

# Esther Was Taken to the King's Palace and Entrusted to Hegai, Who Had Charge of the Harem

## 2: 1-11

**DIG:** Verse 1 is a hinge verse, spanning four years (1:3 and 2:16). In that time, what has happened to the king's anger? His memory? His decree? To Vashti? Who were Mordecai's ancestors (First Samuel 9:1-2 and Second Samuel 16:5-13)? How are Mordecai and Esther related to each other? What might have happened if Esther had not obeyed Mordecai?

**REFLECT:** How would you feel if the LORD, as King of your life, took four years to solve a big problem for you? How important, to you and God, is time, opposed to timing? What life-changing event did you have in your life? How did you handle it? Did it make, or break you? How? How can you use that experience to help others?

**Vashti** refused to come to **King Ahasuerus** in the third year of his reign in 483 BC. **Esther** was made queen in the seventh year of his reign in 479 BC (2:16-17). During the intervening four years **the king** was off fighting a disastrous war with Greece. His humiliating defeat drained the treasuries of the **Persian** Empire and discredited **him** in the eyes of his subjects. Shortly after his return from Greece, **Esther** was chosen as his new queen. The Greek historian Herodotus depicts the life of **Ahasuerus** after his military defeat as one of excess. He spent a lot of time with the wives of some of his officers, creating such discord and anger that eventually he was assassinated, oh the irony, in his bedroom in 465 BC.<sup>19</sup>

Four years later when **King Ahasuerus'** fury had subsided, he realized that he had been foolish in his actions (2:1a). Throughout the book it is evident that **the king** was led along by his **magi** (1:13-14). Strong leaders listen to advice, but they know how to recognize foolishness. He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her (2:1b). That **Ahasuerus remembered Vashti** implies some regret over the whole incident, but **the king** was trapped by his own irrevocable decree (1:19).

Then the king's personal attendants proposed: Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king (2:2). After four years, **the magi** certainly didn't want **Ahasuerus** having any second thoughts about **Vashti**. She could certainly be their ruin. The search for Miss **Persia** seems so outlandish to us today, but even by **Persian** standards queens were not normally chosen that way. According to Herodotus, **Ahasuerus'** father Darius only took his wives from the nobility of **Persia**. More often than not, they came from

the families of **his** seven closest advisors (1:14). But surely a **king** who held such absolute power could marry any woman **he** wanted.

Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the royal fortress of Susa (2:3a). In addition to **his** one or more wives, the king normally had many concubines. They were virgins to be called at the pleasure of **the king**. They lived lives of luxurious isolation in **his harem**. Most of the girls were uprooted from their families and entered a state of perpetual widowhood. Artaxerxes II, the son of **Ahasuerus**, was said to have 360 beautiful concubines in **his harem**. While this may seem to be an extremely demining process to us today, it was not sexism. The boys were treated worse than the girls. Herodotus tells us that five hundred young boys were rounded up each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the **Persian** court. Everyone was subject to the whims of **the king**, anywhere, anytime. **His** power was unyielding and absolute.

Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them (2:3b). It was customary to put a eunuch in charge of **the house of the women**, a most responsible position. The beauty treatments included purification and the use of precious ointments. Like the gardens and the banquet hall, **Ahasuerus** had an appreciation for beautiful things. Unfortunately, "things" are exactly what **the king** thought women were. As **Vashti** had shown, and as **Esther** would soon show, aside from **Mordecai** the women were more courageous and intelligent than the men in this story.<sup>20</sup>

"Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it (2:4). **Ahasuerus** could have had any young woman he wanted. Once brought to the palace, their sole purpose in life was giving pleasure to **the king** - pleasure to his eye, to satisfy him in bed, and to expand his impressive collection of *things* for others to admire.

This is the second time that **the king's magi** manipulate **Ahasuerus** for their own gain. He continues to display weak leadership as he allowed others, who had their own personal agendas, to decide what he would decree. The one who holds absolute power continues to defer to others who know how to skillfully manipulate his needs. In doing so, the author shows us how the odds are stacked against **Mordecai** and **Esther**. The politics within the **Persian** court are deadly and those who survive seem to be able to manipulate the needs of **the king**. It is a treacherous place for those who would become the target of such impulsive and unstable power.

