

# LESSON 19

## Esther 1:16-18

16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. 17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. 18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

Verses 16-18 describe the seriousness of Vashti's offense against the king.

We have already noted that, unlike some other books in the Old Testament, the book of Esther is driven primarily through narration than through dialogue. Memucan's advice in verses 16–20 is the largest block of direct speech in the chapter and one of the largest in the entire book.

Memucan, one of the king's seven 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 "despise their husbands in their eyes."

This answer was clever because it relieved the king from a charge that he was acting out of personal animosity. Instead, the king was acting on behalf of husbands everywhere! What could be more noble! Memucan has elevated the king's marital problem into a national crisis!

And the Rabbis, as they so often did, had an additional explanation for Memucan's plan. According to rabbinic tradition, Memucan had been having problems with his own disobedient wife at home, and he saw this event as an opportunity to bring her into line!

Before we look at the plan, let's review the fear that the plan is supposed to solve. The fear in verse 17 is that women everywhere will learn what the queen has done, and that will cause them to follow her bad example. So it would seem that any plan should be primarily concerned with keeping news of this event under tight control so that no one learns about what the queen has done. Is that the plan we are about to see? Let's take a look.

## Esther 1:19-22

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small. 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan: 22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every 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 also says that in Vashti's 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 has experienced a big reversal!

The irrevocability of the king's command in verse 19 is also mentioned in Daniel 6, where Darius (**not** Xerxes' father, Darius the Great) was manipulated by his administrators into issuing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer.

As we discussed in the introduction, 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 damage could not be undone because there

was no mechanism for recalling the decree. But that explanation would not explain the events in Daniel 6.

And there are some other big problems with that commentator. First, complaining that there is no evidence outside the Bible ignores the fact that the Bible itself is evidence. In fact, Esther is perhaps the best source of evidence that we have for what was going on in Persia at this particular period of time. And Daniel is also evidence. It is illogical to ignore the Biblical evidence of irrevocable Persian laws.

And, second, as for the Greeks not mentioning the irrevocable laws, that is not a certainty at all. As we saw in the introduction, Herodotus confirmed that King Xerxes was “compelled” by his own laws. Doesn’t that tell us that Xerxes could not alter those laws? Otherwise, how could those laws compel him? If the king was the law (as with most ancient and modern despots), then how could the king be compelled by the law? And even if the Greeks did not mention it, that does not prove it did not exist. It is hard to know what the Greeks did not tell us!

Also, we have already seen an example in Ezra 4:21 where a royal decree was carefully worded in such a way so as to permit its change – and that sort of careful wording may explain why this 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.)

Now let’s go back to the question we asked with the previous verses - what was the problem that this irrevocable law was intended to address? The problem was the the king did not want anyone to hear about what the queen had done to him. Is that what this new law prevents? No. In fact the reverse is true - the new law from 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, the king ends up sending a dispatch about her defiance to every province in the empire!

Did the powerful king see the foolishness of this advice from his wise men? No. He did not. Verse 21 says that “the saying pleased the king and the princes.” They all think it sounds like a great plan!

And what about Vashti’s punishment for not wanting to appear before the king? Her punishment is that she is not allowed to appear before the king! As one commentator described it:

“Memucan’s advice creates the very hullabaloo he had wanted to squelch and prevents Vashti from doing precisely what she had refused to do.”

But perhaps the punishment was appropriate: If the Queen will not come when summoned, then let her never come ever again!

And note that there is no careful wording in this decree that would prevent it from being irrevocable. In fact, Memucan wants to be sure that the decree is irrevocable. He stresses in verse 19 that it cannot be altered, and in verse 20 he wants it published everywhere, which would really make it hard for the king to ever change it. Why?

If Vashti was the vengeful Amestris, then no doubt Memucan wanted to make sure she never regained her power! (But she later did just that when her son came to power, and so perhaps Memucan later heard from Vashti once again!)

So where are we then with this description of the most powerful person on earth? I think one commentary answers that question very well:

“Xerxes, as we quickly learn, is weak-willed, fickle, and self-centered. He and his advisers are a twittery, silly-headed, cowardly lot who need to hide behind a law to reinforce their status in their homes.”

As we have already noted, Esther is one of the funniest books in the Bible. As one commentator has noted, “The book’s incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks.”

