

# Esther 01 - King Ahasuerus' Banquet; Queen Vashti Refuses to Obey the King's Order; Vashti Removed as Queen

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## Esther 1

## I. Threat to the Jews (Esther 1:1—5:14)

### (1) King Ahasuerus disposes Queen Vashti (1:1-22)

#### (A) Background of Ahasuerus (1:1-2)

- (a) From India to Cush as the extent of his reign (1:1)

**1** Now it happened in the days of **Ahasuerus**, the Ahasuerus who reigned **from India to Cush** over **127 provinces**,

1 Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,

1 This is a record of what happened during the reign of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Cush.

1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:)

- "...Ahasuerus" - his Persian name was Khshayarsha, which in Hebrew becomes Ahasuerus, and in Greek, Xerxes. He ruled over the Persian Empire from 486-465 BC.

— He was well-known in history: he inherited the Persian Empire from his father, Darius I, who died in 486 BC; his grandfather was Cyrus the Great.

- "...from India to Cush" - the extreme borders of the Persian Empire, which included the kingdoms of Persia, Media, and Babylonia.

— "India" refers to the territory that is now western Pakistan; "Cush" was the upper (southern) Nile region including southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia.

- "...127 provinces" - governmental units (political subdivisions) of the empire

(b) Susa as his palace (1:2)

2 in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the **citadel in Susa**,

2 in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa,

2 At that time King Ahasuerus was ruling from Susa the capital.

2 That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,

- "...citadel in Susa" - located 200 miles E of Babylon, 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf

— "citadel" - *habirah*, refers to an acropolis or fortified area that stood 72 feet above the rest of the city. It had a wall 2.5 miles long surrounding it.

— "Susa" was both the name of the capital city and the royal fortress that occupied a separate part of the city. Susa was one of many capital cities in the Persian Empire (Ecbatana, Babylon, Pasargadae, and Persepolis).

The French excavations at Susa between 1880-1890 disclosed the great palace of Xerxes (Ahasuerus, 486-465 BC), the place where Queen Esther would have lived. The building covered 2.5 acres, and included a beautiful throne room which was decorated with 36 fluted columns, each being some 67 feet high and supporting a ceiling of Lebanon cedar. The capitals of the pillars were formed of the heads and shoulders of oxen, placed back to back. The cornice and friezes on the interior of the room had decorations of colored glazed bricks which were arranged in the form of rosettes, lions, men, and other attractive patterns. [Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, 244-245.]

(B) Banquets of Ahasuerus and Vashti (1:3-9)

(a) Ahasuerus' 180 day-banquet in 483 BC (1:3)

3 in the **third year of his reign** he held a **banquet** for all his officials and attendants, the army *officers* of Persia and Media, the nobles and the officials of his provinces, in his presence.

3 in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army *officers* of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence.

3 In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers, and the military leaders of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the provincial officials were present.

3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:

- "...third year of his reign" - 483-482 BC; Ahasuerus would've been about 35 years old, in the prime of his life.

— Some 40 years after the events described in Esther, Nehemiah would serve as a cupbearer to Artaxerxes, Ahasuerus' son (Cf. Neh 1:1—2:1).

- "...banquet" - banquets are a prominent feature in the story of Esther. At least nine different banquets are mentioned (Cf. 1:1-4,5-8,9; 2:18; 3:15; 5:4,8; 8:17; 9:17-19).

## Historical Context

The Greek historian Herodotus (485-425 BC) refers to these banquets in his *History*, where he states that Ahasuerus was conferring with his leaders about a possible invasion of Greece.

Ahasuerus' father, Darius I, had invaded Greece and been shamefully defeated at Marathon in 490 BC. While preparing to return to Greece and get revenge, Darius had died (486 BC) and now his son felt compelled to avenge his father and expand his empire at the same time.

Herodotus claims that Ahasuerus planned to invade all of Europe and "reduce the whole earth into one empire": "My intent is to throw a bridge over the Hellespont and march an army through Europe against Greece, that thereby I may obtain vengeance from the Athenians for the wrongs committed by them against the Persians and against my father."

[Herodotus, *The History*, Book VII, section 8.]

The king's uncle, Artabanus, strongly opposed the plan, but the king persisted and succeeded in convincing the princes and officers, at this particular banquet, to follow him. According to Herodotus, it took Xerxes four years to get ready for the invasion he launched in 481 BC (Herodotus' four years would extend from the beginning of Xerxes' reign in 485 BC). No doubt the 180 day party involved planning sessions in which all the province leaders were being prepared for the war effort.

Unfortunately, this ostentatious display of wealth couldn't guarantee the Persians a military victory. In 480 BC, the Persian navy was destroyed at Salamis, while the king sat on a throne watching the battle. In 479 BC, the Persian army was defeated at Plataea. Thus ended Ahasuerus' dream of a world empire.

