

ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN

ESTHER 1:1 – 2:18

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

²In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present, ⁴while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred eighty days in all.

⁵When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a drinking bout lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. ⁷Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸Drinking was not dictated by law, it was to be without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

⁹Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus.

¹⁰On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, ¹¹to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the turban, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold.

'Ahasuerus' means 'chief of rulers'. The reference is to Xerxes I (486-465). There were thirty-one satrapies in the Empire, each divided into a number of provinces. The scene is set in 483 BC.

The Persian kings were renowned for their sumptuous banquets, but 'one hundred eighty days' has the ring of a fairytale setting.

In verse 3, the word translated 'nobles' [פַּרְתִּימִים, part^emîm] is a Persian loan word.

Having completed the 'banquet' for the officials, Xerxes organises a week long 'drinking bout' (verse 5) for the people of Susa. There are a number of Persian loan words in this passage: in verse 5, 'garden' [בַּיְתָן, bêtân]; in verse 6, 'cotton' [כַּרְפָּס, karpas]; in verse 8, 'law' [דָּא, dāt].

The 'law' (verse 8) appears to be that everyone has to drink when, and only when, the king drinks. Xerxes waived the law so that everyone could drink to their heart's content.

In his *History of the Persian Wars* IX, 108-113 Herodotus speaks of Xerxes' wife, Amestris.

Verse 11 contains another Persian loan word, 'turban' [כֶּתֶר, keter]. The plethora of Persian words helps create the exotic scene.

Ezra 7:14 also mentions the king's 'seven advisers' (verse 14), as does Herodotus (*History of the Persian Wars* III.84).

The Persians are depicted as male chauvinists, who, however, need a royal decree to keep some control over their women folk.

The laws of the Persians and the Medes are described as irrevocable (verse 19; see also 8:8, 9:27; Daniel 6: 8). There is no evidence for this from sources outside the Jewish Scriptures. It is, as we shall see, essential to the plot.

In verse 20 'decree' [פְּתִיגָם, pitgām] is another Persian loan word .

Having dismissed his wife in the cause of male supremacy, he is about to marry a formidable woman whom he can't refuse!

¹²But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

¹³Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and custom, ¹⁴and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom): ¹⁵"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?"

¹⁶Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! ¹⁹If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. ²⁰So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honour to their husbands, high and low alike."

²¹This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; ²²he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.

¹Some time later, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

²Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Let attractive young virgins be sought out for the king. ³And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. ⁴And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

⁵Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. ⁶He had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away. ⁷Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.

⁸So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹The girl pleased him and won his favour, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. ¹⁰Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. ¹¹Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

Xerxes is missing his wife, but because his edict is (according to the story) irrevocable (see 1:19), he cannot take her back. He accedes to the advice of his attendants. According to Herodotus (see I.135) Persian kings could marry only virgins from seven noble Persian families. Our story-teller ignores this.

The Greek Addition A borrowed the details regarding Mordecai from verses 5-6 (see 11:1-2).

We are introduced to his relative Esther. Her name echoes the Babylonian 'Ishtar', but it may come from a Persian word meaning 'star'. As was customary in the diaspora, she also has a Jewish name, Hadassah, meaning 'myrtle'.

That no one knows Esther is a Jewess is essential to the development of the plot.

¹²The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women.

¹³When the girl went in to the king she was given whatever she asked for to take with her from the harem to the king's apartment.

¹⁴In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

¹⁵When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was admired by all who saw her.

¹⁶When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal apartment in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ¹⁷the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

¹⁸Then the king gave a great banquet to all his officials and ministers – "Esther's banquet." He also granted a holiday to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality.

Xerxes is obviously pleased with Esther for she is taken to the area of the harem reserved for those chosen as concubines (verse 14).

We are told that 'Esther was admired by all who saw her'(verse 15).

Xerxes makes her his queen (verse 17).

