

ESTHER

Chapter 1

Queen Vashti Deposed

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes,^a the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush^b:² At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa,³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa.⁶ The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones.⁷ Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.⁸ By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.¹⁰ On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas—¹¹ to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.¹² But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.¹³ Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times¹⁴ and were closest to the king—Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.¹⁵ “According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. “She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.”¹⁶ Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes.¹⁷ For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.’¹⁸ This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way.

There will be no end of disrespect and discord. ¹⁹ “Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.” ²⁰ Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.” ²¹ The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. ²² He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.

1:1 *Ahasuerus.* Persian king (486–465 BC), son of Darius I (522–486 BC). Grandson of Cyrus the Great (559–530 BC), who had issued the decree allowing the Judeans in captivity to return to their homeland (Ezr 1:2–4). “Ahasuerus” is Hbr rendering of Persian title “mighty man,” a title the king used on monumental inscriptions. He is better known by his Gk name, Xerxes. (TLSB)

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE TIME – The events described in this book took place between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra, after the return of Zerubbabel, but before the return of Ezra. In this book we learn how God used Esther to save the people of Israel from destruction. (PBC)

Xerxes. A transliteration of the Greek form of the Persian name Khshayarshan (see note on Ezr 4:6; see also NIV text note here). Xerxes succeeded his father Darius and ruled 486–465 B.C. (CSB)

India to Ethiopia. Persia’s territory exceeded that of any previous empire, extending from the Indus River, far to the southeast, to the borders of Greece and the region below Egypt, far to the southwest. (TLSB)

127 provinces. See 8:9. The Greek historian Herodotus (3.89) records that Xerxes’s father Darius had organized the empire into 20 satrapies. (Satraps, the rulers of the satrapies are mentioned in 3:12; 8:9; 9:3.) The provinces were smaller administrative units. (CSB)

Vast empire was divided into satrapies and provinces.

1:2 *citadel of Susa.* The fortified acropolis and palace complex; it is distinguished from the surrounding city in 3:15; 4:1–2, 6; 8:15. Several archaeological investigations have been made at the site since the mid-19th century. Xerxes had made extensive renovations in the palace structures. (CSB)

Susa. The winter residence of the Persian kings; the three other capitals were Ecbatana (Ezr 6:2), Babylon and Persepolis. One of Daniel’s visions was set in Susa (Da 8:2); Nehemiah also served there (Ne 1:1). (CSB)

Winter residence of Persian kings, 200 mi NE of Babylon, one of four royal cities. Ahasuerus had made extensive renovations to the acropolis area above the city. (TLSB)

1:3–4 The year (483–482 B.C.), the persons in attendance and the length of the meeting suggest that the gathering may have been to plan for the disastrous campaigns of 482–479 against Greece. Herodotus (7.8) possibly describes this assembly. (CSB)

1:3 *third year.* Gk historian Herodotus tells of a gathering of Ahasuerus’s mighty men one year before his disastrous military campaign against Greece (482–479 BC). (TLSB)

banquet. Feasting is a prominent theme in Esther (see Introduction: Purpose, Themes and Literary Features i.e The author’s central purpose was to record the institution of the annual festival of Purim and to keep alive for generations the memory of the great deliverance of the Jewish people during the reign of Xerxes). (CSB)

The Hbr can be translated “drinking party” or “banquet.” Ancient Gk historians report that the Persians gave lavish banquets. Banquets are the settings for important plot developments in Est. (TLSB)

1:4 DISPLAYED THE VAST WEALTH – Luxury was the characteristic of the Eastern monarchs, and particularly of the Persians. In their feasts, which were superb and of long continuance, they made a general exhibition of their wealth, grandeur, etc., and received the highest encomiums from their poets and flatterers. (ACC)

180 days. For half a year, Ahasuerus displayed the ostentatious grandeur of the royal opulence inherited from his father, Darius. Rarely has such extravagance been exhibited. (TLSB)

1:5–6 The excavations at Susa have unearthed a text in which Xerxes’s father Darius describes in some detail the building of his palace. Xerxes continued the work his father had begun. (CSB)

1:5 At the conclusion of the half-year feast, Ahasuerus lavished his generosity on commoners, who were welcomed into his private quarters for a weeklong celebration. Some scholars suggest that this was a wedding feast because a week was the normal length of marriage celebrations. (TLSB)

1:6–7 Detailed description attests to the historical accuracy of this account, underscoring the luxurious indulgence of the Persian court. Numerous rare words portray images of flamboyant beauty and luxury. *cotton.* Mentioned directly only here in Scripture. First cultivated in India, cotton slowly found a place alongside linen in the West. (TLSB)

1:8 *There is no compulsion.* Rule requiring guests to drink only when the king raised his goblet was set aside. They were permitted to drink as they desired. (TLSB)

