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The King Gave a Grand Banquet in Susa, and Displayed the Vast Wealth of His Kingdom **1: 1-9**

The king gave a grand banquet in Susa, and displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom **DIG: What might have been the occasion for this opulent banquet thrown by King Ahasuerus? What would warrant a six-month “open-house?” Who comes? What do you make of all the architectural, fashion and wine detail given here? What does that tell you about the king’s wealth? Popularity? Ego? Why do you think his wife, the Queen Vashti, throws a separate party?**

REFLECT: How are you like or different from the king of Persia? Can you be swayed by the opulence in this life? Why or why not? What reversal of fortunes have you had in your life? How have you handled them? Empire-building took center stage in the king of Persia’s life, what’s in the center of yours? Why?

This section sets the tone for the book. **The vast wealth, splendor and glory of Ahasuerus’ majesty** draw attention to his lavish **banquets** at **Susa**, where he is gathering support and loyalty for his military campaign against Greece. Yet, the irony of this picture is lost on us today. The original readers would have known that four years after this **banquet, Ahasuerus** would return virtually broke from **his** ill-advised attack. Given that the author of **Esther** was writing years after **Ahasuerus’** defeat, he could have chosen to introduce him as the Persian **king** who lost the epic battle at Hellespont to the Greeks. Instead, he chose to introduce **Ahasuerus** in the grandeur and confidence of his glory days. The unstated reversal of **the king’s** destiny, which would have been known to the author and original readers, sets the stage and foreshadows other reversals of fortune throughout the book of **Esther**.⁹

This is what happened (1:1a). In Hebrew, the book begins with the linguistic formula, *Now it came to pass*. This introductory formula is found in other historical books such as **Joshua, Judges** and **Samuel**, whose story continues what had gone on beforehand. It can also be used at the beginning of a narrative (**Ruth 1:1**). The

author introduces the book in such a way to suggest to his readers that the ensuing story are events that actually happened.

These events happened **during the time of Ahasuerus**, or *Xerxes* in the Greek (**1:1b**), the Persian king who reigned from 486 to 465 BC (**to see link click Ad - The Historical Accuracy of Esther** to see the timeline). **He** is mentioned in **Ezra 4:6** as **the** reigning **king** when those opposed to the rebuilding of the Temple brought accusations against it. **His** name was pronounced *Ahashwerosh* in an attempt to represent the Persian *Khshayasha*. It has no meaning in Hebrew, but when pronounced aloud it sounds something like “King Headache” in English. They probably called him “King Headache” because no one could mention **his** name without getting a headache!

The Persian king ruled over 127 provinces stretching from the northwest portion of the peninsula of **India to the upper Nile region in Egypt (1:1c)**. From his father Darius I he inherited the great Persian Empire that extended from India to Ethiopia. It was the largest empire known up to that time. The standard administrative region within the Persian empire was called a *satrapy* and was governed by an official called a *satrap*. He was responsible for the administration of the region, including the collection of taxes and the raising of an army on the king’s behalf. **The division of the Persian Empire into 127 provinces seems to contradict the twenty provinces that Herodotus mentioned. There is no extant historical evidence that at any time were there as many as 127 satrapies, not even 120 mentioned in Daniel 6:1.**

But here in **1:1**, the Hebrew word used does not mean *satrapy*, but **province** and probably refers to a smaller region surrounding a city. In **Daniel 2:49** the same Hebrew word refers to the **province** of Babylon; in **Ezra 2:1** and **Nehemiah 7:6** it refers to the **province** of Judea surrounding the city of Jerusalem. Both Jerusalem and Judea were a small part of the larger *satrapy* of the Trans-Euphrates region. We don’t know their exact relationship, but a **province** was a subdivision of a *satrap* (**Ezra 2:1**). In addition, the number of **provinces** almost certainly changed as cities were gained or lost during wartime. And because the *satrapies* were administrative units, their number also likely changed to meet administrative needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of *satrapies* and **provinces** would be constantly changing during the Persian period. Since both **Daniel 6:1** and **Esther 1:1** use about the same number, **120** to **127**, they are probably referring to the **provinces**. By choosing the larger number, **provinces** over *satrapies*, the domain of **the king** is made as impressive as possible. The author may have been implying

that there was nowhere the Jews could hide from the decree of death that would soon be pronounced against them.¹⁰

