablets from the reign of Xerxes are also scarce; consequently less information is obtainable from them than from the larger collections dated to his Persian predecessors. Finally, the classical historians almost universally lost interest in Xerxes after his forces were defeated at Plataea and Mykale in 479; thus they provide little information bearing upon the events described in Esther that are dated later in his reign.

One factor that compensates to some extent for this state of our information regarding Xerxes' reign is the number of excellent full-length studies of the Persian-Greek wars that have been published recently. No less than three such works have appeared in the last decade: *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* by Charles Hignett,¹¹ *Xerxes at Salamis* by Peter Green,¹² and *Persia and the Greeks* by A. R. Burn.¹³ In addition, G. B. Grundy's classic, *The Great Persian War*, was reissued in 1969.¹⁴ These studies of the classical sources provide detailed descriptions of the movements of Xerxes and his armies from 481 to 479 with which the chronological notations in Esther can be correlated. In view of the availability of this information it should not be difficult to correlate the dates in Esther with those of this period.

The first event of significance in Xerxes' reign with which we are acquainted is his suppression of the Egyptian revolt. Darius died late in 486, before he was able to attend to that revolt, thus leaving it for Xerxes to deal with.¹⁵ Since inscriptions in Egypt

¹¹ Published by the Oxford University Press in 1963. I have utilized this work the most in the reconstruction that follows, since Hignett conveniently collected the chronological materials involved in Appendix XIV, pp. 448-457.

¹² Published by Praeger of New York in 1970. The same book has been distributed in England under the title *The Year of Salamis, 480-479 B.C.* by Weidenfeld and Nicholson of London, 1970.

¹³ Published by Edward Arnold of London in 1962.

¹⁴ Originally published in London in 1901. Reprinted by AMS Press of New York in 1969.

¹⁵ On the date of the Egyptian revolt see Herodotus, *The Histories* 7. 1.4. References to Herodotus are taken from LCL ed. by A. D. Godley (London, 1931).

dated to Xerxes began to appear early in 484, his suppression of that revolt can be dated to 485, and Herodotus has noted the severity with which he subjugated the Egyptians.¹⁶ With Egypt under control again, Xerxes was free to direct his attention to the campaign against Greece. With good reason, then, it has been suggested that the 180-day "banquet" in Xerxes' third year referred to in Est 1:1-3 was connected with laying plans for that Greek campaign. The presence of the "army" (MT) or the "officers of the army" (LXX) in Susa at that time (v. 3) lends some support to the suggestion. Herodotus, incidentally, devotes a dozen lengthy paragraphs to Xerxes' discussion with his nobles and generals describing the decision to carry out the campaign against Greece (7. 8-19).

Because of the intense heat at Susa in the summer time, it is possible that this lengthy conference took place in the winter, or from the fall to the spring according to the chronology of Esther. The Fortification tablets from Persepolis illustrate this aspect of the royal use of Susa, since "only 6 texts record travel to Susa in the 5 months III-VII (roughly, June through October), while 42 texts record travel to Susa in the other 7 months (VIII-II)."¹⁷ Since it seems reasonable to conclude that these 6 months from Esther would have ended in the spring, the 7-day celebration that followed it (v. 5) could also fit well with the New Year's festival. This would be in accord with the statement that the entire populace of Susa was involved in that celebration. If this was indeed a New Year's festival, it should have marked the beginning of Xerxes' 4th regnal year. And if the preceding conference was called to plan the Greek campaign, then that same 4th year might have been the one intended for carrying out that plan. The delay until his 5th year for the start of the campaign can be attributed not only to the time necessary to

¹⁶ For the Egyptian sources relating to the reign of Xerxes, see G. Posener's *La première domination*, pp. 117-120, 141, 190. For Herodotus' remark about the severity of Xerxes' suppression of the Egyptians, see *The Histories*, 7.7.

