

I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22

A. Display

TEXT: 1:1-8

- 1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces,)
- 2 that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,
- 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;
- 4 when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even a hundred and fourscore days.
- 5 And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.
- 6 There were hangings of white cloth, of green, and of blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and white, and yellow, and black marble.
- 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 bounty of the king.
- 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none could compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Today's English Version, 1:1-8

From his royal throne in Persia's capital city of Susa, King Xerxes ruled 127 provinces, all the way from India to Sudan.

In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his officials and administrators. The armies of Persia and Media were present,

as well as the governors and noblemen of the provinces. For six whole months he made a show of the riches of the imperial court with all its splendor and majesty.

After that, the king gave a banquet for all the men in the capital city of Susa, rich and poor alike. It lasted a whole week and was held in the gardens of the royal palace. The courtyard there was decorated with blue and white cotton curtains, tied by cords of fine purple linen to silver rings on marble columns. Couches made of gold and silver had been placed in the courtyard, which was paved with white marble, red feldspar, shining mother-of-pearl, and blue turquoise. Drinks were served in gold cups, no two of them alike, and the king was generous with the royal wine. There were no limits on the drinks; the king had given orders to the palace servants that everyone could have as much as he wanted.

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Potentate*: 'Achashewerosh is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khshayarsha* (which is *Xerxes* in Greek). Ahasuerus is generally recognized by historians as Xerxes I (486-465). It is not the same Ahasuerus as named in Ezra 4 and Daniel 9 (who was probably Cambyses, the immediate successor of Cyrus the Great). The author of Esther distinguishes this Ahasuerus by describing his reign from "India to Ethiopa." The Hebrew word for "India" is *hoddu* an old Persian word meaning *Hindu* or Sanskrit meaning, *great river*; hence, Indus River. The empire of Xerxes extended from the Indus River on the east to Ethiopia (*Cush*, in Hebrew) in the south, and to Lydia (Asia Minor) on the east (see map on page 271). At one time, the Persian empire even extended east into the Greek mainland. Some have been skeptical about the statement that Xerxes ruled over 127 "provinces," because Herodotus wrote that the empire was divided into 20 satrapies. The Hebrew word translated *provinces* is *medinah* and it is not certain at all that *medinah* represents the same as the word *satrapy*. *Medinah* may very well represent a subdivision of the Persian *satrapy*. According to Herodotus there were about 60

nations under the Persian rule so it is altogether possible that the 20 satrapies or 60 nations were subdivided into smaller "provinces" (127 of them). Xerxes assumed the throne in 486 B.C. Shushan (Susa) was the city from which he was ruling in the third year of his reign. The Hebrew word *birah* is translated *palace* but is, more accurately, *fortress*. This was the whole palatial section of the city of Susa which was much more strongly fortified than the city surrounding it. The *birah* included the courts, gardens, out-buildings and the royal palace itself. Furthermore, the same word *birah* is used in 2:5 to indicate that Mordecai lived within the fortress and in 9:12 showing that as many as 500 other common citizens lived within the fortress of Susa. The main city had a circumference of six to seven miles, and the *birah* (fortress) was enclosed with a massive wall about two and one half miles square. As late as 1100-1200 A.D. there were 7000 Jews living in Susa. By 1500 A.D. the city became uninhabited and fell into ruins.

v. 3-5 *People*: In the third year of his reign (483 B.C.), Xerxes was making plans, according to Herodotus, to invade the Greek mainland. He planned to attack within two years. This "feast" was, in Hebrew, a *mishetteh*. *Mishetteh* is from a root word meaning, *to drink wine*; hence it is a banquet whose main feature is a drinking bout (cf. 1:7-8). The Hebrew word *sarav* would be better translated *officials* or *rulers* than *princes*. It is from the root *sar* meaning to rule, while the word *nagid* (used of the Messiah in Dan. 9:24-27) has more the connotation of royalty. The word *paretemim* is translated *nobles* and is probably derived from a Babylonian word meaning *first* or *chief*. The word *chel* is translated in the ASV, *power*; it means literally, *army* (cf. Isa. 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17). We are not told exactly how many guests there were. But the number would certainly run into the hundreds. And it is probable that the guest list changed regularly because he would not want to invite the whole army and all its chiefs at once and leave the empire defenseless. Besides, the feast lasted six months so the guests could come in relays.

