

ESTHER

Week 2, Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of Esther is not part of the main plot; rather some of the primary players are introduced and the scene is set. After all, this is a story, told by an expert story teller, and so it is structured in that fashion. Here the royal life of Persian monarchs is portrayed in all of its decadent extravagancies. We see how focused the royal court is upon the trappings of government and how those in power can devolve into spending their time on the most ridiculous matters that are so trivial but they think are a priority. Naturally these matters are what affects them most on a personal level; matters that (in their minds) might affect their wealth, status, image or their egos.

When our story of Esther opens, the New Persian Empire is a relatively young empire. This 2nd of the 4 gentile world empires predicted by Daniel's prophecies is only about 50 years old. And what we must always keep in mind is that in the main, each of these empires that arise merely takes an empire that was already in existence and converts it to a new ethnic government. That is, the Babylonians took an empire established by the Assyrians and made it their own. The Babylonians certainly added territory where possible, and modified the laws and tax systems to suit them, but what it really mostly amounted to was a change of government administration by force.

A coalition of the Medes and Persians had recently conquered the Babylonian Empire and made it their own. The ethnic Chaldean ruling dynasty that governed the Babylonian Empire was replaced by the ethnic ruling dynasty of the Medes and Persians, and so now it was the Persian Empire. And of course all kings of empires want their empire to be greater still. Some do it by trying to improve and refine the territory they already have to make it richer; others have the conquest of other kingdoms and lands in mind to make their holdings ever larger. Most kings of empires do both to some degree. King Cyrus, the first king of the New Persian Empire, had his hands full simply consolidating his power and governing the empire, as it was, when he took it from the Babylonians. He was also somewhat idealistic and sought to right the many wrongs he felt the Babylonian government had perpetrated upon its people; and thus one of his first acts was to free the Jewish people to go back home to Judah.

The king in our story of Esther, however, had different motivations and goals. As the 4th king of the Media-Persian Empire, he was the benefactor of what his predecessors had accomplished. Not unlike King Solomon, he inherited a stable Empire, huge tax revenues and a gigantic amount of wealth in the state treasury. So, this king lived in the lap of luxury and sat around his palace all day, consulting with his lap dogs masquerading as advisors, and thinking of ways to spend his bottomless fortune. His ego and legacy were his main concerns, so he had Macedonia and surrounding areas (Greece) in his sights as a means to expand his empire and his reputation.

Let's read Esther chapter 1.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 1

Depending on which Bible version you are using, you might be saying: wait a minute. What happened to the rest of the verses; you seem to have skipped some. If your Bible is taken from the Greek Septuagint then chapter 1 is about 50% longer than if your Bible is taken from the Hebrew. If you are reading from the CJB (as am I), then it is taken from the Hebrew Masoretic text of about 1000 A.D.

We discussed last week what the reason for the differences between the two versions might be, and while we can only speculate, it is a pretty reasonable speculation that it is because without the additions it was felt that there is nothing religious about the story of Esther at all. In fact, the mention of God is missing entirely. The result of this startling fact is that early Rabbis debated over whether the Book of Esther even belonged as part of the Holy Scriptures. It seems that the additions to the Greek versions of Esther satisfied most of them sufficiently enough to accept the book as worthy of being part of the Hebrew Bible.

So, let's stop right here, and I'll read to you the additions made to chapter 1. Essentially the Greek additions replace verse 1 of the Hebrew version. In other words, this entire addition belongs at the beginning of the chapter. From verse 2 forward the Greek versions and the Hebrew versions are nearly identical.

READ GREEK ADDITIONS TO CHAPTER 1 FROM THE JERUSALEM BIBLE

The early church treated these additions differently depending on the decision of the bishops in charge of regional groups of congregations. Some accepted the additions in their entirety and included them in the Bible. Others discarded them entirely and accepted them only as part of the several books of the Apocrypha. St. Jerome made them like an appendix at the end of the Book of Esther. And here in the Jerusalem Bible the additions are placed like they are in the Septuagint, but are written in italics so that the reader knows that these verses are disputed and can make a personal decision about how to handle them.

My approach to this issue is this: I shall read from the Hebrew text first. Next I'll alert you and read the Greek additions as they were placed in the Septuagint. We might talk about these additions briefly. Personally, I can't find good reason to accept them as authentic, but rather have every reason to see them as a misguided attempt to add to the Scriptures even if the motive might have been a good one.

