



LIVING IN A HOSTILE WORLD
Studies in Ezra and Esther
Lesson 5
(Lesson 2 of Esther)

ESTHER - THE SHINING STAR
ESTHER 1:1-2:20

AN OUTLINE SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS OF ESTHER:

- Chapter 1 - Vashti Cast out**
- Chapter 2 - Esther Crowned**
- Chapter 3 - Haman's Conspiracy**
- Chapter 4 - Esther's Courage**
- Chapter 5 - Esther's Cleverness**
- Chapter 6, 7 - Haman Crushed**
- Chapter 8 - Xerxes Counter decree**
- Chapter 9 - Jewish Conquest**
- Chapter 10 - Author's Conclusion**

I. VASHTI DIVORCED ESTHER 1

A. The King's Feast 1:1-9

We are first introduced to the sumptuous living of the Persian royalty. While laborers lived hand to mouth even when producing art that still is magnificent, life at the royal court was extravagant beyond imagining. The more lavish the king's hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy.

White and violet (blue, v. 6) were the royal colors of Persia. The Royal cities of the Persian Empire were Ecbatana, Susa, Persepolis and Pasargadae.

The third year of Ahasuerus' (Xerxes') reign was evidently 482 B.C. For 180 days (six months) he entertained his guests (v. 4). This was evidently the military planning session that Ahasuerus conducted to prepare for his campaign against the Greeks. The Greek historian, Herodotus, referred to this meeting and said it took Ahasuerus four years (484-481 B.C.) to prepare for his Greek campaign.

As the six months drew to a close, yet another banquet is described. This banquet is shorter - a mere seven days - and for the benefit of all the men who dwelled in Susa, rich and poor alike (1:5). The longer banquet was for the nobility (1:3-4). The opulence was just as evident in this shorter celebration with its abundance of food and wine. While the king provided wine in abundance, he did not force any to drink other than what they wished (1:8).

B. The Queen's Dismissal 1:10-11

Eunuchs were men that the Persian kings castrated who served the king and his family (v. 10) so they could not have sexual relations with the female members of the royal court and start dynasties of their own. "Vashti" ("best," "the beloved," or "the desired one," v. 11) was evidently the Persian name of the queen whom Herodotus referred to as Amestris (her Greek name).

It is not possible to determine why Vashti refused to obey the king's summons (v. 12). Many of the ancient Rabbis and modern interpreters added midrashic embellishments to the story of Vashti. Some said that her refusal was the king's order

that she appear naked before his guests. According to the Talmud the queen refused to come because Gabriel had smitten her with leprosy. The important point for the writer was that she did not appear, not why she did not appear.

We are not told the king was “drunk,” but that his heart was “**merry**.” The Bible does not prohibit men from becoming merry, but only from becoming drunk (see Deuteronomy 14:24-26). We should be careful not to read too much into this text. Nevertheless, it was when the king’s heart was “**merry**” that he sent for Vashti to appear before the men who were gathered with him (1:10-11). This probably was intended to be the grand finale. The text says that she was not instructed with regard to her dress other than she should appear wearing her royal crown. She was summoned to display her royal beauty, not to entertain the troops with some kind of burlesque show. Remember, the purpose of the celebration is for the king to display his “*royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty*” (1:4). The king was not asking; he was summoning his queen. But neither was he demanding she do anything demeaning to herself. She was to appear in all her glory to bring glory to the king.

The irony is apparent: the king, who ruled the entire world could not control his own wife.

C. The King’s Humiliation 1:12-22

Imagine how humiliating this would have been for Ahasuerus. His purpose in all of the festive events of the past six months was to impress his guests with his great wealth and power. He wanted faithful supporters when he began to wage war with Greece. And now, during the closing ceremonies of this six-month extravaganza, the king’s own wife snubs him, refusing to honor or obey him and thereby embarrassing him before all of his guests.

The king was angry at Vashti, but he did not lose control. He did not demand that she be put to death nor decide her fate at that moment. He called for his chief counselors and asked them what he should do. When their advice was given, the king heeded it, carrying it out as they recommended.

