Ester (Esther) ~ Part 1

Today, we start another book from the **Tanakh**: **Ester**. I couldn't ignore her; like **Rut**, **Ester** is the only other **Book** in the **Tanakh** named after a **woman**. She is still celebrated annually in **Jewish** congregations around the world.

The conflict between **King Achashverosh** (Xerxes) and **Queen Vashti** illustrates the challenges of authority and respect within a relationship. If you find yourself often in disputes at home, consider setting aside time to communicate openly about your expectations and boundaries with your spouse or family members. Make a list of areas where you feel your views are not respected. Approach these conversations with grace and love, ensuring everyone can express themselves without fear of retaliation, just as **Vashti** bravely advocated for herself.

Ester is a unique book. It is the only book in the **Bible** that never mentions **God**, although His presence is implied through **Mordekhai's** allusion to divine providence (4:14). At times, the book seems rather secular; historically, this has raised questions about its place in the **synagogue** and **church canon**. **Ester** is tightly connected with specific historical events, yet it is also a piece of literature, a narrative with all of the literary features necessary to make it a great story. It is a book whose purposes are not always explicitly stated but are derived from the story as a whole.

Angers the King

1 [1] These events took place in the time of Achashverosh, the Achashverosh who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. [2] It was in those days, when King Achashverosh sat on his royal throne in Shushan, the capital,

Achashverosh is the **Hebrew** name for **King Xerxes**, who ruled from 486–465 (B.C.); he is mentioned only two other times in the rest of the **Tanakh** (Ezra 4:6; Daniel 9:1).

[3] in the third year of his reign, that he gave a banquet for all his officials and courtiers. The army of Persia and Media, the nobles and the provincial officials were in attendance. [4] He displayed the dazzling wealth of his kingdom and his great splendor for a long time, 180 days.

In the third year of **Achashverosh, probably 483 B.C.,** the first of 10 feasts recorded in **Ester** occurred; these are important structural and thematic markers in the book. The word "feast" is derived from the **Hebrew** verb **shathah**, meaning "to drink." The "feast" was more of a drinking bout than a meal. **Ancient Greek** writers noted that the **Persians** were famous (or infamous) for their prodigious drinking.

[5] At the end of that time, the King gave a seven-day banquet in the courtyard of the royal palace garden for all the people, both great and small, there in Shushan, the capital. [6] There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings fastened to silver rods, with cords of fine linen and purple; the columns were marble; the couches [for reclining at table] were of gold and silver on a mosaic flooring of malachite, marble, mother-of-pearl and onyx. [7] Drinks were served in gold goblets, with each goblet different from the others. There was royal wine in abundance, as befits royal bounty. [8] The drinking was not according to any fixed rule, for the king had ordered the stewards to serve each man what he wanted.

Unlike the first feast, the second **banquet** was not for the nobility but for all the citizenry in the **fortress of Susa**. The event is described in great detail (v. 6) to highlight the **King's** opulence and wealth. For the **Persians**, it must have been regarded as a fabulous party because the **royal wine flowed freely, according to the king's bounty**. Moreover, by royal decree, each guest could drink as much as he desired or was capable of drinking.

[9] Also Vashti the Queen gave a banquet for the women in the royal house belonging to King Achashverosh. [10] On the seventh day, when the King was in high spirits from the wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizta, Harvona, Bigta, Avagta, Zetar and Karkas, the seven officers who attended him, [11] to bring Queen Vashti before the king with the royal crown, in order to show the people and the officials her beauty, for she was indeed a good-looking woman. [12] But Queen Vashti refused to come at the order of the king, which he had sent through his officers. This enraged the king - his anger blazed inside him.

The third feast was given by **Queen Vashti**, who is first introduced in this verse; it was only for the women. Both biblical and extrabiblical sources demonstrate that women were often present at the feasts, but their presence was not mentioned at the two earlier feasts (vv. 3, 5). Neither **Persian** nor **Greek** records mention a queen named **Vashti**; instead, they identify **Amestris** as queen during **Achashverosh's** reign.

The King's Decree

[13] As was the king's custom, he consulted sages well-versed in matters of law and justice. [14] With him were Karshna, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsna and Memukhan, the seven vice-regents of Persia and Media, who were part of the king's inner circle and were the most important officials in the kingdom.

Some suggest that the phrase "who understood the times" refers to astrologers and translate it as "who understood propitious times." However, the answer from these wise men does not mention the stars or the zodiac. More likely, the reference to those who "understood the times" is like the usage in 1 Ch 12:32, in which the men of Issachar "understood the times," that is, they were simply wise men. The names of the seven wise men, also called officials, do not correspond to known Persian individuals.

[15] [The king asked the sages,] "According to the law, what should we do to Queen Vashti, since she didn't obey the order of King Achashverosh conveyed by the officers?" [16] Memukhan presented the king and vice-regents this answer: "Vashti the queen has wronged not only the king, but also all the officials and all the peoples in all the provinces of King Achashverosh; [17] because this act of the queen's will become known to all the women, who will then start showing disrespect toward their own husbands; they will say, 'King Achashverosh ordered Vashti the Queen to be brought before him, but she wouldn't come.'

Memukhan's recommendation (vv. 19–20) was based on his claim that **Queen Vashti's** action was not just a personal affront but a universal affront to all the officials and all the peoples in all the provinces. **Memukhan's** exaggeration served only to legitimize the poor advice he was about to give the King.

[18] Moreover, the noble ladies of Persia and Media who hear of the queen's conduct will mention it to all the king's officials, which will bring about no end of disrespect and discord. [19] If it pleases his majesty, let him issue a royal decree - and let it be written as one of the laws of the Persians and Medes, which are irrevocable - that Vashti is never again to be admitted into the presence of King Achashverosh, and that the king give her royal position to someone better than she.

The irrevocability of the laws of **Persia** and **Media** is not documented in either Persian or Greek literature, although it is mentioned several times in the **Tanakh** (Ester 8:8; Daniel 6:8, 12). Some scholars regard this as an historical inaccuracy on the part of the author. The consort was always called **"Queen Vashti"** until this verse; now she is simply **"Vashti."**

[20] When the edict made by the King is proclaimed throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, then all wives will honor their husbands, whether great or small."

This passage is replete with irony and satire. The King, who could not control his own wife, now issues a universal **decree** that **all women** would **honor their husbands**.

[21] This advice pleased the King and the officials, so the King did what Memukhan had suggested - [22] he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, that every man should be master in his own house and speak the language of his own people. [1]

In Ester 1, we see **Queen Vashti** choosing her self-respect over obedience to a command that undermines her dignity. If you've felt pressured to compromise your values in your home - perhaps regarding lifestyle choices or financial decisions - this week, take deliberate steps to articulate those values clearly. Write down what you stand for and, ideally, what you want to embody as a family. Share that with your loved ones to build an understanding that empowers everyone to honor their dignity and make decisions aligned with shared principles.

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[1] Ester 1:1-22.