

Appendix

The Names of the Main Characters in The Book of Esther

Xerxes

"Ahashuerus" is a Hebrew rendering of the Persian name "Khshayarshan." Its Greek form is Anglicized as "Xerxes." My purpose in this section is to show that these three are all forms of one name and are linguistically interchangeable.

The names of the Achaemenid kings after Darius which have been preserved were probably 'throne-names' or appellations, perhaps taken at the time of accession, or when named crown prince. That Darius' personal name was Spentadata, hence connecting his with Zoroastrian tradition as son of Vishtaspa, patron of the prophet, is quite unproved. His 'throne-name' may be explained as *dārayat* plus *vahush* 'having wealth (good things of life)'. It is odd that in the Aramaic documents of Egypt from the Achaemenid period, we find the shortest form of the name *drwš*, applied to Darius I, but later the name is longer *drywhwš*, as well as other forms. The name Xerxes probably means 'hero among rulers', Old Persia *khshaya-* plus *aršan-*, while Artaxerxes has nothing to do with *-xerxes*, rather it is a Greek explanation of *Artakhshassa* meaning something like 'having just rule', *arta-* and *khshassa-* (Old Persian form of *khshatra*).¹

The Persian word *aršan*, which forms the second part of Xerxes' name, is cognate with Greek *arsēn* (see Gal 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male [*arsēn*] nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"). In both languages the basic meaning is "male." Thus, the throne name Khshayarshan [*xšayaršan*] has the connotation "manly, heroic"--"Hero Among Kings" (according to Kent) or "Hero Among Rulers" (according to Frye).²

As taken over into Hebrew the name ^אחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ (with *waw*) contains a substitution of *waw* for *yodh*, which is common in later Hebrew. With *yodh* restored ^אחַשְׁיָרֶשׁ comes reasonably close to the sound of the king's Persian name. Jewish scribes at Elephantine, writing in Aramaic, used the consonants *ḥsyʾrš* (with *yodh*) to spell this same word, which, if vocalized *ḥ^osayyāʾršā* would also closely approximate the sound of the word in Persian.

Perhaps the scribes who copied the book of Esther felt that the middle syllable *yā* sounded too much like the divine name Yahweh and so changed *yodh* to *waw*. This is a conjecture. Perhaps it was the appearance of the letters that caused the slip. At Qumran, for example, *yodh* and *waw* are virtually identical in form and are routinely confused with each other. But, whatever the process by which a *waw* found its way into the Hebrew form of Xerxes' name, changing it back to *yodh* brings us a long way toward reconciling the differences between the forms in which this king's name is found in the first two languages mentioned above.

The development of Greek Xerxes [*kserksēs*] from Persian Khshayarshan [*xšayaršan*] is straightforward. Greek had the sound [*x*] (the letter *chi*, a velar continuant) but lacked the sound

[š], which would preclude any consonant cluster [xš]. The latter (in Persian) became first [kš] and then [ks] on its way into Greek. Thus, a hypothetical intermediate form **Xayarxan* [ksayarksan] or **Xayarxes* can be posited as part of the process by which Persian Khshayarshan became Greek Xerxes. Thus Khshayarshan, Ahasuerus, and Xerxes I are all one and the same.

Vashti

It is possible that Queen Vashti is known in Greek, through Herodotus and other ancient writers, by the name Amestris.³ According to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* the Greek name Amestris is Ionic for Amastris, which "may reflect Old Persian **Amāstri-*, containing **ama-* 'strength, strong' and **stri-* 'Woman'; . . ."⁴ Thus, Amestris/Amastris is Persian as well as Greek. The *m* is represented by Hebrew *w* (or *v*),⁵ the *a* of Hebrew "Vashti" is confirmed as being correct, and an original *r* has fallen away in the final syllable under circumstances where a Jewish reader would have found it difficult to pronounce.

None of the above changes is linguistically implausible in and of itself. The most difficult part has to do with representing Persian and Greek *m* by Hebrew *w* (or *v*). According to Shea there is a precedent for this type of correspondence from Elamite, where Persian words using *v* are consistently brought over as *m*. But here the situation is reversed. Amastri (Greek Amestris) is a Persian name. Thus, the correspondence is between an *m* in the source language and a *v* in the target language.