D. The Counselors

The king’s counselors were wise men - men he respected and to whom he listened. The counsel of seven (1:13-14) continued in existence for at least 25 years after this event (cf. Ezra 7:14). These men were cabinet-level officials in the government. As principal advisers to the king they had special access to the king. This was unusual because the Persian king was usually inaccessible to his people. These are chief ranking officials of the kingdom.

These seven wise men were asked what the king should do, because they were men who had a grasp of the times and who also understood “*law and justice*” (1:13). These men not only understood the wrong Vashti had done, they had a keen sense of justice and thus discerned an appropriate punishment for her rebellion. They also knew the various peoples, languages, and cultures represented in the kingdom of Ahasuerus and how the king’s decision would affect the people.

E. The Advice

The king’s advisers feared that Vashti’s rebellion would lead to a popular women’s liberation movement and to a revolution among the aristocratic wives particularly (vs. 17-18). There is extra-biblical evidence that no one could revoke Persian laws once they were official (v. 19; cf. 8:8; Daniel 6:8). The counselors were an-

xious that the king's decision be irrevocable since if Vashti regained power they would be in great danger.

In verse 19: "*laws of Persia and media*" note the order in contrast to Daniel 6:8, reflecting the greater prominence of the Persians at this period.

One advisor, Memucan, gave his opinion; it was concurred by the rest and implemented by the king. Memucan concluded the queen had done wrong, not only against her king but also against the kingdom. She was the most prominent and visible woman in the Persian Empire, and, consequently, her actions set a precedent affecting every woman in the kingdom. Vashti had spurned her husband's authority. He was not just her husband; he was the king! If the king did not deal decisively and sternly with Vashti, there would be a revolt in every household. Wives would have the courage to deal with their husbands just as Vashti had done with Ahasuerus. And we thought the women's liberation movement was new!

The advisers did not suggest to the king a solution that we would consider biblical. They approached this situation from the standpoint of their eastern, chauvinistic culture, not from the principles of the Word of God. No doubt they saw women as inferior to men and thus to be used by men for their pleasure. As a result, the advice of the king's counselors was directed at maintaining the status quo, and was not in obedience to divine commands.

The counsel which Memucan gave the king was simple. The queen was to be removed from her position of prominence and honor. She was to be banned from appearing with the king as his queen and to be replaced by a new queen of the king's choosing, a woman "*more worthy*" (1:19) than Vashti. The king's decision should be irreversible, and it should be made a law of Persia and Media which could not be reversed. The king's decree was then to be conveyed throughout the kingdom, a signal to husbands to stay in charge and for wives to be in submission.

F. The Letters

A considerable number of languages and scripts existed in the vast Persian Empire. We have copies of decrees of Xerxes written in Persian, Elamite and Babylonian as well as in Aramaic.

Heroditus, (c. 484 B.C.-c. 425 B.C.) was a Greek historian. Heroditus is referred to as the Father of History for his nine-volume work. It is the first comprehensive attempt at secular narrative history and considered the starting point of Western historical writing.

He traveled in Persia and wrote the following concerning the Persian postal service to which the writer of Esther alluded several times (v. 22; cf. 8:10).

Nothing mortal travels so fast as these Persian messengers. The entire plan is a Persian invention; and this is the method of it. Along the whole line of road there are men (they say) stationed with horses, in number equal to the number of days which the journey takes, allowing a man and horse to each day; and these men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance which they have to go, either by snow or rain, or heat, or by the darkness of night. The first rider delivers his dispatch to the second, and the second passes it to the third; and so it is born from hand to hand along the whole line.

- Herodotus, 8:98

II. ESTHER ELEVATED ESTHER 2:1-20

The far-reaching Providence of God is at work for His chosen people. Esther is placed in a position so she could deliver her people even before they are in danger. This story would have been a great encouragement to the Jews of the postexilic period, as it has been to all believers since then.

A. The Plan to Replace Vashti 2:1-4

The king's anger eventually subsided toward Vashti. He may well have truly loved her and his feelings for her now come back. He now seems to have second thoughts about the action taken against her. No wonder the king's advisors counseled him to make his dealings with her a matter of law which could not be changed. They evidently knew the king loved her and would possibly reverse his decision.

