

Thamar E. Gindin

# The Book of Esther Unmasked



PRAISE FOR THE HEBREW EDITION OF  
THAMAR E. GINDIN'S  
THE BOOK OF ESTHER UNMASKED

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‘A refreshing and readable blend of erudite scholarship and humour, which Gindin does masterfully.’

– *Ady Manory, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA*

‘The book is so much fun to read! Who knew that a book about Indo-Iranian philology could be so much fun?! Well done, really. Truly amazing.’

– *Prof. Adam Silverstein, Bar Ilan University, Israel*

‘This is a book you will not want to take with you to the synagogue, because it’s too interesting, and you won’t be able to listen to the reading and fulfil the commandment.’

– *Netanel Chlafa Brandl, Hodayot, Israel*

‘Your book is so absolutely wonderful! I know nothing about etymology, but you’ve created a composition that is elegant and beautiful and profound, and the light it sheds on the Book of Esther – I wonder how it hadn’t been shed before.’

– *Shai Gillis, Mevo Beitar, Israel*

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ZERESH BOOKS

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the nation of Israel has been intertwined with that of the Iranian people since the eighth century BCE. With the Assyrian exile, Jews began to come in contact with Iranians. Four of the books of the Bible<sup>1</sup> were written in a setting that is clearly Iranian: Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The other books written during the exile and afterwards, during the Second Temple period, exhibit Iranian features that aid researchers in dating them, e.g. Persian words (in the Hebrew text) such as *gizbar* ‘treasurer’, *zman* ‘time’ and *pitgam* ‘message’ (in Modern Hebrew, ‘proverb’), or matters of faith such as Satan as a spiritual entity, resurrection and other eschatological beliefs.

The Book of Esther can be read in many ways. There are traditional Jewish readings, feminist readings, comparative biblical readings and many more. In recent years, an anti-semitic reading has developed in Iran. Since the story takes place in the Persian king’s court, the present book offers an Iranological reading, that is, a reading based on our current knowledge about ancient Iranian history, politics, religion, culture, language and so on. While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are considered history per se, the Book of Esther

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the book, the word ‘Bible’ refers to the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament).

is subject to controversy even among scholars: some insist it describes historical events, while others consider it as a legend or a fable. Whereas the leading question in my lectures is ‘truth or fiction?’, the present book hardly deals with the Book’s historicity; rather, it aspires to present ancient Iran, and sometimes the ancient Near East, through the story of Esther.

The primary sources to the book are varied and include, naturally, inscriptions left by the Achaemenid kings themselves in Persian cuneiform. I also relied on descriptions by Greek historians, first and foremost Herodotus. True, their credibility is questionable, both because the ancient Greeks were the sworn enemies of the Persians (and history is always biased, even when there’s no rivalry), and because the reliability of their sources is unclear. Sometimes it seems like they’re based on mythology: the story of Cyrus’ birth bears a disturbing similarity to the birth stories of Abraham, Zoroaster and Moses, and the ascension of Darius to the throne is suspiciously similar to the Book of Esther, as we shall see in Chapter 9. I’ve read the Greek historians in English on the Perseus website, and in times of doubt also consulted the original Greek.

Among the primary sources you will also find the Septuagint version of the Book of Esther. This Greek translation was made from a version of the Hebrew text different from the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew Bible traditionally used by Jews. Another Greek translation I’ve used is the Alpha Text, whose public relations are not as good as those of the Septuagint. Most scholars date the Septuagint earlier than the Al-

pha Text, but this relative dating has been challenged, and the controversy remains. I've read the Septuagint in a parallel Greek–English version, and the Alpha Text in English only. I discuss these translations only when I have something worthwhile to say about them; not all the differences are enumerated here.

The Septuagint includes six significant additions that do not appear in the Masoretic text. In this book, I've brought them without additional commentary.

I occasionally refer to sayings and opinions by Chazal, the ancient Jewish sages who wrote the Mishna and the Talmud, but since there are many commentaries on the Book of Esther from a Jewish point of view, I did not treat these sources thoroughly or in depth.

This book is structured as an annotated Book of Esther. I've tried to even out the information between chapters, so that some of the names, terms and topics appear with a short commentary at their first occurrence, and are elaborated on in other chapters where they are mentioned again. Part of the commentary appears as footnotes. Many of these are not bibliographical references, but rather secondary commentary, that is, notes on the commentary that are not directly related to the text itself.

'Heavy' linguistic commentary, which some might want to skip and others might want to delve more deeply into, may be found both in footnotes and in paragraphs marked by a thin line.

