

The Book of Esther⁴

Lesson 2

Esther Chapters 2 and 3

483 BC – 473 BC

The Scripture says that after ousting Queen Vashti from his palace and sending an edict to his entire empire, King Xerxes “remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.” The most beautiful woman in the kingdom who previously belonged to the king and is pregnant with his child can no longer enter into his presence. No doubt, the king regrets the decisions he made in his drunken rage. Surely, his regrets alter his emotions long enough that his attendants attempt to turn his attention from Vashti to another woman in the next passage.

Attendant’s Suggestion

Esther^{2:2} Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. ³"And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to Susa the capital, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*. ⁴"Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.

The suggestion from the attendant might seem provocative, but actually the practice was common among all the kingdoms of the world at that time from Europe to China. Harems of the most beautiful women in the world were kept for the king’s purposes. Xerxes already had a harem that he had worked his way through but evidently, none of them had satisfied his desires. To satisfy the king’s longings, new young virgins have to be brought into the harem. The attendants need to encourage the king to appoint overseers throughout the provinces to seek out the women and take them to the harem under the care of Hegai. In the secular custom of the day, the king gives the order to gather all the young virgins from all economic levels and deliver them to the king’s harem. The parents of the young maidens dare not refuse for their own personal safety. If their daughter meets the criteria, she will be taken to the king’s harem. Once the daughter leaves her parents, they know they will never see her again unless she becomes the chosen one of the king.

We know little about Hegai except that he is the king’s chamberlain, a eunuch, faithful to the king and in charge of the most beautiful virgins in the kingdom. In most kingdoms, the chamberlain is a repulsive old man with whom the maidens must carefully interact in order to obtain his favor. The favor of the chamberlain means added benefits. Hegai’s name means repulsive; therefore, he fits the criterion for the eunuch in charge of the king’s harem. Most, if not all of the women, will be repulsed by Hegai because of his appearance.

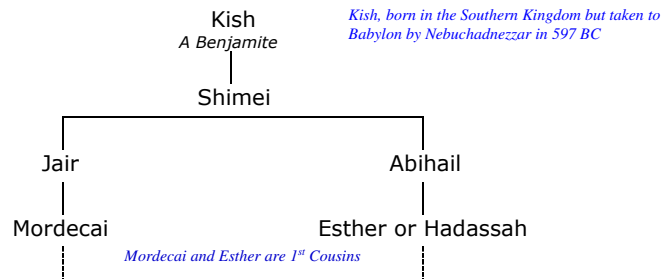
Mordecai’s Cousin Esther

Esther^{2:5} Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, ⁶ who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled. ⁷ And he was

⁴ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled “The Book of Esther” are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

When the Scripture offers a genealogy, it is often easier to decipher the information with a chart.



Once Esther is orphaned, her first cousin, Mordecai, takes her into his home and treats her like she is his own daughter. Obviously, Mordecai must be somewhat older than Esther because he has an established home suitable enough for the beautiful Esther to join his family. Her Hebrew name is Hadassah which means "myrtle." When Hadassah enters the royal harem, Hegai changes her name to Esther, the Persian name for the star Venus, an indication of her incredible beauty and good fortune. No one knows how Mordecai and his family came to settle in Susa. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar placed them in that area while it was still under Babylonian control in 587 BC.

Esther's Place of Favor

Esther^{2:8} So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to Susa the capital into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. ⁹ Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace, and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.

Esther enters the harem some time after the king's decree of 483 BC. Just how soon she arrives we do not know, nor do we know her age at the time. The Scripture does indicate that Hegai finds great favor in her quickly and provides her with the best cosmetics, food, seven maids and living quarters in the harem chamber. Do all the ladies in the harem have maids? Probably not. In most harems, the women live in tight but clean quarters as they wait for their turn with the king. Hegai sees something special in Esther and he provides her with an incredible advantage over all the others.

Esther's Secret Heritage

Esther^{2:10} Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make *them* known.

Mordecai fears for Esther's welfare. Her heritage as a Jew can be a disadvantage in the Persian court. Esther obeys her cousin and keeps her ancestry secret.

Mordecai's Concern

Esther^{2:11} And every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

How does Mordecai gain access to the front of the court of the harem? Perhaps he walks back and forth to keep from being arrested or expelled from the court area. Mordecai remains close enough that he can gain access to information about Esther's well-being.

Harem's Beautification Treatment

Esther^{2:12} Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women-- for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women-- ¹³ the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

From the day Esther enters the harem, a required twelve-month beautification treatment transpires before she can have her visit with the king. She must undergo six months of saturation with the oil of myrrh followed by six months of adornment with spices and cosmetics.

