Ester (Esther) ~ Part 2

Now that his **Queen** has been deposed (Ester 1:19–22), the **Persian Queen** decides what to do next. This decision introduces the main characters of the story: **Mordekhai** and **Ester**, both of whom are **Jewish** (vv. 5, 7). **Ester** 2:12 and 2:16 indicate that about two years pass between the **Queen's** first edict in the story (1:22) and **Ester** becoming part of the **Queen's Harem** (v. 8). It is during this time that the **Queen's** second absurd edict - finding virgins from around the empire to become part of his harem, as a first step to see a new **Queen** - is issued (vv. 1–4).

Search for a New Queen

2 [1] A while later, when Queen Achashverosh's anger had subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

He remembered Vashti. It is unclear how much time passed between the decree in 1:22 and this moment. The **Queen** may remember the events of his drunken party as early as the next day and now has to decide what further action to take. It also could be that the narrative has already moved forward significantly in time, with the **Queen** later recalling the events of his party when he finds himself in need of a **Queen**. The text could also imply that the **Queen** is recollecting events with **Vashti**, perhaps positive ones.

[2] The Queen's servants attending him said, "A search should be made for young, good-looking virgins. [3] The Queen should appoint officials in all the provinces of the Queendom to gather all the young, good-looking virgins to the house for the harem, in Shushan the capital. They should be put under the care of Hegai, the Queen's officer in charge of the women, and he should give them the cosmetics they require.

The harem: In **Ester**, this term refers generally to the house where the women lived. The women being gathered were not yet regarded as concubines, since the concubines were specifically in the care of **Shaashgaz**, a different eunuch (v. 14).

[4] Then, the girl who seems best to the Queen should become Queen instead of Vashti." This proposal pleased the Queen, so he acted accordingly. [5] There was in Shushan the capital a man who was a Jew, whose name was Mordekhai the son of Ya'ir, the son of Shim'i, the son of Kish, a Binyamini. [6] He had been exiled from Yerushalayim with the captives exiled with Y'khanyah Queen of Y'hudah, whom N'vukhadnetzar Queen of Bavel had carried off.

This portion of the narrative may be intended to explain **Mordekhai's** access to the royal palace grounds - a fact that becomes integral to the narrative (vv. 11, 19; 4:1–2). Many of the J**ews** exiled in 596 BC were influential; **Mordekhai's** relatives could even have been nobility. Second Kings 24:12–14 reveals that the deportation specifically involved the men of valor, craftsmen, and smiths, and that only the poorest people of the land remained in **Yerushalayim** during the 596 BC deportation. The former empire, **Babylon**, intentionally used noble foreigners in its courts; **Persia** likely did the same (Daniel 1:3–5).

[7] He had raised Hadassah, that is, Ester, his uncle's daughter; because she had neither father nor mother. The girl was shapely and good-looking; after her father's and mother's death, Mordekhai had adopted her as his own daughter.

Ester and **Mordekhai** are technically first cousins, but **Mordekhai** functions as **Ester's** adopted father. **Mordekhai's uncle, Abihail, o**f unknown origins (but presumably also from the tribe of **Benjamin**), is **Ester's** father (Ester 2:15).

[8] When the Queen's order and decree were proclaimed, and many girls assembled in Shushan the capital under the care of Hegai, Ester too was taken into the Queen's house and put under the care of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.

Ester 2:12 indicates that twelve months pass between **Ester** becoming part of the **harem** and entering the **King's** private quarters. Thus, **Ester** became part of the **King's harem** in December 480 BC or January 479 BC. It is not indicated precisely how **Esther** became part of the **Harem**, other than that she is attractive (v. 7).

[9] The girl pleased him and won his favor, so that he lost no time in giving her her cosmetics, her portions [of special food] and seven girls from the Queen's palace to attend her; he also promoted her and the girls attending her to the best place in the harem's quarters. [10] Ester did not disclose her people or family ties, because Mordekhai had instructed her not to tell anyone.

