

What does it mean for a Jew to be living in Persia?

It means that your grandfather chose *not* to go back to Jerusalem.
Rather than return when Cyrus the Great permitted the Jews to go home in 538 B.C.,
instead your grandfather chose to stay in Babylon –
and then he chose to take his chances by moving further east into Persia,
in order to serve Cyrus –
or maybe his son – your father – took a job working in Darius’s court.

And now you find yourself – 50 years later – living in a Jewish expatriate community in Susa
(modern day Iran).

The book of Esther is *not* about living in Exile.

The Exile is over!
You could go home to Jerusalem any time you like!
Although “home” is an odd name
for a place your family hasn’t lived for more than 120 years.

It would be like me saying that I was going “home” to Santiago, Chile,
where my grandfather was born in 1903.

The book of Esther is not about living in Exile –
the book of Esther is about what it means to live in the Dispersion – the diaspora.
Your identity as a people still matters –
but you no longer really think of the *land* as your home.

In that way, Esther helps us to think about what it means to be the people of God
in the new covenant!

The apostle Peter refers to us as “elect exiles of the dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1).

Sure, in one sense we are exiles –
our true homeland is the heavenly Jerusalem.
But in another sense, we are not exiles – we have not been “banished” from our homes.
We live in the diaspora – the dispersion – where, for the time being,
every homeland is a foreign land – and every foreign land is a homeland!

There is a profound difference between Esther and Daniel.

Daniel is plainly oriented toward Jerusalem.
He lives in Babylon from the time of Nebuchadnezzar until the time of Cyrus –
and his prayers and his labors are all focused on how to live faithfully
until his people can return home.

Esther is not interested in returning “home.”

Susa – the Persian citadel – is now home.

In this way, the book of Esther teaches us how to live faithfully here in the diaspora –
for those who will spend the duration of their earthly lives
in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

We are not just biding our time here in exile – waiting until we can go home.
We are dispersed here.

 This is where we will live until Christ returns!
We can't just adopt short-term tactics.
We need long-term strategies for how to live here for generations!

It's no accident that Esther is the only book of the OT outside of the Five Books of Moses
that includes the inauguration of a new feast!

The book will end with the inauguration of the Feast of Purim –
the feast of casting lots!

That's an interesting name for a feast!

 It almost sounds like it's celebrating the roll of the dice – the flip of the coin –
 the lucky guess!

At times it may appear that our survival is just the luck of the draw!
But the book of Esther will remind us that the cast of the lot is in the hand of God.

Of course, God never speaks in the book of Esther – indeed, God is not named.
He is never mentioned!

But while God may be silent in this book – his presence is felt everywhere throughout!

At the very midpoint of the book – 5:7 is the numerical midpoint
(exactly the same number of letters on either side of this point)
 but in chapter 5, verse 4, Esther says, *Yabo' Hammelek WeHaman Hayyom.*
 (let the king and Haman come today)
The first letter of each word spells YHWH.

That's not an accident!

 God is everywhere present – overseeing and governing all things.

And yet – there is no moment where we know for certain that God commands a certain action.

 The book of Esther makes clear that very often, the people of God have had to act
 without knowing what God will do.

And your actions matter.

 Yes, Mordecai will tell Esther that if she does not act,
 salvation will come to the Jews from some other place –

but, as Mordecai puts it, you and your father's house will perish!
On the one hand, you can have confidence that God will accomplish his holy will!
On the other hand, if you abandon the task that he has called you to,
then you may not live to see his holy will done!

In other words, the book of Esther illustrates beautifully
the third petition of the Lord's Prayer:
"thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
If I pray that God's will would be done on earth,
then I must *do* God's will on earth!

There was a beautiful illustration of this on Friday night.
Grace Reformed Church in Walkerton celebrated her 25th anniversary.
Grace Reformed was my first pastorate – where I was ordained.
I served there for a year and a half from 1997-1998.

There are five families left from the original core that founded Grace Reformed –
including all three of the men whom I ordained as the first elders.

As good Presbyterian elders they are all quick to disclaim any merit of their own.
But I went up to each of them last night and thanked them for their faithful labors
over the last 25 years.
There were many times when it would have been far easier to give up and walk away.

