

Introduction: The King Remembered Vashti (v1-4)

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 citadel, 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^[a] be queen instead of Vashti.” This pleased the king, and he did so.

There are three things that we see in this brief statement:

King Xerxes is a prisoner of his anger –
 he is a prisoner of his feelings for women –
 and he is a prisoner of his advisors. (Wells, 36)

Anger is not always a bad thing!
 You can be “good and angry” (David Powlison)!
 But the book of Esther portrays Ahasuerus’s anger as a problem.
 He is angry – but his anger controls him.
 He is “out of control” – and so has to cool down before he can think rationally.

But then, when he cools down,
 he does not consider that maybe *he* was at fault for what happened with Vashti!
 As the king, he is used to having whatever he wants.
 And he wants women to do whatever he says!

With Vashti out of favor, he wants to find someone else!

He is the Great King – the King of Kings – and he is in charge!
 But, oddly enough, for the King of Kings –
 he always seems to be waiting for his advisors to tell him what to do!!

These three themes will recur throughout our story –
 Ahasuerus is driven by his anger – by his sexual appetite – and by his advisors.

And throughout the book, the theme of ‘remembering’ (or forgetting) will also recur.
 Ahasuerus tends to be forgetful.
 His remembering and his forgetting will play a key role in the story.

1. “Now There Was a Jew” – Mordecai and Esther (v5-7)

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.

In verse 5, we are introduced to Mordecai.

Mordecai is a Jew dwelling in Susa.

We are told that his family had been carried away from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar among the deportation in 597 B.C.

(the first deportation under Nebuchadnezzar).

The point about being “carried away” is repeated three times in verse 5.

The family had been “carried away” from Jerusalem among those “carried away” with Jeconiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had “carried away.”

This reminds us of the importance of the exile.

The Jews have been carried away into captivity.

They are aliens and strangers – sojourners in a foreign land.

They are vulnerable – always at the mercy of the good favor of the king!

But there are three other important connections identified in verse 5.

First, Mordecai is not of the tribe of Judah.

He is of the tribe of Benjamin.

There will be a number of allusions to the Joseph story – and Benjamin was Joseph’s only full brother.

Second, Mordecai is of the house of Kish,

who was the father of King Saul –

and there will be *lots* of allusions to the Saul story!!

But third, Mordecai’s family was deported in the exile of 597 (Jeconiah).

That means that Mordecai’s family was *important*.

Nebuchadnezzar only took the most important people with Jeconiah.

Later, in 586, he took all the middling classes as well –

but if Mordecai’s family was taken in 597,

then they were some of the important folks

(as his connection with King Saul might have suggested).

Of course, we don’t know how or why his family came to Susa.

They had a chance to return to Jerusalem in 535 B.C.

(when Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return).

And there are many Jews who weren’t part of the first restoration,

but who went home to Jerusalem over the next hundred years.

But some stayed behind.

Mordecai's family chose not to return from exile –
but to continue to move further east – away from Jerusalem –
to the Persian capital in Susa.

We don't know all that went into the decision, but it was probably made by Jair,
Mordecai's father.

I say this because Esther (or Hadassah) was the daughter of Mordecai's uncle –
which suggests that the family had been in Susa for a little while.

The Persians had been in power now for 50 years –
and since several Jews had taken important positions
in the Persian court in Babylon (certainly Daniel),
it is not surprising to find some in mid-level positions in the Persian capital.

Mordecai is an interesting name for a Jew.

It is a Babylonian name – and not just that, but it is based on the name of Marduk,
the chief god of Babylon.

It is very unlikely that his father (Jair) named him that –
but as with many Jews in Babylon,
they were given “Babylonian” names when they served in the court
(think of Daniel, who was called Belteshazzar –
or Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – his friends,
who are usually known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego).

Now, the Persian kings were followers of Ahura-Mazda,
the god of the Zoroastrian religion –
but they still offered sacrifices to the Babylonian gods –
and the Jews would have been considered part of the Babylonian world,
so it's not surprising to find a Marduka (Mordecai)
in the service of Xerxes.