In those days, many believed that a diet including strong coarse foods not easily digested generally produces excessive perspiration and a strong odor. A diet of mild and easily digested foods, coupled with frequent hot baths followed by a rub of the oil of myrrh, in most cases, will remove the disagreeable smell and promote good health.

At the end of the twelve-month treatment, the young woman can request anything she desires for her visit with the king. She can have anything she thinks might render her more engaging and set her apart from all the other women.

Young Lady's Visit

Esther^{2:14} In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

Each maiden from Hegai's harem of virgins, in turn, enters the chamber of the king about 6:00 in the evening and spends the night. In the morning, she does not go back to the harem of Hegai; rather, she goes to Shaashqaz's harem of the concubines. All the women of both harems belong to the king; however, the virgin women live together in one location and the women who have been with the king live in the other. Just because she enters into a sexual relationship with the king one time and could possibly bear a child from that visit, she cannot call him her husband, enter into his presence, or leave the concubine harem without the order of the king. If she pleases him, he will call her back by name for one or more visits with him. If she bears a child and the king does not recognize her in some way, the child has no inheritance, privileges to the throne or wealth. Both the concubine and the child will live in the harem for the rest of their lives or until the child can enter the service of the king. Shaashqaz controls the concubine harem. His name means beardless, a disgrace to a man and a proper epithet for a eunuch. It shows the reason for his position.

479 BC

Esther's Turn

Esther^{2:15} Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, advised. And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her. ¹⁶ So Esther

was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

Esther's turn to visit the king arrives in the tenth month of the sacred Jewish calendar in the seventh year of Xerxes' reign or 479 BC.⁵ Four years have passed since Xerxes ousted Vashti and he still does not have a queen. Perhaps Esther has been in the harem for only a little more than a year. Perhaps there she has been there for the entire four years. No one knows how long she has been in Hegai's care. Because she trusts Hegai, Esther allows Hegai to dress her. How will she dress and adorn herself for the visit with the king? Esther allows Hegai to dress her.

Esther's Crown

Esther^{2:17} And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

When the morning arrives, does Esther return to the concubine harem? Probably not. It seems that Esther has found the favor and kindness of the king that night and he crowns her sometime during her stay. When he crowns her, he makes her the Sultana, the queen. She then controls all the rest of the wives and concubines and they must treat her with profound respect.

Esther's Banquet

Esther^{2:18} Then the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty.

With the crowning of his new queen, Xerxes celebrates with a magnificent banquet for all his court and servants. The day includes a holiday from work for everyone and he gives Esther and many others gifts in accordance with his wealth.

In the Persian Empire, the crowning of a queen, including Vashti, is accompanied by the *aurum reginae*, or queen gold, a tax of 10% of all the regular fines as a gift to the new queen. The tax from one city provides the queen's clothing - from another city, her silver jewelry, from another her hair products and another, her pearls. This time the king gives gifts to everyone. Perhaps the king's gifts to the people increases Esther's popularity.

Haram's Replenishment

Esther^{2:19} And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.²⁰ Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care.

Esther is the new queen but the four years of auditions have left the virgin harem of the king empty. Those who have auditioned for the king now reside in the concubine harem. A second collection of the beauties in the empire occurs to replenish the virgin harem. As the

⁵ Tebeth is the 10th month on the Jewish sacred calendar and the fourth month of the Jewish civil calendar. The sacred calendar starts with the month of Nisan and the civil calendar starts with the month of Tishri. Both calendars have the same months. The sacred calendar starts six months after the civil. On the new Jewish calendar, established in 320 AD by Hillel, the month coincides with December or January today. However, in that time, the Jewish calendar was tied to the lunar cycle instead of the solar calendar.

second collection to fill Hegai's harem concludes, Mordecai still sits at the gate and Esther still keeps her heritage a secret.

Mordecai's Discovery

Esther^{2:21} In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.²² But the plot became known to Mordecai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.

So far, nothing in the Scripture or history tells why Mordecai can sit at the king's gate unbothered by the king's men. Perhaps he holds some position in the king's organization. Perhaps the king allows the Jews free reign at the gate. Perhaps Mordecai holds a highly recognized position among the Jews and the king has designated a place at his gate for the Jews to transact business. Since the time that villages and cities formed in God's creation, every nation has transacted business at the gates. For some reason, unknown to all, Mordecai sits at the gate without fear of the Persian authorities.

