

ESTHER

Chapter 2

Esther Chosen Queen

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 be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so. 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 Benjamite, 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. 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. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. 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. 10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 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. 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. 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. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. 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 on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 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.

2:1 *after these things.* Esther was taken to Xerxes “in the seventh year of his reign” (v. 16), i.e., in December, 479 B.C., or January, 478. The Greek wars intervened before a new queen was sought. (CSB)

For several years, Ahasuerus was engaged in a futile attempt to conquer Greece. His thoughts would not have been on domestic affairs such as his lack of a queen. (TLSB)

Four years passed between the decree deposing Vashti and the elevation of Esther. (PBC)

remembered Vashti. Perhaps the king realized that Vashti had not been such a bad wife after all and that his decision had been rash. (TLSB)

2:2 *young virgins for the king.* To add to his harem. (CSB)

Maidens in their teens who were sexually pure. (TLSB)

2:3–4† The phraseology here is similar to that in Ge 41:34–37. This and numerous other parallels suggest that the author of Esther modeled his work after the Joseph narrative. Both accounts are set in the courts of foreign monarchs and portray Israelite heroes who rise to prominence and provide the means by which their people are saved. (CSB)

2:3 *harem.* Lit, “the house of the women,” where the king’s wives and concubines were kept. No one would have access to them except the king. The number of wives was a mark of wealth and power (cf 1Ki 11:3). (TLSB)

cosmetics. Lit, “bodily rubbings.” Beauty treatments and massages enhanced the natural beauty of these girls. Oils and perfumes were applied to soften sun-dried skin and to cleanse pores. Eye painting in shades of dark red, black, and green was also common. (TLSB)

2:4 *who pleases the king.* Lit, “who is good in the king’s eyes.” Implies irresistible attractiveness. Yet, these young virgins had to please the king in other ways (cf v 14), which would have involved compromises for a faithful Judean woman. (TLSB)

2:5 *Jew in Susa the citadel.* As far back as the fall of the northern kingdom in 722–721 B.C. Israelites had been exiled among the cities of the Medes (2Ki 17:6). After the conquest of Babylon by King Cyrus of Persia in 539, some of the Jewish population taken there by the Babylonians (605–586) probably moved eastward into the cities of Medo-Persia. Only 50,000 returned to Israel in the restoration of 538 (Ezr 2:64–67). The presence of a large Jewish population in Medo-Persia is confirmed by the discovery of an archive of texts in Nippur (southern Mesopotamia) from the period of Artaxerxes I (465–424) and Darius II (424–405). This archive contains the names of about 100 Jews who lived in that city. Some had attained positions of importance and wealth. Similar Jewish populations are probable in many other Medo-Persian cities. (CSB)

Hbr term refers to citizens of the province of Judah. Judeans attained prominent positions of wealth and authority in many Medo-Persian cities. (TLSB)

Mordecai. The name is derived from that of the Babylonian deity Marduk. There are numerous examples in the Bible of Jews having double names—a Hebrew name and a “Gentile” name. Mordecai likely had a Hebrew name, as did Esther (v. 7), Daniel and his friends (Da 1:6–7), Joseph (Ge 41:45) and others, but the text does not mention Mordecai’s Hebrew name. A

cuneiform tablet from Borsippa near Babylon mentions a scribe by the name of Mardukaya; he was an accountant or minister at the court of Susa in the early years of Xerxes. Many scholars identify him with Mordecai. (CSB)

May be the Persian form of “Marduk,” a heathen god. (TLSB)

son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish. The persons named could be immediate ancestors, in which case Mordecai would be the great-grandson of Kish, who was among the exiles with Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. It is more likely, however, that the names refer to remote ancestors in the tribe of Benjamin (see 2Sa 16:5–14 for Shimei, 1Sa 9:1 for Kish). This association with the tribe and family of King Saul sets the stage for the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Amalekites (see notes on 3:1–6). If the names are those of remote ancestors, the clause “who had been carried into exile” (v. 6) would not apply to Mordecai, who would have been over 100 years old in that case; rather, it would have to be taken as an elliptical construction in the sense “whose family had been carried into exile.” (CSB)

Names found in the family of King Saul more than 500 years earlier (1Sm 9:1–2; 2Sm 16:5). (TLSB)

Benjaminite. Of the tribe of Benjamin, like Saul (1Sm 9:1–2). Tribe became part of the kingdom of Judah. (TLSB)

2:6 Mordecai’s ancestors had been carried into exile. (TLSB)

Jehoiachin king of Judah. See 2Ki 24:8–17; 2Ch 36:9–10. (CSB)

Variant spelling of Judah’s king Jehoiachin, who was exiled in 597 BC along with the upper classes of Judah (2Ki 24:8–17). Suggests that Mordecai may have had some prestige or nobility. (TLSB)