Verse 4 specifically states the purpose of this feast was that Xerxes might "show" the riches of his kingdom and his own

majesty for half a year. If Xerxes lived today, psychiatrists would say he had "an identity problem." The emperor's main reason for this great feast seems to have been to create an image for himself. He wished to impress his government officials with his greatness. According to Herodotus it was at this feast Xerxes announced: "As Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, have enlarged the empire, I wish to do the same. I propose to bridge the Hellespont, march through Europe, and fire Athens for burning Sardis and opposing Datis and Artaphernes. By reducing Attica and Greece, the sky will be the only boundary of Persia." The emperor's "image building" had also the pragmatic motive of "psyching" his fighting force up for the coming invasion of Greece. Not only were the government officials and the army and its chiefs feasted, the emperor made a week-long feast for all the other citizens then residing in the fortress of Susa, both rich and poor, great and small. These drinking bouts seem to have been for men only. The women apparently had a feast of their own (1:9).

v. 6 *Palace*: The description of the palace is in no way an exaggeration. Tapestries and awnings of expensive, imported linens in pure white, deep green and royal blue were fastened with soft white linen cords to solid silver rings and tall pillars of marble. Some of these columns of marble were 67 feet high. In 1884-86 a Frenchman named Dieulafoy excavated the ruins of this great palace. One writer has said, "There is no event described in the Old Testament whose structural surroundings can be so vividly and accurately restored from actual excavations as 'Shushan the palace.'" Couches (used to recline upon when eating, probably much like the later Roman *triclinium*) were either overlaid heavily with gold and silver or made of pure gold and silver. The floors of the palace were made of beautifully patterned and variable-colored marbles red, white, mother-of-pearl yellow, and black.

v. 7-8 *Party*: The feasting passion of the Persians was insatiable. Some of these feasts had as many as 15,000 guests at one time, and cost nearly \$100,000 for each banquet session. As noted before (1:3) *mishetteh* means a *drinking bout*. Wine flowed freely, according to the "bounty" of the king. The Hebrew word translated "bounty" is *yod* and is literally, *hand*. In other words,

the good, choice wine of the imperial wine-cellars was distributed according to the king's boundless means. Ordinarily, everyone present drank only upon command or invitation according to the "law" of ritual and the whim of the emperor or toastmaster. At these feasts, however, that law had been suspended and everyone was allowed to drink as they pleased. The Persians were noted for their drinking. Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), Greek historian and soldier, knew this and wrote, "They drink so much that they cannot stand upright on their feet, and must be carried out." This was the setting and these were the circumstances surrounding critical decisions made by the emperor Xerxes. The results or consequences of his decisions were used by the Lord God Jehovah to save the Jews of the dispersion from extinction and thus provide a witness to the revealed Word of God through the centuries awaiting the Messiah's coming. No matter how depraved or stupid the behavior of man, all will ultimately redound to the goal and glory of God.

B. Defiance

TEXT: 1:9-12

- 9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to 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 ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,
- 11 to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on.
- 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Today's English Version, 1:9-12

Meanwhile, inside the royal palace Queen Vashti was giving a banquet for the women.

On the seventh day of his banquet the king was drinking and feeling happy, so he called in the seven eunuchs who were his personal servants, Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas. He ordered them to bring in Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. The queen was a beautiful woman, and the king wanted to show off her beauty to the officials and all his guests. But when the servants told Queen Vashti of the king's command, she refused to come. This made the king furious.

COMMENTS

v. 9-11 *Demand*: Three different lexicons give three different meanings to the name *Vashti*; one lexicon says it means, *beauty* (a word of Persian origin); another says *Vashti* means, *best*; while still another says the meaning is *while drinking* (from the Hebrew root *shatha*). It is more likely to be of Persian origin. Some have suggested that *Vashti* was not the actual name of the queen but a word of endearment such as, "sweetheart" or "darling." There is no evidence that Persian custom demanded women feast separately from men. Esther invited Haman and the emperor to a feast (5:3ff). *Vashti* made her feast in the *beth-hammalekuth*, or, house of the king (palace). On the last day of the drinking bout, when the heart of the king was *detov* (lit. *at good*) or *merry* with wine, he ordered seven of his most trusted servants to bring the beautiful queen into the huge hall where all the inebriated men were carousing. The Jewish Talmud and other Jewish commentators think the command to be that *Vashti* should be brought in with *only* the royal crown, that is, naked. The custom of women appearing publicly only when veiled was doubtless as serious then in Persia as it is now in Iran. It would have been threatening enough to her modesty to appear fully dressed but without her

veil before hundreds of drunken men. She would have been ridiculed ever after as a common trollop. Of course, the king's demand might have actually required her to appear completely naked. That is more in character with the behavior of an intemperate man like Xerxes after drinking too much wine. The word translated *fair* is the Hebrew word *toy* which means literally, *good, pleasing, delightful* or *very excellent*.