On linguistic evidence alone, identifying Vashti with Amestris appears to be possible, if difficult. But the argument need not rest on only one line of evidence. Historically Vashti's status and behavior at court matches that of Amestris so closely that, given any hope of a linguistic correspondence, the proposed identification remains attractive.

Esther

The name "Esther" (Hebrew *ʾestēr*, Greek *estēr*), if Persian, means Star. The same word could be given a Babylonian derivation associated with Inanna/Ishtar ("Queen of Heaven," goddess of love and war),⁶ but the best evidence, while not entirely beyond dispute, suggests that this is not the case.

This name is transliterated into Greek as *Aster* or *Esther* (LXX). The Greek root *aster* appears in such English words as 'aster,' 'star,' and 'asteroid,' which means 'starlike.' The Babylonian form of the word was *Ishtar*, which became *ʾAštōreth* (plural) in Hebrew and *Astartē* in Greek.⁷

This source gives the Hebrew as *ʾaštōret* (see 1 Kgs 11:5, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13). The same name also occurs in the Old Testament as *ʾaštōrōt* (see Gen 14:5). Supporting the identification of "Esther" with "Ishtar" is the fact that Ishtar was a fertility goddess and that Esther was known for her great beauty. She was "lovely in form and features" (Esth 2:7).

Against the above identification is the Greek form of the name (*esthēr*), as given in the Septuagint, where *th* is *theta* – the sound of English *th* in words such as "thin." This *theta*,

however, is not nearly so important for our purposes as the *eta* which follows it. The name Ishtar comes over into Greek as Astarte (*astartē*), which is never spelled with an *eta* (**astērtē*) and certainly not with a *theta* (**asthērtē*, **esthērtē*). So if "Esther" means "Ishtar," as some claim, where is the final syllable (*-tē*)? And without it, where is the connection in the Septuagint between Esther and Astarte? The linguistic evidence, while mixed, would indicate that Esther does mean Star after all.⁸

Esther was probably a name given to the girl by her Persian friends. "Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah . . . who was also known as Esther" (Esth 2:7, 8). Hadassah was her given name. If "Esther" was a name given to Hadassah by her Persian friends, we would expect the name to have a Persian derivation and meaning. If the name is Persian, it is therefore Indo-European and not only does it mean "Star," but in having this meaning it is cognate with our own English word "star."

Mordecai

The name "Mordecai" is a transparent derivative of "Marduk," patron deity of Babylon. In Greek transcription the connection is even closer than in English transcription, because the initial vowel in English is *o* while in Greek it is *a*. Its Babylonian form is "Mardukayya." The rabbis of the Talmudic age eventually tried to obscure this fact. They proposed deriving Mordecai's name from Aramaic *môrā' d'kiyyā'*, which they equated with Hebrew *môr d'rôr* "pure myrrh."⁹ This merely demonstrates that they didn't want the name to mean what it obviously does. The book of Esther itself, however, does not hide the origins of its names.¹⁰ This fact in turn is consistent with the generally secular tone of the book.

Haman

Although Haman was an Agagite (i.e., in the royal line of the ancient Amalekite people which God commanded Saul to exterminate), the name "Haman," according to the *New Bible Dictionary*, "may be derived from that of the Elamite god, Hum(b)an."¹¹ Ran Zadok normalizes the spelling of this name as Humpan,¹² which can be identified with Sumerian Enlil, the Sumerian/Assyrian god of the air.¹³

The Elamite name "Humpan" or "Huban" assumes a number of different forms, e.g., *^dHu-ba-an*, *^dHu-um-ba-an*, *^dHu-pan*, *^dHu-um-ba*. The first vowel is sometimes *a* (*Am-ba-hap-u-a*, *Ha-am-ba-*), sometimes *i* (*Im-ba-ap-pi*), but most often *u* (as above and in many other examples).¹⁴

¹Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (New York: Mentor, 1963), p. 122.

²See Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd ed., American Oriental Series, vol. 33 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953), p. 182. For Frye see *Heritage of Persia*, p. 122.