Unless otherwise stated, I used the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) for the English text. Whenever I felt that the

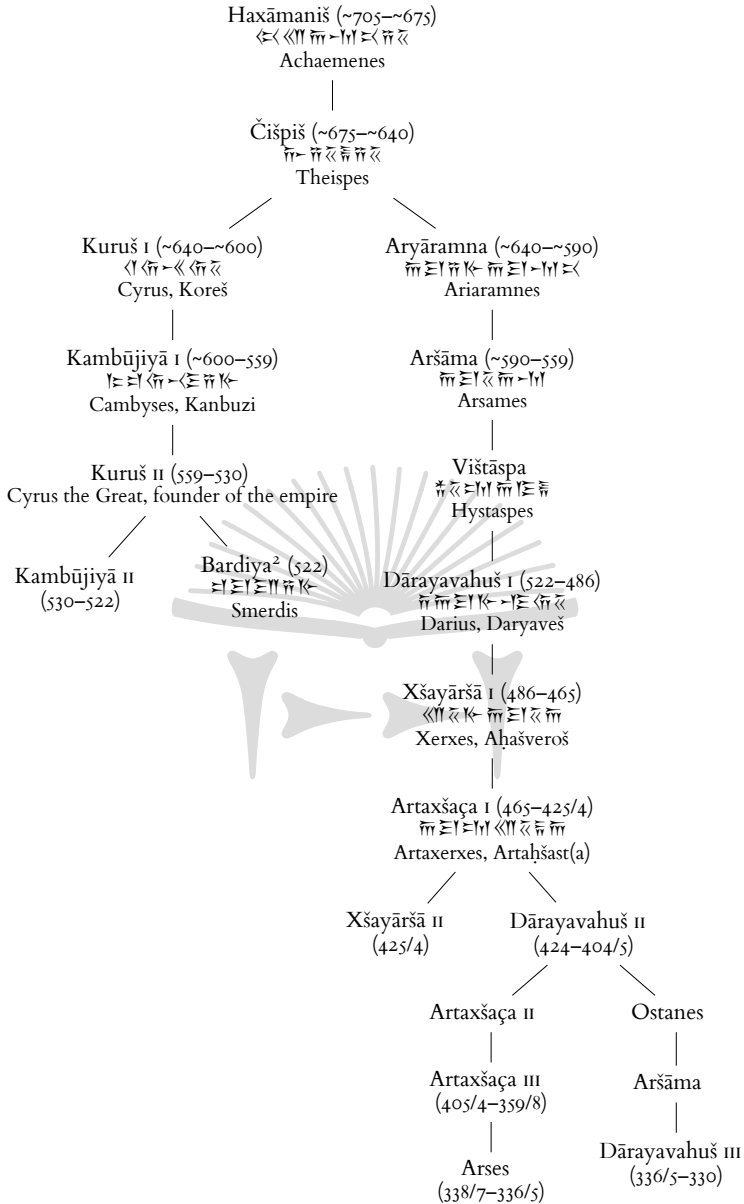
*Authorised (King James) Version (AKJV)* reflects the Hebrew text better for my purposes, I used it instead. Occasionally I refer to words of Iranian origin in the original Masoretic Text (MT) itself. Quotations from the Septuagint are taken from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*.

This book will strengthen each reader's belief as to the historicity of the Book of Esther. Those who believe the events are historical will find that the author describes the royal court with utmost accuracy, from the palace structure and feast customs to court procedures and women's status. Almost all Iranian names in the MT have meanings (the others may have meanings that escape me), and the author uses Persian words and understands their meaning. Those who believe this is merely a legend and refuse to accept the slaughter of 75,810 individuals at the hands of the Jews will be happy to learn that there is no documentation for the event except in the Book of Esther, and that the story and the holiday echo neighbouring cultures of the time.

## HISTORICAL AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Persian is an Indo-European language. The tribes we now call Indo-European originated in a place which is neither India nor Europe, probably in the southern steppes of the (then) future Soviet Union. Then a certain group of them, called the Aryan tribes – in their language, *Ārya* 'noble, hospitable' – began roaming.

The Aryans set forth southbound. Some continued to the southern subcontinent, India, and some roamed westward, to a territory they called '(the land) of the Aryans' – in their



<sup>2</sup>An impostor king; details in Chapter 9.



## AN ANCHOR IN REALITY

**1 This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia.**

**Ahasuerus.** Ahasuerus (Old Persian *Xšayāršā*, Greek *Xerxes*) is the name of two kings of the Achaemenid dynasty, which ruled the First Persian Empire (539–330 BCE). The empire was founded by Cyrus the Great, but the dynasty is named after his great-great-grandfather, Haxāmaniš (Achaemenes).<sup>1</sup> The complete family tree may be found in the introduction. Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther is identified with *Xšayāršā* the First, who reigned between 486–465 BCE. He was the eldest son of *Dārayavahuš* (Darius) the Great and *Hutausa* (Atossa), daughter of Cyrus the Great. *Xšayāršā* the Second, his grandson, reigned for only 45 days, and thus cannot be the king referred to in the Book of Esther, which begins in the third year of his reign and ends in the twelfth.

Ahasuerus is mentioned once in the Book of Ezra (4:6), between Darius and Artaxerxes – in accordance with his place on the sequence of rulers. In the Book of Daniel, on the other hand, there is mention of ‘Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede’. Darius the Mede is not mentioned any-

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<sup>1</sup>The meaning of the name: ‘he who has a friend’s or an ally’s mind’ (from the same root, *√man*).

where else, and there is no such documented sequence of rulers: Darius' father was Vištāspa, and Ahasuerus' son was Artaxerxes. Moreover, it is Cyrus who was half-Mede. Most scholars agree the confusion results from the time elapsed between the events and the writing of the Book of Daniel.

