

II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23

A. Search for a Queen

TEXT: 2:1-4

- 1 After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was pacified, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.
- 2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:
- 3 and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women; unto the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them;
- 4 and let the maiden that pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

Today's English Version, 2:1-4

Later, even after the king's anger had cooled down, he kept thinking about what Vashti had done and about his proclamation against her. So some of the king's advisers who were close to him suggested, "Why don't you make a search to find some beautiful young virgins? You can appoint officials in every province of the empire and have them bring all these beautiful young girls to your harem here in Susa, the capital city. Put them in the care of Hegai, the eunuch who is in charge of your women, and let them be given a beauty treatment. Then take the girl you like best and make her queen in Vashti's place."

The king thought this was good advice, so he followed it.

COMMENTS

v. 1 *Remorse*: Late in 480 B.C., Xerxes (Ahasuerus) returned from a disastrous military expedition to the Greek mainland (see Introduction, pg. 265). It had been three long years since he had,

in a drunken rage, humiliated his beautiful queen, Vashti (she was probably executed finally). The word *pacified* is *keosek* in Hebrew and means "a sinking down." Finally, after three years, his wrath settled down enough for him to remember with remorse, his beautiful Vashti, and what he had done to her. The Hebrew word *zakar* is the verb translated *remembered*. He remembered "what she had done, and what was decreed against her." He had gone to Greece filled with male egotism, for a while venting his arrogance upon the Greeks, but then, suffering a humiliating defeat, he returned to Persia slightly less arrogant perhaps, than when he left. Whether Xerxes remembered Vashti before this or not, the Hebrew language does not indicate. The Hebrew verb system has no tense, at least in the sense in which past, present, and future are understood in English. Hebrew verbs have two "kinds" of action; complete and incomplete. It does have seven verb stems each expressing a particular voice or degree of action. The word *zakar* is the Qal stem of the verb and means completed action in the active voice; "he remembered." Perhaps it was not until Xerxes had suffered an ego-deflation and returned to the familiar surroundings of the palace that the impact of the Vashti incident was able to sink into his heart. In the *Haggadah* (meaning, "relate") portion of the *Midrash* (meaning, "explanation") which is more homiletical than historical, it is conjectured that before Esther was made queen, Xerxes would compare women who entered with a statue of Vashti that stood near his bed. After his marriage the statue was replaced by one of Esther (*Midrash Abba Guryon, Parashah 2*). As legendary as that may be, the biblical text seems to infer that Xerxes realized that Vashti had acted with wisdom when she refused to allow her royal highness to be profaned, and that his reaction was, at best, hasty, and worse than that, despicable!

v. 2-4 *Recommendations:* The Hebrew noun *ne'aroth* is feminine plural of *na'ar*. It is translated *servants*; these *servants* were probably young maidens. Those now advising the emperor were not the seven princes of chapter one. These young maidens might well be visualizing the atmosphere in the palace should the emperor continue to brood on about his beautiful Vashti's fate

and his own guilt. Quickly, with the shrewdness of feminine intuition, they suggest something that is certain to divert the attention of the male of the species—a beauty contest to choose a new royal consort. Note that nothing is said about the social or political qualifications of the prospective queen. According to protocol, the emperor was supposed to take his wives from the seven chief families of the realm (see comments 1:13-15). These young female servants knew how to change the mood of the emperor. Their suggestion was that the search for a new queen be concentrated on the physical features of womanhood. She must be fair to look upon and she must be a virgin. The word for virgin is *bethulah* and connotes "young" virgin. For a discussion of the difference between the words *bethulah* and *'almah*, both of which mean *virgin*, see *Isaiah, Vol. I*, by Butler, pub. College Press, pg. 152-153.

These women servants of the emperor suggested that elaborate procedures be instituted to find the "fairest of the fair," the one young maiden in the whole Persian empire that would most please him. No possible candidate should be overlooked. All the maidens who might please the emperor were to be transported to the capital city, Susa, and housed in the "house of the women." The "house of the women" was the emperor's *harem*. Ancient kings and emperors had many wives and concubines. King Solomon had a house like this to accommodate his many wives and concubines (cf. I Kings 7:8). In the Persian palaces the "house of the women" was quite large and spacious because the emperors were known to have housed as many as 300 or 400 concubines as well as their "wives." Hegai was probably one of the emperor's most trusted *eunuchs*. The Hebrew word is *saris* and is translated in the RSV as *eunuch*. He was probably some repulsive old man, on whom the court ladies were very dependent, and whose favor they constantly courted. Some of the Hebrew kings evidently had such eunuchs (II Kings 9:32; Jer. 41:16). The Hebrew word *tameruqeyhen* is translated *things for purification* in the ASV but *their ointments* in the RSV. It is from the root word *maraq* which means *to make clean, bright by rubbing, to polish*. It is not the Hebrew word used to legislate religious or

ceremonial purification, therefore it probably had to do with some form of beauty treatment such as diet, training in royal behavior, anointment of the body with perfume, and facial make-up. It may also have been a sort of quarantine that would allow time for any latent disease or blemish to show up before the emperor made his selection.

