



Esther - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

This is a mini-story in its own right. The scene is set by a description of two banquets, hosted by the king and queen respectively. Queen Vashti's defiance of her husband King Ahasuerus and its consequences follow.

I Esther 1:1-2:23 - Introduction

In this opening major section the author sets the scene by describing Queen Vashti's downfall in Chapter One, her replacement by Esther (2:1-18), and how Mordecai foils a plot against the Persian king (2:19-23). This situates Esther and Mordecai for the roles they will play in the main action that follows.

I.a Esther 1:1-22 - King Ahasuerus Deposes Queen Vashti

Refer to the chapter summary above.

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

Esther 1:1

Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes I, was king of Persia from 486-464 BC. He inherited the vast Persian Empire from his father, Darius I, who is mentioned in passages such as Ezra 4:24, 5:5-7 and 6:1-15; Daniel 6:1 and 6:25; Haggai 1:15 and 2:10. The fact of the existence of this king and circumstance is extremely well attested; archæologists have discovered the ruins of the very palace where these events happened.

India here refers to the land around the Indus Valley, which is now Pakistan.

Ethiopia refers to the land just south of Egypt, now northern Sudan.

² In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³ in 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, ⁴ while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all.

Esther 1:2-4

In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne. At this time, approximately 483 BC, Ahasuerus was planning for a doomed invasion of Greece, which would take place several years later. At this time the city of Athens was in its classical glory and in Greece they were celebrating the 79th Olympic Games.

The Persian Empire was then the largest the world had ever seen. It covered what is today Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel; and also parts of modern day Egypt, Sudan, Libya and Arabia. Also at this time Ezra had returned to Jerusalem after it had been conquered by the Babylonians, the Jews taken into exile and then some had returned under Zerubbabel and Jeshua to rebuild the temple. The temple had been rebuilt about 33 years before, although more simply and without the glory of Solomon's temple. In 40 years time, under the successor of Ahasuerus, King Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah would return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the previously conquered city.

Susa, in western Persia and now called Shush in the south western part of modern Iran, was one of Persia's four capital cities, primarily a winter palace: <<*The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem*>> (Nehemiah 1:1), and: <<*In the vision I was looking and saw myself in Susa the capital, in the province of Elam, and I was by the river Ulai*>> (Daniel 8:2).

He gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The first feast was for all the government officials, where Ahasuerus showed off the glory and splendour of the riches of his kingdom. This feast lasted for one hundred and eighty days.

Media was in north-western Persia, near the Caspian Sea. Once a separate nation, it was conquered in circa 550 BC by Cyrus the Great, who founded the Persian Empire. The time, i.e. 483 BC, the third year of Ahasuerus' reign, and the presence of the army, suggest that Ahasuerus may have been building support for his invasion of Greece as preparations took place circa 483-480 BC, and the Battle of Thermopylae was in 480 BC.

The one hundred and eighty days were presumably not spent in continuous feasting but in festivities punctuated by sumptuous meals.

⁵ When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

Esther 1:5

The king gave a banquet lasting for seven days. The second feast was for the citizens of the capital city Susa and it lasted for seven days. The basic reason for these feasts was, of course, pride. The king wanted to impress his subjects with a great display of his own wealth, power, majesty and generosity. This is typical of the way <<*that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them*>> (Matthew 20:25b). There is little doubt that Ahasuerus paid for this feast out of the public treasury.

Seven day festivals were quite normal in the Near East. Many of the Hebrew festivals were held for seven days, e.g. the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which follows Passover making an eight day festival in total, and the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. It was also common for weddings to be celebrated over seven days as when Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah: <<*Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years*>> (Genesis 29:27), and the marriage of Samson to his Philistine wife: <<*She wept before him for the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she nagged him, on the seventh day he told her. Then she explained the riddle to her people*>> (Judges 14:17).

The citadel of Susa refers to the fortified palace complex. The feast lasting for seven days was probably the climax of the one hundred and eighty days of festivities in v.4.