The opening of the chapter gives us a time, place, and the name of the king at the center of the Esther story. The time is the 3rd year of this king's reign. Even though the Greek addition pinpoints the date to the 1st day of Nisan (the first month of the Hebrew religious calendar), I don't think we can rely on it (although it is not an impossible date). Thus since this king was known to reign from 486 B.C. to 465 B.C., this story would necessarily have to be placed in 484 B.C. However, it must be stated that it is very difficult and tricky to align the reigns of these various kings according to our

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modern calendar system. No Bible era culture (right on through the New Testament) would have spoken in terms of A.D. or B.C. There was no universal calendar in those days; rather it's as though the calendar was reset upon each new king succeeding to the throne. Literally in the year a Middle Eastern king was coronated, it became year 1 in his kingdom or empire. Other kingdoms did the same thing, so each independent kingdom had its own reckoning of what year it was. So when we're told "it was in the third year of so and so's reign" if the people of that king's kingdom had a calendar hanging on their walls (of course there was no such thing), that make-believe calendar would have said the year was "three". But when a new king was crowned, the year would revert to "one".

The place of our story of Esther is in Susa. In Hebrew it is called Shushan. This was originally the capital of the Kingdom of Elam but it had long since been destroyed. The new Susa was a magnificent city. Actually history records that there were 4 capital cities of the New Persian Empire operating at the same time: Susa, Ecbatana, Babylon, and Persepolis. But calling them all "capitals" is misleading. Susa was the administrative center of the empire. It is the equivalent of London or Moscow or Washington, D.C. The other 3 cities mentioned are where there were royal palaces that the king would use for various reasons, sometimes moving to enjoy the seasons. Having 4 palaces was appropriate for a king of an empire of such an enormous size as Persia as it demonstrated his wide-ranging authority and wealth; but Susa was his primary residence and it was the official capital of the Media-Persian Empire.

Our king is called Ahasueras in Persian, Xerxes in Greek, and Achashverosh in Hebrew. These are all vocalizations in these 3 different languages of the same name. And depending on your Bible version one of these 3 will be what you read. Yet some versions will say that this king is not Xerxes but rather Artaxerxes. These, indeed, are two different people (Artaxerxes is Xerxes' son) and by saying Esther's king is Artaxerxes it is the Bible editor's attempt to place the time of our story about 40 years later. This has been mostly discredited.

So Esther takes place entirely within the confines of the capital city of Persia, which is Susa; the king is Xerxes, and for the sake of simplicity we'll say that the time is around 480 B.C. Xerxes was the son of Darius 1. This is not the same Darius (Daryavesh) of the Book of Daniel who was a Mede. While archeology has not proved it, it seems that the Darius of Daniel, who was a Mede, essentially was a lesser king who ruled under the higher authority of Cyrus who was a Persian. In time Darius lost his position and Cyrus became the sole king of the Persian Empire. As the symbolism of one of Daniel's visions accurately portrays the Media-Persian Empire as a Ram with 2 horns, the horns were of two different sizes; one noticeably larger than the other thus indicating one is more powerful than the other. And indeed that was the case. The Kingdom of Persia was more powerful than the Kingdom of Media. And although these 2 kingdoms were strong allies (due to long standing royal family ties), nonetheless it was only a matter of time before the bigger horn flexed its muscles. So it seems as though Darius the Mede was given the position as the king of former Babylonian Empire (and he operated out of Babylon) as a happy political accommodation that was instituted immediately following the fall of Babylon, but in a few years it had served its purpose to recognize the honor, friendship and achievements of the Medes, and now Cyrus the Persian simply abolished this intermediate office and became the sole king over a united Persian Empire.

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So (again for the sake of simplicity) Cyrus was the 1st Persian king, Cambyses followed him, then Darius 1, and then Xerxes. It was Darius 1 who built the fabulous palace of Susa that his son Xerxes now occupied. Since it will be important to our story, I'll also tell you that Darius 1 had built an amazingly modern postal system. The Persian government administration relied on rapid communications as the Persian Empire was so vast and culturally diverse. He thought (and wisely so) that accurate and efficient communication between the central government and its many provinces and districts was the key to successful governing and defense of the empire. This was accomplished by a network of roads that all eventually led to Susa. Ancient records show, for example, that there were 111 relay posts on the road between Susa and Sardis. So one can only imagine that there had to be a few thousand postal relay stations in all in this vast communications network of the Persian Empire.