¹⁷ Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, p. 41.

organize his army and its supplies according to Herodotus (7. 20), but also to the revolt that occurred in Babylonia. The proposed campaign and the Babylonian revolt might even be related as cause and effect, if the occasion for the revolt was a refusal by the Babylonians to contribute forces to Xerxes' army.¹⁸

The Babylonian revolt against Xerxes has been difficult to date because of conflicting information in the classical sources about it. Ctesias reported that Xerxes suppressed this revolt before he went on his Greek campaign, while Arrian located that event after his return from Greece.¹⁹ There is no information in Herodotus that supports one view over the other. Because of the difference of opinion between Ctesias and Arrian on this subject, Cameron's study of Xerxes' titulary in the contract tablets from Babylonia appears to be the best basis upon which to date this king's subjugation of Babylon:

The really marked change, and one which may well indicate royal exasperation with the refractory people of Babylonia, comes with the fifth year. Probably with the very first month of that year "King of Babylon" is dropped from the royal titulary and is never again used throughout the balance of Xerxes' reign or in any of his successors. The chief Persian title, "King of Lands," though used earlier in Babylonia, now became standard. Its use for the first time in Xerxes' reign early in the fifth year is an argument, however weak, for dating at least one Babylonian revolt to the preceding or fourth year (482) just before Xerxes set out for Greece.²⁰

Cameron has also stated: "Noteworthy is the fact that in Xerxes' army list Babylonia and Assyria are bracketed together, indicating that each had lost its status as an independent unit."²¹ With both Egypt and Babylonia well in hand, Xerxes was free to proceed

¹⁸ An alternative to this interpretation would be that Xerxes did start out on this campaign in his 4th year but that Babylon took the opportunity to rebel after he had left. This would have necessitated his return to crush that revolt, and there is no hint of this in the classical writers; therefore it seems less likely than the course of events proposed above. It also seems unlikely that the Babylonians would have waited to rebel until after they had sent their troops away with Xerxes.

¹⁹ For references and discussion see Cameron, "Darius and Xerxes in Babylonia," pp. 324-325.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

²¹ *Ibid.*

with his expedition against Greece. With regard to the initial stages of that expedition, he apparently left Susa with his army in the spring or summer of his 5th year, 481, and by the fall arrived in Sardis, where he spent the winter.²² The initial military encounters of the campaign occurred in 480, Xerxes' 6th year, as is borne out by three lines of Greek evidence. Herodotus observes that the invasion occurred during a year in which the Olympian Festival was celebrated (7.206), which must therefore have been a year B.C. divisible by 4. He also indicates that it occurred in the year of the archonship of Kalliades (8. 51), which corresponded to the Athenian year of 480/79.²³ Finally, he mentions a partial eclipse of the sun in connection with the campaign, by which time Xerxes had withdrawn from Athens (9. 10). This coincides well with the solar eclipse calculated for October 2, 480.²⁴ Thus the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis can be securely dated to 480.

Xerxes' campaign of 480 started with a march in May from Sardis to the Hellespont.²⁵ Early in June (3 months before the fleet reached Attica) Xerxes and the army left the Hellespont, and they arrived at Therma by early August.²⁶ Approximately two weeks later the Persians arrived at Trachis near Thermopylae, where they encamped for 4 days prior to the battle, which lasted 3 days.²⁷ The battle at Thermopylae was over by the end of August, about 10 days after the end of the Olympics.²⁸ The Persians reached Athens overland in about a week, and their fleet arrived shortly after the land forces did.²⁹ The fleet engaged

²² Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, p. 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 143, 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 449-450.

²⁹ The length of time it took the Persians to reach Athens from Thermopylae has been disputed. *Ibid.*, pp. 195-197, 211. The length of time they occupied Athens has also been disputed, since it is not certain with which of two full moons the Olympic festival was connected that year. *Ibid.*, pp. 449-451. In either case the date of the battle of Salamis is not in doubt. *Ibid.*, p. 452.

the Greeks in the straits of Salamis before the end of September, since Xerxes had left Athens after the battle was over and before the eclipse of October 2.³⁰ This means that Xerxes arrived back at the Hellespont by mid-November, for Herodotus says that he made the return journey in 45 days (8. 113), half the time it took his army to do the same distance when going in the opposite direction. This datum has been disputed, but traveling the 550 miles at a rate at which the ancient armies did does not seem excessive.³¹ If the interval of time in which Xerxes went from the Hellespont to Sardis was approximately equivalent to that in which he went from Sardis to the Hellespont, then he reached his winter headquarters in Sardis about the first of December, 480.

