

## Lesson 6: Esther 1:1 – 2:18

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### Esther 1

As we discussed, feasting is one of the themes in Esther, and in fact the book of Esther begins with a feast given by King Xerxes. The events of the banquet lead to the king's anger against Queen Vashti and to her subsequent departure. That departure sets the stage for Esther to come forth and deliver her people.

Other women in the Bible are renowned because they were the mothers of sons who became great in Israel (e.g., Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah). The only other book in the Bible named for a woman is Ruth, whose role in history was to give birth to an ancestor of King David. In contrast, Esther is renowned because of her courage.

### Verses 1-3

<p>1 Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, 2 in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, 3 in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him,</p>
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Verse 1 begins with the phrase “This is what happened during...” or “Now in the days of...,” which is the same type of introduction we find in books such as Joshua and Judges. Those who argue this book is not historical (a) must admit that the book presents itself as a history, and (b) must explain why their reasoning as to Esther would not also mean that Judges and Joshua are likewise fictional.

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the name of the Persian king called Xerxes I by the Greeks. We saw him briefly in Ezra 4:6. He reigned from 486 to 465 BC, and from his father Darius the Great he inherited the great Persian Empire that extended from India to Ethiopia (as verse 1 tells us and as history confirms). This was the largest empire known up until that time.

Critics argue that the “127 provinces” in verse 1 is inaccurate because Herodotus listed only 30 satrapies. Fair-minded critics, however, notice that verse 1 does say there were 127 satrapies, but rather than there were 127 provinces. The Hebrew word translated “province” no doubt refers to a subdivision of a satrapy. In Daniel 2:49, the same Hebrew word refers to the province of Babylon, and in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:6 it refers to the province of Judea. (Although Daniel

does refer to the leaders of the 120 provinces as “satraps” in 6:1.) As for the different numbers between Daniel and Esther, I could point you to any number of sources that say the United States has 48 states!

One interesting suggestion was that 127 is symbolic of Xerxes’ reign over the entire earth, being a combination of 12 (the number of God’s people), 10 (the number of completeness), and 7 (the number of perfection). But I think we must reject that option because Esther is a historical text that is not presented using apocalyptic language. Although apocalyptic language is properly interpreted by assuming the language is figurative unless forced to do otherwise, historical narrative is properly interpreted according to the opposite rule.

Susa had been the capital of ancient Elam. Darius I rebuilt it and used it as his main residence before he moved his capital to Persepolis. Xerxes also had his main residence at Persepolis, but he lived in Susa during the winter. Daniel previously had a vision at Susa (Daniel 8:2), and later Nehemiah served in Susa as cupbearer to Xerxes’ son, Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah 1:1).

Xerxes ascended to the throne in 486 BC at the age of 32. The third year of his reign was 483 BC, three years before his famous expedition against the Greek mainland. Rulers used banquets to show their greatness and to reward their loyal subjects. Herodotus described banquets with 15,000 guests. The Assyrian king Ashurnazirpal once gave a feast with nearly 70,000 guests.

At the Louvre Museum you can see part of a wall covered with many-colored mosaics from the great banquet hall built by Darius in Susa – the same place where many of these events took place.

Verse 3 refers to “Persia and Media” rather than “Media and Persia.” This ordering attests to the book’s historical accuracy. Prior to the days of Cyrus, the Medes had been the dominant partner. Cyrus won the allegiance of both and united them because his father was Persian and his mother was a Mede. By the time of Xerxes, Persia was the dominant partner within the joint empire.

Verses 1-3 thus provide the setting for the events that will follow: the Persian court in Susa in the fifth century BC.

### Verses 4-8

<p>4 while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 5 And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small,</p>
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a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. 6 There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. 8 And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.

Verses 4-8 tell us about the splendor of King Xerxes. Persia's wealth and magnificence dazzled even Alexander the Great when more than a century later he entered this same palace and found 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion and 270 tons of gold coins. Excavations at Susa between 1884 and 1886 produced many treasures from this very palace (which are now displayed at the Louvre in Paris). (See also the handout for Lesson 6.)

The same critics who complain about the 127 provinces in verse 1 also complain about the 180-day banquet in verse 4. But the language does not say that the banquet lasted that long. More likely, Xerxes must have had some sort of public exposition that lasted that long. This may have also been a time of planning for the military campaign against the Greeks, which would explain why "the army of Persia and Media ... were before him" in verse 3. The feast itself, verse 5 tells us, lasted only 7 days.