And to paraphrase Mordecai –
if they had given up, then salvation would still have come to Walkerton!
There would have been another church – other elders –
who would have preached the gospel to that city!
But they and their households would have perished.
Not literally – most likely!
But rather, *this story* would never have been told!

This story of God's faithfulness over 25 years –
watching a little group of 50-60 saints grow in fits and starts
until Grace Reformed today is practically our twin –
with over 110 members.

God has been good to them.
He has been faithful to his promises!

But they also have been faithful as they have believed God's promises,
and walked forward in faith, hope, and love!

Esther is a book that teaches us how to do this!

Oh – and also –
Esther is a rollicking good story!

We don't know who wrote the book of Esther –
but our author plainly knew a great deal about the Persian court –
does not appear to have any knowledge of later Greek culture –
and loves to weave repeating themes and motifs together
to heighten the irony and satire!

For this reason, we will need to be careful at times not to take him too literally!
He likes to poke fun at certain people – Ahasuerus not least! –
and humor is often difficult to translate.

Think about various English lines that would fall on deaf ears:
“Are you pulling my leg?”
No, no, I'm not touching your leg – I'm just making a joke...

But as we get into our text, these things will become more clear.

We start with Xerxes!

1. The King's Feast (v1-9)

I Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew spelling of the Persian name *Xshayarsha*,
which the Greeks wrote as “Xerxes.”

There are various men with that name in ancient history –
but our author very kindly indicates *which* Ahasuerus – which Xerxes – he means.

He means the one who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.
And there is only one Xerxes who ever did that!

He was the son of Darius the Great.
Darius died in 486 B.C. –
and so Xerxes reigned from 486-465 as the fourth king of the Achaemenid Empire –
(otherwise known as the old Persian empire).

And we are told that our opening scene occurred in the third year of King Xerxes –
in other words, in 483 B.C.

² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, 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, ⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.

The Greek historian Herodotus also tells us about that feast.

This was when Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was planning his great assault on Greece.
He had gathered together all his leading advisors.

This was where the king would cajole and convince the nobles
to fund and staff the army for a great invasion.

That's why the army is here (v3) –

and all the nobles and governors of the provinces.

It's why he spends *six months* – 180 days – showing off his royal glory and splendor.

You might think that his wealth would be better spent in training and deploying an army –
but Xerxes understands that motivation is half the game!

He has to unite the leaders of the Medes and Persians –
and so to do this he will spend vast fortunes.

One commentator says well that this “is clearly the summit of royal aspiration.

Here we have the dream of heaven and the realities of earth
portrayed in one and the same moment...

Eventually *these days were completed*.

In other words, perfection has been reached.

The peoples of the earth have feasted and the king of the earth is on his throne.

Just as the animals gathered around Adam (Gen. 2:19-20)

and just as the nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord's house
(Isa. 2:2-3),

so this is a picture, albeit a parody,

of created order and eschatological fulfillment.” (Wells, 26)

The irony, of course, is that Xerxes thinks that this story is about *him!*

He will then spend the next year organizing the troops –
before marching against Greece from 481-479.

The four year gap between Xerxes' great feast in the third year
and replacing Vashti in the 7th year

would mean that Xerxes only replaced her
when he got back from his catastrophic losses in Greece.

And yes, everyone who first heard the book the Esther being read
would have known well the story of Xerxes' great victories
at Thermopylae and Athens –

but also his great humiliation at Plataea in 479.

And in that light – the king’s extravagance may start to look a little different.

At first he may look grand and glorious –

but then you realize that he isn’t really in control of anything...

And yet his 180 days of feasting weren’t enough for him!

So he holds a second feast!

The 180 days are for the great men – the nobles and governors.

The last 7 days are for everyone!

We will see lots of doublets in the book of Esther.

Esther herself will imitate Xerxes in giving a doubled feast at the end of the book.

But there are pairs and twins and doublets all throughout the book!

⁵ And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

Notice that “all the people” were invited.

Isaiah had spoken of the great feast that God would hold for all nations!

And here Xerxes is doing what God had promised that *he* would do!

But our author goes on at great lengths to describe the beauty and lavishness of the feast:

⁶ There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods^[a] 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.

If your goal is to get all the nobles and governors to sign off on your great war-effort,

then yes, I suppose, letting everyone do what is right in his own eyes

might well result in a rousing (if drunken) cheer for marching off to war!