At that time King Ahasuerus, the most powerful man in the world, **reigned from his royal throne in the fortress of Susa (1:2)**. **The main city had a circumference of six to seven miles, and the fortress occupied an elevated site enclosed by a massive wall two and a half miles in length, and crowned by the royal palace.** At the beginning of **his** reign, **the king** had put down rebellions in Egypt and Babylon. **Susa** had been the capital of ancient Elam. **His** father, Darius I rebuilt and lived there before Persepolis became his capital. **Ahasuerus** also had **his** main residence at Persepolis. But he lived in **Susa** in the winter because the summer temperatures were intolerable. **The citadel** was a fortified area raised above the rest of the city. It was a rectangular platform seventy-two feet above the general level of the city, surrounded by a huge wall two-and-a-half miles long.



And in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The timing of this banquet corresponds well to the great war council of 483 BC, held to plan the next invasion of Greece. **The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, or members of the royal family and the nobles of the provinces were present (1:3)**. The enormous size of the Persian Empire, from modern Pakistan in the east, to modern Turkey in the west, included many nationalities with different languages, ethnic origins and religions. It took some time after his father's death for **Ahasuerus** to secure the throne against **his** rivals and quell the uprisings in Egypt and Babylon. Then **he** devoted himself to finishing **the citadel of Susa** that **his** father Darius I had begun. With those tasks completed, **the king** was ready to apply himself to empire-building. As a result, here we see him rallying support for his **military** campaign against Greece.

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty (1:4). No doubt that this time involved planning sessions in which all the provincial leaders were being prepared for the war effort, as well as being impressed with **Ahasuerus' wealth and splendor**. His approaching **military** campaign was going to be a costly affair and **the king** wanted everyone to know he could make good on his promises and reward those who would rally behind it. **Feasting for 180 days seems so absurd to some that they challenge the historical accuracy of the book of Esther.** But **Ahasuerus** was bringing **nobles, officials and military leaders** from all over his vast kingdom, preparing them for the war effort against Greece. Having them all come to **Susa** at one time was probably not wise, either logistically or militarily. More than likely they were brought in from each of the **127 provinces** in shifts. So the gathering of Persian leaders and the display of the wealth of **the king** lasted for **180 days**.

When these days were over, the king gave a banquet for the local residents, **lasting seven days for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa (1:5a and c).** This was the culmination of the festivities. Both banquets were eye-popping spectacles of the glories of **his** kingdom. This event would have further consolidated support for **the king** and **his** campaign among all his subjects. No one witnessing such staggering exhibits of wealth and luxury could have been in doubt of the might and authority of **King Ahasuerus**. The world belonged to him, and him alone.

The banquet was held **in the enclosed court of the king's palace (1:5b).** The court of **the king** was laid out with beautiful **gardens** containing various fruits and flowers. Different trees, like the palm, cypress, olive and pomegranate, were also probably planted there. Sometimes the court was paved with beautiful **marble**, with a fountain in the center.

Next, the dazzling luxury of the Persian **palace** is emphasized. **The garden had hangings of white and blue cotton or linen** hanging between the **marble** pillars of the court, **fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. Blue and white** were the royal colors (**8:15**). **There were couches of gold and silver** for the accommodation of the guests while they feasted, **on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality (1:6-7).** Only the descriptions of the Tabernacle (**Exodus 25-28**)

and the Temple (**First Kings 7** and **Second Chronicles 3-4**) surpass the vivid detail given here. The visual image is important in the mind of the reader. Writers of the Old Covenant books were economical with their words. By spending time on the nature of the garden and the hall, the author clearly displayed a sense that in the midst of such opulence and false pretense, true wealth could be discovered in being faithful to the will of **ADONAI**.¹¹

By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished (1:8). By Persian law, each guest had **to drink** every time **the king** drank, **but this time they were allowed to drink as the pleased. Ahasuerus** magnanimously waived this edict for those unable to keep up with him. Which indicates that **he** was some kind of drinker. The author makes a point of the many times **the king** drinks in this story (**1:10, 3:15, 5:6, 7:2**); indeed, the Hebrew word for **banquet** is related to the word for *to drink*.¹²

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus (1:9). The women did not have their feasts in the same room with the men. This separation was an ancient custom. **The name Vashi does not agree with Greek historian Herodotus, who refers to the wife of Ahasuerus as Amestris.** The names of **Ahasuerus, Vashi,** 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. **Vashti's** name is said to sound similar to the Old Persian expression meaning *beautiful woman*. As such, it would have simply been a literary device used to characterize the woman otherwise known to history as Amestris.