The banquet corresponds well with the great war counsel of 483 BC. Herodotus records the following words of Xerxes at that counsel, which may have been the same banquet described here in Esther: "For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose." He then proceeded to describe the upcoming Greek invasion, and he told them they would receive lavish gifts in exchange for their support. If so, it was important that he display his wealth and power to convince them he would make good on his promises.

Verses 6-7 emphasize the incredible luxury of the Persian palace. Herodotus relates an incident that occurred during Xerxes' retreat from Greece in which the king left one of his tents in an abandoned camp. The Greeks were astonished to find gold and silver couches in the tent. They wondered what such a rich Persian king would want with Greece!

The word translated “edict” or “law” in verse 8 is used 19 times in the book and each time refers to a royal decree. Usually a toastmaster would indicate when everyone was to drink, but here the people could drink whenever they pleased. This detail suggests that the banquet was not only luxurious but was also licentious. We are reminded of the banquet in Daniel 5 that preceded the fall of Babylon to Persia.

These introductory verses emphasize one of the key themes in the book of Esther – the theme of reversal. All who read the book originally knew as they read Chapter 1 how these events were going to turn out – Xerxes campaign against the Greeks was a total failure! They knew that Xerxes would return from that campaign with depleted power and a depleted treasury. This unstated reversal sets the stage for the other reversals that will follow.

And there is yet one more hint of reversal in these opening verses. The elaborate description of this foreign palace is unusual in the Bible. Only the description of the temple receives similar treatment, but that temple had been destroyed and had now been rebuilt in a much less grand manner. Perhaps the author wants the reader to see the beauty of the temple as having been moved to Persia, along with the people of God. If so, then we are being reminded of yet another humiliating reversal.

## Verse 9

9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Verse 9 tells us about the Queen’s banquet, and the fact that she gave one tells us that she had liberty to make such decisions and take such actions. We will later see Queen Esther exercising similar powers.

Herodotus tells us that the name of Xerxes’ queen was Amestris, and many point to this discrepancy as evidence that the book is fictional. But fair-minded critics will notice that Xerxes himself has a different name in the book of Esther, and such could have been true of his queen. (Esther has two names in this book.) Also, the king may have had several queens. Also, some suggest that Vashti, which means sweetheart, may have been an epithet.

It is known that Amestris was the mother of the next king, Artaxerxes I, and served as queen mother during his reign. Perhaps Herodotus mentions only Amestris because he was concerned only with the royal wives who bore successors to the throne. He mentions only two

of the several wives of Darius, both of which bore sons who contended for the throne.

Verse 9 shows the King and the Queen acting separately, and it thus foreshadows the trouble that will soon come between them.

### Verses 10-12

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Verses 10-12 describe a command from the King and the Queen's denial of that command. Verse 4 tells us that Xerxes wanted to display his splendor and glory, and the beautiful Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown would have been seen as a living trophy of that splendor and glory.

Why did he send seven eunuchs to go and get her? The eunuch part is self-explanatory, but why seven? Some suggest that seven may have been needed to carry her in while seated in the royal litter. In any event, they are listed by name in verse 10 for a reason – their names serve to verify the event.

Herodotus tells us something interesting about the Persian view of alcohol – they drank as they deliberated matters of state:

Moreover it is [the Persians'] custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk, and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. And when they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.

The ancients believed that intoxication put them in closer touch with the spiritual world. If Herodotus was correct, then drinking would have been an essential element of Xerxes' war counsel – yet another historical fact in the book of Esther.

A key event in the entire book occurs in verse 12 – Queen Vashti refused to come to Xerxes, the most powerful person on earth at that time. Why? The rabbis said it was because the king wanted her to appear before him naked, wearing only “her royal crown” in verse 11. But the text does not tell us that. We do know, however, that coming to show the princes her beauty would have meant coming unveiled – and would have meant doing so before a large crowd of drunken men. Thus, it is not difficult to see why the queen refused. Also, it was important for God’s plan that Vashti exit the scene, and so God may very well have been behind her decision to defy the king.

In any event, it was a courageous action on her part (some might say foolhardy), and she paid the price for that courage. (“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.”) She defied her king and her husband by refusing to shame herself in public. It seems that she was willing to give up her status and power in order to do what was right. We will see a similarly courageous action by Queen Esther in Chapter 5.