These chronological data may seem somewhat remote to Esther, but they bear some relation to the references regarding Xerxes' search for a new queen to take the place of Vashti. Working backwards from the time that Esther went in to Xerxes (X/7), Est 2:12 states that the preparation period prior to that time was 12 months, 6 months' treatment with oil of myrrh and 6 months' treatment with perfumes and other cosmetics. The text does not say what day in Tebet Esther went in, but it obviously could have been no later than the last day of the month, which was January 20, 478 Julian.³² Twelve lunar months earlier fixes the end of January, 479, as the date by which time she should have commenced her preparation.

This date depends, however, upon several variable factors. If the preparation period was figured according to the common Semitic style of inclusive reckoning, then 5 months and a fraction would have sufficed for each type of treatment. Parker and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Egyptians traversed at least 15 miles a day under Thutmose III to cover the distance from Sile to Gaza in 10 days. Cf. J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, 1955), p. 235. The Persians apparently travelled up to 17 miles a day (5-8 parsangs), according to Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.5-4.11. The Romans may have made 20 miles a day when they marched from Alexandria to Gaza under Titus.

³² R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence, R.I., 1956), p. 31.

Dubberstein have calculated that a second Adar occurred at the end of Xerxes' 7th year,³³ but if a second Ululu was intercalated instead, that would have put the commencement of Esther's treatment a month later. A textual variant also occurs here, for instead of "in the 10th month, which is Tebet," as in the MT, the LXX has "in the 12th month, which is Adar." These variable factors demonstrate that it is difficult to be precise about the date when Esther entered upon her period of preparation in Susa. The earliest that she could have done so would have been a couple of months after Xerxes arrived back at Sardis, and it could easily have been several months after that. One can also suggest that the prolonged period of preparation was scheduled especially because Xerxes did not plan to return to Susa until after the campaign of 479.

While at his winter quarters in Sardis, Xerxes turned his attention from making war to making love. Herodotus reports that while he was there he fell in love with the wife of his brother Masistes, and endeavored, unsuccessfully, to carry on an affair with her (9. 109). In connection with this incident, it may be inferred that Xerxes' queen Amestris was not with him in Sardis during the winter of 480/79. There are several reasons for this inference: (1) Herodotus does not mention her in connection with the king's stay there, (2) Herodotus' refers to her next in connection with events that occurred after Xerxes' return to Susa, and (3) considering Amestris' violent reaction to Xerxes' philandering upon his return to Susa, the absence of such a reaction on her part is significant since Xerxes provided just as much provocation at Sardis.

This conclusion raises the possibility that Amestris, the only queen of Xerxes known from Greek sources, may have been Vashti, the only other queen of Xerxes known from the Bible besides Esther. If so, the incident recorded in the first chapter

³³ Ibid. This second Adar is not attested by a text. It rests upon Parker and Dubberstein's calculations as to when the intercalated month should have occurred.

of Esther could have provided the reason why Vashti was left home from this campaign whereas the wives of lesser figures were included in the royal entourage.

The possibility of an historical connection between Amestris and Vashti raises the question of whether the differences between the two names can be explained on the basis of known linguistic shifts between the languages involved. Differences in vocalization play little part in this problem. From the initial vowel of Amestris in Greek one might have expected an initial *'aleph* in Hebrew. The LXX of Esther, however, provides similar examples of such a contrast with the MT, i.e., Abataza for Zethar, and Arkesaios for Karšena. Xerxes' name provides an example in the opposite direction, since it was written with an initial vowel in Elamite, Akkadian, Aramaic, and Hebrew, but not in Old Persian or Greek.³⁴ The terminal consonant in Amestris is certainly a Greek addition. And inasmuch as the Greek had no equivalent for *shîn*, the medial sibilant offers no problems. Nor does the identical dental that follows it.

The problematic consonants involved in this identification are thus reduced to two, the initial labial and the later liquid. If these two names derived from the same original, there are only two possible explanations for the *R* in the Greek form Amestris. Either it was present in her name originally and was retained in the Greek form and dropped from the Hebrew, or it was absent from her name originally and was added to make up the Greek form. One proposal to explain the first alternative is that the *R* was dropped from the Hebrew form of her name because Hebrew was not congenial to the *TR* sequence.³⁵ However that may be elsewhere in the Old Testament, it seems an unlikely explanation here, since the *TR* sequence also appears in Esther's name. In support of the second alternative is the fact that an intrusive *R* appears in the latter part of Artaxerxes' name in Greek, whereas

³⁴ See n. 4.