How large was this rather young empire? Verse 1 says it consisted of 127 provinces that ranged from India in the east to Ethiopia in the west and south. But let's be clear: this is not referring to the India we know today. The reference is to the Indus River, and so this is speaking of what we today call Pakistan. As for Ethiopia, the modern Ethiopia is not exactly the same as the ancient one. The ancient one is today called Northern Sudan.

Further using the term provinces gives us a false picture. The Hebrew word is **medinah** and in modern terms the word district is a better choice. Think in terms of counties or parishes. So the 127 **medinah** were smallish districts that at one time had been independent kingdoms or city-states, and so they each had somewhat identifiably different languages and variant dialects, and of course different customs and traditions.

Verse 3 says that King Xerxes threw a banquet for all of his government's officials. And that he showed off his amazing wealth for 180 days. As I mentioned in last week's introduction, this is often discounted as untrue because it is unthinkable that anyone could hold a 180 day long banquet. But that's not what is said or implied. Rather there was a banquet (the text implies 2 banquets, one at the start of the festival and one to bring it to a close) that was associated with this 180 day festival and it was done for the purpose of Xerxes letting his subjects view the wealth and power he held. What might have precipitated the decision to do this? While it is speculative, we can pretty firmly connect the time period of this banquet to Persia's attack of the Greeks. That is it seems that perhaps 2 years or so after this 180 day festival, Persia sent a large expeditionary force to conquer Macedonia and the surrounding territories. Persia was repelled by the Greeks, by the way, and a second attempt perhaps 18 months later wound up in a terrible loss for Xerxes. So a number of astute scholars point out that this feast was no doubt a way for Xerxes to muster support of the government officials of his far flung empire for a war of conquest that was mostly the dream of a pampered and bored king. After all, in Persia life was good, things were generally peaceful, and there was widespread prosperity in the empire. Why would anyone want to go to war for more land? Thus the king hoped that by showing off his wealth and awesome resources, these government officials would lose their reluctance, back his plan and see the proposed war with Greece as an assured victory that would only add to the wealth and prosperity of the empire.

The next several verses elaborate on the festivities and speak of marble columns, and mosaic flooring, and couches to recline in while eating. There were curtains made of the finest linen, and

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much use of the most expensive colors there were to manufacture: blue and purple. Goblets made of gold were used, and they were all different. The royal wine (the finest wine) was used to ply the guests. Verse 8 explains that the guests didn't have to follow the usual Persian protocol of drinking proportionally to the king. That is, there was a rule (a **dat**) that the king determined how much people were to drink, and however much he drank they were to follow his lead. And as the story unfolds we find that Xerxes was a lush who seemed to be intoxicated as much and as often as possible. This passage has caused Bible scholars some interpretation problems because on the one hand we hear that Persian law is irrevocable, and on the other the king revoked the law about how much wine these festival guests were obligated to drink.

But common sense and some reading of other Persian documents makes it self-evident that the Persian term **dat** can indicate a law, a regulation, a tradition or even a custom. So apparently it was a Persian custom for everyone to follow the king's lead in drinking, as opposed to a law that might get one arrested and prosecuted. And since so many ethnic groups were represented at this festival, and since the purpose was for PR and schmoozing the guests, the king relaxed the custom and made it clear that there would no breach of protocol or offense taken if a person chose to drink more or less than the king.

Verse 9 explains that the king's wife, Queen Vashti, held a banquet for the women. These women would have been wives and perhaps escorts of the various government officials. Now would be a good time to explain something that will very shortly have some bearing on this story. The Middle East has always been a highly male dominated society. But it is manifested in varying degrees from society to society and age to age. The Persian society in this era was among the more extreme. Men partied and drank by themselves, away from women. Women lived very separate lives from their husbands, depending on one's level in society. At the highest level, the royal and aristocrat level, it seems that the separation was the greatest. Some of it was male chauvinism and domination, but some of it also concerned the great degree of modesty that was required of females. So it was considered terribly inappropriate and immodest for the women to be around men who were drinking. In fact, this was cemented in Persian law.

Since essentially this 180 day festival had as its highlight an unlimited supply of the king's own wine stores, drunkenness was the daily mode of most of these officials. Thus Vashti had to entertain the wives and girlfriends of these officials from the 127 provinces. But verse 10 explains that on the final day (the 7th day) of the banquet (the 7 day banquet spoken of in verse 5), after months of being drunk and disorderly, the inebriated king decided he wanted his most honored male guests to view his beautiful wife, so he ordered that she come to him immediately.