We see a very subtle message in these verses – this all-powerful king was not in charge! Instead, rightness was in charge. We see very early in this book an answer to the questions, “Who is really in charge? And who should be obeyed, and at what cost?” These verses are doing more than just providing an explanation for why Esther would enter the scene. These verses are also showing us a glimpse of a central theme in this book.

Verse 12 tells us that King Xerxes became enraged. One reason for his great wrath was no doubt because the refusal had occurred in front of his officers and nobles. He needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey him! We see in these opening verses the inner weakness of what was outwardly the most powerful empire on earth.

One reason Vashti’s decision took such courage was that she no doubt knew what kind of man Xerxes was. History records a number of events attesting to Xerxes’ instability, not the least of which involved his punishment of the ocean. That strange event is described as follows in a 1913 text by Ellis and Horne:

Darius was ... succeeded by his son Xerxes, under whom the war with Greece was carried to a disastrous climax. Xerxes was accounted the handsomest man of

his time, but proved also the most feeble; he was as idle and foolish as his father had been active and wise.

Inexperienced in warfare, Xerxes planned an expedition of numbers so vast that he expected them completely to overwhelm the rebellious Greeks. It was not easy for a Persian army to travel all the way to far-off Greece, and Xerxes was weary of the march before it was well begun. When at length his forces reached the strait which separates Asia from Europe, a bridge of ships was built from shore to shore. A storm swept this away, and Xerxes showed his petty wrath by commanding his soldiers to give the sea three hundred lashes with whips, as if it had been a human slave. He also had a set of fetters thrown into the water as a symbol of its bondage to him. After this punishment, though possibly not because of it, the sea behaved better; the bridge of ships held firm, and Xerxes entered Europe.

Herodotus tells us that Xerxes once beheaded the men building a bridge during his Greek campaign simply because a storm delayed its completion. This was the person whom Vashti openly defied and embarrassed!

While we generally view Vashti as noble and heroic, that is not the case with all commentators. And because the book of Esther does not reveal her motives, there is some ambiguity as to why she did what she did. (We will encounter the same sort of ambiguity with Esther herself.) Many ancient Jewish and Christian sources villainize Vashti as a wicked and rebellious woman for refusing to obey her husband. Even Martin Luther used Vashti as a negative example in his writings about divorce, urging husbands in some situations to “take an Esther and let Vashti go.” But verse 10 seems to be the key verse here – it suggests that Vashti’s refusal had something to do with the king’s drunkenness. Also, if Vashti and Amestris were in fact the same person, then she was likely in the late stages of pregnancy with her son, Artaxerxes I.

One reason why Esther is such an incredibly interesting book is because it does not tell us why the people involved did most of the actions in this book. There is a conspicuous ambiguity throughout the book that must have been intentional. We are invited to reach our own conclusions – and while most of us view Vashti and Esther in a positive light, others do not. (The Greeks later rewrote the book of

Esther and added non-inspired explanations and motives for the actions in the book.)

### Verses 13-15

13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, 14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, 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 delivered by the eunuchs?"

In verses 13-15, the King discusses what happened with his counselors. It was customary for a Persian king to have such counselors, and it was also customary to sometimes have them killed when they angered him – as Darius II and Cambyses are known to have done. In verse 15, the king asks then what he should do.

Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the king's seven counselors. Herodotus confirms that only the king's seven closest advisors were permitted to enter the king's presence uninvited and unannounced. Verse 13 says that they knew the times, which means they used astrology and other forms of divination.

### Verses 16-18

16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, 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 women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

Verses 16-18 describe the seriousness of Vashti's offense against the king – Memucan, one of the king's advisors, explains that it was an offense not just against the king but also against all husbands. When the word gets out about what Vashti has done, it will cause other wives to "say the same to all the king's officials." This answer was very clever because it relieved the king from a charge that he was acting out of personal animosity or capriciousness.



## Verses 19-22

19 If it please 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 repealed, 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, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." 21 This advice pleased the king and the princes, 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, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Verses 19-22 describe the Queen's punishment and the King's decree. For her punishment, Vashti would lose her royal position and never again be allowed to come before the king. Verse 19 says that in her place would be put someone "who is better than she." Notice that for the first time in the book, Queen Vashti is referred to simply as "Vashti" in verse 19. She had experienced a reversal!