2:7 *Hadassah.* Esther’s Hebrew name, meaning “myrtle.” The name Esther is likely derived from the Persian word for “star,” though some derive it from the name of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. (CSB)

Hbr, “myrtle.” *Esther.* Persian name that comes from *stareh*, meaning “star,” and is associated with Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love, or the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth. Interestingly, “Esther” has a verbal root in Hbr (*str*), which means “to conceal.” Jewish rabbis later associated her name with God’s hiddenness: “I will surely hide (*’astir*) My face” (Dt 31:18). (TLSB)

she had neither father nor mother. Her father’s name was Abihail (v 15), but nothing is said about how she lost her parents and came under her cousin’s protection. (TLSB)

beautiful figure and was lovely to look at. Lit, “beautiful of form and good in appearance.” Esther excelled in both her noble carriage and irresistible attractiveness. (TLSB)

2:8 *Esther also was taken.* Neither she nor Mordecai would have had any choice in the matter (cf. 2Sa 11:4). (CSB)

Esther was not only an exile from her homeland but also was taken captive by the king’s men. She faced the prospect of being doubly violated, both as a woman and a Judean. She is forced to make the best of a bad situation. (TLSB)

2:9 *young woman pleased him.* Esther captivated Hegai, the keeper of the royal harem, with her charm. *favor.* Hbr *chesed* is often used for God's steadfast love and carries ideas of covenantal loyalty and undeserved affection. Hegai showed some of these characteristics. (TLSB)

special food. Lit. "her portions." Unlike Daniel and his friends (Da 1:5–10), Esther does not observe the dietary laws, perhaps in part to conceal her Jewish identity (vv. 10, 20). Giving such portions is a sign of special favor (1Sa 9:22–24; 2Ki 25:29–30; Da 1:1–10; negatively, Jer 13:25); in the Joseph narrative cf. Ge 43:34. The motif of giving portions appears later as a practice in observing Purim (9:19, 22). (CSB)

seven chosen young women. Specially selected companions for Esther's development, serving as royal advisers. (TLSB)

best place. Hegai provided Esther with the best apartment, perhaps in close proximity to the king. Archaeological reconstruction of the royal harem indicates that most bedrooms were so small that even a single occupant had little personal space. (TLSB)

2:10 The fact that Esther concealed her identity is reported twice—here and in v. 20. (CSB)

commanded her. Mordecai demanded secrecy regarding Esther's nationality lest she jeopardize her chances for advancement. Esther's willingness to hide her Judean heritage likely resulted in some religious and cultural compromises (e.g., diet, Sabbath observance). (TLSB)

Esther's willingness to hide her Jewishness would certainly have involved some compromises in her lifestyle and in her worship. In this regard her conduct contrasted sharply with that of Daniel and his three friends (Daniel 1,3) (PBC)

2:11 Mordecai observed Esther's progress from a distance, probably through the columned courtyards. He may have had some minor government position. (TLSB)

2:12 *regulations for the women.* Process provided opportunities for training in aristocratic etiquette. (TLSB)

six months. Regimen of skin-lightening and skin-softening treatments required a significant length of time. (TLSB)

myrrh. Often associated with sexual situations (cf Ps 45:8; Pr 7:17; Sg 1:13; 5:1–13). (TLSB)

2:13 *whatever.* Perhaps perfume, jewelry, or a luxurious garment likely to please the king and provoke erotic feelings. (TLSB)

2:14 *to second harem.* To the chambers of the concubines. (CSB)

Only one night with the king was common practice, unless the girl pleased him and the king asked her back. (In the tale *A Thousand and One Nights*, the king took young girls each night until charming Scheherazade captivated him with her stories.) This is a far cry from God's intentions for marriage. *concubines.* After having slept with the king, these girls acquired a new

status as a sexual partner who received protection and provision but had no rights to inheritance as a wife. Unfortunately, most women would never leave this second home. (TLSB)

2:15 *Abihail.* Means “my father is mighty.” Esther’s full family name was given when her turn came to go in to the king. (TLSB)

asked for nothing other than – In the ancient Near East the supervisors of the kings’ harems were men who had been castrated to remove any possibility that they might engage in sexual relations with one of the king’s wives and produced a son who might become heir to the throne. These men were often shrewd politicians who exerted great influence through the women of the court. Hegai’s favor for Esther may have been due in part to the fact that he had her picked as a winner and wanted to establish his influence with the future queen. (PBC)

No one would be more familiar with the king’s most intimate preferences than Hegai. (TLSB)

2:16 *tenth month ...month of Tebeth... seventh year.* December, 479 B.C., or January, 478. Esther’s tenure as queen continued through the events of the book, i.e., through 473. She may have died or fallen from favor shortly thereafter. (CSB)

Four years after Vashti’s rejection. (TLSB)

