



Esther - Chapter Two

I Esther 1:1-2:23 - Introduction (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

Following the counsel of his servants and God's sovereign plan, of course, King Ahasuerus gathered beautiful young virgins from his vast kingdom to be placed in his harem, so that they might have a one-night audition with the king. It is here that Mordecai, a self-identified Jew, and his orphaned cousin Esther, are introduced. Esther was chosen because she had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at. Mordecai worried about his cousin's welfare, and every day he walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

To bolster his reputation and salve his wounded pride, King Ahasuerus gathers the captive girls he considers beautiful to select his new queen to replace the disgraced Vashti. In contrast, from a Jewish perspective, Esther spoils and demeans herself by acceding to the pagan king's desires, although in reality she had little choice if she wanted to live. Yet as queen, Esther will be used by God, despite her impurity and shame, to protect the lineage of God's chosen people, from whom the Messiah was yet to come.

God continues behind the scenes, as Mordecai becomes aware of a plot against Ahasuerus and communicates it to the king. Although Mordecai should have been rewarded for his allegiance, he was forgotten for the time being. However, God is ruling sovereignly and will use these events in his own time. The invisible hand of God continues to work toward his people's preservation.

I.b. Esther 2:1-18 - Esther Becomes Queen

From among all the beautiful young virgins brought from all parts of the empire it is Esther who finds favour with the king and is chosen to replace Queen Vashti.

¹ After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. ² Then the king's servants who attended him said, 'Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. ³ And 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 the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. ⁴ And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This pleased the king, and he did so.

Esther 2:1-4

After these things. This is broader than just the events of the previous chapter. Verse 16 indicates that there was a four year span between Chapters One and Two. During that time King Ahasuerus made his great, unsuccessful invasion of Greece and he came home a defeated man, probably wanting to cheer his heart through sensual diversions.

In a more sober mood, and indeed a sober state, the king apparently regretted dismissing his beautiful queen. However, a solution is at hand. In contrast to the wise men of Chapter 1, the king's servants, literally **the young men**, were the ones giving the king advice on what he should do next. These are probably the same men who answer the king later when he wishes to reward Mordecai: <<***Then the king said, 'What honour or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?' The king's servants who attended him said, 'Nothing has been done for him'>>*** (Esther 6:3).

Their suggestion that beautiful young virgins should be gathered for the king's appraisal immediately attracts his interest and approval, creating the opportunity for Esther to make her appearance. In line with normal practice, a eunuch such as the seven named in Esther 1:10-11 is in charge of the king's women, i.e. his harem. The plan was to assemble a group from the most beautiful women of the land; to bring them into a harem for the king to choose the most favoured woman to be his new queen.

Hegai may be the same officer of Xerxes, i.e. Ahasuerus, whom Herodotus refers to in Greek as Hegias.

This pleased the king, and he did so. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus records that Ahasuerus had a total of four hundred women selected.

⁵ Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.

Esther 2:5

The name Mordecai occurs in Persian treasury records of this period as the name of a government official but whether he was this Mordecai is not known. The Mordecai of the Book of Esther has a genealogy that likely links him to King Saul, who lived about six hundred years earlier. He belongs to the same tribe, i.e. he was a Benjaminite, and his great grandfather Kish had the same name as Saul's father: <<*There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else*>> (1 Samuel 9:1-2).

If indeed Mordecai was a direct descendant of Saul this would bear significance when his adversary Haman turns out to be an Agagite; refer to the comment made on Esther 3:1.

⁶ Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away.

Esther 2:6

King Jeconiah, also known as Jehoiachin, was the second-to-last king of Judah. He was deported to Babylon in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:10-15), 114 years before the present events. So the clause 'had been carried away from Jerusalem' cannot refer to Mordecai himself for it would make him about 120 years old, but refers to Kish, his great-grandfather (v.5).

⁷ Mordecai 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.

Esther 2:7

Hadassah meaning 'myrtle' is the Hebrew name of Mordecai's orphaned cousin; Esther or 'star' is her Persian name. The reference to her great beauty prepares the reader for what follows. In prophetic symbolism the myrtle would replace the briars and thorns of the desert, so depicting the Lord's forgiveness and acceptance of his people: <<*I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive*>> (Isaiah 41:19a), <<*Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off*>> (Isaiah 55:13), and: <<*In the night I saw a man riding on a red horse! He was standing*

among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses>> (Zechariah 1:8).

The girl was fair and beautiful. The Hebrew for fair and beautiful is literally, 'beautiful in form and lovely to look at.' The Bible is generally given to understatement; when it says that Esther was fair and beautiful, it is not exaggerating her true beauty.

Only a few women have been described as beautiful in the Bible: Abram's wife Sarah in her eighties (Genesis 12:14), Jacob's wife Rachel (Genesis 29:17), Abigail, who became David's wife (1 Samuel 25:3), David's daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1), Abishag the Shunammite, who comforted an elderly David in his last days (1 Kings 1:3), Job's daughters collectively (Job 42:15), and the woman in Song of Solomon (Song 1:5). Bathsheba is also referred to as beautiful but not with use of the usual Hebrew adjective *yapah*. Instead, she is describe more as being physically attractive to David because of her nakedness when he first saw her.