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 commentary provides a different reason:

“Humor, especially the humor of ridicule, is a device for defusing fear. The book teaches us to make fun of the very forces that once threatened – and will threaten again – our existence, and thereby makes us recognize their triviality as well as their power.”

God laughs at the pretensions of earthly powers.

Psalm 2:4 – “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.”

Psalm 37:12-13 – “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.”

Psalm 59:8 – “But thou, O LORD, shalt laugh at them; thou shalt have all the heathen in derision.”

We see God laughing in the book of Esther! In the context of human fear, divine laughter breaks the tension. It brings us relief. God will prevail over the powers of any and every age! The book of Esther reminds us that deliverance comes from God – and that God’s people should always be a confident people! We can laugh in the face of fear!

But we should pause here and notice something about the author of this book: this author was very brave! One thing that all despots have in common is that they do not like being laughed at! Yes, God is not mentioned in this book, but do we see God in the mere existence of this book? One commentator thinks so:

“The security and confidence of the author, who could comment in this way on the highest ruler in the contemporary world as well as on the court and its intrigues, is striking, and witnesses in a totally unconscious way to the efficacy of faith in the living God.”

If we are still on the lookout for themes in this book (and we are!), then we may see another theme here: the theme of excess. In this chapter, we have seen an excess of power, an excess of possessions, and an excess of drinking. And here, one woman defies her husband, and suddenly there is a national crisis! And the law is not limited to that one woman, but applies to all women everywhere! Let’s be on the lookout for other examples of that theme of excess.

The command in verse 22 is curious. The KJV reads, “that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.” A more accurate translation is: “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. But the most likely reason for the edict 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.

Another possibility for this odd requirement is that it addresses a problem similar to what we see in Nehemiah 13:23-24, where Jewish men married foreign wives, and their children could not speak

Hebrew. Perhaps the Persians had a similar problem, but if so, there is nothing in the context about it.

Yet another possibility is that Xerxes was following the lead of Cyrus in encouraging the development of minority cultures in his empire by allowing various languages to be spoken. Support for that view might be found in verse 22's requirement that the decree be provided in various languages.

A final possibility is that this phrase does not belong here at all, but is the result of scribe who mistakenly recopied the earlier phrase "to every people after their language" twice. The "scribal error" explanation is never my favorite, but we know it happened on rare occasion. Support for such having happened here might come from the Septuagint, which omits that final phrase in verse 22.

So where are we at the end of Chapter 1? Queen Vashti has left the building, and her exit has prepared the way for someone "better than she" (verse 19) to replace her.

"Chapter 1 ends with the king rushing to reach the post office before it closes. Within the space of a few verses the high and mighty [Xerxes] has been defied, manipulated, and roundly humiliated. While this much is obvious to his advisors, his citizens, and now to us, the readers, [Xerxes] seems largely out of touch with reality. It is a characteristic that will surface again and again in subsequent chapters."

And what will happen when Esther appears? Will she be obedient to the king? Will she be under the king's thumb? Will she be powerless? Let's see.

## Esther 2:1-4

After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her. 2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king: 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them: 4 And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing 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 Esther 1:3 tells us occurred in the third year of his reign.

Xerxes' disastrous campaign against the Greeks 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. The king had affairs with the wives of some of his generals, which, among other things, led to his assassination in his bedroom in 465 BC, the 21st year of his reign.

It seems to some from verse 1 that the king regretted his irrevocable decree against Queen Vashti, but that is not what the text says. It says simply that the king **remembered** Vashti. As one commentary notes, that phrase is "wonderfully ambiguous!"

If Vashti was the evil and vengeful Amestris, then perhaps his remembering of Vashti and what she had done in verse 1 was not entirely a remembrance with fondness! It may be that after all these events, Xerxes was more than ready for a new queen! In any event, the decree was irrevocable, and so in these verses we see the beginning of a search for a replacement.

In verse 1 the king remembers "what was decreed against her." Wasn't that the king's own decree? Or was it really? I think we see in that phrase both the king distancing himself from his own decree and also a subtle reminder that the decree was not the king's own idea. In fact, as we continue through this book, we might start to wonder whether this all-powerful king ever had an idea all on his own!

Remember that we are on the look out for other examples of the theme of excess. We didn't have to wait very long! Verse 2 says: "And let the king appoint officers in **all** the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together **all** the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace."