v. 12 *Denial*: Vashti refused. That was all there was to it. She presumptuously and deliberately disobeyed the emperor's demand and sent the servants back empty-handed. Why did Vashti refuse? We must speculate. Perhaps her moral standards were high enough that she refused to do what was wrong. It would not be impossible that Vashti had adopted the higher moral standards of the Hebrew people around her. Some would question Vashti's morals because the *feast* she made for the women (1:9) was also a *mishetteh* (drinking bout). Most likely, Vashti's refusal was motivated by her desire to retain her social and political status. Any queen who would allow herself to be exploited and degraded like a common prostitute could never command respect for her person or position again. Vashti, too, may have become inebriated and with the false courage that comes with drunkenness, dared to defy the emperor's command. Whatever Vashti's reason, the emperor was enraged. A literal rendering would be, "And was angry the king, very (exceedingly), and his anger blazed within him." The word translated *very* is 'ud and means, *steaming, powerful, excessively, fiery*. Xerxes, who just moments ago was feeling good all over and merry in his heart, is now steaming and burning with red-hot anger. "What fools we are to put into our mouths that which would take away our brains!" (Shakespeare). How devastating drunkenness is to cause a monarch to lose all sense of propriety toward one who occupies the position of queen of the realm!

C. Decree

TEXT: 1:13-22

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

- 14 and the next unto him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom,)
- 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not done the bidding of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?
- 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 peoples that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.
- 17 For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible 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.
- 18 And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like unto all the king's princes. So will there arise much contempt and wrath.
- 19 If it please the king, let there go forth 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 the king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.
- 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his kingdom, (for it is great,) all the wives will give to their husbands honor, both to great and small.
- 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:
- 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 should speak according to the language of his people.

Today's English Version, 1:13-22

Now it was the king's custom to ask for expert opinion on questions of law and order, so he called for his advisers, who

would know what should be done. Those he most often turned to for advice were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan—seven officials of Persia and Media who held the highest offices in the kingdom. He said to these men, “I, King Xerxes, sent my servants to Queen Vashti with a command, and she refused to obey it! What does the law say that we should do with her?”

Then Memucan declared to the king and his officials; “Queen Vashti has insulted not only the king but also his officials—in fact, every man in the empire! Every woman in the empire will start looking down on her husband as soon as she hears what the queen has done. They’ll say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to come to him, and she refused.’ When the wives of the royal officials of Persia and Media hear about the queen’s behavior, they will be telling their husbands about it before the day is out. Wives everywhere will have no respect for their husbands, and husbands will be angry with their wives. If it please Your Majesty, issue a royal proclamation that Vashti may never again appear before the king. Have it written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it can never be changed. Then give her place as queen to some better woman. When your proclamation is made known all over this huge empire, every woman will treat her husband with proper respect, whether he’s rich or poor.”

The king and his officials liked this idea, and the king did what Memucan suggested. To each of the royal provinces he sent a message in the language and the system of writing of that province, saying that every husband should be the master of his home and speak with final authority.

COMMENTS

v. 13-15 *Panic*: When Vashti disobeyed the emperor’s order, panic ensued. The image he had built for himself by this grandiose feast was destroyed in one stroke. It was such an unprecedented response, the emperor did not know how he should act. He knew the queen’s actions would be known sooner or later throughout

the empire. Along with the gossip must go a story of the emperor handling the situation. But how shall it be handled? He hastily convened a meeting with his "wise" men. These are well-known men who are "next unto him" and probably would be likened to our President's "cabinet members." They were not astrologers or magi as the Talmud thinks. They are men learned in the laws and customs of Persian government—familiar with all precedents set in the past and presently having the power of law. The Hebrew word used here for *law* is *dath* and not the usual *torah* (Mosaic law). *Dath* is a word used in the O.T. only during the Persian period and is used of the emperor's laws 3:8; Haman used the word to refer to the "laws of the Jews" 3:8; it is used for the rules of drinking at a feast 1:8; for purifying of women 2:12. The Hebrew word translated *the times* is *ha'itim* and most often means *past times*. Some commentators have theorized that "the times" refers to the winds of a social upheaval (an ancient "equal rights movement") then beginning to blow in Persia. Since the word *ha'itim* almost always means *times of the past* it is doubtful that such a movement was then in progress. Most assuredly, if Vashti's impertinence is not squelched, a feminist movement would soon be started! That was the definite conclusion of the emperor's advisory council. There were seven families of the first rank (Ezra 7:14) in Persia, from which the king was supposed to take his wives. The chiefs of each of these seven families had access to the king at all times, except when he was in the company of one of his wives.

v. 16-20 *Prompting*: Why did Xerxes wish to punish Vashti "according to law"? Apparently there was no law at that time to cover such behavior. The emperor eventually made one, but it was after the fact. Perhaps Xerxes did not have the courage or the ability to handle Vashti's insolence as a husband should. Perhaps the deflation of his ego prompted him to seek a severe punishment to recover his damaged image. Memucan recognized that the politically expedient thing to do was suggest some punishment which would make it appear Vashti's behavior was a serious matter of public policy and concerned the welfare of the whole empire. It would not do, of course, to allow the citizens to think

Vashti's punishment was merely the gratification of the emperor's personal rage.