³⁵ J. S. Wright, "The Historicity of the Book of Esther," in J. B. Payne, ed., *New Perspectives on the Old Testament* (Waco, Texas, 1970), p. 42.

it is not present in his name when it was written in Persian, Elamite, Akkadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Egyptian.³⁶ One could propose that a similar intrusive *R* cropped up in Amestris' name in the course of its transmission into Greek. It has also been suggested that the *R* may have been added in the classical sources to differentiate between Amestris and Xerxes' daughter Amutis.³⁷

The different initial labials can be explained without great difficulty. Since Old Persian had no *W*, the initial *wāw* in Hebrew implies an original Old Persian *V*.³⁸ Furthermore, Old Persian had a *V* but Greek and Hebrew did not. In this case then, that original Old Persian *V* dissociated into different labials in Greek and Hebrew, *M* and *W* respectively, neither of which reflected precisely the consonant from which they stemmed. The same thing can be seen between Old Persian and Elamite, where the *V* > *M* shift was constant because there was no *V* in Elamite either.³⁹

Thus the identification of Herodotus' Amestris and Esther's Vashti offers no insurmountable difficulties on linguistic grounds; the question is how well she fits that identification historically.

The chronology reconstructed here indicates that Xerxes sent out his edict ordering the beauties of the kingdom to be collected in Susa and prepared for his return while his attention was also turned to such a subject in Sardis. Does the account in Est 2 meet the chronological and geographical demands?

The text does not indicate that Xerxes was away from Susa when he issued his order, but it does not state that he was in Susa, either; thus it permits either reconstruction. As has been pointed out, the variable factors involved in the chronological references in that text allow sufficient time for his edict to have

³⁶ See n. 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 11-12.

³⁹ The Old Persian *V* > *M* Elamite shift was a constant for which numerous examples might be cited; e.g., Vivāna > Mimana, Varaza > Marāza, Gubaruva > Kambarma, etc. Cf. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, pp. 75-82, nos. 34, 72, 73, 92, 110.

reached Susa before Esther commenced her period of preparation, especially considering the speed with which the Persian courier service was credited.⁴⁰ The amorous affairs of Xerxes which Herodotus describes may have been more than simply such affairs, if he was also in search of a new chief wife or queen at that time. His attention to these women under such circumstances could also explain why Amestris' reaction was so violent towards them. Position rather than affection may have been more the issue as far as Amestris was concerned, since the royal harem probably was not otherwise lacking.

The fate of Mardonius and his army at Plataea was of great importance in the events of 479, but it does not concern us directly, since Xerxes did not accompany the army in Greece in 479 as he had done in 480. Of more importance for the events described in Esther is Herodotus' observation that Xerxes did not leave for Susa until the Persian survivors from the battle of Mykale on the coast of Asia Minor arrived at Sardis (9. 107). Plutarch provides two dates in different Greek calendars for the battle of Mykale; they figure out to August 20 and 27, respectively.⁴¹ He cites the latter date as the day the battle was commemorated, and some historians have suggested that the commemoration may have taken place later in the month than the actual date of the battle. Plutarch also accepted the tradition

⁴⁰ "Some travelers, however, evidently rode on post horses permanently maintained at fixed posts. Thus the 'fast messengers' (m. *pirradaziš*) presumably used the 'express' (*pirradaziš*) horses. Rations for such horses (as in PF 1672) are recorded for a period of months, not just for one day. Herodotus 8.98 pays tribute to the speed of the Persian courier service. A passage from his account, in familiar paraphrase, is inscribed on the New York City Post Office; 'Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.' According to Herodotus, each post horse ran for a whole day. If this were so, no very impressive speed could be achieved. Actually there may have been a change of horses at each supply station, that is, every twenty miles or so. The famed pony express (1860-61), running between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, and covering 1,838 miles in a minimum of ten days, maintained posts seven to twenty miles apart." Hallock, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, p. 6.

⁴¹ The two dates were 26/27 Panemos and 3/4 Boedromion. For references and discussion see Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, pp. 454-457.

from Herodotus (9. 101) that the battles of Plataea and Mykale were fought on the same day. This unlikely coincidence has been disputed by historians. Given the various and complicated factors discussed by interpreters of this matter, the battle of Mykale has generally been dated between August 1 and 20, "probably not much later than the middle of the month",⁴² according to Hignett. Sardis is about 75 airline miles from Mykale in the lee of Samos, and even given the difficult conditions under which the Persians had to travel that distance, they should not have taken very long to do so. That being the case, we may estimate the date that Xerxes left for Susa as approximately the 1st of September, 479, or about the beginning of the 7th Babylonian and Persian month in his 7th regnal year.