The irrevocability of the king's command in verse 19 is also mentioned in Daniel 6, where Cyrus' governor was manipulated by his administrators into issuing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer. Many critics complain that there is no evidence of such irrevocable decrees outside of the Bible. As one noted:

It is hard to conceive of a legal system which does not allow for emendation of its laws. Furthermore, there is no attestation of such an idea in any Persian source. Nor is there any mention of it in Greek sources, which presumably would not hesitate to point out peculiarities in the Persian way of doing things, as they do when they mock the splendor of the Persian court, for example.

That commentator suggests that the word "repealed" in verse 19 should be translated "transgressed," and that the irrevocable decree against the Jews we will see later was irrevocable only in the sense that once the order had gone out to all the provinces the damages could not be undone because there was no mechanism for recalling it. This explanation, however, does not explain the repeated references to the same concept in Daniel 6. I think we must conclude that, for whatever reason, Esther and Daniel are describing an aspect of Persian law that has not been found in other ancient sources. And as for never changing the edicts, we have already seen an example in

Ezra where the law was worded in such a way to permit its change – and that may explain why it was not often an issue. Perhaps the problem arose only with hastily created laws, which certainly describes the irrevocable decrees in Esther and Daniel. (Even today we have some experience with hastily created legislation that is seemingly irrevocable – healthcare anyone?)

Some commentaries cite a passage from the writing of Diodorus Siculus as support for the irrevocability of Persian law. Specifically, they argue that a man named Charidemus was executed by Darius III because Darius could not change what had been decreed. However, I believe a careful reading of the source document shows otherwise:

Charidemus became angry and made free with slurs on Persian lack of manliness. This offended the king, and as his wrath blinded him to his advantage, he seized Charidemus by the girdle according to the custom of the Persians, turned him over to the attendants, and ordered him put to death. So Charidemus was led away, but as he went to his death, he shouted that the king would soon change his mind and would receive a prompt requital for this unjust punishment, becoming the witness of the overthrow of the kingdom. Charidemus's prospects had been high, but he missed their fulfillment because of his ill-timed frankness and he ended his life in this fashion. Once the king's passion had cooled he promptly regretted his act and reproached himself for having made a serious mistake, but all his royal power was not able to undo what was done.

It seems to me that Darius' regret occurred after Charidemus had been killed, and the thing he could not undo was the act of having already put Charidemus to death. Even though it would be nice to have a secular example of an irrevocable Persian law, we need to be careful that we do not twist the historical record to create such an example where it does not exist. If the world sees us twisting history, won't it assume we are doing the same thing with the Bible?

The command in verse 22 is curious – “that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.” The traditional view is that the king ordered everyone to speak only their father's native language in their house, which some argue would have been an odd decree from a Persian king. The NIV solves the problem by just rewriting the verse: “proclaiming in each

people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household." (But careful Bible students avoid solving such problems by rewriting the text!) The most likely reason for the edict (and contrary to the NIV's rewrite of the original text) is that the use of the man's language in his home was a sign of his leadership, which fits well with the context of the edict.

Ironically, by accepting Memucan's advice, the king ends up publicizing his embarrassing plight to the entire empire! Afraid that all women of the empire would hear about what Vashti had done, he ends up assuring what he fears by sending a dispatch to every province of the empire!

As we have already noted, Esther is one of the funniest books in the Bible. (And, yes, there is humor in the Bible. Anyone who disagrees either has no sense of humor or hasn't read the Bible!) But is humor appropriate in a book that describes the near genocide of God's people? The simplest answer is that by the time Esther was written, the threat had passed and all who read it knew of the happy ending. Another explanation may be that provided by Byron – "If I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep." In any event, as another has noted, "The book's incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks."

At the end of Chapter 1, Queen Vashti has courageously exited the scene, and she has prepared the way for one to replace her and exceed her courage. Does the Bible denigrate women as some argue? Hardly! No religion has done more for the status of women than Christianity, and the Judaism that preceded it.

## Esther 2

### Verses 1-4

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 young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. 4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

The phrase “after these things” in verse 1 does not specify how much later these events took place. Verse 16 will tell us that Esther came before the king in the seventh year of his reign, which would be four years after the events in Chapter 1, which 1:3 tells us occurred in the third year of his reign. Xerxes’ disastrous campaign against the Greeks in 480-479 occurred between these two events. That loss depleted his treasuries and discredited him in the eyes of his subjects. Herodotus describes the king’s life after that defeat as one focused on sensual overindulgence. He had affairs with the wives of some of his generals, which, among other things, led to his assassination in his bedroom in 465 BC.