And, as if in evidence of this double-naming system, we hear of Hadassah, his cousin –
with her Persian name, Esther.

There is quite a quarrel over the meaning of Esther in Persian!

Some are convinced that it is rooted in the name of Ishtar – a Babylonian goddess.

Other are insistent that it just means “star” –

since it would be inappropriate for a faithful Jewess to have a pagan name.

I have to chuckle a little at that –

because Daniel and his friends were given pagan names,
and it didn't stop them from being faithful Jews...

Also the name Ishtar is closely related to the Persian word for star –
which is why the name Esther could easily be understood in both senses.

Indeed, I would suggest that the ambiguity of the name “Esther”
may well have been the reason why Mordecai chose it for her.

After all, we have no reason to believe that Hadassah went by any other name until now.
She is introduced as “Hadassah, *that is*, Esther.”
In other words, the one *you* all know as Esther.

But until this moment, she wasn’t Esther – she was Hadassah!
Her name becomes part of her disguise.
Is she named for Ishtar the Babylonian goddess?
Or simply “star” – for her silent beauty!

But in the same way that the introduction of Mordecai revealed his helplessness and vulnerability
as one whose family had been “carried away” –
so also the introduction of Esther reminds us that she is vulnerable –
fatherless and motherless – far from her homeland.

But she is also “fair and beautiful” –
and the way that she is described highlights her physical attractiveness.
The ESV captures it very accurately:
“the young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at.”

You often hear Proverbs 31 cited – “charm is deceitful and beauty is vain...”
but then you read Esther and see that beauty sure seems to have gotten her a long way!

Yes, it is undoubtedly true that beauty got Esther a long way.
Though in most respects, it’s hard to imagine
that Esther herself found it quite as much fun as you might think...

Listen to how our text says it:

2. “Many Young Women Were Gathered” – Hegai and Esther (v8-11)

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.

I think we often think of this as a beauty pageant!
Ah – the king is looking for a queen – and so Esther went down to the palace to audition!

I’m grateful that the Veggie Tales version dealt with this more honestly.
Many young women were “gathered” –

and Esther also “was taken.”
This was not something that you “signed up for.”
This was something that the regional officers “signed you up for!”
Hey, Mordecai, your cousin is really cute.
She’s coming with us.
What are you going to do, tell the king “No”?
He doesn’t like hearing “no”...
She’s coming with us.

There was no choice.
There was no saying no.
You are maybe 16 years old – maybe 20, at most.

Maybe you were engaged to be married.
But the king wants you – maybe just for a night,
after which he will forget you –
but once you’re in the harem, it’s hard to get back out...

Once you’ve been with the king, he doesn’t like anyone else having you.

What do you do, if you are Hadassah?
Xerxes is a dangerous man! (remember Vashti!)
Do you really want to get that close to him?
Do you really want to be queen in that harem?
Everyone knew that Xerxes was a skirt-chaser.
While he was on his invasion of Greece, he was chasing his brother’s wife.
She refused him – so he persuaded his brother
to have his daughter marry Xerxes’ son (thinking to get closer),
and instead he fell for his daughter-in-law (otherwise known as his niece).

Is that the sort of man you want to get close to?

Why does Hadassah – oh, wait, no, we cannot call her that anymore.
Her name, her people, her identity is to be obliterated.

She is now Esther –
a pretty face – a beautiful figure – alone, helpless, and vulnerable.

But if Ahasuerus is known for being a slave to his advisors,
Esther also is surrounded by advisors –
but her relationship to them is different!
She is known for finding favor.

⁹ And the young woman pleased him and won his favor.

Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem, was pleased with Esther.
He knows what his king likes – and he sees that Esther has it.

So
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.

These would be seven concubines from the palace –
women who had already been with the king and could advise her on what he liked –
or didn't like.

It all sounds so exciting –
until you realize what this is talking about.

A harem full of young ladies whose one and only mission in life
is to sexually gratify one powerful man.