This indicates that Xerxes returned to Persia from his Greek debacle in the fall; thus it is natural that he went to his winter residence in Susa, as Herodotus indicates. This also fits well with the Biblical narrative, since Esther was in Susa/Shushan when she went in to him. From the chronological factors involved, it is evident that Xerxes had at least 3 months to return to Susa before Esther went in to him sometime in the 10th month of that 7th year. The same three factors discussed above might lengthen that interval by a fraction of a month up to several months, depending upon (1) the day of the month when Esther went in to him, (2) whether a second Ululu or a second Adar was intercalated in Xerxes' 7th year, and (3) whether one accepts the MT date for that event in the 10th month or the LXX date in the 12th month. Even at the minimum, these factors allow sufficient time for Xerxes to have returned to Susa before Esther was selected as his queen; but the events described by Herodotus as occurring in Susa after Xerxes' return would indicate, if they did occur, that Esther's installation took place on the later rather than the earlier side of these chronological limits.

Again Xerxes became enmeshed in an amorous affair, this time

⁴² Ibid., p. 457.

with Masistes' daughter Artaynte instead of Masistes' wife. According to Herodotus, Xerxes was more successful in romancing with this young lady (who had become his daughter-in-law in the meantime) than he was with her mother (9. 108-111). The matter came to a head, however, when he promised Artaynte the desire of her heart. She chose Xerxes' coat-of-many-colors, which Amestris had woven with her own hands for him (a very unqueenly activity—to ingratiate herself with him again?). Xerxes reluctantly gave her the robe, but Amestris got revenge when the time came to celebrate the king's birthday. On that occasion she asked Xerxes, Salome-like, to give her Masistes' wife, and according to the custom of the day he was obliged to comply with her request. Amestris promptly had her mutilated. As a consequence, Masistes attempted to flee to Bactria to raise a revolt against Xerxes, but the king's men caught and killed him before he reached his intended destination.

In essence, Herodotus breaks off his account of Xerxes' reign at this point, after the description of these events that took place in Xerxes' 7th year subsequent to the king's return from the Greek campaign. Thus it is an overstatement of the case to say that Amestris was Xerxes' queen between his 7th and 12th years,⁴³ since we have no further information about her until the time her son Artaxerxes I occupied the Persian throne.⁴⁴ In view of this silence of our sources, there is no specific evidence to indicate whether or not Amestris was Xerxes' chief wife from his 7th year to the end of his reign. This silence at least allows

⁴³ C. Moore, *Esther*, p. XLVI.

⁴⁴ Aside from the events described above, Herodotus mentioned Amestris in connection with an episode when she was said to have had 14 sons of Persian nobles buried alive (7.114). Since this is said to have happened when she "attained to old age," it should be attributed to the time when she was Queen-mother during the reign of her son Artaxerxes I. The other incident with which she has been connected was the execution of Inarus, the Libyan rebel from Egypt, and his Greek generals, to which execution Artaxerxes finally agreed because of her insistence. For the classical references and discussion of this, see A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 308, 312.

a place in Persian history for Esther, although it does not prove that she occupied it. Since the equation of Vashti with Amestris has been proposed, the information about Amestris in Herodotus needs to be examined further in the light of the information about Vashti in Esther.

If Amestris was Vashti and the verdict on Vashti was that she was "to come no more before" Xerxes (Est 1:19), then what was Amestris doing at his birthday banquet described by Herodotus? What Xerxes' advisors recommended was not "divorce" in the modern sense of the word, but rather demotion from her being the chief royal wife and bestowal of that position upon someone else. The prohibition upon her coming before Xerxes was connected with this demotion, which probably exiled her to a considerably less important position in the royal harem. In other words, since she was no longer to be the chief royal wife, she could no longer exercise the prerogatives that pertained to such a position. To interpret this phrase to mean that Vashti never could come within eyesight of Xerxes again probably is pushing its significance too far. As an idiom, it could be paraphrased to mean that she could not appear with Xerxes in her official capacity again. The reverse of this occurs in the case of the idiom referring to the 7 princes that "saw the face of the king" (Est 1:14), which may have meant something like they "could converse personally with the king,"⁴⁵ i.e., minister to him personally in matters of state.

