

The King Gave a Grand Banquet in Susa, and Displayed the Vast Wealth of His Kingdom

1: 1-9

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 banquet for the women?

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 (see the timeline on Ad - **The Historical Accuracy of Esther**). 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, including Judah and Jerusalem, **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 in the world 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 existing 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 Yerushalayim and Y'hudah 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. **Susa**

was the former capital of ancient Elam and became one of the three capitals of **the Persian kings**; they spent the winters in Babylon, the spring in **Susa** and the summer in Ecbatana. **Susa** was both the name of **the city** and the name of **the royal fortress**, 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 fortress 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 royal fortress 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 **his** might and authority. 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 TaNaKh 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 they 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 ancient 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 whom **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 messianic community. 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 Yeshua ha-Meshiach.

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 2:4**). 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.