

# LESSON 18

## Esther 1:4-8

4 When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days. 5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; 6 Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble. 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king. 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Verses 4-8 tell us about the splendor of King Xerxes.

Persia's wealth and magnificence even impressed Alexander the Great. More than 100 years later, Alexander 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 dug up many treasures from this very same palace, and they are now displayed at the Louvre in Paris (as shown on our handout from last week).

The same critics who complain about the 127 provinces in verse 1 also complain about the 180-day banquet in verse 4. But, again they need to read more carefully before they start griping. Verse 4 does not say that the banquet lasted 180 days. The feast itself, as verse 5 tells us, lasted only 7 days.

Most likely, Xerxes had some sort of public event that lasted 180 days. And those six months may have been a time of planning for the military campaign against the Greeks, which would explain why the nobles and princes of Persia and Media were before Xerxes in verse 3.

In fact, turning to Herodotus, this banquet corresponds well with the great war counsel of 483 BC. In Book 7 of **The Histories**, Herodotus writes:

"After the conquest of Egypt, when he was on the point of taking in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes called a conference of the leading men of the country, to find out their attitude towards the war and explain to them his own wishes."

Herodotus records the following words of Xerxes at that counsel, which may have been spoken at the same banquet described here in Esther:

“For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose.”

Xerxes then proceeded to describe the upcoming Greek invasion, and he told the leading men that they would receive lavish gifts in exchange for their support.

If this is what was going on at this banquet, then it was important that Xerxes display his wealth and power to convince everyone that he would make good on his promises. And anyone who made Xerxes look powerless before this important audience would definitely make the king very angry. (But who would ever do that!)

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 behind in an abandoned camp. The Greeks were astonished to find gold and silver **couches** in the tent, and 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 it refers to a royal decree.

Verse 8 begins literally, “And the drinking was according to the rule: let there be no restraining.” 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 drunken banquet in Daniel 5 that preceded the fall of Babylon to Persia, and now we see a drunken banquet preceding Persia’s failed campaign against Greece.

So, as we will often do, let’s pause and ask whether and how these opening verses are emphasizing the key themes of the book - reversal and feasting.

The feasting theme is easy to spot, but what about the reversal theme? Can we see that theme in these opening verses? And the answer is yes.

Everyone who read Chapter 1 originally knew as they read how these events were going to turn out for the great king Xerxes – his campaign against the Greeks was a total failure! They would have

known that Xerxes returned from that campaign four years later with depleted power and a depleted treasury. This **unstated** reversal in Chapter 1 sets the stage for the other reversals that will follow in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther could have easily begun with a record of Xerxes' great defeat, but it did not. Instead the book begins with a display of Xerxes' great wealth and power. Why? Perhaps because it better shows the theme of reversal.

And there is one more hint of reversal in these opening verses. This elaborate description of a foreign palace is unusual in the Bible. Only the description of the first temple receives similar treatment. But that first temple had been destroyed and now rebuilt in a much less grand manner. Perhaps the book of Esther wants the reader to see the beauty of the first 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.

So perhaps these opening verses are very subtly showing us two reversals – the reversal of Xerxes and Persia regarding the failed Greek invasion, and the reversal of God's own people as they and the beauty of their temple had been carried off to Persia.

## Esther 1:9

9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.

For those who may have wondered whether feasting was really a theme of this book, note that we have now had two feasts in the first 9 verses.

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

These opening verses show the King and the Queen acting separately, which perhaps foreshadows the trouble that will soon come between them.

Women were present at royal Persian banquets, but typically the men and women were separated once the drinking started. Only the concubines were left for entertainment after the other women had left. Josephus explains Vashti's upcoming decision simply as her reluctance to break this protocol.

And who is Vashti? As we discussed at length in the introduction, I think the most likely answer is that Vashti from the book of Esther is the same person as Amestris, the person that Herodotus identifies as the queen and the mother of the next king, Artaxerxes. But, as we also discussed, if that is correct, then Vashti was evil and vengeful, which may cause us to change our view of Vashti (which is otherwise based entirely on this one event in her life).

## Esther 1:10-12

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 Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, 11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on. 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Verses 10-12 describe a command from the King and the Queen's denial of that command.