The historical Xšayāršā I left many rock and wall inscriptions in Persepolis as well as scattered inscriptions in the other capitals, Susa (biblical Shushan) and Ecbatana (biblical Ahmeta, present-day Hamedan), and the citadels Van and Alvand. In these inscriptions, he mostly brags about the size of his empire and the enormous construction projects that he and his father carried out. We will remember that in Chapter 3. Meanwhile, in Greece, Xerxes is the Persian king the Greeks love to hate more than any other. He has defeated them and been defeated by them. In Chapter 8, we will expand on one of his most painful defeats, a defeat that resulted from not listening to a wise woman's advice.

The name *Xšayāršā* has two elements. One is derived from the root  $\sqrt{xšā}$ , meaning 'to be worthy' or 'to reign'. When conjugating the root as a verb in the present tense, the stem is *xšaya-*, which may be translated as 'reigning'. Another word from the same root, which is also the most common word in Old Persian and the first one to be deciphered when the language and its cuneiform system were discovered, is *xšāyaθiya* 'king', which became New Persian *šāh* (Shah). In Sanskrit, the classical language of India and a sister language of Old Persian, the root is  $\sqrt{kṣa}$ , from which the name of the warrior caste is derived: *kṣatriya*. Kings come from this caste.

The second part of the name is *ṛṣan* ‘man, hero’, or *arṣan*, some sort of male animal. The common interpretation of the name is ‘ruling over heroes’ or ‘hero among kings’.

In the nominative (subject) case, the case in which this name usually appears, *xšayāršan* is declined as *xšayāršā*, like all ancient Indo-Iranian nouns ending in *-an*. Two well-known Sanskrit examples for this declension are *ātman* ‘self, soul, spirit’, which we know from the (nominative) epithet *mahātmā* ‘of great soul’, and *karman* ‘deed’, which Western languages adopted in its nominative form, *karma*.

In the Hebrew Bible, the pronunciation of the name is */axašveroš/*, usually spelled *ḤšWRWš* but sometimes *ḤšWRš* (with the same vocalisation) and once also *ḤšRš<sup>2</sup>*.

*Xšayāršā*, *Xerxes*, *Ahasuerus* – how did we get such different names in the different languages?

The name *Xšayāršā* is difficult to pronounce in both Hebrew and Greek, for different reasons. Greek has no */š/* sound. The cluster */xš/* becomes Greek */ks/*, rendered in Latin by the letter *x* (in English, *x* in initial position is pronounced as */z/*). *\*/kserses/* became */kserkses/* (*Xerxes*) by way of assimilation.

In Hebrew, the main problem is that the classical language could not tolerate an initial consonant cluster; that is, a word cannot begin with two or more consonants without a vowel in between. This problem has two possible solutions. Here we see one: *prothesis* (*pros* ‘before’, *thesis* ‘some-

<sup>2</sup>Here, as in quite a few places in the Hebrew Bible, the reading tradition differs from the written version, and the name is pronounced as in other places.

thing laid<sup>3</sup>). A *prothetic vowel* is a vowel placed before a consonant cluster, thus breaking it. It's much easier to pronounce /axšayāršā/ than /xšayāršā/. Try it yourself!

Since Classical Hebrew did not render the last vowel of the name in writing, the spelling remained ʿḤSYRŠ. The letter ך (ḥ) became ן (w), which happens many times in handwriting, and in one case was omitted altogether. Vocalisation marks were added to the Bible only centuries after the redaction of the original text, reflecting later pronunciation.

The second solution to consonant clusters is *epenthesis*: breaking the cluster by inserting a vowel between the two consonants. In Akkadian, the king's name is attested both with prothesis – *Axšiyaršu*, and with epenthesis – *Xišiyaršu*.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Persian no longer tolerates consonant clusters. Anyone who has ever heard Iranians speak languages that do have initial consonant clusters could hear both solutions: *estudent*, *estart* and *estop* with prothesis, and *pirint*, *tiridi* (3D), *porofesor* with epenthesis. The name *Xšayāršā* is pronounced /xašāyāršā/.

The similarity between the last syllable of the name and the Persian word *šāh* 'king' paved the way for *meta-analysis*, a re-analysis of the word in a way that does not reflect its original etymology: the king, by folk etymology, is *Xašāyār-šāh*, and Iranians who bear his name are called *Xašāyār*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The suffix *-u* in Akkadian names is a case ending. Semitic words have three cases. Indo-Iranian languages had eight. The names are quoted here in the nominative case, but some are also documented in the direct object (accusative) case – *Xišiyarša*, and in the catch-all (genitive) case – *Xišiyarši*.

<sup>4</sup>Meta-analysis often goes hand-in-hand with folk etymology, an et-

The omission of the final vowel is not unique to the king's name, and we will see it in most proper names and loanwords in the book. This is one of the reasons the Book of Esther is dated a few hundred years after the (alleged) events: in the transition from Old to Middle Persian, all final vowels – in fact, all syllables following the stress – have disappeared. In all nouns and most proper names in the Book of Esther, the final vowel is omitted, but the consonants still reflect the Old Persian reality.