The king's attendants recognized that he was morose both from losing to the Greeks, as well as losing his love. The king's attendants suggest new virgins to divert the king and to save themselves from Vashti's wrath.

They proposed that the king follow through with the proposal to choose a new queen. He needed little prodding to conduct a beauty pageant, especially when he alone was the judge. The most beautiful young virgins in his kingdom were the contestants, and the plan was for him to try out each and every one of them. Those who were not chosen as queen appear to have been kept on as his concubines. The night each virgin spent with the king was not just one of dinner and dancing. The women were brought into the king's harem and placed in the keeping of Hegai (2:3, 8). She then underwent a year long period of preparation (2:12). After her night with the king, the young lady was kept in a different harem under the custody of Shaashgaz, a eunuch in charge of the king's concubines (2:14).

B. The Four Year Interval

The text does not immediately tell us that several years have passed since the events of chapter one. We know this because the celebration of the king was held in the third year of his reign (1:3) and Esther is not brought before the king until the seventh year of his reign (2:16). Some of the history that took place during that time are:

1. Xerxes' father

In 490 B.C., Xerxes' father, Darius the Great, had led a huge fleet of 600 ships carrying some 60,000 Persian crack cavalry and foot soldiers to capture Athens and subdue the Greek civilization. But he was soundly defeated on a small plain called Marathon by the brilliant Greek general Miltiades. In spite of the vastly numerical superiority of the Persians, the Greeks out-circled their foes and cut them down as overripe wheat.

2. The Battle of Marathon

The battle of Marathon is listed as number six in the book, *History's 100 Greatest Events*, by William A. DeWitt.

3. Crossing the Dardanelles

In the spring of 480 B.C., Xerxes crossed the Dardanelles with over 100,000 men and hundreds of ships. History tells us Xerxes wept while watching the display of his smartly marching army all carrying their brightly colored flags and banners. When asked why he wept the king replied, "*Because I know all military glory is but for a moment and will soon fade away forever. Because much*

less than one hundred years from now every man present here today will have died, myself included."

4. Naval disaster

Disaster struck soon after, for he lost 400 ships in a severe spring storm at sea. In blind frustration and anger, Xerxes beat upon the stormy waters with his belt.

5. Defeat on land

Upon landing in Greece, his proud Persian troops were stopped for an entire day at the mountainous pass called Thermopylae. Here, a Greek captain named "Leonidas" and his 300 brave Spartan soldiers held back the entire invading army for twenty-four hours, inflicting losses on them and allowing the much smaller Greek army to carry out an orderly retreat to safety.

6. Defeat at sea

Xerxes eventually broke through and burned Athens to the ground. But most of its citizens had escaped to the island of Salamis. The king then set sail for Salamis, confident of victory, for he outnumbered his enemy at least three to one. But the smaller and swifter Greek boats had mastered the art of ramming. Soon, before his horrified eyes, Xerxes viewed the slaughter of his proud navy.

7. He left for Persia a defeated man.

His remaining troops were put under the command of General Nardonius. A year later, Nardonius was defeated and killed in a pitched battle at Plataea in 479 B.C. The Persian Empire was then dealt the final death blow. J.F.C. Fuller's, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World*, lists the battles at Salamis and Plataea among the most important in recorded history.

C. The Miss Persia Beauty Pageant 2:5-11

The king evidently had sexual relations with a different virgin every night whenever he pleased. The harem officials watched these girls closely to make sure they did not have some disease that they would communicate to him. The women in the harem used their time to become as attractive as possible.

Like the semi-nomadic Arab women of the eastern Sudan in the last century, women like Esther long, long ago fumigated themselves, saturating their hair, skin, and pores with fumes from cosmetic burners.

- "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," Biblical Archaeologist 38:3-4 (September, December 1975)

After their night with the king, these young women resided in a facility with other concubines where they might live for the rest of their lives. The king might call for them again or he might not. Historians have documented Ahasuerus' amorous affairs in Persia, Greece, and elsewhere.

-Whitcomb, John C. "Esther." In The Wycliffe Bible Commentary

D. The Choice of Esther as Queen 2:12-20

Among the contestants was a beautiful young Jewess, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah and whose Persian name was Esther. The only qualities mentioned regarding Esther are physical. She was beautiful, in form and face.