The question arises in this connection, If Amestris still was Xerxes' queen at this time, why did she have to bide her time until his birthday in order to take that opportunity to get revenge upon Masistes' family? If she still occupied her former position, would it have been necessary for her to come to the king as a suppliant on a state occasion for such purposes? The evidence is indirect, but her absence from the winter court at Sardis, her attempt to ingratiate herself with Xerxes again by

⁴⁵ This is the way C. Moore has translated the phrase in question in *Esther*, pp. 2, 10.

way of the coat-of-many-colors, her relative position in this affair, and her violent jealousy of other women of the royal household, all point in the direction of the idea that her status had been affected in some way or another, and the events of Est 1 may provide an explanation for that alteration.

On the other hand, Amestris' activities at this time appear to indicate that Xerxes had not yet filled her position with someone else. This is of significance for the question of Esther's historicity, since Xerxes' absence from Susa on the Greek campaign still offers an explanation for the time lag between Vashti's rejection and Esther's acceptance that fits the chronological requirements satisfactorily. Looking at this matter from another viewpoint, if the writer of Esther had created this story out of thin air, there would have been no reason to allow for such a time lag. If Amestris' brutality to Masistes' wife did follow soon after Xerxes' return to Susa, where Herodotus locates it, it could have provided him with a great stimulus to get on about the business of selecting a new queen, and this is the time when, and the place where, Esther came into Xerxes' favor, according to the Biblical record. Thus the date of Esther's installation is of considerable interest since it occurred right around this time, regardless of the precise date where the chronological variables would locate it.

Unfortunately, our written sources are largely silent on the remainder of Xerxes' reign; therefore the events attributed to his 12th year by Est 3-9 lie outside the scope of an investigation of literary documents. One archaeological point may be made about them, however, on the basis of non-epigraphic materials from Palestine. If the fighting "in the provinces of the king" referred to in Est 9:16 did take place, it would be difficult to detect it archaeologically in Persia or Babylonia since one would not expect to find a related destruction layer in the larger cities there, and since the scribes who might have written a tablet recording such an event could well have had interests opposite to that of the Hebrews. Thus the chances of any illumination upon this episode from that quarter seems rather slim. The

situation is somewhat different, archaeologically speaking, in Palestine. In contrast to the larger cities of Persia and Babylonia, smaller towns were located on their respective tells there. Although written sources recovered from those tells are more scarce than those recovered from the great centers of the east, the destruction layers in the strata of those tells can, at times, be correlated with historical events known from written sources.

Of interest in this connection is the gap in occupation on the summit of Samaria that commenced with the end of Period VIII, the so-called "chocolate-soil layer." In the report of the excavations by the British at Samaria, Kathleen Kenyon observed that this "cannot be much later than the sixth century B.C.;"⁴⁶ but in a later more general work on Palestinian archaeology, she refined that date to "probably early in the 5th century."⁴⁷ This occupation simply lapsed, however; it did not terminate with a destruction. Remains there after that are extremely fragmentary until well into the Hellenistic period.⁴⁸ The findings from this period at Shechem are of a more dramatic and precise nature. Stratum V at Shechem ended with a destruction by fire. The date of this destruction has been derived from fragments of imported Greek wares connected with it. These fragments of black and red Attic ware found in the debris lend themselves to a rather precise date for the destruction. According to Nancy Lapp, "the latest example of figured ware, No. 9, dates ca. 480 B.C. Allowing time for its importation into Palestine and consideration for its value, a conservative terminus for the end of Stratum V at Balāṭah would be the end of the first quarter of the 5th century B.C. or ca. 475 B.C."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ J. W. Crowfoot, K. M. Kenyon, and E. L. Sukenik, *The Buildings at Samaria* (London, 1942), p. 115.

⁴⁷ K. M. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land*, Praeger paperback ed. (New York, 1960), p. 299.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 300; Crowfoot, Kenyon, and Sukenik, *The Buildings at Samaria*, pp. 116-119.

⁴⁹ Nancy R. Lapp, "Some Black- and Red-figured Attic Ware," Appendix 7 in G. E. Wright, *Shechem: A Biography of a Biblical City* (New York, 1964), p. 241.