Perhaps Herodotus mentions only Amestris, whether or not she was really **Vashti**, because he was only interested in the queen mother who bore the successors to the throne. All other wives and concubines, of which Persian kings typically had many, were presumably irrelevant to his purpose of tracing the succession of the Persian dynasty. This motivation seems likely because Herodotus mentions only two of the several wives of **Ahasuerus'** father Darius I. Both of those named women bore sons who contended for the throne of their father, which **Ahasuerus** eventually won. If Herodotus included only the queen mothers, then the problem is solved. Only Amestris would be expected to be named by him since she gave birth to **Xerxes'** (Herodotus would have used his Greek name) successor, Artaxerxes. There is nothing in Herodotus' account that is inconsistent with **Vashti** being the wife of



Ahasuerus, or with her fall from his grace as recorded in **Esther**.¹³

Although the magnificence of **Ahasuerus'** empire now lies in ruins beneath centuries of dust, the world continues to witness the showy displays of military bravado. After the Persians, the Greek Ptolemies and Seleucids dominated the eastern Mediterranean, bringing strife and turmoil to the Jewish people. Then the Romans, the greatest military machine of their time, tried to destroy the infant Church. The book of **Revelation**, which contains a description of the holy City of **God**, or the New Jerusalem (see my commentary on **Revelation Fr – Then I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth**), was written to assure the early believers that even the oppression of Rome herself could not frustrate the LORD's sovereign plan to bring all of history to culmination in Jesus Christ.

*Dear Great and Powerful Heavenly Father, How Mighty You are! What a comfort it is to know that You are in control of all governments and you are the victorious winner of the final war (**Revelation 19:20-21 and 21:9-10**). Though the world seems to be spinning out of control with pandemics, governmental lock downs, personal trials and problems, it is calming to know for sure that you are in control. It is You who grant power to the kingdoms that You choose to reign. No matter how strong the ruler is, You are stronger and it is in Your power and wisdom that decide who rules. A monarch and his kingdom may reign only for as long as you allow. **The beast was given a mouth uttering great boasts and blasphemies. It was given authority to act for forty-two months (Revelation 13:5). But the court will sit and he will be stripped of his power to be destroyed and abolished for all time. (Daniel 7:26).***

*Praise your Almighty power, for it is for sure that Yeshua will be the final and permanent ruler of the world! **He** will reign for all eternity in an everlasting Kingdom that will never pass away. **Dominion, glory and sovereignty were given to Him [Yeshua] that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will never pass away (Dani'el 7:14).***

*Love You and praise You dear Daddy. You are strong, mighty and powerful and no ruler is as powerful as **You**. You choose who reigns and who lives. You decide the number of years for each person on earth. Some of Your children will die young by the hand of the antichrist and some You will give strength to live as your witnesses here on earth for a while during trials before dying and then entering your great and glorious heavenly kingdom for all eternity. **Then the kingdom, power, and***



greatness of the kingdoms under all heaven will be given to the people of the kedoshim of the Most High. Their kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions will serve and obey him' (Daniel 7:27). I am so thankful to have such a loving and powerful Father! You are Awesome! I desire to live my life on earth to please You with my whole heart. I thank so You for being my father. **But whoever did receive Him, those trusting in His name, to these He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12) !** In Yeshua's name and power of His resurrection. Amen

No matter how great an empire thinks they are during their day, **the King of the universe sits high above on His throne laughing and scoffing at their impotence (Psalm 2).** Through operating behind the scenes, as He does here in the book of **Esther**, ADONAI alone is King of kings. **Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4).** Therefore, the book of **Esther** stands as a warning that whatever worldly power or position one attains, in the final analysis, there will be a reversal of fortune that will end up in physical and spiritual death.

For believers in Yeshua, **the providence of God** is our great comfort. Throughout every generation, in every corner of the world, He rules supreme **and will put into effect when the time is ripe - His plan to place everything in heaven and on earth under the Messiah's headship (Ephesians 1:10 CJB).** To be in **Christ** is to be on the winning side of history, and to be victors even in the face of the troubles in this life.