Susa was a principal city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires, and was originally known to the Elamites as 'Susan' or 'Susun'.

The Greek name for the city was Sousa and the Hebrew, Shushan. The modern city of Shush in Iran presently occupies the ancient site.



The court of the garden was an enclosed courtyard for entertaining for, although this was a winter palace, the climate was extremely pleasant. It was common for a palace to have a garden and courtyard: <<*Manasseh slept with his ancestors,*

and was buried in the garden of his house, in the garden of Uzza>> (2 Kings 21:18a).

⁶ There 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 coloured stones. ⁷ Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished in accordance with the bounty of the king. ⁸ Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

Esther 1:6-8

There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. In the ancient Aramaic text, in which Esther was recorded, the white material is literally described as ‘white stuff.’ This may be evidence that Esther was written with a man’s eye for decorating detail, not a woman’s.

There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry. In formal dining, guests reclined on a couch that stretched around three sides of a room. The host took the centre seat at a U-shaped series of low tables surrounded by the most honoured guests on either side, with the guests’ heads reclining toward the tables and their feet toward the wall.

Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. Wine was served in great quantities as was the custom: <<*Then 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*>> (Esther 2:18), and were drunk from expensive vessels like those taken from Jerusalem: <<*Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them*>> (Daniel 5:2). On this occasion, King Ahasuerus set aside the custom that everyone had to drink whenever the king drank.

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

Esther 1:9

Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus. The third feast was for the women in the royal palace, and was conducted by

Queen Vashti, the wife of King Ahasuerus. This separate banquet for the women was another departure from normal Persian practice, perhaps because of the large number of guests.

¹⁰ On 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, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. ¹² But 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.

Esther 1:10-12

When the king was merry with wine is a clear implication is that Ahasuerus was drunk and may have been a factor in the dramatic outcome of the occasion. The bible frequently records people being intoxicated at such meals: <<*And when their hearts were merry, they said, 'Call Samson, and let him entertain us.' So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars*>> (Judges 16:25), and: <<*When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down*>> (Ruth 3:7). Although it says it was grief, intoxication may well have played a part in the apostles being unable to remain awake with Jesus in Gethsemane: <<*When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial'*>> (Luke 22:45-46).

Wisdom advises against such situations: <<*It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed, and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more*>> (Proverbs 31:4-7).

The eunuchs were castrated men who, among other duties, served as guards and trusted aids in the royal harem.

To bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown. According to Jewish tradition, this request came from an argument among the men at the feast as to which country had the most beautiful women. Ahasuerus decided to settle the issue by putting his wife the queen on public display: <<*Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house, and*

the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him>> (Psalm 45:10-11).

For she was fair to behold. The author does not explain why Queen Vashti refused to come, probably because the reasons were irrelevant: even the queen was expected to obey the king absolutely. It is not specifically said but the implication is that Vashti was expected to display herself in an immodest way. This was also implied when the daughter of Herodias danced for King Herod, which led eventually to the death of John the Baptist: *<<When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it'>>* (Mark 6:22). Refer to the comments made on that passage,

Although Queen Vashti was by no means a follower of the true God, she had enough wisdom and modesty to know that this was something she should not do. The Bible says that wives have a special responsibility to submit to their husbands: *<<Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord>>* (Ephesians 5:22). Yet it does not mean that a wife must obey her husband if he commands her to sin or intends to bring public shame on her. Every command to submit on a human level is conditioned by the higher obligation to obey God before man. However, it is important for a Christian in such a situation to maintain a submissive and respectful attitude towards the one in authority. It is possible to disobey the command of another but do so in a submissive manner. It is impossible to say if Queen Vashti had this attitude in this situation. Jewish traditions say that her refusal had nothing to do with modesty. These stories say that she was ready to appear before the banqueters completely unclothed, except that God smote her with leprosy just as she received the request - an obviously fanciful tradition.

