

Now the King was Attracted to Esther More Than Any of the Other Women

2: 12-20

DIG: As the king's "search" unfolds for Miss Persia, how does it compare or contrast to Isaac's "search" for a wife (see my commentary on **Genesis Fw - Isaac and Rebekah**)? Of what significance is the yearlong preparation period? Do you think King Ahasuerus kept his distance from the contestants? Why or why not? What does the text suggest? How was Esther's reign similar to that of Joseph and Daniel?

REFLECT: It is easy to look at other people's decisions and size them up, think, and know that we clearly know right from wrong, and if we were in their shoes, we would have known them both and done the right thing. We believe God will give us the wisdom to know what to do and moral strength to do it. But life isn't always that tidy. Do you make moral judgments about the actions of others? When was the last time you were on the horns of an ethical dilemma yourself? Did anyone make any judgments about your decision? How did it make you feel? Was it fair? Why?

King Ahasuerus spared no expense to prepare his women for one night in his bed. For twelve months they were lotioned and perfumed. Before a young woman's turn came to go in to king Ahasuerus, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics (2:12). **Some question the historical accuracy of Esther in that a year of beauty treatments seems far fetched.** King Ahasuerus was an egomaniac who had unlimited wealth to feed his fantasies. The opulence and degradation of that time is hard for us to imagine today. **The beauty treatments** were meant to enhance the attractiveness of **the women**, but in reality, the length of time it took to prepare **them** for **their** one-night-stand with **the king** was probably more about **his** ego than **their** readiness.

And this is how she would go to the king: **Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace (2:13).** The residence for the wives and concubines of **the king** were separated from the rest of **the palace** court. There were three sets of living quarters: one for the virgins who had not yet been sent for by **the king**, one for the concubines, and one for the queen and the other royal wives. This was one busy guy! The first is mentioned in 2:8 where **Esther was entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem.** The second is mentioned here. **In the evening she would go there and in the**

morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name (2:14). The third is mentioned in 1:9, and was under the charge of the queen herself.

After spending one night in the king's bed, the women were returned to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem of concubines. There she would spend the rest of her life alone with the other women in practical widowhood. Her life had been hijacked by the king's pleasure. She could not leave the harem to marry or return home to her family. In all likelihood, she would never see the king again, unless he specifically asked for her by name (literally summoned to his bed by written memo). There were so many women and he drank so much that it was doubtful he could remember the names even if he wanted to. Children conceived by the king on these one-night-stands were raised to serve their father in high positions, but they could not ascend to the throne.

Esther is finally introduced to the narrative. When the turn came for Esther to go to the king for her one-night-stand it was the tenth month of Tebeth (the word Tebeth is found only in the book of Esther and nowhere else in the TaNaKh), in the seventh year of his reign (December 479/January 478 BC), five years after Vashti had been deposed (2:15a and 16). The names of the months in the book of Esther are those adopted by the Jews in Babylonia. The passive voice used here suggests that she went, not that she was eager to go, but that it was beyond her control. The Bible says nothing about how she felt about her situation.

When she went she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested (2:15b). It is said that some of the girls took advantage of this to deck themselves out with many precious diamonds and jewels. But Esther wisely trusted in Hegai's expert knowledge of the king's desires rather than her own instincts. Her respect contrasts with Vashti's defiance and implies a different ending.

And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her (2:15c). This marked the turning point for Esther. She chose to play the game. She lost her way when she accepted the culture's view that beauty was all that she had to offer. She forgot she was Hadassah - a daughter of the Covenant, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah. Her purpose changed from pleasing God to pleasing the king. Warned by Mordecai to conceal her Jewish identity, she managed to elude detection and won high marks from everyone inside the palace because she was so pleasing. Hegai, the king's eunuch who supervised the women's care, picked her out from all the other women as the favorite and took extra measures to promote her candidacy. She complied with everything he said.

Esther didn't merely survive **her** abduction into **the king's harem**, **she** made the most of it. **She** auditioned for **the queen's** crown by having sex with a man who was not **her** husband. Then after winning the crown, **she** married a pagan. **She** was beautiful, and pleasing but **she** was losing **her** way. In all **her** splendor, **the** future **queen** was being lulled to sleep.²³ **Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins (2:17a). Providence!**

*How did **she** win **his** favor in just one night? Did ADONAI give **her** favor with **the king**? The Bible doesn't say. But one thing we do know is that because **Esther** evidently did whatever it took to please a lascivious pagan king, **she** won the position of **queen**, through which **she** later saved the whole Jewish nation from which the Messiah later came.²⁴*

This happened around the time when, back in **Esther's** homeland, **Ezra** the priest was taking drastic measures in Jerusalem to restore the purity of **her** fellow Israelites. **He** broke up families with children and literally insisted on divorces between Israelite men and pagan **Gentile women** to ward off ADONAI's anger for their blatant disregard of His Word (**Ezra 9:1-5 and 12**). The Torah prohibited intermarriage with **Gentiles (Deuteronomy 7:3)**. How would **Ezra** have judged this Jewish **queen**?