The Septuagint<sup>5</sup> has a slightly different version of the Book of Esther. Of all the changes, the one relevant to the present discussion is the king's name. In the Septuagint, the story is about Artaxerxes. Later Jewish versions also name Artaxerxes (Old Persian *Artaxšāça*) as the king: the Jewish-Persian poet Shahin, of the fourteenth century CE, wrote his poetic epos *Ardeshir-nameh* about the story of the Book of Esther, with the hero king Ardeshir, a later version of the name Artaxšāça (he's also sometimes called Bahman, but let's

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ymology invented by the people, which is – at best – loosely connected to the true etymology. As an example, the letter *s* in the word *island* results from folk etymology based on meta-analysis: the original Old English word was *igland*, from *ieg* 'related to water', and the additional *s* came from the identification of this element with *isle*. The best known case of meta-analysis in the English language is that of nouns beginning with *n* or with a vowel: *a norange* became *an orange*, while *an ekename* became a *nickname*.

<sup>5</sup>The Septuagint is the oldest translation of the Bible to a foreign language – Greek. It is called so (Latin *septuāgintā* 'seventy') because according to the legend, seventy sages (seventy-two, actually, but it would make the name too long, so it was rounded down) translated the Bible separately, and all reached one and the same version.

save that for Chapter 3) – and in an Aleppo version of the Book of Esther, Ahasuerus' epithet is *al-Azdaširi* (ʿLʾZDŠYRY).

Chazal, the ancient Jewish sages, were aware of the problematic identification of the king, and they came up with the perfect solution. Tractate Rosh Hashanah states:

Darius, Cyrus, and Artaxerxes were all one: he was called Cyrus because he was a worthy king; Artaxerxes after his realm; while Darius was his own name.<sup>6</sup>

That is, all the Persian kings were called Cyrus (Hebrew *koreš*) because they were worthy (Hebrew *kašer*, i.e. kosher). Cyrus himself was definitely a kosher king, and in *Ardešir-nameh*, we even learn that he was Esther's son.

They were all referred to as Artaxerxes because of their realm: in ancient Iranian religion, and in Old Persian and Avestan, *arta* is everything that's good and right to do – what the righteous do. *Xšaça* means 'kingdom', thus the king's name is comparable to *Melkizedek* 'just king', or rather 'king whose kingdom is just'.

Darius, Chazal tell us, was their given name.

Of course, this is historically inaccurate. Today we know that most kings left rock inscriptions, seals and weights bearing their names. Most of them also list their genealogy up to Haxāmaniš (Achaemenes), and each one of them has one name.

In my opinion, the simplest solution for the discrepancy between the king's names in the different versions is that the translators had different versions before them, and because they had no prior knowledge of Old Persian, Per-

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<sup>6</sup>Adapted from Rosh Hashanah (3:2).

sian phonology and contact linguistics, the name Ahasuerus sounded to them more similar to *Artaxerxes* or *Ardeshir* than *Xerxes* or *Khashayar*.

**One hundred and twenty-seven provinces.** The historical numbers are a bit different: Dārayavahuš (Darius), father of Xšayāršā, lists 23 provinces<sup>7</sup> that were under his rule when he ascended to the throne. He later expands the empire. To those who want to know exactly how many provinces were under his rule, he recommends counting the images of the tribute-bearers in the rock reliefs.

More than once, Xšayāršā enumerates the provinces he ruled. This is the longest list (see the empire map in the introduction):<sup>8</sup>

Media, Elam [these two were the most important as they had been past empires, and therefore always open the list of provinces], Harauvatiš (Arachosia), Armenia, Zraka (Drangiana),<sup>9</sup> Parthia, Haraiva (Aria), Bactria, Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, ʔataguš (Sattagydia), Sparda (Sardis), Egypt, Ionians (Greeks) – those who dwell by the sea and those who dwell across the sea, men of Maka, Arabia, Gandara, Hiduš (Sind, i.e. the Indus Val-

<sup>7</sup>Xšayāršā uses the Old Persian word *dahyu* ‘state, country’. In New Persian the word was shortened to *deh* and lost some of its glamour – it now refers to a village.

<sup>8</sup>In this list I chose to use the better-known names – usually the Greek ones. I’ve left the original Persian where it is of interest, in itself or for the book, and added the Greek one in parentheses.

<sup>9</sup>Xšayāršā uses the Median form of the name, with initial *z*. The Greek name reflects the Persian form, with initial *d*. These differences in form indicate the Proto-Indo-European source had an initial *ǵ*. Details later.

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GIRL POWER

**1** So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. **2** On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.’ **3** Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me – that is my petition – and the lives of my people – that is my request.’

Then Queen Esther answered. The Alpha Text involves God again, and adds here: ‘Esther struggled with her reply, because the adversary was before her eyes, and God gave her courage as she called upon him.’

**4** For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.’

If we had been sold merely as slaves. Both Greek translations turn the unreal condition here into indicative sentences, describing a reality. The Septuagint remains slightly



more loyal to the original: ‘For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be booty and to be enslaved – we and our children as male and female slaves – and I kept silent.’ Alpha takes more liberty: ‘For I and my people have been sold into slavery, and their young children as booty. But I did not want to tell you, lest I trouble my lord.’