Bigthan and Teresh guard Xerxes' doors to the king's gates. Both have enough issues with the king to plot his death. The men fail to keep their thoughts private. At some point, their talk becomes loud enough that Mordecai learns of the plan. Perhaps Mordecai's constant presence at the gate causes the two to let down their guard or perhaps they seek to include him in the plot. Whatever the case, once Mordecai learns of the details, he tells his cousin, the queen, and she tells the king. Esther informs Xerxes that this knowledge of the plan rests in Mordecai; however, she does not make her relationship to her cousin known to the king.

King's Investigation

Esther^{2:23} Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

Xerxes finds the report true and has his two officials hanged. He watches as his scribe records the incident in the official chronicles of the king's business.

474 BC

Haman's Elevation

Esther^{3:1} After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who *were* with him.

The deaths of Bigthan and Teresh leave two vacancies in the king's organization. He chooses Haman to fill both positions and he increases the job description to include the oversight of the seven princes who have immediate access to the king. These same seven princes who are named in Esther 1:14 have led the king to issue the edict and to oust Vashti. No doubt, even though he has replaced Vashti with Esther after a four year interval, Xerxes still regrets the incident. Xerxes uses the death of the two officials to put distance between him and the seven princes.

Servant's Question

Esther^{3:2} And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage.³ Then the king's servants who were

at the king's gate said to Mordecai, " Why are you transgressing the king's command?" ⁴ Now it was when they had spoken daily to him and he would not listen to them, that they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's reason would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew. ⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. ⁶ But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him *who* the people of Mordecai *were*; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who *were* throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman's new found favor includes an expectant action from the servants at the king's gate. When everyone else bows to Haman, Mordecai refuses to do so. What power does Mordecai hold that allows him to refuse to follow the command of the king day after day? Warned by the servants, Mordecai still refuses to comply. His steadfast conviction infuriates Haman. Why does Haman not order Mordecai to bow? Does he not have the authority over Mordecai that he has over the king's servants? Why is Haman afraid of Mordecai? Why does his Jewishness strike fear in Haman's heart? Rather than handling just Mordecai, Haman plots to destroy all the Jews in the king's entire empire who support Mordecai.

Year's Pur

Esther^{3:7} In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, Pur, that is the lot, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month to *month*, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar.

By this time, Esther has been Xerxes' queen for five years. It is 474 BC and Haman has a plan, but he does not know when to present it to the king. Everyday he resorts to Pur, or the casting of lots, to determine if it is the right day to approach the king. For the better part of twelve months, almost 354 days, Pur is cast and finally in the twelfth month, the lot falls for him to safely approach the king.

Haman's Complaint

Esther^{3:8} Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from *those* of all *other* people, and they do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain. ⁹ "If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the *king's* business, to put into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰ Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, "The silver is yours, and the people *also*, to do with them as you please."

In the last month of 474 BC, Haman approaches Xerxes with his complaint against the Jews. He offers the king 10,000 talents of silver to allow him to destroy the Jews. The king agrees and gives him his signet ring to emboss the edict. However, the king refuses to take the money; he does not need it.

473 BC

King's Signet Ring

Esther^{3: 12} Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and it was written just as Haman commanded to the king's satraps, to the governors who were over each province, and to the princes of each people, each province according to its script, each people according to its language, being written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring.

After at least 13 days, the king's scribes gather together to produce copies of the edict in

every language of the 127 provinces. On the 13th day of the first month of 473 BC, the edicts are stamped with the signet ring and sent by couriers to the ends of the empire.

Haman's Plan

Esther^{3:13} And letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth *day* of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder. ¹⁴ A copy of the edict to be issued as law in every province was published to all the peoples so that they should be ready for this day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out impelled by the king's command while the decree was issued in Susa the capital; and while the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in confusion.

Haman's decree instructs the people of every province in the Persian empire to kill every Jew exactly 11 months and 1 day after the date of the edict. The edict is sealed on the 13th day of the first month of 473 BC and all the Jews are to be slaughtered 11 months later on the 13th day of the twelfth month of the same year. The edict leaves the king's palace in Susa while Haman sips wine with the king.

Mordecai's Mourning

Esther^{4:1} When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. ² And he went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.

Surely, by the end of the day, the 13th day of the first month, Mordecai hears of the edict and he mourns. He removes his regular clothing and puts on the clothing of the poor, sackcloth. He returns to the gate that he visits everyday dressed like a beggar. He is filthy from the dirt and ashes he has flung on himself. To approach the king or his gate, one must adorn himself in his finest apparel. No one is allowed at the gate of the king in this garb. Why is Mordecai allowed at the gate in this attire? Why does Haman not do something to stop him? Will the decree affect more people than the Jews because Persians have married Jews? Where will the slaughter and pillaging stop? Will the half-Jewish children be killed too? Haman's decree will bring heartache throughout the empire!