Meanwhile, back in **Persia**, **Esther** kept **her** secret in the closet. Being a third generation exile made the cover-up much easier. **She** probably learned **Persian** as a child, so **her** speech did have the telltale Hebrew accent that normally exposed a person's foreign ancestry. **She** grew up in **Persia** and **she** talked and dressed like a native. For five long years **she** accepted the sexual mores of the pagan world around **her** and enjoyed the luxuries of **her** privileged lifestyle. In short, **she** was trying to live in two worlds. **She** came from a background of Torah observance, but the whole emphasis in **the king's harem** was on physical beauty. **Esther** fit right in with that pagan culture.²⁵

So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (2:17b). The author carefully avoids the word "marriage," although it is implied. Although he does not tell us what **Esther** thought of **her** "marriage" to **Ahasuerus**, **she** apparently did not protest. Should **she** have? Would you have? Why? How? When?

Perhaps **Esther** hated **her** circumstances with all **her** heart. Possibly **she** felt that life in the harem violated every conviction and moral principle **Mordecai** had instilled in **her**. Maybe **she** wondered how ADONAI could have let such a horrible thing happen to **her**. On the other hand, perhaps **Esther** loved life in **the harem**. Possibly the sensuality of **harem** life appealed to a part of **her** human nature. Maybe **she** was swept off **her** feet by the attention of the most powerful man in the empire. Conceivably **she** knew that **her** lifestyle violated the Torah,

but didn't really care. Maybe **she** thought this was the best thing to ever happen to **her**. **She** had just won the **Persian king** lottery! Would such an attitude have pleased the LORD? Was **Esther** in God's will or not?

Some excuse **Esther** because **her** marriage to **the king** was beyond **her** control. Somehow I think that virtue would have been lost on **Ezra**. Or they say that marrying **Ahasuerus** was the lesser of two evils, and in spite of the sin involved, it led to the greater good for God's people. Really? Is that what you would teach your children? God will bless it in the end anyway, so go for it? Can you really use **Esther** as a positive role model up to this point in the story? How could you possibly use this episode from **Esther's** life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to sway powerful men? Use your body to advance God's kingdom? Do the ends really justify the means?

She did not get to be **the queen** by consistent obedience to the Torah, the way, for instance, Joseph did in Egypt when he refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and spent several brutal years in an Egyptian prison as a result. **Esther** may well have been a virtuous **woman** obedient to the Torah; but even if **she** was, the author chooses to hide **her** virtue in a morally ambiguous and complex situation. He does not allow us to come to simple conclusions about **her** life in light of Scripture. The author skillfully describes **her** complex life in real terms because that's the way life is in this fallen world.

***Esther** may have looked back on this episode in **her** life with shame and regret, or **she** may have looked back on it with a clear conscience, knowing that **she** acted as wisely as **she** knew how at the time. In either case, each one of us also has both kinds of episodes in our lives. **Esther's** story shows that we can give them to the LORD and move on.²⁶*

Some doubt the historicity of the book of Esther because Persian kings collected their harem indiscriminately, but they usually took wives only from one of seven noble families; therefore, they say that Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus seems unlikely. The sudden decision on the part of **Ahasuerus** reveals that the sight of **Esther** overwhelmed him. Readers can only imagine. But more importantly, we cannot overlook the **providence** of God. What He had done with Pharaoh and Cyrus probably reflects what He did with **King Ahasuerus** as well. ADONAI had influenced that pagan **king** for His ultimate purposes.

Then the author briefly describes **Esther's** coronation. **And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality (2:18).** In later years, when people recalled this feast, or banquet, they would call it by this name.

During the coronation there was an apparent gathering of the unsuccessful contestants to be chosen as **queen**, or **harem of virgins at the king's gate**. **Esther** wasted no time in appointing **Mordecai** to an official position in the **Persian** judicial system before the final ceremonial parade that concluded the coronation activities where **he was sitting (2:19)**. His being there shows how **he** could have overheard an assassination plot against **the king (2:21-23)**, and how a feud started that would threaten the entire Jewish nation.

But **Esther** had kept secret her family background and nationality just as **Mordecai** had told her to do, for she continued to follow **Mordecai's** instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up (2:20). **The purpose of the parenthetical statement in this place is to make it clear that Mordecai was not known to be a relative of the queen, and therefore, conspirators were not likely to be on their guard against him.** For the next five years, **Queen Esther** was the perfect woman - the fairest in the land, dutifully complying with the wishes of **her** husband and **king**, and never, ever, making waves. Remarkably, **she** even managed faithfully to follow the instructions that came from **Mordecai**, **her** father figure, who kept an eye on things from the sidelines. That fragile arrangement was bound to collapse and did - in a single day (3:12-15). But instead of destroying **her** life or getting **her** in trouble, the crisis shook **her** to the core, and proved to be **her** greatest strength.²⁷

Throughout the narrative of **Chapter 2**, the hand of **God** is understood to be the force behind the development of the story. The first readers of **Esther** must have been amazed when they realized this important truth. The Jewish people were going to be victims of genocide. Satan was giddy with joy because the very future of the Messiah, redemption itself, hung in the balance. Since there was no chance for a Jew to become king, **Esther** was brought to the royal court to become **queen**. As Joseph was introduced to the court of Pharaoh and **Dani'el** to the court of Nebuchadnezzar, **Esther** came to the court of **Ahasuerus** for a similar reason. Joseph's leadership meant food for his famine-stricken family and their eventual prosperity. **Dani'el's** leadership led to a new status of acceptance of Jews in Babylonia. As we move along in the story, eventually **Esther's** leadership would yield similar results. The common element in all three is that it was **God** who brought about those results.²⁸