He told 7 royal courtiers, close advisors, to go and fetch his wife; she was to wear her royal crown. But she refused, and we're not given the reason for the refusal. So as we can imagine all sorts of opinions have arisen as to why this was. One tradition is that she was being required to appear naked before the king and his male guests. And it is the Rabbis who came up with this one. They said that because it says she is to wear the royal crown, we should take it to mean that was ALL she was to be wearing. However because the Rabbis have always painted the government officials of the 4 gentile world empires as louts and barbarians, this is the reason for their assumption of nakedness that is in no reasonable way implied by this passage. Some scholars paint her as an

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arrogant queen who thought she could use her power as royalty and that she mistakenly also thought she had the right of her own prerogative to go or not to go. However I think that this had to do with the issue we just discussed. It was Persian law that a woman could not be in the presence of men who were drunk or drinking; to do so offended a woman's modesty bringing shame upon her and it violated exclusive male territory thus infuriating the male ego. So she was caught in a catch 22. No matter her decision, she was in a no-win situation all because her drunken husband and his associates were behaving irrationally.

No matter, her firm stance on the matter left this king in a bad spot. He had made his boast in front of his royal court and he couldn't have his wife humiliate him in such a way. So he calls upon 7 other men, called wise men, to help him decide what Persian law dictated that he do in response. Verse 13 in our CJB says that these men were well versed in law and justice; that's not a correct translation. Rather the passage says that he consulted with "wise men who knew the times", and it was these who were the experts in Persian law. The Hebrew word used for the times is **eth**. And **eth** means time just as we think of it today. The Hebrew word **chakam** means wise or wise men. In those days, the intellectuals of the Babylonian and then the Persian empires were well versed in astrology and divination. Time was a mysterious thing, and that's one reason that calendars were devised and kept by these same "wise men".

When Yeshua was born we hear in Matthew 2 of the wise men coming from east (Babylon), following a star.

CJB Matthew 2:1 *After Yeshua was born in Beit-Lechem in the land of Y'hudah during the time when Herod was king, Magi (wise men) from the east came to Yerushalayim*

² *and asked, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

These men were very similar in profession to the ones we see attending to the king in our Esther story. But I'd like you to take note of the series of sevens that we have just encountered. The 7 day banquet; the issue of the king calling for Queen Vashti on the 7th day of the 7 day banquet (and the giant furor this has erupted into). The king ordering 7 of his advisors to go and tell the Queen to appear before the king; and now a different group of 7 wise men are consulted when Vashti refuses to comply. Point being that as we have learned in our past studies, when we start seeing the number 7 appear, this helps us to know that God is directly involved in the situation and that His sovereign will is being brought about even though it may be happening undetected by humans. Some scholars say that this is not the case because it is a secular setting in a foreign country, and that it is a Persian problem of a Persian king that is being dealt with. I say that this is really the story of Hebrews being rescued by a Hebrew man (Mordechai) and his Hebrew female relative (Esther), and no doubt the story is being told by a Hebrew story teller in the Hebrew language; a story meant for Hebrews to enjoy. Thus the series of 7's would be a signal to Jews and it gives Esther a Jewish religious context that is perhaps not so "missing" after all (and we don't need those dubious Greek additions to discover it).

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There is an important context for us to grasp in order to understand the king's self-made dilemma and his wise men's challenge in dealing with it. The king was in a pickle. Because he was drunk and not thinking straight, he issued an unbelievably disrespectful and inappropriate order to his beautiful Queen to come and display herself to his guests as though she was a prized heifer. And while modern Western women reading and listening will probably automatically see this through a somewhat feminist lens that is not my intent nor is it that of the story. This disrespect on display was a Middle Eastern type of disrespect that involved immodesty and dishonor. This is not about a woman standing up to a man. A woman in that setting would literally rather die than live in such a state of shame for the rest of her life.

And the king had painted himself in a corner because he can't just say "I was drunk and didn't mean it". Kings never make mistakes. Besides, this king was ALWAYS drunk. Kings were considered god-like in their wisdom. And so a decision made in an alcoholic stupor was considered every bit as thought out and valid as one made stone sober. Further he would be seen as weak and foolish, humbled by a mere woman, if he didn't do something drastic to deal with his wife's disobedience, because he had made his decree publically.

