



Lesson 2

Queen Vashti Dethroned (Esther 1:1-22)

I. Scripture Reading:

Esther 1:1-22

II. Synopsis:

1. King Ahasuerus (1:1-8)

The book of Esther begins with “In the days of Ahasuerus...” (1:1), reminding the reader that this book is not an allegory, but a factual historical record of God’s preservation of His chosen people as they faced annihilation.

King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes I in Greek history, was the son of Darius I, who preceded him. He

ascended the throne at age 32 and reigned from 486 to 465 B.C. The King Ahasuerus mentioned in Ezra 4:6 could be the same king as seen in the book of Esther.

Esther 1:1 points out that the realm of the Persian Empire under Ahasuerus ranged “from India to Cush” (modern-day Pakistan to North Sudan), ranging from Asia to Europe and Africa and consisting of 127 provinces. Scholars have not yet reached a consensus on how the regions were categorized; however, the author of Esther clearly tried to demonstrate that the Persian Empire was a very large and diverse empire, encompassing people of many ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. This foreshadows the later conflict that arises out of the ethnicities and religions.

Darius I tried to conquer Athens, but was not successful. After Ahasuerus ascended the throne, he desired to complete his father’s conquest of Greece. In order to gain support from his provincial princes, officials, and commanders, he hosted a lavish six-month banquet for them during the third year of his reign, implying that those in attendance who supported his campaign to conquer Greece would receive great rewards. The descriptions of the banquet’s extravagant decorations, precious vessels, and unlimited supply of wine in this lavish banquet and the additional, seven-day banquet for the people in Susan, proudly display the king’s great wealth, great power,

and great glory. The author uses the later examples of Vashti's disobedience and Esther's plea to reveal the irony that despite possessing wealth, power, and glory, the king could not possess true wisdom by his wealth. (ref: Psa 49:6-9)

2. Queen Vashti (1:9-12)

In Farsi, Queen Vashti's name means "desired" or "beloved," indicating that she was a very beautiful woman. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the queen of Ahasuerus was Amestris, which is viewed by most scholars as Vashti's name in Greek pronunciation. Ahasuerus had many concubines in his harem, but there was only one queen recorded in the history, and she even accompanied him in the campaign against Greece once. Since there is nowhere to find the name of either Vashti or Esther in history contemporary to the book of Esther, some scholars doubt the authenticity of the book. According to Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi in *Persia and the Bible*, we know that Vashti was the mother of Artaxerxes. Herodotus might have recorded only the names of those who were mothers to later kings. In history, we see the irony that despite being beautiful and beloved by the king, Vashti spent her later days alone.

Herodotus, who wrote extensively on the history of the Persian Empire, describes the Persian court tradition

of female companions accompanying male guests to the official banquet without being segregated from them on account of their sex. The Bible states that Queen Vashti hosted a separate banquet for the women, indicating that Vashti had the freedom to make decisions and act on her own. Some scholars believe that the notion of a separate banquet indicated a poor relationship between the king and queen; however, it is possible that Vashti arranged the separate banquet to let the women also have an enjoyable time with their other female companions. But on the last day of the seven-day banquet, the king sent seven trusted eunuchs to Vashti, asking her to wear her crown to the main hall so that the attendants could admire her beauty. Queen Vashti refused her husband's request, which cast a shadow over the otherwise successful celebration.

We do not know the purpose of King Ahasuerus' request; it may have been similar to today's practices, where royal appearances at important events excite the people and inspire loyalty to the throne. We also do not know why Queen Vashti refused her husband's request. Some scholars suggest that since the king specifically mentioned that the queen should wear her crown, she otherwise was to appear naked. Alternatively, the queen may have felt it was beneath her dignity to appear in front of a group of drunken men who might insult her with inappropriate comments.

Whatever Vashti's reason for refusing the king's command, King Ahasuerus was furious. He had hosted the banquet to inspire the loyalty and obedience of his princes and commanders; the queen's refusal in front of his officers and princes suggested that he was not authoritative enough to even keep his own household and marriage in order. If not even his wife would obey him, how could he continue to inspire confidence and loyalty in his troops?

The kingdoms of this world usually rule over their subjects through the practice of punishment and rewards. But the kingdom of God is different. In Philippians 2:6-11 we see that Jesus, despite being the Son of God, humbly took the form of a human and died willingly on the cross to redeem us. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place so that every knee shall bow and every believer proclaims that "Jesus Christ is the Lord" and gives glory to God. We can see that the kingdom of God doesn't rule by the same incentives human kingdoms practice. Instead, Jesus came down to earth so that we all can enjoy an abundant life and be liberated by knowing the truth of God's wisdom and love. Do you want an abundant life and true freedom?