To understand the undercurrents of verses 10-12, we need to remember the purpose of this great feast. Verse 4 tells us that Xerxes wanted to display his splendor and glory, and most likely that was to gain support for his campaign against the Greeks. The beautiful Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown would have been seen as a living trophy of the king's splendor and glory, and so he wanted to show her off.

Why did the king send seven eunuchs ("chamberlains" in the KJV) to go and get the queen?

The eunuch part is self-explanatory, but why seven? Some suggest that seven may have been needed to carry her while she was seated in her royal litter. In any event, they are listed by name in verse 10 for a reason – their names serve to verify this historical record of the event.

Herodotus tells us something interesting about the Persian view of alcohol – the Persians 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 – which is yet another historical fact that we find in the book of Esther.

A key event in the entire book occurs in verse 12 – Queen Vashti refuses to come before Xerxes, the most powerful person on earth at that time. And the question is ... why? Why did the queen refuse the king’s order?

Why? That is a question we will ask many times in our study of this book – why? What was the person’s motivation? Why did the person do something or not do something? What was the person thinking? Sometimes in this book, we are told what someone was thinking, but other times we are not. Vashti falls in the latter category. We know only what she did; we are not told why he did it. So, of course, the speculation runs rampant! Here is how one commentary described the situation:

“Vashti could have been motivated by any of the following: anger, pride, disdain, dignity, modesty, marital fidelity, love, royal decorum or early feminism. Any of these motives, or a heady cocktail of them all, could have prompted her refusal. One thing is certain – refuse she did, and in doing so she set in motion an epoch-making train of events.”

Herodotus describes another banquet at which the women present were assaulted by drunken men (5.18). And, as we mentioned earlier, almost any woman (evil or not) would have been reluctant to appear before a group of men who had been drinking for seven days straight.

And yet this was not just any woman – this was the royal wife of King Xerxes of Persia, the most powerful man on earth. And this was not just any event – this was the banquet at which Xerxes was planning his invasion of Greece and at which he most needed to impress his princes and generals with his royal power and authority.

Vashti could hardly have picked a worse time to refuse the king’s request. So, again, we must ask, why?

Perhaps she was opposed to the Greek invasion, and rightly so as it would later turn out!

Perhaps there was a conflict between the royal command and existing Persian law or custom.

Josephus suggests that Vashti refused to appear before the king “out of regard to the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers.” [Antiquities, 11.6]

The answer the Jewish rabbis offered is that the king wanted Vashti to appear naked before him. To reach that conclusion, they add a single word to verse 11, so that instead of reading “to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal,” it instead reads “to bring Vashti the queen before the king with **only** the crown royal!” However, we interpret verse 11, we do know that coming before the princes to show them her beauty would have meant coming unveiled. So modesty could have been a motivation even absent the rather lurid suggestion of the Jewish rabbis.

Jewish legends over the years have added quite a bit to the events in Chapter 1. Even the explanation that Vashti had been commanded to appear unclothed did not satisfy all the Rabbis. Some of them could not see why such a shameless creature as Vashti (as they considered her) should be unwilling to come even in that condition.

In Jewish legend, Vashti is sometimes said to have resisted appearing because the angel Gabriel, to effect the salvation of the Jews, had afflicted her with leprosy. Jewish tradition also depicts Vashti as the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar and daughter of Belshazzar. Jewish lore further views Vashti’s own banquet as filled with political intrigue – the nobles’ wives were captives being used as insurance that their husbands not rebel against Xerxes. None of that is in the text.

We should also mention one intriguing theory that was discussed earlier. Vashti may have refused to appear at the drunken banquet when ordered to do so by Xerxes because she was pregnant at the time with Artaxerxes, who later became the next king. We know that Artaxerxes was eighteen when he came to the throne in around 465 BC, which would mean that he was born in 483 BC, shortly after the lavish banquet we see here.

As we struggle to come up with a motivation for Vashti’s refusal to appear before the king, we should step back and ask a broader question – why aren’t we given her motivation? Why is the text silent on that key question? Anyone reading Chapter 1 would naturally be puzzled by her response and would wonder why she did what she did. Why doesn’t the Bible tell us? The book of Esther certainly provides motivations elsewhere – why not here?