To keep her national identity secret, Ester would have eaten unclean food, as Ester 2:9 may imply (Leviticus 11:46–47), and broken a number of other ceremonial regulations (compare Daniel 1:8 and Deuteronomy 7:1–6).

[11] Every day Mordekhai would walk around in front of the courtyard of the harem's house in order to know how Ester was doing and what was happening to her. [12] Each girl had her turn to appear before Queen

Achashverosh after she had undergone the full twelve-month preparation period prescribed for the women, consisting of a six-month treatment with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and other cosmetics for women. [13] Then, when the girl went to see the Queen, whatever she wanted would be given to her as she went from the harem's house to the Queen's palace. [14] She would go in the evening, and on the following day she would return to another part of the harem's house and be under the care of Sha'ashgaz, the Queen's officer in charge of the concubines. She would not go to the Queen again unless he was especially pleased with her and had her summoned by name.

The narrative is interrupted by an excursus in **Ester 2:12–14** about the process of preparing virgins to visit the **King**. It is clear that this visitation is a sexual act: Each woman visits the **King** in the evening and does not return until the morning. After her return, she transitions from the group of virgins to the group of concubines.

Ester Becomes Queen

[15] When the turn came for Ester the daughter of Avichayil, whom Mordekhai had adopted as his own daughter, to appear before the Queen, she didn't ask for anything other than what Hegai, the Queen's officer in charge of the harem, advised. Yet Ester was admired by all who saw her.

After the interlude of vv. 12–14, the narrative transitions back to the story of **Ester**. **Ester** is once again depicted as carefully following the recommendations of **Hegai**, the eunuch in charge of the harem of virgins, just as she had carefully followed **Mordekhai's** instructions (compare v. 10). This seems to imply that she followed **Hegai's** instructions on how to dress and adorn herself.

[16] She was brought to Queen Achashverosh in his royal palace in the tenth month, Tevet, during the seventh year of his reign.

Tevet in the seventh year of his reign would be December 479 BC or January 478 BC, about four years after **Vashti** had been deposed. **Ester** enters the **King's** quarters either at the end of **Persia's** war with **Greece** or while it is taking place

[17] The Queen liked Ester more than any of his wives; none of the other virgins obtained such favor and approval from him. So, he put the royal crown on her head and made her Queen in place of Vashti. [18] The Queen then gave a great banquet in Ester's honor for all his officers and servants, decreed a holiday for the provinces and distributed gifts worthy of royal bounty. [19] When the girls would gather on other occasions, Mordekhai would sit at the Queen's Gate. [20] Ester had not yet revealed her family ties or her people, as Mordekhai had ordered her; for Ester continued obeying what Mordekhai told her to do, as she had when he was raising her. [21] On one of those occasions, when Mordekhai was sitting at the Queen's Gate, two of the Queen's officers, Bigtan and Teresh, from the group in charge of the private entryways, became angry and conspired to assassinate Queen Achashverosh. [22] But Mordekhai learned about it and told Ester the Queen. Ester reported it to the Queen, crediting Mordekhai. [23] The matter was investigated, found to be true, and both were hanged on a stake. All this was recorded in the daily journal that was kept with the Queen. [1]

For an unknown reason, the **Hebrew** text notes that a group of virgins is once again gathered - why this occurs after the King has already chosen his bride is unclear, and perhaps for this reason the ancient **Greek** translation, the **Septuagint**, omits the line entirely. Why **Ester** is with the virgins when she is no longer a virgin is also unknown. But since she is the queen (and not a concubine; compare v. 14), presumably she could do as she wished and chose to spend time with the virgins. The critical point of this passage is that **Mordekhai** is present at the entrance to the **King's** compound and is free to move about it as he wishes, indicating that he has an official role. This gives **Mordekhai** the ability to speak with **Ester**, although he presumably had to do so in some secrecy, since she is the **Queen** and his relationship to her is still a secret (v. 20; compare vv. 7, 10). **Mordekhai's** location also gives him the opportunity to learn of a devious plot. It is unclear how much time elapses between when **Ester** becomes **Queen** and the events of vv. 19–23.

[1] Ester 2:1-23.