*A flashback to the time of the deportation of the Jews from Jerusalem in 597 BC interrupts the story to introduce two people who will be indispensable to the plot, **Esther** and **Mordecai**. The whole story flows swiftly without introducing more details than necessary.*

Now there was in the fortress of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. **The Hebrew *Yehudi* originally meant a man of the kingdom of Judah, but after the Babylonian captivity it came to be a generic term for all Israelites.** He was named **Mordecai** son of **Jair** the son of **Shimei**, the son of, meaning the descendant of **Kish** (2:5). The names of **Ahasuerus**, **Esther**, **Mordecai** and **Haman** do not come across in the English translation. Instead of being the actual name of the historical person, these names were probably chosen or created by the human author to characterize the people who nonetheless did actually exist in history with other names.

This verse associates **Mordecai** with another of the tribe of Benjamin, King **Saul**, whose father's name was **Kish** (1 Samuel 9:1-2). This reference to a **descendent** is used in other passages in the Bible. For example, when the blind beggar called out to **Yeshua** as **He** was passing by: **Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me (Lk 18:38)**, he did not mean to say that **King David** had fathered **Yeshua**, but that **Jesus** was a **descendant of David**, or was in the royal line of **David**. Also here, the author associates **Mordecai** in the royal line of **Saul**.

**Mordecai's** great-grandfather had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by **Nebuchadnezzar** king of Babylon, among those taken captive with **Jehoiachin**, better known as *Jeconiah*, king of Judah (2:6). **Some have doubted the history of Esther, saying that if Mordecai were really taken into captivity with Jehoiachin, he would have been about 120 years old during the reign of Ahasuerus.** One way of resolving this problem is to read the relative clause in the Hebrew text, as saying that **Mordecai's** great-grandfather, **Kish**, was the one taken into exile with **Jehoiachin**. When the author mentions **Mordecai** in connection with the exile he continues to provide context to the historical setting so that the reader can understand the events about to take place. The author is pointing to the fact that when **the king of Judah** went into exile, **he** was representative of all the Jews who would go into exile, including those who would be born in captivity.

**Mordecai** just happened to be taken captive to **Susa**, where **he** would raise the future queen of **Persia**. **Providence!** **Mordecai** had a cousin named **Hadassah**, whom **he** had adopted as his own daughter when her father (**Mordecai's** uncle **Abihail**) and mother died (2:7a and c, 2:15a). **The rabbis apply the verse: Happy are they . . . that do righteousness at all times (Psalm 56:3 or 106:3), to a person who brings up an orphan in his house.** It seems that **Hadassah's** descendants were also exiled when Babylon's King **Nebuchadnezzar** destroyed Jerusalem in 589 BC. Events in **her** story happened some fifty years after **her** descendants return to the Land. But **she** was among the Jewish people who

chose to remain in **Persia** instead of returning to their native soil. Today **Hadassah** is the name of the Jewish women's Zionist organization, speaking out against anti-Semitism. It was founded on Purim in the year 1912.

This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful to look at. In fact, some have called the book of Esther *the Beauty and the Feast!* According to the rabbis, she was one of the four most beautiful women in the world, the other three being Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail (Megillah 15a). The one Jewish woman who would need to be attractive to the king just happened to be a knockout (2:7b). Providence!

The name Esther does not agree with Herodotus who refers to the wife of Ahasuerus as Amestris. Some of the apparent discrepancies that have been identified as historical problems by some may instead be the legitimate use of poetic license in order to interpret the significance of what happened. In other words, some expressions in the story may have been intended for literary effect, not for historical accuracy as we define it today. This need not undermine the integrity of the book. For example, Vashti's name is said to sound similar to the Old Persian expression for beautiful woman. Ahasuerus' name sounds comical when pronounced in Hebrew and would correspond to something like "King Headache" in English. The name Esther sounds similar to Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. Haman's name sounds similar to the Hebrew name meaning wrath. Of course, these phonetic wordplays do not come across in the English translation. Instead of being the actual name of the historical person, these names may have been chosen or created by the author to characterize the people who nonetheless did actually exist in history with other names.<sup>21</sup>

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken (in the second Targum there is a story that Mordecai attempted to conceal her from the king's officers) to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem (2:8). And it just worked out that the beautiful Esther happened to be in the right place at the right time. It is clear that she did not volunteer to participate in this contest, she was taken by force. Her beauty and lovely figure must have caught the attention of the king's officers. The author does not spend any time on how she felt. Regardless of her feelings one way or the other, Esther was at the mercy of a ruthless pagan king - just as her people were. We still have not seen or heard from her because her own personal opinion about what was happening to her seems irrelevant as the events of the story march on to their inevitable climax.

She pleased Hegai and won his favor. Esther's beauty and charm were overpowering, even to a eunuch. The word favor is *hesed*, and can also refer to covenant loyalty or kindness.