2:17 *loved.* Hbr word signifies a spectrum of emotions from casual affection to overwhelming devotion, including sexual desire. (TLSB)

set the royal crown on her head. Apparently, Ahasuerus stopped his search for a queen with the appearance of Esther. (TLSB)

2:18 *great feast.* Fourth of 10 banquets reported in Est. *remission of taxes.* Hbr means “caused a rest,” understood here as canceling some taxes. In 10:1, Ahasuerus “imposed tax on the land.” Some understand the king’s action to mean something like “proclaimed a holiday.” (TLSB)

2:1–18 After careful preparation, beautiful Esther meets Ahasuerus, gains his favor, and becomes queen of Persia. At this point, her future looks bright. But perilous times were coming for her and for her people. In all that happens, God is silently at work directing affairs. At the critical moment, Esther would be in a position to play a decisive role in delivering Israel. “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform” (LSB 765:1). We walk by faith and not by sight. • Help me, Lord, to pass through good times and bad, always trusting Your loving guidance. Amen. (TLSB)

Mordecai Discovers a Plot

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king’s gate. **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. **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. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

2:19 The enlargement of the harem apparently continued unabated. Perhaps there is a causal connection between the second gathering of women and the assassination plot (vv. 21–23); some have suggested that it reflects palace intrigue in support of the deposed Vashti. (CSB)

virgins were gathered together. We are not told why this second group of virgins was gathered. Perhaps Ahasuerus desired more concubines who could both serve his personal interests and be ladies-in-waiting for the new queen. (TLSB)

king's gate. The gate of an ancient city was its major commercial and legal center. Markets were held in the gate; the court sat there to transact its business (see Dt 21:18–20; Jos 20:4; Ru 4:1–11; Ps 69:12). A king might hold an audience in the gate (see 2Sa 19:8; 1Ki 22:10). Daniel was at the king's gate as ruler over all Babylon (Da 2:48–49). Mordecai's sitting in the king's gate confirms his holding a high position in the civil service of the empire. From this vantage point he might overhear plans for the murder of the king. (CSB)

A city's main gate was a place for business as well as for gossip and rumors. Mordecai's presence here allowed him contact with many officials of the realm and may indicate his status as a respected citizen. (By way of illustration, the gate area at Persepolis was nearly half the size of a football field.) (TLSB)

2:21–23 Another point of comparison with the Joseph narrative is the involvement of two chamberlains (Ge 40:1–3; see note on vv. 3–4). (CSB)

guarded the threshold. Guardians of the king's private chamber had easy access to Ahasuerus in his most vulnerable moments. (TLSB)

became angry ... sought to lay hands on Intrigue and assassination plots against rulers were common in Persian history. Esther would also have been at risk if this plot had been carried out. In 465 BC, Ahasuerus was in fact assassinated by men who guarded his royal entranceway. (TLSB)

2:22 Esther, referred to by her royal title for the first time, reported the conspiracy to her husband, giving credit to Mordecai for providing the information. Persian kings were renowned for rewarding benefactors. (TLSB)

2:23 *hanged.* Among the Persians this form of execution was impalement, as is confirmed in pictures and statues from the ancient Near East and in the comments of the Greek historian Herodotus (3.125,129; 4.43). According to Herodotus (3.159) Darius I impaled 3,000 Babylonians when he took Babylon, an act that Darius himself recorded in his Behistun (Bisitun) inscription. In Israelite and Canaanite practice, hanging was an exhibition of the corpse and not the means of execution itself (Dt 21:22–23; Jos 8:29; 10:26; 1Sa 31:8–10; 2Sa 4:12; 21:9–10). The execution of a chamberlain in the Joseph narrative also appears to have been by impalement (Ge 40:19). The sons of Haman were killed by the sword, and then their corpses were displayed in this way (9:5–14). (CSB)

Refers not to strangulation by a rope but probably to impalement on a sharp stake and slow death by starvation, the Persian mode of execution from which the Romans got the idea of crucifixion. (TLSB)

chronicles. The concern of the author of Esther with rhetorical symmetry is seen in the fact that the annals are mentioned in the beginning (here), middle (6:1) and end (10:2) of the narrative.

The episode dealing with the plot of Bigthana and Teresh is a good example of the many “coincidences” in the book that later take on crucial significance for the story. (CSB)

Official records of the Persian government, where later Ahasuerus read of what Mordecai had done (6:1). (TLSB)

2:19–23 Mordecai’s discovery of a plot against Ahasuerus means that the king owes him a favor. At a crucial time in the future, when the fate of many Judeans will hang in the balance, Mordecai’s good deed will have saving consequences. Events that seem unconnected come together in God’s plan to save His people. • Lord, at times I feel unrewarded for the good I do. Forgive my discontent, and keep me fervent in my desire to serve You always. Amen. (TLSB)