(b) Ahasuerus reveals his wealth (1:4)

4 At that time he **displayed the riches of his royal glory** and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

4 And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

4 He displayed the enormous wealth of his kingdom, along with its splendid beauty and greatness for many days—for 180 days in all.

4 When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days.

- "...displayed the riches of his royal glory" - these "banquets" (i.e. drinking and sex parties) were well known; this particular banquet would last for 6 months.

— This banquet, for all government officials, is where Ahasuerus showed off the glory and splendor of the riches of his kingdom

*He now exhibits "the riches of his kingdom" to his nobles and chief officers, showing them doubtless all the splendors of the palace, the walls draped with gold, the marble pillars and rich hangings, the golden plane tree and the golden vine, and perhaps the ingots of gold where with Darius had filled the treasury. [Herodotus 7:27, 3:96.]*

(c) Ahasuerus' seven-day banquet (1:5-8)

5 When these days were finished, the king held a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in **the courtyard of the garden of the king's palace**.

5 When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

5 When those days were over, the king held a seven-day banquet in the courtyard of the garden of his palace for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least important.

5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;

- This second banquet, lasting seven days, was for all citizens of the capital city

- "...the courtyard of the garden of the king's palace" - this is a space nearly 350 feet long by 250 feet wide, with a square of 145 feet taken out of it for the central building. The total area exceeded 60,000 square feet.

6 *There were curtains of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic floor of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and mineral stones.*

6 *There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones.*

6 There were curtains of white and blue linen tied with cords of fine linen and purple material to silver rings on marble columns. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other precious stones.

6 Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble.

7 Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful in proportion to the king's bounty.

7 Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty.

7 Drinks were served in gold vessels of various kinds, and there was plenty of royal wine because the king was generous.

7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king.

8 But the drinking was *done* according to the *royal* law; there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household, that he was to do as each person pleased.

8 The drinking was *done* according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.

8 According to the king's decree the drinking was not compulsory because the king instructed every steward in his house to serve each individual what he desired.

8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

- In accordance with Persian law, drinking was not compulsory. This differed from the usual Persian custom by which people at a banquet were required to drink each time the king raised his cup.

(d) Vashti's banquet entertaining the palace women (1:9)

9 Queen **Vashti** also held a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

9 Queen Vashti also held a banquet in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus for the women.

**9** Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.

- "...Vashti" - her name means "The Beloved" or "The Desired One"

- This banquet, hosted by Queen Vashti, was only for the women in the royal palace

(C) Vashti's refusal to obey the Ahasuerus' command to appear at the conclusion of the banquet (1:10-12a)

**10** On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was **cheerful with wine**, he ordered **Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas**, the seven **eunuchs** who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,

**10** On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,

**10** A week later, when the king was under the influence of all that wine, he ordered Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served King Ahasuerus,

**10** On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,

- "...cheerful with wine" - he was wasted

- "...Mehuman" - the chief officer

- "...Biztha" - the treasurer

- "...Harbona" - chief of the bodyguards

- "...Bigtha" - in charge of the female apartments

- "...Abagtha" - the chief baker

- "...Zethar" - the chief butler

- "...Carkas" - the chief commander of the palace

- "...eunuchs" - Persian kings often castrated many of the men who served the king and his family so they could not have sex with the female members of the royal court and start dynasties of their own

11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal turban in order to display her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful.

11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with *her* royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.

11 to bring Queen Vashti to the king, wearing the royal crown to display her beauty to the people and the officials, since she was lovely to look at.

11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.

- Jewish tradition says this request came from an argument among the men at the banquet as to which country had the most beautiful women. Ahasuerus decided to settle the issue by putting his wife, Queen Vashti, on public display.

— While it is not explicitly stated, the implication is that the king expected Vashti to display herself in an immodest fashion

(D) Ahasuerus' response (1:12b-22)

(a) Anger (1:12b)

12 But Queen Vashti **refused to come at the king's order** delivered by the eunuchs. So **the king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him.**

12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

12 Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's order that was brought by the eunuchs. Then the king flew into a rage.

12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

- "...refused to come at the king's order" - we aren't told in Scripture why Vashti refused to obey the king's order, but the most logical reason we can glean from this situation is that she chose to not stake her dignity as a woman, and wife, and a queen before her inebriated husband and guests.

— It is evident that Ahasuerus thought the appearance of the queen, scantily clad, would contribute to his glory

— The important point here is the fact that she did not appear before the king at his command, not *why* she did not appear. However, one interesting reason could've been that she was pregnant with their son, Artaxerxes, who was born in 483 BC, the year this banquet was held.

- This refusal of the king's order put the queen in a very dangerous situation
- "...the king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him" - it's hard to imagine the embarrassment of the king and the astonishment of those in attendance at the banquet at the refusal of the queen to a king's order in an empire where the will of the king was absolute.
- It's likely that this refusal sent shockwaves throughout the banquet and the entire city, if not the whole empire
- We must understand that the Persian king held tremendous power and used it as he pleased to reinforce his own glory and power, with little or no thought for the consequences to others.