3. The Queen Banished (1:13-22)

King Ahasuerus was noted to be an irritable and cru-

el king, whose arrogance and ignorance is evident by how he dealt with the queen's disobedience. Furious over his queen's refusal of his order, he asked seven of his wise men what to do next. One of the counselors, Memucan, suggested that the king issue a public decree banishing the queen from the Susa citadel and demanding that all women submit to their husbands. The king and others supported this idea and acted accordingly. Ironically, one result of the decree was that it made public to everyone that the queen had rejected the king's demand. Additionally, when wifely submission to a husband is mandated by law, the act of submission becomes a formality and loses its true meaning.

At the end of Chapter 1, the author hints that another woman would replace Vashti, and that woman, Esther, would be the protagonist of this book. We shall see how God used the queen's position to fulfill His plan for His Kingdom.

On the surface, Chapter 1 describes the vastness of the Persian Empire and the greatness of King Ahasuerus. But the author also wants the reader to understand life in the Persian Empire: the king's forcing people to submit to him, the inherent conflicts among different cultural groups, and the stress in a high-profile marriage. Such descriptions allow the reader to better understand the challenges facing Esther, a Jewish girl who became a Persian queen

to counteract the oppression against her people.

Lastly, Chapter 1 lets the readers see the irony of Memucan's suggestion and King Ahasuerus' subsequent decree. Later chapters in Esther show how all the peoples in the Persian empire witnessed God's immense power, which transcends ethnic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. They all became witnesses to history, commemorated by the Purim festival first observed over 2,000 years ago.

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD section “Background” and “Scholars’ Discussion: Dr. Paul Lai”.

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks:

- (1) The father of King Ahasuerus was _____. Their common goal was to capture _____, but neither succeeded.
- (2) The Persian Empire was in its prime during King Ahasuerus' reign. The realm of the empire ranged from _____ to _____ (from modern-day _____ to _____) and was divided into _____ provinces.
- (3) In Chapter 1, there are _____ banquets, and the number seven is mentioned _____ times. They are the _____ in

- verse 5, _____ in verse 10, and _____ in verses 13-14.
- (4) After King Ahasuerus issued a royal decree dethroning Queen Vashti, he sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to _____ and _____.

2. Scripture Study:

- (1) How did the author describe the prosperity and glory of the Persian Empire?

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- (2) Why did King Ahasuerus go out of his way to give the banquet?

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(3) What was in the king's edict?

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3. Discussion and Sharing:

(1) Scholars through the ages have been divided on the topic of Queen Vashti. Some think she was a disobedient wife and not a good role model for women; others view her as a symbol of women's brave self-expression. What lessons did you learn from Queen Vashti?

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(2) King Ahasuerus saved face at the expense of others; in contrast, Jesus sacrificed himself for the good of others. What kind of attributes do you think a leader, whether at home or at work, should possess?

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(3) Are there many ethnic groups where you live? What is the relationship like between these groups? Please think of ways that ethnic groups can come to know, understand, and appreciate one other despite their linguistic differences. If there is only one ethnic group where you live, please share with others what you know about ethnic minorities.

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**Bible Study Process
for Bible Study Group or
Sunday School**

This part supplies a reference for group leaders and Sunday school teachers. If needed, please refer to Appendix: “Instruction for Bible Study Group Leaders and Instructors”. Please feel free to adjust the process according to time limits.

A. Preparation (5-15 minutes)

1. Icebreaker / Introduction:

- a. Please invite 2-3 members to share what they found regarding modern day Iran or the ancient Persian Empire from newspapers and magazines last week. If any have traveled to Iran before, invite them to share what they saw and heard.
- b. Briefly introduce the battle of Marathon, the origin of Marathon and the battle of Thermopylae, then segue the discussion into the state of affairs in the Persian Empire under King Ahasuerus.

2. Last Week's Scripture Memorization: “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Est 4:14)

3. Opening Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, as we get together and study your words, please be with us and bless us. May the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts and help us to understand your words. May you open our ears so that we can know your will, follow your lead and be blessed by you. Please give us wisdom and strength through your words, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to you. We also want to seek after your heart and be a blessing to the people around us. We pray all these in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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B. Development (40-90 minutes)
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I. Scripture Reading:

Esther 1:1-1:22

II. Synopsis:

1. King Ahasuerus (1:1-8)
2. Queen Vashti (1:9-12)
3. The Queen Banished (1:13-22)

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD section “Background” and “Scholars’ Discussion: Dr. Paul Lai”.

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks: Questions (1) – (4)
2. Scripture Study: Questions (1) – (3)
3. Discussion and Sharing: Questions (1) – (3)

C. Conclusion (5-15 minutes)

1. Summary:

From Esther 1, we see that the Persian Empire was vast and the most powerful empire at the time. However, material riches and supreme power did not bring long-lasting contentment to King Ahasuerus, and the royal decree he issued did not bring harmony and happiness to his people. But real contentment, joy, and abundant life can be found from salvation in

Jesus Christ as promised by God.

2. Homework Assignment:

- a. Scripture Reading: Esther 2:1-18
- b. Please learn more about a vulnerable/minority group around you and think about what you can do for them. For example, pray for them, join their community activities, etc.

*** Closing Prayer: ***

The small group leader can lead the prayer or ask a group member to lead.