But for those who hear the book of Esther being read –

and especially for those who remember the temple –

they will hear of this great feast wondering if maybe some of those golden vessels

were taken from the temple in Jerusalem...

If all the people in Susa were present –

then that means that Mordecai and other Jews were there that day.

Jews and Gentiles alike streaming to the feast of the Great King!

What does it mean to live in the diaspora?

It means to live in the midst of a powerful nation – where you have a place –
but a precarious place.

You live in a land ruled by law – and yet its laws can be ridiculous!

It means that living near the king is both incredibly dangerous, and potentially quite safe.

You cannot *trust* the king – but you *can* trust the God in whose hand the king always resides!

But then we hear that

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

While the men are out in the garden – Vashti holds a feast for the women in the palace.

Vashti is almost certainly the Queen Amestris –

the daughter of Otanes – one of the conspirators with Xerxes' father, Darius,
who had helped Darius take the throne.

Notice again the prominence of feasting!

Vashti holds a feast for the women.

According to Persian custom the only women present for the men's feast
would be servant women and “entertainers” – shall we say...

Which is why the King's command in verses 10-11 is so scandalous:

2. The Queen's Refusal (v10-12)

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, ^[b] in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.*

The seventh day is supposed to be a day of rest –

and a day for giving rest to others.

But Ahasuerus observes no Sabbath!

Rather, he thinks of the seventh day – the great day of the feast –

as a day for entertainment – a day for *him* to be the center of attention.

Xerxes is used to the whole world quivering “at the mercy of his drunken whim” (Wells, 29).

And so he calls for the Queen to come so that he can show off her beauty!

Again – Isaiah had spoken of Zion as the bride of Yahweh –

and how he would beautify his beautiful house.

But the LORD does not parade his bride around like a showgirl!

God's world – and God's kingdom –
function properly when male and female operate in harmony.

And as we will see – the male/female relationship plays center stage in the book of Esther.
Not just the marriage relation (Esther also interacts with Mordecai and Haman),
but plainly 'male-female disharmony
[is] a sign of the Persians' fundamental disorder,
a disorder in which Esther and Mordecai,
by dint of their harmonious partnership,
will have the opportunity to outmaneuver' (Wells, 31)

¹² *But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs.*

If you know anything about Amestris, this is not surprising at all!
She is the only one known as "Queen" during Xerxes' reign.

This has caused some consternation among Bible scholars,
and has led some to claim that the book of Esther is just a fable.
Others have tried to argue that Amestris *is* Esther –
and while the names are fairly similar,
the timing doesn't work.
Because Amestris went with Xerxes on his invasion of Greece –
whereas according to chapter 2,
Esther didn't meet Xerxes until after he came back from Greece.

What this suggests is that the decree referred to in verse 19 was not as draconian as it sounds.
It would be entirely possible for her "dethroning" to be symbolic –
and the pageant in chapter 2 would also be symbolic –
giving the title of "Queen" to a woman who would otherwise simply be
a member of his harem.

Everything in the book of Esther is entirely consistent with this understanding.
The idea that a principal wife – a crowned Queen –
would think that her life would be in jeopardy for going to see him
after not being "called for" for 30 days (4:11) is almost inconceivable.
Amestris certainly never thought of herself as being banished from Xerxes!
We know from Herodotus that she remained influential
throughout the life of Xerxes (and after).

She was not a woman to be trifled with –

and certainly was never “deposed” from being Queen!
At the same time, it is entirely consistent with her fiery temper
that she would refuse to be made a spectacle of!
(When Xerxes started an affair with the wife of one of his sons –
around the time that Esther was made “queen” –
his daughter-in-law asked him for a cloak that Amestris had made for him.
When Amestris saw her daughter-in-law wearing that cloak,
she had the woman’s mother mutilated
[notice that she knew better than to go after Xerxes or her daughter-in-law directly!]).

But when Vashti/Amestris refused to show up,

At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

He is “Easily angered, [but] he never seems quite in control” (McClarty 220)

The book of Esther is ultimately a story of two queens.

One who refused to come.

The other who dared to come.

Vashti may appear to be a heroic woman who stood up for principle!

But the point of our text is that she *lost everything!*

If Esther follows the example of Vashti – the Jews will be destroyed!

