

## The Book of Esther<sup>1</sup>

### Lesson 1

#### Esther Chapter 1 – 2:1

483 BC

When King Darius I begins his rule in 522 BC in Babylon, Daniel rises to encourage him about the future. Although Daniel receives the vision in Babylon, its setting occurs in Susa on a river. His encouragement calms Darius' fear as he continues to reign for 35 years during which time he builds the great city of Susa that he establishes as his winter home and palace. To his credit, he rejects the request to stop the rebuilding of the temple that began anew in 520 BC as recorded in the story of Ezra and the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. Darius I takes Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great as his wife, strengthening his authority by marrying into the blood line of the first king. Together, Darius and Atossa bear a son named Xerxes I in 519 BC. While Darius is on the throne, the temple's completion and dedication occurs in 515 BC in Jerusalem. Darius dies in 486 BC and Xerxes I starts his rule. He, like all the later Persian kings, abandons Babylon and reigns solely from Susa because of its central location in the empire and its wonderful weather. However, when the summers became too severe, the king moved his court to Ecbatana located on the site of modern-day Hamadan, Iran. The Persians call the king Khshayarasha, the Greeks call him Xerxes, but the Hebrews transliterate the Persian name and call him Ahasuerus. The Hebrews then continue to use the same name to mean any king in the Persian line, just as the Egyptians use the title pharaoh and Americans use the title president.

#### King's Display

**Esther**<sup>1:1</sup> Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,<sup>2</sup> in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which *was* in Susa the capital,<sup>3</sup> in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army *officers* of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of his provinces being in his presence.<sup>4</sup> And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

By the third year of Xerxes I's reign, the Persian Empire includes 127 provinces, seven more than his father had created and his capital rests in Susa rather than Babylon.<sup>2</sup> In 483 BC, after three years of control, Xerxes decides to exhibit the great wealth of his kingdom to all those within his government organization. He displays the wealth of his kingdom for six months and culminates the event with a magnificent banquet.

#### King's Banquet

**Esther**<sup>1:5</sup> And when these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

At the end of the six-month exhibit, the seven-day banquet begins in the court of the garden of the king's palace that his father, Darius I, had built in Susa during his 35 year reign.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel 6:1

### King's Decor

**Esther**<sup>1:6</sup> *There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.*<sup>7</sup> Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty. And the drinking was *done* according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.

The record of the décor of Xerxes' palace garden shows the lavish bounty of the king's estate. Curtains of the finest material known to man, were hung by beautiful cords, attached to silver rings, and secured to marble columns to give shade to the beautiful gold and silver couches sitting on an exquisite mosaic floor that encompass the entire garden. The goblets of gold hold the bounty of wine for the quests of the king, but the king requires nothing of his officials. According to verse 1, the empire includes 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. The vast kingdom includes people of all colors, tongues, customs and traditions, and the king allows everyone to enjoy the seven-day banquet according to the "desires of each person."

### Queen's Banquet

**Esther**<sup>1:9</sup> Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

While the king banquets with the officials in the garden, his queen, Vashti, entertains the wives at her own banquet inside the palace. The custom of the day forbids the feasting of men and women together.

### King's Command

**Esther**<sup>1:10</sup> On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,<sup>11</sup> to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.

At the close of the banquet, Xerxes sends seven of his eunuchs to bring Vashti to the garden to introduce her to the men and display her beauty. The name Vashti means beautiful in the Persian language, no doubt a royal name given to her upon her marriage to Xerxes. The common people know her by her given name, Amestris.

### Queen's Refusal

**Esther**<sup>1:12</sup> But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

At face value, to request the queen to appear with her royal crown seems reasonable; however, the Targum offers an interesting twist. The Jewish Rabbis use other words, paraphrases, explanations, and expansions of the Jewish Scriptures to interpret the passage. The collection of these snippets resides in the Jewish Targum. The Targum adds one word to verse 11 that sheds light on the reason for the queen's rejection of the request. It says, "... to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal crown in order to display her naked beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful." But the Targum, although authoritative among some of the Jewish echelon, holds no authority with the majority of the students of the Scripture. The probable reason for the refusing to appear

before the king is pregnancy. Within the year of 483 BC, the birth of Artexerses occurs. Pregnant women of the Persian Empire never appear in the presence of men, covered or uncovered, for any reason. However, the custom of the culture allow for pregnant women to appear in the presence of other women. Vashti's refusal to show her beauty for any reason, pregnant or not, infuriates Xerxes.

### King's Dilemma

**Esther**<sup>1:13</sup> Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so *to speak* before all who knew law and justice, <sup>14</sup> and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom—<sup>15</sup> "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus *delivered* by the eunuchs?"

The issue which causes the king's dilemma focuses on the queen's disobedience to his command. Vashti's refusal breaks all the customs of the day and Xerxes confers with the seven princes who know the laws of Persia. Xerxes owns a harem of women, and, if Vashti appears before him as seldom as Esther will later in the book, it is clear that he demands and commands women to fulfill his desires with no regard for the opinions of others. In the custom of the Persian Empire, a wife must obey every word of her husband. In addition, according to the custom of the Persian Empire, every person must obey every word of the king. "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti?" the king asks his seven legal authorities who also hold the rank of prince in his kingdom.

### Prince's Concern

**Esther**<sup>1:16</sup> And in the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but *also* all the princes, and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup> "For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.' <sup>18</sup> "And this day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in *the same way* to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.

Memucan, one of the seven princes, states that Queen Vashti's response to the king sets a precedent for all the other women in the empire to follow. If the queen can rebel against her husband, then every other wife in the kingdom can also!

### Prince's Proposal

**Esther**<sup>1:19</sup> "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti should come no more into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. <sup>20</sup> "And when the king's edict which he shall make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."

Memucan proposes an edict that Queen Vashti will never enter the presence of the king again and her position will be given to another. We must note that the edict does not include the death penalty or imprisonment. Why? Most likely Vashti's pregnancy precludes the threat of death or imprisonment. Her banishment from the king and loss of her title and position ought to suffice for the punishment of the future mother of a king if she gives birth to a son. The edict will set a precedent among all women in the kingdom from India to

Ethiopia, and allow men to remain dominant in the culture. The edict will go through all the proper steps to assure that it can never be repealed even by a future king.

### King's Edict

**Esther**<sup>1:21</sup> And *this* word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. <sup>22</sup> So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

Pleased with Memucan's proposal, the process begins and the edict cannot be changed. The Persians translate the edict into every language or dialect of the people in the 127 provinces and send it out. The edict commands "that every man should be the master in his own house." With the edict, the officials remove Vashti from the house of Xerxes.<sup>3</sup>

### King's Remembrance

**Esther**<sup>2:1</sup> After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Perhaps in a drunken stupor on the seventh day of the banquet, Xerxes ordered Vashti to go against the customs of the day. Perhaps in his fury, Xerxes ordered an edict that he now regrets. Perhaps he remembers Vashti's beauty and wishes to reclaim her but he cannot do so because of the law of the Medes and the Persians. Xerxes cannot change the consequences of the edict upon Vashti or himself. No one knows the true meaning behind the verse but its words lead the reader to understand that Xerxes replays the events in his head and tells someone about it enough times that the king's attendants will attempt to turn his attention from Vashti to another in the next passage.

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<sup>3</sup> Vashti will give birth to Artaxerxes I that year (483 BC). He will take the throne when his father dies.