Esther was also an orphan. When both of her parents died, her cousin Mordecai took her and raised her as his daughter (2:5-7). Both Esther and Mordecai were from the tribe of Benjamin, the descendants of Kish (deported from Jerusalem with Jeconiah in 597) and his son Shimei (2:5-6).

The *name* "Mordechai" seems to be derived from "Marduke" the Babylonian

god. Many Jews had both a Hebrew and a Babylonian name.

“Hadassah” in Hebrew means “Myrtle.” “Esther” is possibly derived from “Ish-tar,” the Babylonian goddess of love - or it could be from a Persian word meaning “star.”

Esther was a strikingly beautiful young woman, and the favorable response she gained was probably the result of her appearance more than of her character. Nowhere in the book do we find mention of Esther’s character. This is most unusual for a Jew. The Bible clearly teaches us to judge a person in terms of their character, not according to their beauty or charm (Cf. 1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 31:10, 30; Luke 16:15).

This young lady found a special place in the heart of Hegai, who gladly favored her above the rest. His favor may have been because of her personality or character in addition to her beauty, but one would think the author would have told us so in a way similar to the stories of Joseph or Daniel. We must be careful not to read into the text what we would like to find. Neither is there a word of approbation for Mordecai. We know Esther did not reveal her nationality because she was instructed not to by Mordecai (2:10). It seems cowardly, though we must not judge them too harshly, since we have not experienced their times.

Esther must have eaten, dressed and lived like a Persian, thus breaking Jewish dietary laws and other customs. Presumably this is because Mordecai felt her Jewish dissent would lessen her chances of becoming queen. One must wonder if she would have even been a contestant had it been known that she was Jewish. Why was Mordecai willing to wear his Jewishness as a badge, but not Esther? Perhaps because Mordecai was not trying to become the next queen, Esther was.

In verse 13 the “anything” is emphatic, in other words she got everything she wanted, clothes or jewelry.

Less (makeup or whatever) made a better impression on the king than *more*, and so Hegai informed Esther. Esther seemed to have donned no special ornaments to please the king. She was wise and cooperative and accepting of Hegai’s advice (in contrast to the headstrong Vashti). This seems to be four years after the Vashti incident.

E. The Banquet for Esther

The king threw a huge banquet in honor of Esther and proclaimed a holiday.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Some See the Book as a Record of What Not to Do.

Bob Definbaugh writes:

Ezra and Nehemiah are the account of the godly Jews who returned to the promised land and who sought to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple amidst great difficulty and opposition. Esther, on the other hand, is an account of those who became too attached to the land of their sojournings and thus disobeyed God by not returning when it was not only allowed, but commanded.

It is in the light of the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures that we can see the Book of Esther for what it is and appreciate its unique message and contribution. While Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the return to the land by the faithful remnant, Esther depicts the fate of those who remain in the land of their captivity. We

should not expect Mordecai and Esther to be godly Jews, for they are living in disobedience. No wonder there is no mention of God, and no wonder that Esther's Persian name is the name of a heathen God, Ishtar.

...Something is drastically wrong with God's people as represented in the Book of Esther. We should not delight in Esther's "success" in becoming queen; we should be distressed. - Robert Definbaugh, http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=681

B. Some See It as a Beautiful Statement of God's Providence and Watchcare.

In spite of the omission of any name for deity, there is no book in all the Bible where God is more evident, working behind the scenes, than in this book.

- H. L. Willmington, Willmington's Guide To The Bible

While it is true that there are no direct references to religious observances in the book, it should be noted that in calling for a fast before she goes to the king, Esther is explicitly putting her case into the hand of God. Such a fast to be kept not only by her and her immediate companions and family, but also by all the Jews in Susa, would clearly include prayer to God. Mordecai is to call them together as an act of public recognition of their dependence upon God.

There is a basic trust in God underlying the whole book and the main characters are shown both to be dependent upon God and consciously to recognize their dependence upon Him. This is enough to give the book deep religious value. A book does not have to be full of references to God and of religious observances to have religious significance. The most moral stories need no moralizing. - John Bender-Samuel, "Esther," The International Bible Commentary