The book of Esther is a textbook on divine providence. It shows us how God’s providence works. And what we find is that God’s providence works in part through human behavior, and we see here that that behavior can flow from even the most ambiguous and confused of motives. One seemingly insignificant event leads to another in the opening chapters of Esther, and in that mysterious chain of

human actions the promise of the covenant made long before between God and his people is upheld and fulfilled.

It is telling that the book of Esther does not begin with Mordecai or Esther. It does not begin by retelling the history of the Jews. It begins instead with the Persian king Xerxes, who neither knew nor worshiped God. A completely pagan king decides for purely worldly reasons to give a banquet. On the last day of the banquet, he decides to treat the men of his empire to a good look at his beautiful Queen Vashti. She decides not to obey him. He decides. He decides. She decides. With these decisions, this group of foreigners sets in motion a chain of events that takes on a life of its own. Why? Because God used that chain of events to bring about good things for his people. And do we think God is no longer doing that?

But back to our question - why aren't we told their motivations? Because Vashti's motivations are irrelevant. Because Xerxes' motivations are irrelevant. Was Vashti courageous? Was Vashti modest? Was the king cruel? It matters not. God would use their decisions and their actions to bring about good things for his people without regard to their motivations.

The events in the book of Esther provide an example of the great promise in Romans 8:28 – “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

We often talk about God opening doors for us, but it is interesting to think that we also open doors for God. We have free will, so we can decide to open door A or open door B. Whichever door we choose, for good or evil, God can turn our decision into something good.

Isn't that exactly what happened with Joseph's brothers?

Genesis 50:20 – “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Joseph's brothers made an evil choice, but God turned their bad choice into something good for his people. Their evil choice opened a door for God to do something wonderful. Had that door not been opened, God would have used something else or someone else to accomplish his plans, but that particular open door allowed God to use Joseph for that purpose.

We see a very subtle message in these verses – this all-powerful king was not 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 soon enter the scene. These verses are also showing us a glimpse of a central question in this book. **Who is really in charge?** Could it be that the one who is really in charge is not even named anywhere in this book of Esther?

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. And this was the person whom Vashti openly defied and embarrassed! Again, I think this is very strong evidence that Vashti and Amestris are one and the same person, and that she was pregnant with the royal heir at the time of these events. She knew the king would not harm her.

As I mentioned in our introduction, while we often view Vashti as noble and heroic, that is not the



case with all commentators. Many ancient Jewish and Christian sources paint 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.” (We will have more to say about divorce when we get back to the book of Ezra!)

## Esther 1:13-15

13 Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment: 14 And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom;) 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

In verses 13-15, the King discusses the problem 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 both known to have done.

That these seven counselors “saw the king's face” means that they had special access to the king. Herodotus described them this way: “any of the seven may enter the palace unannounced, except when the king was in bed with a woman” (3.84).

Verse 14 tells us that these counselors “sat first in the kingdom,” which means they were highest in the kingdom. That description was likely literal as well as figurative – they likely always sat next to the king at state occasions or banquets, as they seem to have been doing at this banquet. Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the king's seven counselors.

Verse 13 says that they knew the times, which means that they used astrology and other forms of divination. Again, we see our big question in verse 13, “Who is really in charge?” Is it fate? Is it luck? Is what happens to us determined by the stars? Or is there a greater power involved? Perhaps the one who created those stars! What we see in this verse is the collision of world views that we discussed in the introduction.

What can we say about the names in verse 14? “Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan?” One of them has a speaking role in verse 16, but the others do not. Why are we given all of their names? (And remember that we were also given the names of the seven

eunuchs back in verse 10.) Why?

First and foremost, as we also said for verse 10, having these specific names certainly adds to the historical nature of the text. In fact, the first name, Carshena, has been found at Persepolis in the Fortification Tablets.

All of the names seem to be Persian, and that may suggest a second reason why we are given the list of names. One commentator suggests that the very sound of these foreign names would have been “ludicrous to Hebrew ears,” and so the list may have been given to add to the “impression of a dumb chorus” advising the king. (Not only do we see the great king Xerxes in his royal palace, but we see his group of seven esteemed advisers: Doc, Sleepy, Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Bashful and Sneezy!) There is certainly an aspect of humor and mockery here when it comes to great king Xerxes, as we will continue to see as the chapter continues.

In verse 15, the king asks these seven counselors what he should do with the rebellious Queen Vashti.

#ezra-esther