The end of verse 3 describes beauty treatments. The Hebrew word for this is "rubblings," which is apparently a reference to a massage with perfumed oils. The noun actually comes from a verb meaning "to scour" or "to polish."

If the king had really been **fondly** remembering Vashti in verse 1, he seems to have gotten over it by verse 4: "And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen **instead of Vashti**. And the thing **pleased the king**; and he did so."

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 the Persian kings caused in satisfying their personal desires. And the suffering was not limited to women: Herodotus reports that 500 young boys were taken each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court.

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 seven advisors were so eager to see Vashti banished.)

But Plutarch reports that other Persian kings sometimes married women from outside those sources, which seems to be what Xerxes was about to do here, and also what his father Darius the Great had done.

## Esther 2:5-9

5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; 6 Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter. 8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.

We have a shift in scene in verse 5. Suddenly we are reading, not about the great and powerful king, but about two obscure Jews living nearby.

The Jews are mentioned for the first time in verse 5, and it is interesting that they are spoken of in the



third person - “there was a certain Jew.” One commentator suggests that while the inspired author was a Jew, he wrote the book as though it were a Persian court chronicle written by a non-Jew. If so, that might help explain some of the other unique features of the book.

The phrase “who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away” in verse 6 has been the source of some controversy. Why? Because the event referenced in verse 6 occurred in 597 BC, which would make Mordecai over 120 years old if he was the one who had been carried away.

The most common solution is to read verse 6 as referring not to Mordecai but instead to Kish, the great grandfather of Mordecai. That solves the chronological problem, but commentaries seem to agree that that view “is by no means the natural interpretation of the Hebrew syntax.”

Another way to address the difficulty is to read verse 6 as applying to Mordecai, but to be saying that Mordecai had been carried away in the person of his forefather. That is, when Kish was carried away, Kish’s future descendants had also been carried away, including those, such as Mordecai, who were born in captivity.

But why does the text go to such lengths to connect Mordecai with these particular ancestors? Because something very subtle is going on here in the text. The names in Mordecai’s genealogy in the mind of any Jew would immediately associate Mordecai with King Saul, another Benjaminite: Kish was the father of Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-2), and Shimei was the man from Saul’s family who cursed David when he fled from Absalom (2 Samuel 16:5). Why is that association with King Saul important? We will answer that question when we meet Haman.

The fact that Mordecai’s family was taken into captivity with Jehoiachin implies that his family most likely belonged to the upper classes of Jewish society.

And we see some subtle foreshadowing in verse 6 - Esther’s family had previously been carried away or removed. In fact, the Hebrew text uses variations of the root word “remove” (galah) four times in one verse. Is Esther about to be removed again? Will she become a double exile?

The Babylonian name Mordecai (“man of Marduk”) refers to Marduk, the chief god of the Babylon pantheon. If Mordecai also had a Hebrew name, we do not know it. Recall that Daniel and his three friends had both Hebrew and Babylonian names.

Is there any evidence outside the Bible of Mordecai? Perhaps. In a text from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes that was 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 accountant was none other than 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 given in the book. We already know that it was common 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. The root Hebrew word for Esther means concealed or hidden. By mentioning both of her names, the text may be stressing that Esther was a woman with two identities, one of which was hidden. “She is both grand gentile goddess and humble Hebrew flower.”

If Mordecai refers to the false god Marduk and if Esther refers to the false god Ishtar, then perhaps the text is again asking the question, “Who is in charge?” Will Mordecai turn to Marduk for help? Will Esther turn to Ishtar for help? Or will they instead turn to the one true God who is not named anywhere in this book? And there is some irony in the rescue of God’s people by Jews named for the false gods of Babylon and Persia.

How many women were brought before the king? We don’t know, but Josephus says there were 400.

The phrase “Esther also was taken” suggests that she and the others were not given a choice. Although the passive voice does not require that interpretation, the same passive voice is used in verse 6 to describe the captives who were carried away from Jerusalem. The passive voice is used quite often in Esther, most likely 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. As one commentary observed, “Esther’s beauty was overwhelming, even to a eunuch.”

Some wonder why Esther apparently did not protest eating the unclean food as Daniel did. Although the text gives no direct answer, we will see an indirect answer in verse 10 - Esther had been instructed not to disclose her identity as a Jew.

#ezra-esther