For the historical significance of this destruction, G. E. Wright drew a blank: "That age is a dark one as far as the history of Palestine is concerned, and we simply do not know what happened."⁵⁰ Est 9:16 dates the fighting that broke out "in the provinces of the king" to Adar of Xerxes' 12th year, or March, 473. A reasonable estimate would indicate most of the fighting referred to occurred where the Jews were located. Aside from Egypt and Babylonia where the exiles resided, from which no records of fighting at this time are known, the single largest concentration of Jews was in Judah. Thus the close proximity of the destruction of Shechem around 475 to the Jews in Judah leads to the hypothesis that they may have been related as effect and cause.

Ezr 4:1-5 traces the frictions between the Samaritans and the residents of Judah back to the last half of the 6th century. This provides some plausibility for the idea that these frictions could have erupted in armed clashes in the first half of the 5th century under the aegis of Xerxes' decrees. In that case, two of the most likely places to look for archaeological evidence for such clashes would be in the strata of the two principal cities of the Samaritans.⁵¹ Thus a positive relationship can be proposed between the lag in occupation early in the 5th century at Samaria, the destruction of Shechem dated ca. 475, and the fighting in the Persian empire dated early in 473 by the book of Esther. This event described in Esther provides, in turn, a possible historical explanation for these archaeological findings in Palestine that have hitherto gone unexplained.

Returning to Moore's three other major arguments against the historicity of Esther, it may be noted that two of them may be

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 167. E. Stern was confronted with the same problem in "Eretz Israel in the Persian Period," *Qad* 2 4/8 (1969, Hebrew): 110-124.

⁵¹ There is some evidence for an interruption of occupation without accompanying destruction at Bethel, Gibeon, Gibeah, and Beth-zur early in the Persian period. The evidence from those sites, however, is not nearly as definite and precise as with Samaria and especially Shechem. Cf. E. Stern, "Eretz Israel"; G. E. Wright, *Shechem*, p. 167.

translational rather than historical. As far as the 127 provinces of Est 1:1 versus Herodotus' 20 satrapies are concerned, Moore himself has pointed out that the Hebrew word in question is *m^edînôt*, "provinces," and since there was a perfectly good Hebrew-Aramaic word for "satrapies" that was not used here, there is no conflict unless one can show that those 20 satrapies were not divided up into 127 provinces. This ratio of provinces to satrapies, incidentally, is about right, from what we know of the province of "Beyond the River" after it was broken off from Babylon by Darius I during his administrative reorganization of the empire.

The problem with Mordecai's age depends upon whether the subject of the verb in 2:6 is the first or the last name in the list. Moore takes the first name in the list, Mordecai, as the subject of the verb and thus interprets the statement to mean that he was deported by Nebuchadnezzar in 597, making him well over a century old by the time of Xerxes. On the other hand, J. S. Wright has suggested on the basis of parallels from the syntax in II Chr 22:9 and Ezr 2:61 that the subject of the verb is the last name in the list, Kish, who was Mordecai's great-grandfather. This interpretation would make Mordecai's age quite compatible with Xerxes' reign.⁵²

Finally, there is Moore's objection that Esther could not have become Xerxes' queen, since the Persian queen had to come from one of the seven noble families. In this case, however, Moore's objection is simply inaccurate. As J. S. Wright has pointed out,

It is a pity, however, that one commentator copies another without checking the facts for himself. Certainly Darius married other wives besides one from the Seven; and his son, Xerxes, who succeeded him, was not the son of this wife. Xerxes' wife, Amestris, was the daughter of Otanes; but this Otanes was the son of a certain Sisamnes, while the Otanes who was one of the Seven was the son of Pharnaspes. Ctesias xiii. 51, moreover, says that she was the daughter of Onophas; and he was not one of the Seven.⁵³

⁵² J. S. Wright, "The Historicity of Esther," p. 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39. Wright's references from Herodotus for these statements come (in order) from 3.87; 5.25; 7.61; 3.67.

In summary, all five of Moore's major arguments against the historicity of Esther have been weighed here, two in detail and three more briefly, and they have been found wanting in greater or lesser degree. This does not prove Esther to be essentially historical, but it does open the door to that possibility to a great extent, and future arguments against its historicity should be based upon more historical merit than these. Before one describes the book of Esther as a novella akin to *A Thousand and One Nights*, as Moore has done, more attention should be given to the historical details in the book itself and in our sources from this period, fragmentary though they be.