She didn't choose this.
She didn't want this.
This ran totally contrary to everything she had ever been taught!

The laws of the Medes and the Persians ran contrary to the law of the LORD –
but here she is – and

¹⁰ *Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.*

At this point Esther appears to be just a beautiful young woman
bouncing from man to man.

Her cousin Mordecai commands her – and she obeys.
The king's commissioners “take her” – and she goes.
Hegai advises her, and she does it.

To what end?
She is cut off from her people.
She has lost her name.
In eating the food of the palace, she has broken the food laws of her people.
In going to have sex with the king, she is breaking the command against adultery,
and even if he marries her, she is marrying outside the faith!

Her name, her people, her family have all been obliterated.

She is alone with no help other than what she can make happen from the inside!

And yet – while she alone, she is not forgotten!

Presumably God has not forgotten her – but remember, God is never named in this book!
Doubtless it felt for Esther as though God had forgotten –
and she never saw Mordecai either!

But

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.*

When you are a minor court official, you always know people.

And now that Esther was in the harem, she knew people!

So it was just a matter of finding a willing messenger who could go back and forth!
(A very important person in our story!)

These unnamed people are very important.

And though they are not named here,
they deserve recognition for being decent human beings!

They saw a man who was concerned for his cousin.

They saw a young woman who was suddenly isolated from her people.

They saw it often enough that they could have become jaded.

How many of the concubines had a cousin who checked on her every day?

He's out there again.

Who?

That fellow Mordecai.

He comes every day – to check on his cousin Esther –
you know, the one Hegai is so smitten by.

Every day.

For 12 months.

Mordecai comes to learn how Esther was.

Mordecai's God does not leave his people.

And so Mordecai does not leave his people either!

Verses 12-14 then describe the pattern of the harem:

3. “Unless the King Delighted in Her” – The Custom of the Harem (v12-14)

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.*

So it was a year from when Esther was “taken”
until she would go in to the king.
And unless the king delighted in her, and summons her by name...
Uh oh. This king has a notoriously bad memory...
He might like you a lot – but if he can’t remember you...

4. “The King Loved Esther More Than All the Women” – Esther and Ahasuerus (v15-17)

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.*

Notice how Esther is identified.
The daughter of Abihail – her father is now named.

Perhaps there is a hint here that Esther’s relationship to the king *should have been* a marriage.
Royalty only marries royalty.

The royal house of Persia was *supposed* to marry only certain families.

(Not that they always *did* – but that’s what the law said....)

But Esther is descended from the *first* royal house of Israel!

(Not that Israel was a powerful enough nation
to make the list of approved families!)

But still, she *is* royalty!

Also, notice all the men listed here –

Abihail, her natural father.

Mordecai, her cousin – who adopted her.

The King – Xerxes – who is about to bed her.

Hegai – the king’s eunuch – who is preparing her for that event.

Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her.

On the one hand, this is great!
Winning favor!!

But winning favor at what cost?
You’ve lost your name – your people – your identity –
your future is murky at best!

You could be “queen of Persia” – or at least, queen of the concubines –
since it’s pretty clear from the text, that Esther is never treated as a full queen.

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^[b] on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

I want you to notice something.

Where are the king’s advisors?

This is pretty much the only thing in the book of Esther
that Ahasuerus does on his own!

(And given that he surrounds himself with eunuchs...
one would *hope* that he could do this one on his own...)

Yes, you are supposed to snicker at Xerxes.

But here in verse 17, we need to give the man credit where credit is due!

Obviously, Esther was the most beautiful woman in the harem.

She was sweet, winsome, beautiful, charming –
everyone loved Esther!

But for once Xerxes was able to figure it out on his own!!

You are supposed to laugh at him – but hey, at least he gets this one right!

And so – of course – it was time for another banquet!!

5. The Feast of Esther (v18)

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.

Even though Esther’s ethnicity is a secret,

it is still worth noting that when good things happen to the Jews,
good things happen to the nations!