³See William H. Shea, "Esther and History," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 14 (1976): 235-37. Other Greek historians that mention Amestris are Ctesias (fragments 13 and

14) and Plutarch (*De superstitione* 13). A careful study of this historical figure would make a good thesis topic.

⁴*Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Ehsan Yarshater Routledge and Kegan Paul, eds. (London, 1985), 1:936.

⁵Modern Israeli Hebrew pronounces consonantal *waw* as [v], but Esther was not written in Modern Israeli Hebrew. Yiddish requires a doubling of the *waw* to spell the [v] sound, thus *ww* = Yiddish [v]. See Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish -English Dictionary* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. xxi. Single *waw* is pronounced [w]. This was probably also the sound of Hebrew *waw* in the time of Esther. But in any event, either [w] or [v] would be quite close to [m], which is the Persia and Greek sound being represented in this way.

⁶Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 122.

⁷*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 3:469. I am not entirely comfortable with the assertion that the word Ishtar has an Indo-European origin. It might, but saying so represents a claim that needs to be supported in some way. The Sumerian logogram for this goddess (*MUŠ*) is commonly transcribed *dInanna*, which in one document appears more fully as *NIN.^dINANNA* "Himmelsherrin, Queen of Heaven" (see Erich Ebeling and Bruno Meissner, eds., *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* [Scientific lexicon of Assyriology and near eastern archeology], [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976-80], s.v. *Inanna/Ištar* A.2.1). *Ištar* (or *Ishtar*) is the Akkadian form of her name. Of special interest here are any facts that link *Ishtar* with the starry heavens. According to Assyrian legend she was the daughter of the moon god *Nanna/Sin*, the sister of the sun god *Utu/Šamaš*, and a close relative of the sky god *An*. A symbol frequently associated with *Ishtar* in her statues and pictures is an eight-pointed star (see *ibid.*, B.1.2, 2.2). So the symbolism fits but the word does not. "Star" in Semitic derives from **kabkab* (Hebrew *kôkâb*), which bears no similarity to "Ishtar." The Sanskrit word for "star," on the other hand, is *star*, with which one should compare Greek *astēr*, Latin *stella* (**sterla*) (see August Fick, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der Indogermanischen Sprachen* [Comparative dictionary of the Indo-European languages] [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1874], s.v. *ster*), and Old High German *stern(o)* (see E. Prokosch, *A Comparative Germanic Grammar* [Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 1938], 19 [p. 60]). Here there is a clear similarity to the word "Ishtar" but when or why a borrowing took place remains unexplained.

⁸In modern Farsi the word for "star" is *setahre* (*Persian Instruction Manual: Learn Today - Travel Tomorrow*, Conversa-Phone Institute, 1974).

⁹See Siegfried H. Horn, "Mordecai, A Historical Problem," *Biblical Research* 9 (1964): 16. The passages Horn cites are Megillah 10b, 15a; Hullin 139b.

¹⁰Shea points out that in the book of Daniel those who transmitted the text did in fact alter one name: "It has long been noted and well-nigh universally accepted in the commentaries that the name *Abed-Nego* in Dan 3 is transparently a corruption of *Abed-Nebo/ Abed-Nabu*, 'servant of Nabu.' This conclusion seems sound and is accepted here, not on the basis of a phonetic shift, nor of an orthographic change, but as a deliberate distortion of the name of the Babylonian god. Apparently it was distasteful to the biblical writer to have a faithful and proper servant of Yahweh named after a Babylonian god, so the name of that god was intentionally altered. The change involved in this case was ever so slight. Instead of using the *beth* with which this name was ordinarily written, the letter next to it in the alphabet--*gimmel*--was substituted for it, thus yielding the intentional corruption of *Nego* for *Nebo/Nabu*" (*idem*, "Daniel 3: Extra-Biblical Texts and the Convocation on the Plain of Dura," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 [1982]: 48).

¹¹2nd ed., s.v. *Haman*.

¹²Ran Zadok, *The Elamite Onomasticon*, Supplement no. 40 to the *Annals* 40 (1984) (Naples, 1984), pp. 11.

¹³Kramer, *The Sumerians*, p. 145.

¹⁴Zadok, *Elamite Onomasticon*, pp. 11-13. The superscript ^d before some of the above forms indicates that the name is applied to a deity.