At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him. Queen Vashti was therefore in a very dangerous situation. It does not seem that she put herself in this situation, because it seems that she was not even at this banquet. Sadly, many women today put themselves in dangerous places, especially where alcohol is involved, showing a severe lack of wisdom. Nevertheless, it certainly gives no justification to the sin of men against an unwise woman in such a situation.

¹³ Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king's procedure towards all who were versed in law and custom,
¹⁴ and 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):

Esther 1:13-14

Then the king consulted the sages. These were wise men, official advisers to the king as found in other royal households: <<*In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh*>> (Genesis 41:8), <<*Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts*>> (Exodus 7:11), <<*A sword against the Chaldeans, says the Lord, and against the inhabitants of Babylon, and against her officials and her sages!*>> (Jeremiah 50:35), and: <<*Then the king promoted Daniel, gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon*>> (Daniel 2:48).

Versed in law and custom. These men were trained to make decisions in accordance with the law: <<*Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans*>> (Daniel 1:3-4), and: <<*So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds*>> (Acts 7:22).

The seven officials of Persia and Media were the inner circle of the king's advisers. Some translations have them as **princes** but it does not specify whether they were directly related to the king, were of other royal descent, or whether this was just a title given to men of high office at court.

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?' ¹⁶ Then 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. ¹⁷ For 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." ¹⁸ This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behaviour will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!

Esther 1:15-18

The officials here were senior male civil servants appointed by the king.

The noble ladies of Persia and Media were the wives of the officials. Memucan predicts that these women will show contempt for their husbands: <<*A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious wife are alike*>> (Proverbs 27:15), and that the men, like the king, will be full of wrath towards their wives. Moreover, this will not be limited to one stratum of society. Memucan repeatedly uses everything he can to impress upon the king the danger of a total breakdown of proper domestic order throughout the entire empire.

¹⁹ If 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. ²⁰ So 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.'

Esther 1:19-20

If it pleases the king. Memucan makes it clear that no decision should be made unless it is the king's desire that it should: <<*For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, 'What are you doing?'*>> (Ecclesiastes 8:4).

Let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered. The absolute authority of the Persian king is expressed in laws which, once written, may not be repealed: <<*Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked*>> (Daniel 6:8). This legal convention will give rise to a difficult situation later in the story: what if the king changes his mind? This is certainly the case in the accounts given in Esther 8:5-8 and Daniel 6:14-18. Paradoxically, Vashti is to be punished by being forbidden to do what she has already refused to do: come before King Ahasuerus. Never again implies divorce and the end of her queenship.

When King Ahasuerus heeded this advice from Memucan, he showed himself to be unreasonable and wrong. He should have honoured the dignity of his queen. Yet, history's profile of Ahasuerus shows him to be an unreasonable and foolish man in many cases. On one occasion, Ahasuerus executed the builders of a bridge because an ocean storm destroyed it; he then commanded that the water and waves be whipped and chained to punish the sea.

²¹ This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; ²² he 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.

Esther 1:21-22

The way in which the wise men resort to law to try to control their wives suggests that they must already have thought this was a widespread domestic problem – a problem, however, that would certainly not have been easily rectified simply by issuing a legal edict. The command that local leaders should each speak to every people in its own language is probably intended to ensure that the substance of the edict is understood by all family members everywhere. The Persian Empire was vast and many languages and dialects would have been spoken. By having the edict written in each local language meant that all could understand it and therefore obey it.

Every man should be master in his own house. The purpose for the harsh treatment of Queen Vashti was to prevent her from becoming a bad example for the other women of Persia to follow. Ahasuerus wanted to reinforce the idea of a man's leadership in the home - the cultural norm.

The goal presented here was admirable, and speaks to the need within every man to sense respect and honour from his wife. Paul's instruction to wives was summed up like this: <<*a wife should respect her husband*>> (Ephesians 5:33b). A wife's respect is the most precious gift she can give to her husband. However, the means used here to gain and preserve this respect were foolish. A man cannot demand or coerce respect from his wife: if it is not earned, it cannot be freely given; if it is not freely given, then it is not worth anything.