**But no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.** Translated literally, the MT has ‘because the enemy is not worth the damage to the king’. The traditional translations take some freedom: King James with ‘although the enemy could not countervail the king’s damage’; the Septuagint has ‘for the slanderer is not worthy of the court of the king’; and Alpha takes it in a completely different direction, with ‘for the man who did evil against us has changed his manner’.

Interestingly, other translations, as well as speakers of Modern Hebrew, interpret this phrase differently, taking *ṣār* ‘enemy’ as *ṣā’ar* ‘agony, sorrow’: for example, ‘because no such distress would justify disturbing the king’ (New International Version), ‘for that would be too trivial a matter to warrant disturbing the king’ (New Living Translation).

**5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, ‘Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?’**

**Who is he, and where is he.** In the MT, the king asks ‘who is he and which is he’. In the Alpha Text, the king elaborates: ‘Who is this who dared to humiliate the sign of my rule so as to disregard fear of you?’ (Recall that in the Alpha Text,

Esther only mentioned being sold to slavery and said that the adversary had changed his mind). Alpha goes on:

When the Queen saw that it seemed a grave offense to the king and that he hated evil, she said, ‘Do not be angry, lord, for it is enough that I have found your conciliation. Enjoy your meal, O King, and tomorrow I will do according to your word.’ But the king swore that she must tell him who was so arrogant to do this, and with an oath he took it upon himself to do for her whatever she wished. So Esther was emboldened and ...

Back to the story line.

**6 Esther said, ‘A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!’ Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.**

A foe and enemy. Alpha adds: ‘your friend’.

**7 The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him.**

**Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther.** Could Esther change the king’s decree? Wait, could she ask the king to execute Haman at all?

We’ve seen many times throughout the book that according to the Greek historians, Iranian women (of noble birth, of course) enjoyed a much higher status than their sisters in other lands, and that royal women had far-reaching influence in the king’s court. This holds true in matters of life and death as well.

In Chapter 1, we saw that Xerxes won the crown instead of his elder brother by another mother, because his mother, Atossa, daughter of Cyrus, was the one who controlled the royal court. Herodotus tells us that it was she who convinced her husband Darius to wage war on Greece; the official excuse was that she wanted maids from specific cities in Greece, but the truth is that her Greek physician cured her from a tumour or inflammation in the breast, and asked in return that she tell the king the words he put in her mouth.

Ctesias tells us that Amestris, wife of Xerxes and mother of Artaxerxes I, made her son execute the leader of a rebellion who killed one of her other sons. That leader had received an oath and promise that he would be safe; it therefore took Amestris five years to convince her son to execute him, but she did it. She also convinced him to pardon one of his friends who was sentenced to death following an inappropriate hunting incident: he dared kill a lion that attacked the king before the king himself had a chance to hunt anything, thereby becoming the first person to kill an animal during the expedition – an honour reserved for the monarch. He was lucky to have Amestris on his side. Artaxerxes also allowed his mother to execute (by skewering on three sticks, thanks for asking) the Greek physician of her daughter Amytis, who convinced the maiden to sleep with him as a remedy for her illness, and then left her when her condition worsened.

Amestris also exercised tremendous power over her husband, Xerxes. In Chapter 5 we quoted Herodotus' story in which Xerxes is forced to give his niece/daughter-in-law/

lover Artaynte the multi-coloured mantle that Amestris had woven for him. He knew Amestris would go berserk with jealousy, and Artaynte didn't make it any easier when she walked around the castle flaunting her new mantle. Amestris waited for another opportunity when the king is obliged to fulfill every wish: his birthday feast.

She asked him for the girl's mother, Xerxes' sister-in-law. The reason is that Xerxes originally fell in love with his brother's wife, whose name remains a mystery; she refused all his messages, and he wouldn't take her by force. So the wise thing was to marry his son Darius off to her daughter Artaynte. But instead of the mother changing her mind, Xerxes fell in love with young Artaynte. In any case, Amestris asked for the mother, not for the daughter. She did not kill her, although that might have been more humane than what she actually did.<sup>1</sup>

A woman who had less influence over Xerxes' decision-making, and it's a pity, was Artemisia, one of his military commanders. Artemisia was the queen of Caria, Greece, and an ally of Xerxes. She contributed five battle ships to his navy, which were the best ships after the Phoenician ones. She was the one who advised him not to enter into a naval battle against the Greeks but attack via a certain land route, because the Greek navy was superior. Xerxes chose to listen to his other advisors, and was bitterly defeated in Salamis.

Back to influential women. In later times, Ctesias tells us of Parysatis, the Babylonian wife of Darius II and mother

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<sup>1</sup>Adult readers who would like the details of the mutilation are welcome to read Herodotus 9.112.1.

of Artaxerxes II,<sup>2</sup> who was the most powerful woman – nay, the most powerful person – in the history of the Achaemenid court. Life was granted or taken at her will, and she practised very creative forms of execution by her own hand – only if the king approved, which he always did. Stateira, her daughter-in-law, also had far-reaching influence in the court. We know she appointed satraps and of course executed people – and the rivalry between her and her mother-in-law ended with Stateira being poisoned to death. She, like her mother-in-law, exhibited extraordinary creativity in her executions. Plutarch presents her in a very positive light in his *Life of Artaxerxes*.