Although God is not mentioned, the use of this word indicates that He is operating behind the scene for **her** benefit. And it just so happened that **the keeper of the harem favored her. Providence!**

Meanwhile, **she** entered a yearlong **beauty treatment** - marinating in oils and perfumes for twelve months before being served up in **her** one-night-stand with **the king**, who rated each girl's performance and decided **her** fate. **Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food**, apparently food of a better-than-ordinary quality. But **she** evidently made no protest about eating the unclean food of Gentiles. **He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem (2:9).**

**Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.** Once **Esther** was taken, **Mordecai's** body language reflected his torment over **her** plight. Like a frantic father whose young daughter is out well past curfew, **he** paced outside **the harem courtyard** day after day, worried sick, and desperate to hear something from **Esther**. **Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her (2:10-11).**

The author does not overtly reveal **Mordecai's** motives here. **The king's** only criterion for his wife was performance in his bedroom and obedience in his court, certainly not ethnicity or religious convictions. However, **Mordecai** had achieved a position in the **Persian** court and possibly already knew Haman's opinion of Jews. Perhaps **Mordecai** counseled **Esther** to conceal **her** Jewish identity because **he** had good reason to fear Haman's anti-Semitism. But for whatever the reason, just as the name of God is hidden in the book (**1:20, 5:4, 5:13, 7:7b**), so is **Esther's** nationality and faith hidden until the very end. The human author makes no attempt to vindicate **Esther** by explaining any extenuating circumstances or divine guidance for **her** behavior.

The absence of **Esther's** thoughts about **her** situation raises questions about **her** Torah observance. **She** was taken into **the harem**, gained favor with **Hegai**, the eunuch in charge, and received **beauty treatments**, special food and servants. Unlike **Daniel** and his friends, **she** does not protest, or set **herself** apart as they had done. In fact, **she** had successfully hidden **her** identity as a Jewess, and evidently had adopted **Persian** dress and customs to the point where **she** was indistinguishable as a Jewish woman. Therefore, we cannot assume that **she** secretly kept the Torah commandments. That is an argument from silence. The text simply does not allow us to assume that **she did**.

From this and other statements in the book it is clear the author was making the point that ADONAI protected and used **Esther** and **Mordecai** *in spite of* the fact that they were

not Torah observant. The five books of Moses commanded that **she** was not to marry a pagan (**Deuteronomy 7:1-4**), or have sexual relations with a man who was not **her** husband (**Exodus 20:14**). Yet, this was specifically the purpose of **her** being included in **the harem**.<sup>22</sup>

Rabbi Sha'ul, when writing to believers in Rome said: **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)**. How does your faith relate to your culture? When Haman was trying to convince **King Ahasuerus** to exterminate the Jews, he based his flimsy excuse on the basis of disloyalty, saying: **There are certain people . . . who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them (3:8)**. So it seems that most of the Jews in **Persia** must have retained enough of their outward, visible distinctiveness to allow Haman and others to see a difference, **whose dress and customs were different from those of all other people (3:8)**.

**Esther** and **Mordecai** had evidently chosen to adopt the dress, customs and practices of **their** Gentile neighbors, at least to the point where **they** could successfully hide **their** identity as Jews. The royal court officials at **the king's** gate came to know **Mordecai** as a **Jew**, but only because **he had told them he was one (3:4)**. **Esther's** decision to risk **her** life by finally coming out of the closet as a Jewess is, thus, all the more moving. But before **Mordecai's** battle with Haman and the looming threat of genocide, no one even knew that they were Jews. The question is sometimes asked, "If you were brought to trial for being a believer, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Well it seems like there would not have been *any* evidence to convict either **Esther** or **Mordecai**!

At what point does the assimilation of culture compromise our faith and witness? Is it the way we dress? The way we talk? What music we listen to? What movies we go to? If a believers living in a hostile land conceal their faith is that lack of faith or merely prudent? Committed believers can and do disagree on these issues. Yet we make decisions like this every day because there is no way to avoid them. We should strive to live in obedience to **ADONAI**, but it's not always clear what that means in our messy lives. We are, after all, human.

This is where the silence about **Esther** and **Mordecai's** faith can encourage us. Even if **they** didn't always make the right choices, or had the purest of motives, the **LORD** was working through **their** imperfect decisions to fulfill His perfect purposes. Other than Yeshua, even the godliest people in the Bible also make imperfect decisions. We are no different than them. Yet, God is all-powerful. Nothing can stand in the way of His ultimate plan for you, me, or the universe. If **ADONAI** can work through imperfect people like **Esther** and **Mordecai**, He can work through us.