(b) Consultation with advisers (1:13-15)

**13** Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king *to speak* this way before all who knew *Persian* law and justice

**13** Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so *to speak* before all who knew law and justice

**13** The king spoke to the wise men who understood the times, for it was the king's custom to consult all those who understood law and justice.

**13** Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment:

14 and were close to him, *namely*, Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom—

14 and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom—

14 (His closest advisors were: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media who had direct access to the king and who held the highest rank in the kingdom.)

14 And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom;)

15 "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, since she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"

15 "According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus *delivered* by the eunuchs?"

15 The king inquired, "According to law, what should be done to Queen Vashti because she did not obey the order of King Ahasuerus that was delivered by the eunuchs?"

15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

- The king consulted with his seven advisers (v13-15; Cf. v10)

(c) Memucan's advice (1:16-20)

(i) Diagnosis of problem: sets the pattern for all Persian wives to rebel against their husbands (1:16-18)

16 And in the presence of the king and the *other* officials, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but *also* all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

16 In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but *also* all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

16 Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and his officials, "It is not the king alone whom Vashti has wronged, but rather all of the officials and all of the people who are in the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

**16** And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.

17 For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women so as **to make their own husbands despicable in their sight**, when they say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded that Queen Vashti be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.'

17 For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.'

17 When the report about the queen goes out to all the women, it will cause them to despise their husbands. They'll say, 'King Ahasuerus ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she wouldn't come.'

17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.

- "...to make their own husbands despicable in their sight" - the purpose for the harsh decision against the queen was so she would not set a bad example, in their eyes, for other women in the Persian Empire. Ahasuerus wanted to reinforce the idea of male headship (dominance) in the home.

18 And this day the wives of the officials of Persia and Media who have heard about the queen's conduct will talk *about it* to all the king's officials, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.

18 This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in *the same way* to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.

18 This very day the wives of the officials of Persia and Media who hear the report about the queen will speak in the same way to all the officials of the king, and there will be more than enough contempt and anger.

18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

- The real fear was that wives throughout the Persian Empire, when they heard about the queen's refusal of a king's order, would treat their husbands in the same manner

(ii) Recommendation to remove Vashti and select another Queen in her place (1:19-20)

19 If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it **cannot be repealed**, that **Vashti may not come into the presence of King Ahasuerus**, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she.

19 If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she.

19 If it seems good to the king, let a royal decree go out from him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. Let the king give her royal position to another woman who is better than she.

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

- "...cannot be repealed" - decrees of the king were sometimes attached to the code for the express purpose of rendering them unalterable (Cf. Dan 6:8-9)

- "...Vashti may not come into the presence of King Ahasuerus" - their recommendation was for the king to divorce the queen

20 When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."

20 When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."

20 When the edict of the king that he issues is heard throughout his kingdom—for it's vast—then all the women will give honor to their husbands, from the greatest to the least important."

20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small.

- The counselors viewed the king divorcing the queen as an example and consequence for other women who heard about the queen's refusal and were considering refusing their husbands as well.

(d) Ahasuerus' edict following Memucan's advice (1:21-22)

**21** Now *this* word pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

**21** *This* word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

**21** This seemed like a good idea to the king and his officials, so the king did what Memucan suggested.

**21** And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:

- The king took his advisor's advice and divorced Queen Vashti. This was an unreasonable and wrong decision. He should have honored the dignity of his wife, the queen, but history shows that he was an unreasonable and foolish man in many cases.

— Ahasuerus was prone to making these type of arbitrary, un-hinged decisions. During the 180-day banquet (v3-4), historians tell us that he was planning a revenge invasion of Greece (which he carried out two years later (481 BC), with disastrous results), and that his ultimate goal was revenge for his father's defeat to Greece seven years earlier.

— One example of Ahasuerus' foolishness was he executed the builders of a bridge (built to facilitate his invasion of Greece) because it was destroyed by an ocean storm. And, he commanded that the water and waves be whipped and chained to punish the sea for destroying the bridge.

**22** So **he sent letters** to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man was to be the ruler in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

22 So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

22 He sent letters to all the provinces of the king, written in the script of that province, and to each people in their own language, ordering that every man should be the master in his house and speak the language of his own people.

22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.

- "...he sent letters" - the ancient historian Herodotus (484-426 BC) traveled in western Persia shortly after Ahasuerus' reign. He wrote the following concerning the Persian postal service (an ancient Pony Express), to which the writer of Esther alluded several times (v22; Cf. 8:10):

*There is nothing that travels faster, and yet is mortal, than these couriers; the Persians invented this system, which works as follows: It is said that there are as many horses and men posted at intervals as there are days required for the entire journey, so that one horse and one man are assigned to each day. And neither snow nor rain nor heat nor dark of night keeps them from completing their appointed course as swiftly as possible. The first courier passes on the instructions to the second, the second to the third, and from there they are transmitted from one to another all the way through.*

[Heroditus, 8.98]