The bold stand for principle may appear to be noble and right,

but thumbing your nose at the king generally does not end well!

Too many Christians today seem to think that ‘resisting the government’
is a general Christian duty.

The lesson for us is that if you simply *refuse* the king –

if you openly defy him, it will likely not end well for you!

But if you come to him with *wisdom* and make your case with grace,

then you and your people may live!

How do you live in a world where you are *not* in charge?

How do you operate in a nation where you are a tiny minority?

Esther will provide an example of wisdom and grace for us.

Xerxes on the other hand exhibits neither!

3. The King’s Decree (v13-22)

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?”

Notice that Ahasuerus does not appear to be *really* in control.
He doesn't even know the law!

The real power is found with Memucan:

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,^[c] 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. 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.”

First, notice the importance of male/female relations:
Queen Vashti has upset male authority!!

I heard recently that a pastor told his congregation that a “manly man”
would never do dishes – or anything else that his wife normally does.
Such a pastor could certainly find scriptural support for such a statement –
here in the words of Memucan! –
who is being mocked by the Holy Spirit for his utter silliness!

When I was in Eritrea I preached a sermon on marriage,
where I urged the men in the congregation to help their wives with the dishes!
The missionary doctor who was present was a wise older woman –
but I fear she had grown too accustomed to their culture.
She told me after the sermon,
that I should not have used that illustration.
Eritrean men do *not* do dishes.
And she thought that the men would no longer take me seriously.

In my conversations with the Eritrean men over the next few weeks,
I think that my illustration really helped them.
After all, I had told them that they needed to imitate Christ

in how they laid down their lives for their wives –
humbling themselves – denying themselves – taking up their cross.
Now it's true that I thought I was just using an *easy* example – doing dishes!
It turned out I was using a *hard* example –
something that would actually require a man to truly humble himself!

Humility, however, was *not* on display in Susa that day!

Then again, remember the context!

This is the seventh day of a feast of utter drunkenness.
Not only Xerxes – but also Memucan – should be presumed drunk!

Too many scholars have assumed that Memucan was entirely sober!

Remember what I said earlier about the use of satire and irony?

Much has been made of the line (used both in Daniel and in Esther)
that the “laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be revoked.”
This is almost certainly not to be taken strictly literally.
We actually know of *many* Medo-Persian laws that *were* revoked!

Memucan's speech is presented as what a drunken king's drunken chief advisor would say
when fully inebriated and not thinking straight at all!

Not surprisingly this advice pleased the king and the princes –
and he did what Memucan proposed –

and so he broadcast his humiliation to all the provinces of the empire!

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.

The irony of the King's decree is that it has the opposite effect of what he intended:
far from establishing every man as master in his own house,
it has the effect of announcing to the world
that the King has been humiliated by his own wife!

When we get to chapter 2, we will see that “he remembered Vashti and what she had done
and what had been decreed against her.”

Certainly there was some sort of decision to “replace” Vashti –
but if the replacement was merely symbolic,
then Esther was actually just a “Queen” in name only.

What we see in the book of Esther is that Esther always looks and acts like a concubine.
A true Queen would have had much more power and influence than Esther ever does.
Sure, by the end of the book, she has the sort of power
that a very influential concubine might have!
But she never comes close to being the sort of public influence that Amestris/Vashti was!

My point is simply that the *text of the book of Esther*
suggests that we should always put quotation marks around ‘queen’
whenever the term is used for Esther.

Our author plainly knew the Persian court very well.
And while he *calls* her “queen” – he never describes Esther in any way
other than as a particularly influential concubine.

Which also fits perfectly what we know of Xerxes’ womanizing.
The idea that he would “dismiss” his wife and “replace” her with a lowly concubine
fits exactly the sort of man he was!

But if he had *actually* dismissed Amestris
and replaced her with a lowly concubine as Queen?
That might have started a revolution!

So I want you to see this whole drunken charade
as a complete mockery of Xerxes and his womanizing!

And yet it will also prove to be the means that God will use
to accomplish the deliverance of the Jews in Persia!

Because again, this is not a book about *exile* – but about *diaspora* – dispersion.
What does it mean to be the people of God living in a foreign land?

How do you survive in this age without losing your identity as a citizen of the age to come?

That is what the book of Esther is all about.