Some identify Amestris, Xerxes' wife, with Esther or with Vashti. With Esther (STR), because Amestris (MSTRYS) has practically all the letters (Hebrew renders only the consonants, thus /a/ and /e/ are rendered by the same letter (א), and /t/ (ט, ט) and /θ/ (ט, ת) are not differentiated in Modern Hebrew pronunciation). Others identify her with Vashti, because we have seen that *w-m* routinely interchange in the process of word loans in the ancient Near East, and that Greek uses the letter sigma to render both /s/ and /š/. Omit the prothetic aleph and the case ending at the end, and there you go: Amestris = (a)vaštri(s).

The identification with Esther is problematic even before we realise Amestris was an extraordinarily cruel lady (and that's after leaving some stories out). The main problem is that we know her exact lineage: her father was Otanes

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<sup>2</sup>Apparently, the law limiting the queens to these seven families was not strictly enforced.

(Hutāna), one of Darius' six close friends and accomplices who helped him ascend to the throne (details in Chapter 9). In return for this favour, they were given the prerogative to enter into his presence without requesting permission first, and the promise that the kings would choose their primary wives – the queens – only from among these seven families, the royal family and offspring of the six nobles. Dārayavahuš fails to fully give Hutāna his due credit in his rock inscriptions, but he does mention him and his lineage: 'Hutāna son of θuxra – a Persian'. The meaning of the name Hutāna is 'he who has good offspring', which was true to a certain extent (Amestris was quite successful; as for her sister, let's wait for Chapter 9). At any rate, Hutāna was far from being Jewish. He was a kosher Aryan. Amestris was not collected among other virgins, she was not chosen in a pageant, and she certainly had no nationality to hide.

The identification with Vashti is problematic as well. Chazal do say she was cruel: she made the maidens of Israel slave and do chores on Shabbat (I bet Amestris' victims would have loved to switch places). But Vashti was disgracefully expelled from the palace, or executed, or at least left to hang high and dry indefinitely after the third year of Ahasuerus' reign, and Esther took her place; as we've seen, Amestris remained in absolute power until the end of Xerxes' life and well into the reign of her son Artaxerxes.

Another identification of Esther, which goes quite well with the king's name in the Septuagint, is beautiful Stateira, wife of Artaxerxes II. It even seems plausible that Stateira's name is linked to the goddess Ishtar or to the word for star

(I doubt she was named after a currency<sup>3</sup>). According to Plutarch, she was a beautiful and beloved queen, but the same two problems creep up: lineage and morality – according to Ctesias, she was responsible for some creatively vicious executions, and her father, whose Greek name is Hydranes (Old Persian probably *vidrna*) was, as far as we know, a descendent of one of the noble families from which the queens came. Unsure as identification may be, he was definitely not Jewish, and his name sounds nothing like Abihail or Aminadab, the different names mentioned for Esther’s father.

8 When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, ‘Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?’ As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face.  
9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, ‘Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.’ And the king said, ‘Hang him on that.’

**Harbona.** We remember this name from the list on Chapter 1! In the Septuagint, Harbona of the eunuch list is named Tharra, like the eunuch who conspired to assassinate the king (Hebrew Teresh). The snitch in this chapter is called ... Bougathan! Just like Bigthan, the accomplice of Teresh. In

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<sup>3</sup>*Stater* was a Greek currency that was also used in Iran.

the Septuagint, Tharra's co-conspirator is named Gabatha, a distorted form of Bigtha: another eunuch from the same list.

**And the king said, 'Hang him on that'.** Um. There are many incredulous points in this story, most of which are related to the king's decisions. For example, when the king makes a decision while drunk, and it is carried out before he considers it in a state of sobriety, or the other way around. Here, besides the fact that he's still drunk, there's another breach of Achaemenid law, as Herodotus (1.137.1) tells us:

This is a law which I praise; and it is a praiseworthy law, too, which does not allow the king himself to slay any one for a single offense, or any other Persian to do incurable harm to one of his servants for one offense. Not until an accounting shows that the offender's wrongful acts are more and greater than his services may a man give rein to his anger.

We can justify the king's decision by saying it's not a single offence: Haman conspired to annihilate the queen's nation, he tried (according to Ahasuerus) to conquer the queen in the king's own home, and he had prepared a tree for Mordecai. Still, the decisions were not reconsidered while sober, and no accounting was done.