1:9 *Queen Vashti.* Deposed in 484/483 B.C.; Esther became queen in 479/478 (2:16–17). The Greek historians call Xerxes’s queen Amestris; they record her influence during the early part of his reign and as queen mother during the following reign of her son Artaxerxes (Ezr 7:1, 7, 11–12, 21; 8:1; Ne 2:1; 5:14; 13:6) until the time of her own death c. 424. Artaxerxes came to the throne when he was 18 years old; therefore he was born c. 484/483, approximately at the time of Vashti’s deposal. Since he was the third son of Amestris, the name Amestris cannot be identified with Esther and must be viewed as a Greek version of the name Vashti. Comparatively little is known of the late portions of Xerxes’s reign, nor is it possible to determine the subsequent events of the life of Esther. Apparently after Esther’s death or her fall from favor, Vashti was able to reassert her power and to exercise a controlling influence over her son. (CSB)

From Persian word *vahista*, “best.” (TLSB)

feast for the women. Vashti hosted her own banquet, just for women, simultaneously with her husband’s grand party. (TLSB)

The importance of the story of the removal of Queen Vashti is limited to the fact that it shows how God controlled events so that Esther could become Xerxes’ wife. We should be cautious about drawing moral examples from it. Some commentators have made Vashti the hero of the story. They have suggested that since she was ordered to appear wearing the royal crown, she was to appear wearing only the crown, and that she was a noble woman who courageously refused the indecent command of her drunken husband. Others have made Vashti a villain, a disrespectful, arrogant wife, who had no regard for her husband. Xerxes’ actions seem to be motivated more by pride and anger than by any real understanding or concern for the proper relationship of husband and wife. (PBC)

1:1–9 Ahasuerus celebrates his accession to the throne with extravagant drinking parties for government officials and common citizens. Some people today find it necessary to build ever bigger houses and to buy more expensive cars. Christians must resist societal influences that encourage extravagant materialism. God graciously cares for us, providing us with the necessities of daily living (1Tm 6:8). His kingdom and His righteousness are the very best of all His gifts (Mt 6:33). • Thank You, Lord, for all the material blessings You daily supply. Increase my appreciation for Your gifts, and move me to share generously with others. Amen. (TLSB)

1:10 *seventh day.* The king’s weeklong drinking party was coming to an end (v 5). (TLSB)

1:12 *refused to come*. Although no reason is stated, Queen Vashti's impertinence may have stemmed from her revulsion at being displayed publicly before the king's drunken and lascivious lackeys merely as an ornamental object. (TLSB)

enraged ... anger burned. Vashti's refusal to obey was a public humiliation for the powerful king. (TLSB)

1:13–14 Ezr 7:14 and the Greek historian Herodotus indicate that seven men functioned as the immediate advisers to the king. (CSB)

1:13 *wise men who understood the times*. Court astrologers.

Probably royal astronomers who knew the inner workings of the kingdom, the previous legal precedents, the pulse of the nation, and the most propitious astrological signs to guide the king's decisions. (TLSB)

1:14 *Persia*. Between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, present-day Iran (cf v 1). (TLSB)

Media. Northwest of Persia. Joined with Babylon in overthrowing Assyrian Empire (612 BC). Later conquered by Cyrus the Great and often linked with Persia in Scripture (Dn 5:31). (TLSB)

saw the king's face. Had access to the Persian king, allowing them to converse with him as intimate cabinet advisers. (TLSB)

1:16–20 Memucan overreacts and imagines a national crisis. His concern was that wifely contempt for husbands could disrupt the empire by lowering male authority and provoking wrath (v 18). (TLSB)

1:19 The king took this advice and dismissed his defiant wife from attending him; a divorce was decreed. Vashti was not killed; she reappears in historical documents as a powerful adviser to her son Artaxerxes until her death in 424 BC. (TLSB)

never again to enter. The punishment corresponds to the crime: Since Vashti refused to appear before the king, it is decreed that she never appear before him again. Furthermore, from this point on she is no longer given the title "Queen" in the book of Esther. (CSB)

1:22 *own script*. Persian cuneiform script, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the Hebrew alphabet are very different. Messages, esp laws, had to be communicated in regional languages. E.g., a Persian document from the reign of Artaxerxes III (358–338 BC) was recorded in Imperial Aramaic (see p 720), Greek, and Lycian. Texts emphasize different points, based on interests of local people. (TLSB)

proclaiming ... household. Or "that every man should be ruler over his own household and that his native language should be used in the home," thus

referring to the use of the husband's native language in ethnically mixed marriages as a sign of his rule in the home (see Ne 13:23–24). (CSB)

Decree actually publicized the king's weakness and humiliation. Because of his own failed marriage, he issued an empire-wide law ordering male rule. His decree of male mastery breathes a spirit far different from St Paul's inspired directives on the God-ordained roles of husbands and wives, which are motivated by Christ's love (Eph 5:22–33). (TLSB)

language of his people. Language of the husband was to be spoken in the home of a mixed marriage.

1:10–22 Ahasuerus and Vashti are not models of moral virtue for believers. God uses the king's dismissal of his wife to prepare the way for Esther to become queen. God will often use evil deeds to work His will. Joseph said to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gn 50:20). Nothing demonstrates this truth more clearly than Jesus' death on the cross. Because of His death, we have life. • Heavenly King, I am sometimes disturbed by the way government officials conduct themselves and the laws they enact. Help me remember that You rule over all things and can bring good from evil. Amen.