Memucan, a true male-chauvinist, believed that a woman's respect and surrender is insured through male despotism. Some men believe the only way to assert masculinity is to exploit and tyrannize the opposite sex. The only real and lasting way a man may command the respect and devotion of a woman is to love her with all his heart and actions. Memucan may have known deep in his heart the truth of that last statement, but practically, feared such an answer would not satisfy the emperor's impetuous rage. There is no reason to suppose that Vashti's behavior would cause such catastrophic rebellion as depicted by Memucan. The probable cause of Vashti's rebellion in the first place was the domineering attempt of Xerxes to profane her womanhood before a whole host of male-chauvinists. Memucan's advice to reinforce male domination and exploitation by royal decree would hardly remedy the situation created by Vashti's refusal to obey her husband. It is true that women of that culture were, in some instances, treated as chattel by men. Vashti's defiance caused more of a stir in the hearts of men of the empire than in the women. The contempt and wrath Memucan feared was that of the men of the empire.

There may have been political intrigue involved in Memucan's advice. It appears he expected the emperor to dispose of Vashti's royalty to another "better than she." Did Memucan have someone specifically in mind? If he expected the emperor to choose the next queen from one of the families of the first-ranked seven, perhaps Memucan had a maiden from his own family in mind. Whatever the case, Memucan's advice is very specific that the emperor make it a public decree ("written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes") so that it could not be changed. Vashti's deposition and banishment must be irrevocable. If the way were left open for her to regain Xerxes' favor and restoration to the throne, she would surely execute her vengeance on Memucan.

v. 21-22 Precedent: We tend to agree with the Jewish rabbis in the Midrash that Xerxes "was utterly devoid of sense in so

decreeing," and, "Nay more, he made himself a laughing-stock." There was no need for such a decree. The women of Persia would not be able to overthrow the government or revolutionize the cultural status-quo because of Vashti's disobedience. This royal law protected the myth of male superiority about as much as the attempt to legislate female equality by an "equal rights amendment" in the United States! It is apparent from certain incidents in the book of Esther that wives were held in considerable esteem by their husbands (cf. 5:10; 5:13; 7:1-2, etc.). Xerxes certainly could neither insure his own male superiority nor that of the men of his empire by passing a law. He already had at his disposal enough force to depose or slay a queen who disobeyed him if he wished. But Vashti had already proved that in spite of all his power and laws he could not force her to prostitute her womanhood if she did not wish to do so! But Memucan's advice pleased the intemperate king and his princes.

The precedent-setting decree was sent out to the whole empire. Since there were people of different languages (and probably different dialects), the decree was written in as many different languages as were necessary. The practice of the Persians to address proclamations in different languages is illustrated by the bilingual and trilingual inscriptions from Cyrus to Artaxerxes, and especially by that one of Darius preserved on the Behistun Rock (see map, page 271). The decree of Xerxes was, "Let every man bear rule in his own house," and, "speak according to the language of his people." The latter part of that decree seems superfluous. Jewish commentators take the phrase to mean that if a husband and wife were of different race and language, the husband was not to allow the wife's language to prevail in the home. He was to compel his wife to learn and speak his language.

What happened to Vashti? There is no record. So far as we know, Vashti was never given an opportunity to speak in her own defense. Nor do we find anyone else speaking out on her behalf. Her fate was decided according to the whim of an egotistical and intemperate tyrant. Jewish tradition believes she was executed. The history of deposed kings and queens of the East would substantiate that tradition. Disgraced potentates were usually put to the sword.

Led into rashness by his own intemperance and given foolish counsel by his advisors, Xerxes is trapped. His hand is forced, he banishes the one closest to him and now he is alone with himself. He is in desperate need of a wise consort.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. Pride and arrogance feeds on the exploitation of others.
2. Intemperance, especially in alcohol, causes people to disregard decency and sacrifice personal integrity.
3. No woman, not even a pagan one, likes to be treated as a mere object or “thing” to satisfy male gratification.
4. The proper functioning of members of a household cannot be sustained through civil legislation—it must be established through love.
5. Almighty God uses the consequences of men’s evil deeds to carry out His plan of redemption for the world.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Ahasureus’ Greek name?
2. How large was his Persian empire?
3. What kind of feast was being held by the Persian emperor?
4. What was his purpose in holding the feast?
5. How would you characterize Ahasuerus?
6. Why do you think Vashti refused the emperor’s demand?
7. Why did the emperor panic when Vashti refused him?
8. Memucan’s advice was born of what shrewdness?
9. Do you believe the emperor’s decree was as necessary as Memucan advised?
10. What lessons are to be learned here?