The Iranians are experts on reckoning right and wrong deeds. In the Book of *Wirāz the Righteous*, the person's *daena* (*dēn*), the beautiful girl or old hag who meets the soul upon entering the next world, holds a scale and weighs the good and bad deeds he has done during his material existence. This weighing is called *āmār ī ruwānān*, literally 'the



calculation of the souls', and is very similar to the Hebrew phrase *ḥešbōn nefes̄* 'soul accounting', meaning 'soul-searching' or introspection. If his evil deeds exceed the righteous ones, he goes, of course, to hell. If the good deeds tip the scales slightly, but not more than three *srōšōčaranām* (yes, there are measuring units for sins and mitzvot), he remains in the 'high existence', which is, as they say in Yiddish, *nisht ahin nisht aher* – neither here nor there. Only if the difference is greater than three *srōšōčaranām* is he allowed to cross the Bridge of Selection and go to heaven.

10 **So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.**

**So they hanged Haman.** The Alpha Text is more cruel: before the hanging, the king himself removes his signet ring from Haman's finger and seals the order with it.

The story of Esther is complete. You now know more about pre-Islamic Iran than the average high school graduate in the Islamic Republic. The Islamic regime does all in its power to disclaim, or present as evil, anything that has to do with pre-Islamic Iran. I've talked to people who went to school in Iran during the first two decades after the revolution; they said that they practically had brainwashing classes not only against Israel, but also against everything that came before Islam. A few years ago, the Ministry of Education decided to completely eliminate pre-Islamic Iran from the textbooks. Among the anecdotal claims made by the Islamic fundamentalists, you can find the following etymology for the name of the Achaemenid empire: it's not *Haxāmanešī* (New Persian for 'Achaemenid'), but *Xāxāmanešī*. *Xāxām* in Persian means 'rabbi' (from Hebrew 'wise, sage'). The whole empire was a Jewish conspiracy, and the Book of Esther is proof of that.

However, in part due to the regime's Islamic coercion and its attempts to erase the past, most Iranians today are extremely proud of their ancient heritage, and infinitely prefer it over Islam. Every year in Nōrūz, thousands of people travel to Cyrus' resting place, a few hours' drive from the nearest large city, Shiraz. They chant mottos like 'not Gaza, not Lebanon (lately also: not Syria, not Yemen), my soul is devoted to Iran', and other slogans and songs expressing their love for Cyrus the Great and Iran. Needless to say, the government neither organises nor encourages such gatherings. By contrast, the ceremonies at Khomeini's grave on his *yahrzeit* are perfectly organised, including chartered buses

from workplaces, but people still prefer to spend the day off travelling abroad or around the country, and having a good time.

Here's a picture that was posted on a social network, comparing Cyrus' derelict grave with Khomeini's well-kept tomb.



Babak Iran-Ban, 50's kids (i.e. people born in the 1970s)

Although it denies Iran's ancient heritage or at least tries to play it down, the Islamic regime makes official use of the Iranian solar calendar – a calendar whose months are named after Zoroastrian deities and entities. In the early days of the revolution, when the name 'the Islamic Gulf' was suggested instead of 'the Persian Gulf', Iran very decisively refused. Many Iranians bear names taken from Iranian history and mythology: Kurosh or Sirus, Khashayar, Rostam, Nahid or Anahita, Bahman, Behzad and so on. While not forbidden by law, when parents come to register their newborn son as Arash or Kurosh, registry officers all too frequently try to convince them to use a prettier name, like Mohammad or Ali. In many cases, children's names can indicate their parents' political views and identity, whether they are more Moslem or more Iranian. Word choice can also indicate political views: Iranian nationalists often strive to purify their

speech from Arabic elements, while Islamists draw on the Arabic component more than usual. Interestingly, the website of the Academy for Persian Language and Literature sometimes features Arabic words even where the Persian words are just as or even more common.

Women in present-day Islamic Iran are forced by law to wear *hejāb* (head and sometimes body cover), but they enjoy a much higher status than their sisters in other Muslim countries. You can find women in the high ranks of academy, culture and politics; they serve as parliament members, ministers and vice presidents; the percentage of female engineering students in Iran is similar to that of the USA and Canada. Iran's first and only Nobel laureate is Shirin Ebadi, and Iran's first and only Fields medal winner is Mariam Mirzakhani. Both are women. Mariam Rajavi is the president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran; Nasrin Sotoudeh is a prominent human rights activist and lawyer, and one of the symbols of the human rights movement in Iran; Golshifteh Farahani is an esteemed actress in Europe. The list goes on.

The following sign is one of my favourite examples in lectures about women in Iran:



It says: this vehicle has been taken off the road for improper *hejāb* of the driver and passengers, and audio pollution (i.e., they enjoyed loud music, probably Western).

There are at least three reasons why this could not happen in Saudi Arabia: there is no such thing as leaving home without a man; there is no such thing as leaving home without proper *hejāb*; there is no such thing as a woman driver.

Where is everyone now?

Susa stands desolate. So does Persepolis. Ecbatana has become Hamedan, one of the major cities in Iran to this day.

Herodotus says that once, before a fatal battle, Xerxes suddenly felt melancholic. When asked why, he said that he suddenly realised how transient existence is, and that none of the people standing here, whether they are killed tomorrow or live to ripe old age, will still be alive a hundred years from now. He was right, of course.