⁸ So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in the custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹ The 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.

Esther 2:8-9

Esther also was taken into the king's palace. It was presumably an honour to be chosen for the harem, although it is unclear from the word taken whether Esther went willingly or not. It seems that Esther did not really have a choice about this and her subsequent marriage to a pagan king should not be held against her.

Given the king's order, Esther could not refuse or she may have faced death for defying the king. Once there, however, she appears to have been fully compliant, quickly winning the favour of Hegai, who provided her with the finest of everything and promoted her to the best place in the harem. Esther obtained favour with Hegai, the man in authority over her. In this, her godliness ensured a fulfilment of: <<*Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favour and good repute in the sight of God and of people*>> (Proverbs 3:3-4).

He quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food.

Because of this favour, Hegai gave Esther special beauty preparations and her allowance of the choicest foods. Esther was beautiful to begin with; now she looked like one of those ‘after’ pictures from the glamour photo studios and she looked that way all the time. The Aramaic word for cosmetic treatments comes from the root ‘to scour, or to polish.’

Receiving an allowance of the choicest foods was a sign of privilege and favour:

<<For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived>> (2 Kings 25:30), and: <<The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king’s court>> (Daniel 1:5).

The seven chosen maids or young women, her personal maids-in-waiting, already hint at her royal bearing and destiny. It seems that Hegai knew his master and knew the choice he would make once he had met with Esther.

¹⁰ Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. ¹¹ Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

Esther 2:10-11

Mordecai’s instruction to Esther not to reveal her people or kindred is the first hint of the anti-Semitism that will surface in Chapter 3. However, the reaction of the citizens of Susa in Esther 3:15 will show that not all Persians would share Haman’s opinions of the Jews who lived peacefully among them.

Although there can be some understanding of this attitude not to be open in matters of faith when faced with such persecution, Christians are called never to act in secret but to openly declare they are followers of Jesus and will be rewarded for doing so: <<Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven>> (Matthew 10:32-33).

Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared. Mordecai’s great interest in Esther’s welfare shows his love and concern for her in such a potentially dangerous place.

¹² The 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.¹³ When 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 palace.¹⁴ In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in the 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.

Esther 2:12-14

The regulations for the women. This further indication of the strict regime of the Persian court shows how difficult, and potentially costly, it was for women like Vashti and Esther to assert their independence.

Six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women. Both the time involved and the cosmetics used indicate the elaborate nature of the beauty treatment the chosen women received. Myrrh was an expensive perfume obtained from trees native to Africa and southern Asia, and is referenced elsewhere: <<*I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon*>> (Proverbs 7:17), <<*My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts*>> (Song 1:13), <<*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh*>> (Matthew 2:11), and: <<*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds*>> (John 19:39).

Persia was one of many countries famous for its aromatic perfumes and ancient customs for the preparations of brides, including ritualistic baths, plucking of the eyebrows, the painting of hands and feet with henna, facial makeup, and applications of a beautifying paste all over the body, meant to lighten the colour of the skin and to remove spots and blemishes. One reason for the lengthy time of preparation was to tell if the women had been pregnant upon coming into the harem, so that the king would not be charged with fathering a child that was not his.

Concubines, women officially recognised as the king's mistresses, were housed separately in the second harem, having a lower status than his wife or wives.

Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, corresponds to Hegai, the king's eunuch (v.3), who was in charge of the first harem; refer to the comment made on vv.1-4. Each woman's first night with the king was her initiation as a concubine.

She did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. It sounds wonderful - a year of constant spa and beauty

treatments. Yet the destiny of these women should also be considered: only one evening with the king for many. If he chose them from the four hundred others to be his queen, then she would be his companion until she displeased him. As for the three hundred and ninety nine who lost, they were banished to the harem where they stayed the wife or the concubine of the king, but rarely if ever saw him afterwards. And they were never free to marry another man, essentially living as a perpetual widow.

¹⁵ When 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.

Esther 2:15

Abihail the uncle of Mordecai is the deceased father of Esther referred to in v.7.

Verse 13 states: <<*When 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 palace*>>. By taking nothing except what Hegai advised, Esther shows her trust in his experience and goodwill toward her. The fact that Esther was winning favour and was admired by all who saw her bodes well for her success on this, her night of nights.

Beauty often gains people, especially women, favour with others. This is a fact that Christians must accept, wisely teaching their children what really matters, and refusing to rely too much on beauty in their judgement of people: <<*But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'*>> (1 Samuel 16:7). Christians are called upon to have the inner beauty of Christ reflected in everything they do, say and are.

¹⁶ When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ¹⁷ the 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.

Esther 2:16-17

The month of Tebeth, in midwinter, was the tenth month of the Jewish religious calendar.

The seventh year of his reign, i.e. 479 BC, was four years after the events recounted in Chapter 1.

Of all the virgins she won his favour and devotion. Because of the great favour that she obtained with the king, Esther was selected to be the queen to King Ahasuerus, his most favoured wife.