It seems from verse 1 that the king regretted his decree against Queen Vashti, but that decree had been irrevocable, and so in these verses we see the beginning of a search for a replacement.

On the surface, this search sounds like a beauty contest, but for the women involved it would not have been a pleasant experience. They were uprooted from their homes and taken to live in the king’s harem. A Persian king could have had any woman he wanted, and history tells us about the suffering they caused in satisfying their personal desires. Herodotus also reports that 500 young boys were taken each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court. As one commentator remarked, “One might argue that the young women actually got the better deal.”

According to Herodotus, Persian kings found their wives from among the noble families or from among the families of their seven closest advisors. (Perhaps this explains why those same advisors were so eager to see Vashti banished.) Plutarch, however, reports that other Persian kings sometimes married women from outside those sources, which seems to be what Xerxes was about to do here.

### Verses 5-9

5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. 7 He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. 8 So when the king’s order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel 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. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.

Of the 16 people mentioned by name in Chapter 1, only King Xerxes remains to be mentioned by name. The Jews are mentioned for the first time in verse 5, and it is interesting that they are spoken of in the third person. One commentator suggests that the author was a Jew but that he wrote the book as though it were a Persian court chronicle written by a non-Jew. If so, that would explain some of the other unique features of the book.

The phrase “who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away” in verse 6 could refer grammatically either to Mordecai or to Kish. But the event referenced in verse 6 occurred in 597 BC, which would make Mordecai over 120 years old if it referred to him. Thus, it must refer to Kish, his great grandfather (although at least one commentator argues that is not the most natural way of reading the Hebrew).

The name “Mordecai” likely came from the Mesopotamian god Marduk. We see other Jews who also have names that came from their country of exile. (See Daniel 1:6-7, for example.)

The author is clearly associating Mordecai with another Benjaminite whose father's name was also Kish – King Saul. We will see why this association is important when we meet Haman.

In a text from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes discovered in 1904 at Persepolis, archaeologists found a reference to a man named “Marduka” who was an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa. Some suggest this was Mordecai.

In verse 7, we finally meet Esther. Mordecai had adopted his cousin Esther because her parents were dead. Esther is the only person in the book with two names, although it was not uncommon for Jews to have both a Hebrew name as well as a name from the culture in which they were living. Hadassah means myrtle, and Esther may be the Persian word for “star,” or it may be a Hebrew transliteration of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. By mentioning both names, the author may be stressing that Esther was a woman with two identities, as we will soon see.

Commentators have different opinions regarding how many women were brought before the king. Josephus says there were 400. The phrase “Esther also was taken” suggests that she and the others were not a given a choice. Although the passive voice does not require that interpretation, the same passive voice is used in 2:6 to describe the captives who were carried away from Jerusalem. The passive voice is used quite often in Esther, probably to stress that the characters are for the most part caught up in events over which they lack control.

There is a strong note of irony in verse 9. The man who was pleased by Esther and whose favor she won was Hegai, the king’s eunuch. “Esther’s beauty was overwhelming, even to a eunuch.”

Some wonder why Esther did not protest eating the unclean food as Daniel did. Although the text gives no answer, we will see in verse 10 that Esther was instructed not to disclose her identity as a Jew.

### Verses 10-14

10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. 12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women-- 13 when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. 14 In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

We are not told why Mordecai told Esther to conceal her identity, even though it would almost certainly require her to compromise her fidelity to the Law. Some suggest that she would have had no chance of becoming queen had her nationality been known. But does that mean that Mordecai was acting out of ambition? Perhaps, but more likely he knew (or was made to know) that Esther as Queen would be in a much better position to help her people.

Another possibility is that knowledge of her identity might have proved dangerous to her. We see anti-Semitism in this book, and Haman might not have been the only one who felt that way and was prepared to act on it. In fact, as we will see, Haman’s immediate

reaction to being insulted by a Jew is to strike out against all the Jews in the land. Thus, Mordecai likely had good reason to fear for Esther's safety. The fact that he checked on her daily shows that he was concerned.

Verses 12-14 reveal the process by which the girls were presented to the king. Apparently, most of the girls spent only a single night with the king, after which they moved to the house of Shaashgaz and became a concubine. There was no guarantee that the king would ever call them again, which meant they would be confined to what one commentator called "perpetual widowhood." After one night with the king, most of them would live the rest of their lives secluded in the harem. The author is showing that the odds were stacked against Esther, but these events are not occurring by chance! How could such a marginalized person in a hostile world ever make a difference for God? Only by a great reversal!