Ahasuerus, that is Xerxes, that is Xšayāršā I, is buried in Naqš-e Rostam, next to his father Darius the Great, his son Artaxerxes and his grandson Darius II. We've seen one detail from the tomb in Chapter 6, and here's the whole family together. To give you a scale, the tiny little dots at the bottom are people. Assuming a king who expresses gratitude to Ahura-mazdā is Zoroastrian, his bones were probably laid in this tomb after the birds ate his flesh at a designated building.



Esther and Mordecai are buried in two places – in the Galilee and in Hamedan. In the Galilee, a brown sign from Road 899 to Kibbutz Bar'am will lead you to a small path. The path will lead you to a tomb in which Cyrus the Great interred the bones of his mother, Queen Esther, and then the bones of her uncle Mordecai as well. This agrees with the tradition of Iranian Jews, that Esther gave birth to Cyrus, but is a little bit less in accord with the Achaemenid dynasty as rendered in the inscriptions made by the kings themselves.

If you're in Hamdedan, the Esther and Mordecai Mausoleum is quite close to the main square (or roundabout) of the city. Dr Shariati Blvd is one of the rays of the star whose centre is the roundabout. The second alley to the right is Esther Alley. There, opposite the girls' school, you will find the Hamedani tomb of Esther and Mordecai. It is a pilgrimage site and one of the heritage sites of Hamedan Province. In December 2010, following a demonstration by students supporting the regime, whose version of the Book of Esther we've seen through the book, the word 'pilgrimage site' was removed from the sign. The students also demanded the removal of the mausoleum from the list of heritage sites in Hamedan Province. I don't know about the list, but my sources in Hamedan tell me that the deleted word has been restored to the sign, without involving the media. Today, only Jews are allowed to enter the premises and ask boons of Esther.



(Courtesy of Elham Yaghoobian,  
7Dorim.com)

If the story of the Book of Esther is not historical, who lies in the exquisite coffins? One of the hypotheses suggests it is Shushan Dokht, literally ‘daughter of Shushan, Shushan girl’, the wife of the Sasanian king Yazdegerd I (399–420). Though not mentioned in Jewish sources, she appears in Iranian sources. She is assumed to be the daughter of the *rēš gālūtā*, the leader of the Jewish community. She was the one who ordered that Jews be settled in Hamedan, and over the years the two Jewish queens – the historical one and the one whose existence is controversial – merged into one.

Another possibility, relevant also to the Galilee grave, is that it’s only a place to pray at or visit in the absence of a known grave, or that the place was sanctified in the course of history, and the historical context was added later.



Matchboxes from present-day Iran. The king is Khashayar.

The name of the lecture that evolved into this book is ‘The Book of Esther: history or fiction?’. The name is quite misleading, because as you may have noticed throughout the book, there is no knowing: On the one hand, the author is deeply acquainted with the language, culture and life in the royal court. On the other hand, most of our knowledge about the culture and royal court is through Greek histori-

ans, and who knows how credible they are. It's one story supporting another. On the third hand,<sup>1</sup> there is a tomb, there is Shushan, and there is a king by that name, who had an officer named Marduka and a wife named Amestris. On the fourth hand, the events described in the Book of Esther are not documented anywhere except in the Book and its translations, even though the Greeks surely would have snatched the opportunity to make the Persian king look bad. Besides, Marduka wasn't that important, and Amestris was not Jewish. On the fifth hand, we can always argue that the author exaggerated a little bit, and the real events were not big enough to be worthy of documentation. On the sixth hand, the holiday's customs and the story behind it bear suspicious similarity to other ancient 'turned to the contrary' holidays and the myths behind them, especially Darius' ascension to the throne (which brings us back to Herodotus' lack of credibility). To make a long story short, every reader may keep and strengthen his or her initial opinion, at least until (bidirectional) time travel is invented.

But the truth is that it doesn't really matter. Even if the Book of Esther is a myth or allegory and not historical documentation, we will still read the coolest book of the Bible and celebrate the best-loved holiday on the Jewish calendar. Not to mention that this story is a great excuse for enlightening Western readers about ancient Iranian culture.

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<sup>1</sup>Up to 64 hands are documented, at least among Hindu goddesses.



The story of the Book of Esther is an integral part of Jewish DNA: every girl has dressed up as Queen Esther at least once, and every boy was a king or Mordecai with a cotton beard. Isaac Manger put juicy Yiddish words in the mouths of these characters, but who knows what they spoke originally? Linguist Tamar E. Gindin does. Her *Book of Esther Unmasked* draws directly on the original ancient Mesopotamian, Persian and Greek sources, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is fascinating. Or as Chazal put it: did you know that the Jewish people took cultural components from the gentiles and upgraded them into a flourishing and successful format that the gentiles are buying back?

The Book of Esther is a cultural code that has to be learnt. I laughed until I cried in the part where Tamar explains the etymologies of the names of Haman's sons. One of them was made by hand, and another was destined to be a gynaecologist! Well, we don't always live up to the interpretations of our names, and this happens even in the best of languages. Including Old Persian.

Eyal Shahal, Tel Aviv



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Hebrew, English and Persian. *The Book of Esther Unmasked*, her second book for general audience, was first published in Hebrew in 2015. A forthcoming Persian edition is to be distributed freely on the Internet.



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