When Esther becomes “queen” –

all nations benefit.

It’s also worth noting that this is the seventh year of Xerxes’ reign.

This is important because the seventh year (in the Jewish calendar)
was the sabbatical year – the year when debts were released.

Xerxes is not interested in the Law of God –

but at “Esther’s feast” he (albeit inadvertently) obeys the laws of Esther’s God.

And so he proclaims a sabbath-rest for the Persian empire.

(When you live according to God’s law, it is *good* for you and for all your people!)

The seventh year would also be the year that Xerxes returned from his ignominious defeat at the hands of the Greeks.

And we do know that when kings lose key battles,
they often return home to conspiracies and plots...

and sure enough...

6. “Esther Obeyed Mordecai” – Mordecai Reports a Plot (v19-23)

¹⁹ *Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.*

What is meant by “the second time”?

A lot of scholars are puzzled by this –
but let's just take it the way the story presents it.
The first “gathering of the virgins” was great.

So let's do it again!

This is another piece of evidence that Esther is not a full “Queen of Persia”,
but just the “queen of the harem.”

In other words, the pattern of the harem continues.

And further, pretty much everything in the book of Esther comes in pairs.
Two feasts, two queens, two different places for women in the palace,
two eunuchs who plot against the king...

And many have noted an ominous note in this “second gathering.”
Is Xerxes already bored with Esther?
Will there be a new Queen of the harem?
Is Esther's place actually secure?

But as Xerxes begins his *next* round of sampling the young women of his empire,
Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

Just as Esther has been crowned as the Queen of the harem,
so now Mordecai has risen in his standing,
so that he now sits at the King's gate
(this would suggest that he has some sort of important role
in the administration of the king's business).

Now, that does not mean that everyone knows of the connection:

²⁰ *Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.*

We still see Esther as the faithful, obedient “daughter” –
who does everything that her male advisors tell her to do...

It’s worked well so far.

And in spite of my misgivings about royal concubinage,
it's important to say that the book of Esther
seems to think that Esther has done well.

If you live in a world that is run amok,
you don’t necessarily get to choose your lot in life.

But given that we are strangers and aliens –
pilgrims in the dispersion –
we would do well to think about long-term strategies
for how to live well and faithfully
in a world that is run amok!

That is certainly what Mordecai is doing.
He recognizes that being known as Jew can sometimes get you in trouble.
So, he sits in the king’s gate –
and as he sits in the king’s gate:

*²¹ In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.
²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. ²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows.^[c] And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.*

Surprise, surprise!

Losing a major military campaign in Greece
will convince even your household to turn on you!

Esther’s portrayal of Xerxes fits what we know from other sources.
He was man enslaved to his anger – to his sexual appetites –
and, oddly enough, to his advisors.

Eunuchs have no ability to procreate,
so they could not challenge the King in that respect!
(The bright idea – by the way – was that since a eunuch could not beget children,
therefore his “future” was tied to the king –
and therefore he was likely to be more loyal,
since he could not be seduced by a woman.)

Unfortunately for the “bright idea” –
eunuchs can still get angry and vengeful.
(There’s no way to “snip” that off!)

But Esther makes sure that Mordecai gets full credit for this.
And so this is all duly recorded in the book of the chronicles of the king.

That’s a pretty paltry “thanks”!
You saved my life – I’ll make sure that there’s a note in your file – good job!

But Mordecai never even gets an audience with the king.
Esther tells Xerxes – and Xerxes investigates and hangs the offenders.

But true to Mordecai’s counsel,
Esther does not reveal her connection to Mordecai – or to the Jews.

This is part of what it means to live as the people of God in the dispersion.

The book of Esther is *not* about living in Exile.
The Exile is over!
You could go home to Jerusalem any time you like!

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 –
even after you no longer really think of the *land* as your home.

How should we live – when we know that we will spend the duration of our 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!
This is where Christ *calls us* to live until he returns.
We can’t just adopt short-term tactics.
We need long-term strategies for how to live here for generations!

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.