Esther's life so far has been remarkable. She was the child of Jewish exiles, who both died; she was raised by her cousin in a foreign and often hostile land; she was taken by compulsion into the king's harem; she found favour with all whom she met; and she was finally selected to be the queen of the realm. This remarkable course of events was not an accident; it was not just because of luck or fortune or Esther's good looks or sparkling personality. God had a plan and Esther was part of it. As the psalmist says: <<*For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up; but it is God who executes judgement, putting down one and lifting up another*>> (Psalm 75:6-7).

In exactly the same way, each Christian has a place in God's plan. Wherever they are at right now, God has a purpose for it - maybe a short purpose, or a long one; perhaps a large purpose or a small purpose, but God has a reason.

To this point, the story of Esther also shows that in the outworking of his plan, God can use the evil of man. God did not make Ahasuerus drunk, or make him demand that his queen present herself in an immodest way before the lords of the kingdom; yet God allowed this wicked action of man to fulfil a purpose in his greater plan. Assurance is found in the truth that no other person, no matter how evil they are, can defeat God's plan for each person's life, no matter what they have done or will do to try to thwart God.

¹⁸ 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

Esther's banquet was a feast in her honour as the new queen.

He also granted a holiday to the provinces is seen as a remission of taxes. This was a customary form of celebration referred to by Herodotus in his history of the Persian Empire. Such taxes were often punitive as seen in Judæa during the days of Nehemiah: <<*And there were those who said, 'We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax'*>> (Nehemiah 5:4).

And gave gifts with royal liberality and generosity. These were probably in the form of food given to the poor, so that all could share in the celebrations:

<<Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor>> (Esther 9:20-22), and: <<If you remain, then return to Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed governor of the towns of Judah, and stay with him among the people; or go wherever you think it right to go.' So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present, and let him go>> (Jeremiah 40:5). However, there may have been some lavish gifts given out to the nobility and senior army officers to ensure the loyalty to him.

I.c Esther 2:19-23 - Mordecai Discovers a Plot

Mordecai, entirely without intent, is in the right place at the right time to serve King Ahasuerus. This is one of many examples where readers are meant to recognise God's hidden direction of events even though God is never explicitly named or referenced.

¹⁹ When the virgins were being gathered together, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. ²⁰ Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

Esther 2:19-20

When the virgins were being gathered together. Some translations refer to this as the second time of gathering. The meaning of this is uncertain. It possibly refers to a second gathering of all the virgins of v.2 for a ceremonial parade to complete the celebration of Esther's coronation rather than their arrival in Susa from around the empire.

The king's gate was a place where justice was dispensed by officials appointed by the king; refer to Ruth 4:1-11, 2 Samuel 15:2-6 and the associated comments for each passage. It would have been the main entrance to the palace complex that the king himself would have used.

Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her. Some have thought that the Book of Esther carries this idea of concealment too far. This book has been criticised because it does not mention the name of God as neither does the Song of Solomon. Some say that the name of God was left out of Esther because of its use in the festivities surrounding Purim, where

people commonly became drunk. One rabbi taught: “A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he is unable to distinguish between ‘Blessed be Mordecai’ and ‘Cursed be Haman.’” Some have wondered if, in that atmosphere, it would be too easy to profane the name of God if it were to be read at such a festival. Others see the name YHWH hidden in acrostics, based on the initial and final letters of successive words in Esther 1:20, 5:4, 5:13 and 7:7. In some manuscripts, the letters in these words are written a bit larger to give them prominence. Perhaps also Esther does not contain the name of God because it was written under Persian rule, and for distribution in the Persian Empire. Most likely, Esther does not have the name of God because it shows how God works behind the scenes; God is always active in Esther, even though it is behind the scenes.

²¹ In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus.

Esther 2:21

Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate. The repetition from v.19 indicates that this may have been as an official, part of the decision making group of men who dispensed justice and ratified legal and business transactions. He may have been placed in this position because of Esther’s new influence with the king or possibly he was hoping to catch sight of her as she left the palace complex accompanying the king on a royal visit.

The king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold. These men would have guarded the gate to the king’s private quarters and would either have access themselves or be able to let others through unchallenged.

²² But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai.

²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, both the men were hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Esther 2:22-23

But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. Mordecai’s attitude was not “I’m a Jewish man in exile under a pagan king, so I do not care if he is killed.” Instead, he fulfilled Peter’s command before Peter ever wrote it: <<*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king*>> (1 Peter 2:17 KJ21). This threat of assassination was real. Ahasuerus was eventually murdered by his prime minister, who placed Artaxerxes I on the throne.

The men were hanged on the gallows. The word gallows is literally tree; the idea that they were hanged on a tree probably refers not to a hanging with a noose around the neck, but to impalement on a stake, much like crucifixion. This was a practice known from ancient records. This is later supported by: <<**Furthermore, I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill**>> (Ezra 6:11).

The book of the annals were chronicles, a record of significant events in the king's reign. Similar records were kept for the kings of Judah: <<**Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?**>> (1 Kings 14:29), and the kings of Israel: <<**Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, from first to last, are written in the Annals of Jehu son of Hanani, which are recorded in the Book of the Kings of Israel**>> (2 Chronicles 20:34).