### Verses 15-18

15 When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken 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 winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. 16 And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into 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 women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

We need to pause and consider an important question that we have only hinted at so far in our discussion – is Esther portrayed here as a positive example or a negative example? For many, the question itself is surprising – is there any doubt that Esther is a positive role model? Yes, there is doubt, at least by some. And remember that the author has carefully concealed Esther's thoughts and motivations from us. We see her actions, but we are not told why she acted in that way. And she does not seem to rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the Law as, for example, Joseph did in Egypt.

Here is what one modern commentator has said on this issue:

How would you use this episode from Esther's life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to powerful men? Use your body to advance God's kingdom? The end justifies the means?

Did Esther initially hide her identity rather than face persecution as a child of God, as some suggest? Did she engage in situational ethics, as others argue? We know that she will soon take a very courageous stand, but is she being courageous here as well? Here is a very harsh quote from a 15<sup>th</sup> century Jewish commentator:

Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? Esther too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with Xerxes.

The author of Esther makes no attempt to vindicate her by explaining the extenuating circumstances or reporting that she was operating under God's special instructions. Later Greek translators added such explanations, even having Esther announce at one point that she abhorred "the bed of the uncircumcised." It cannot be an accident that the original text is silent on these questions. The reader is left to decide. Is Esther wholly righteous? Is she partly or maybe even mainly unrighteous? Although we are not without clues, the Bible does not explicitly answer that question, either here or elsewhere. You will look in vain for Esther's name on the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11.

So what is the answer? I think the answer is likely somewhere in between. We definitely see Esther's righteousness and courage in the book, but we may also see the opposite. And, if so, would it be that surprising? How many Old Testament characters are presented as solely righteous? Don't we more often than not see negative qualities mixed with the positive? And remember that every Jew we see in the book of Esther is here only because they had not returned with God's



people to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. Thus, to many, every Jew in Esther would have started off with a negative mark.

As for the intercourse with Xerxes, I think the Jewish scholar had at least one thing right – it would have cost Esther her life to refuse. And I believe we can see that God did not want Esther to pay that price, but rather he had other plans for her. The ultimate answer to the question of Esther’s character is to see the providence of God working in her life and in the events of this book. Whether righteous or not, God was able to use her to advance his plans – and that is something we see throughout the Bible. And when the time for decision finally came, Esther made the right decision. And that, too, is a message for us if we, perhaps like Esther, ever look back on our lives with regret. “But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.” (Philippians 3:13) As long as we remain on this earth, it is never too late to do the right thing.

After the 12-month beauty treatment in verse 12, Esther is finally taken before the king in verses 15-18. She took with her only what Hegai suggested, perhaps trusting that he knew best what would please the king.

The tenth month was a cold, wet month in the middle of winter. The seventh year would have been 479 BC.

Verse 17 is a key verse in the narrative – King Xerxes made Esther queen instead of Vashti. This sudden decision suggests that the king was overwhelmed by Esther’s beauty, and may explain why he chose a queen outside of the leading Persian families. Although Esther was no doubt beautiful, I think we also see here the providence of God pulling Xerxes’ strings, just as he had the strings of Cyrus and Pharaoh.

The author avoids the word “marriage,” although it is implied (but not until some time after their first night together). Or was it, as some commentators argue, a marriage beyond her control and therefore not a true marriage at all?

It is interesting to note that Jewish Esther married Gentile Xerxes at about the same time that intermarriage became an issue among the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. When we return to Ezra 9 and 10, we will see Ezra’s harsh condemnation of the mixed marriages and his insistence that they divorce. How would Ezra have judged this Jewish queen?

What was Esther thinking about all of this? Had she been swept off her feet by the attention of the most powerful man on earth? Or was she wondering why God had allowed such a horrible thing to happen to her? We are not told.

To celebrate, the king gave a great feast and granted a remission of taxes, which no doubt caused the people to love Esther as much as the king did!

It is interesting how often the people of God found themselves in royal courts. Joseph and Moses went before Pharaoh, Daniel went before Nebuchadnezzar, and now Esther goes before Xerxes. As Christians, we should never shy away from opportunities to do likewise. Who knows but that we might have come to that position for such a time as this? For those who don't believe God's people should ever be involved in politics, I'm glad they didn't convince Esther or Joseph or Daniel of that!