So the king delegated the problem. He laid it before his wise men to find a solution. And **Memucan** quickly proved his worth and demonstrated why he deserved to be in the king's inner circle. **Memucan** changed the context of the issue to take the heat off of the king. He quickly broadened the issue of one from a single Queen being disobedient to her all powerful husband, to one that affected not only the members of the royal court but virtually every husband and wife in the empire! After all, everyone present who heard the king's demands for his wife to come, were males.

But if we back away and look at this from a 30,000 foot viewpoint, what has really happened is that a mountain has been made from a molehill. Is there really grave danger to the marriages of every family in the empire because Queen Vashti refused to appear in front of a room full of drunken men (as modesty and protocol would have her do regardless of the consequences)? Honestly, the notion is absurd. **All** the wives in the kingdom are now going to hear of this and begin to rebel and show disrespect to their husbands, too? This is really a bit of comedy that is intended, I think. Yet it also shows how self-absorbed these royals are, so detached from reality, so ready to dispose of even the Queen if it keeps them from admitting the king's error or exposing their vanity.

The law-crazy Persian government decided that the only solution to the law that theoretically was at the bottom of this dilemma was.....to enact yet another law! And this new law was that Vashti could never again be in the presence of her husband. What this really is, is a writ of divorce. In fact, to make the point, up to now every mention of Vashti included the word "Queen". From here forward, the title Queen is no more spoken as a prefix to her name and she's just "Vashti". Some Rabbis said she was executed. There is no evidence of that. But she was kicked out of the harem. We don't know what became of her.

Verse 19 brings up the issue that any law approved by the king is irrevocable. And as we encounter later, we find that this means even the king can't overturn his own law. Some scholars say that they find this to be nonsense, that a kingdom, let alone an empire, couldn't possibly be

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ruled in such a manner. But that is only another example of nothing but an opinion being held up as fact. The only evidence we have is that indeed that was how it was, at least in principle. Might a king have found a way to essentially annul one law with another one? Certainly. Just watch the operation of the parliaments and congresses of Western nations and it is done almost daily.

Verse 21 says the king was most pleased with this solution. He was off the hook and it even made him look like he was mainly concerned that the social fabric of Persia not be sullied or torn in case women might actually think they could brazenly disobey their husbands. What a guy! The wise men, especially **Memucan**, appeared to validate their title. And so in verse 22 the decree to banish Vashti was piggy-backed upon the law that said that wives should honor their husbands, no matter their social status. Letters were sent to each **medinah**, each of the 127 districts, and they were sent in their own alphabet and in their own ethnic language.

This brings us back to this amazing postal system that must have included scribes that represented every known language of the empire, because this won't be the final time that we hear of its use to send decrees of the king throughout the Persian Empire, in all the languages present in his empire. And at the end of this verse, we get this interesting comment that every man should be the master of his own house and speak the language of his own people. There has been much academic discussion about what is intended by this statement, but I agree with the majority of scholars.

To use modern terms, Persia was culturally diverse and multi-ethnic, which meant they were multi-lingual. Inter-marriage among ethnic groups was usual and customary. This diversity was quite welcome in the Persian Empire and we have found an inscription on a tablet written by Xerxes that says this: "I am Xerxes, the great king, the king of kings, the king of all countries which speak all kinds of languages". The more usual practice for an expanding kingdom and especially for an empire was to demand that all the conquered people learn to speak the language of the king. And then the royal documents and decrees (oral or written) were distributed in that language and it was the duty of the empire's multi-ethnic citizens to understand it. Until very modern times, this was the custom in the USA.

This tolerance for various languages in Persian culture stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of Greek culture. Greek writings show that one of the several things that they held against the Persians was the stupidity (in their estimation) of allowing scores of languages to exist in their empire, even writing the king's decrees in many languages for the sake its diverse citizenry.

So the idea of this statement that ends chapter 1 is that it combines the issues of language with a man being the master in his own home; and naturally the context is that this goes hand in hand with the new law about females showing proper respect to their husbands. Thus the law's intended effect was that if a wife came from a different ethnic culture and language than her husband, there was to be only one language spoken and culture practiced in every household: the native language and culture of the husband.

If we can put ourselves in the position of a Jewish person 2000 years ago reading this story, we'd probably be rolling on the floor in laughter right about now. Look at the silly set of circumstances that have evolved among these pagan gentiles who are supposed to be the superior masters of

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their domain. Silly rulings, which now affect every household in the Persian Empire, and stemming from nothing more than a single instance of a Queen refusing her inebriated husband's demand to come and show herself to his drinking buddies.

We'll begin Esther chapter 2 next time.