The emperor considered this good (*tov*) advice. He was pleased at the prospect of looking over all the beautiful women of Persia and choosing one for a queen. It would be a welcome diversion from the tedious affairs of state.

B. Solicitude of Mordecai

TEXT: 2:5-11

- 5 There was a certain Jew in Shushan the palace, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite,
- 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives that had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.
- 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.
- 8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.
- 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with her portions, and the seven maidens who were meet to be given her out of the king's house: and he removed her and her maidens to the best place of the house of the women.

- 10 Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not make it known.
11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what would become of her.

Today's English Version, 2:5-11

There in Susa lived a Jew named Mordecai son of Jair; he was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jehoiachin of Judah into exile from Jerusalem, along with a group of captives, Mordecai was among them. He had a cousin, Esther, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah; she was a beautiful girl, and had a good figure. At the death of her parents, Mordecai had adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.

When the king had issued his new proclamation and many girls were being brought to Susa, Esther was among them. She too was put in the royal palace in the care of Hegai, who had charge of the harem. Hegai liked Esther, and she won his favor. He lost no time in beginning her beauty treatment of massage and special diet. He gave her the best place in the harem and assigned seven girls specially chosen from the royal palace to serve her.

Now on the advice of Mordecai, Esther had kept it secret that she was Jewish. Every day Mordecai would walk back and forth in front of the courtyard of the harem, in order to find out how she was getting along and what was going to happen to her.

COMMENTS

v. 5-7 *Orphanhood:* Enter Mordecai! This book might well have been called, The Book of Mordecai. All the way through the book Mordecai is as much a star as Esther and the book ends with an account of the fame and dignity of Mordecai. The Feast or Purim is called "the day of Mordecai" in II Maccabees 15:36. He

is a favorite character in the Rabbinical literature. The name Mordecai is derived from Marduk, chief deity of Babylon and Persia. Marduk means "be bold and audacious in acts of rebellion; run strenuously, attack." Some suggest that Nimrod is a Hebrew transmutation of Marduk which in turn has some relationship to the constellation Orion. "He who was to the Babylonians a deified hero, was to the Hebrews a rebel Titan, bound in chains among the stars that all might behold his punishment." The fact that the name Mordecai is derived from Marduk substantiates assumption that this famous man was born in captivity. It would seem physically impossible for Mordecai to have been born before the captivity and still be a contemporary of Xerxes. If Mordecai had been carried into captivity (even as an infant) with Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) in 596 B.C., he would be 122 years of age when he became prime minister in the 12th year of Xerxes' reign (474 B.C.); and Mordecai was in office for a long time after 474 B.C. (cf. 10:2ff). In the long standing argument about the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *who* (2:6) we have taken the position that it refers to Kish—great grandfather of Mordecai. The time between the exile of Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) and the time of Mordecai is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai. We have already indicated that *birah* ("palace") means more specifically, *fortress* (cf. 1:1-2). Mordecai did not at this time live within the royal palace itself, but inside the walled fortress known as Susa.

Mordecai was an especially compassionate man toward his own kinsmen. When his uncle and aunt died, they left a beautiful young daughter completely orphaned. Mordecai was a man who went beyond the letter of the law (Ex. 22:22) which forbade exploitation of the widow and the fatherless; he kept the spirit of the law as proclaimed by the prophets (Isa. 1:17) and defended the fatherless. Mordecai had no way of knowing when he first took Esther into his home as his own daughter that someday his association with Esther would promote him to high office and fame. But Jehovah who rewards the righteous knew! Yes, even Mordecai had come to Persia for such a time as this!

The orphaned girl had been named *Hadassah* by her parents

which means *myrtle* in Hebrew. The myrtle is a large evergreen shrub with fragrant flowers and spicy-sweet scented leaves. All parts of the plant are somewhat perfumed. The word *hadassah* in Hebrew came to mean *sweetness*. It has been used as a symbol of beauty and sweetness (Isa. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:7-10). It was one of the trees used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:15). In ancient times it was sacred to Astarte. The name Esther is probably derived from the Persian *stara*, i.e. *star*, or from the goddess Ishtar (also known as Ashtoreth and Astarte). Esther was well named! The Hebrew words *yephath*—*to'ar vetovath mare eh* describe Esther's unusual beauty. *Yephath* means *beautiful*; *to'ar* means the beauty of her *form*; *vetovath* means *pleasant, desirable*; and *mare'eh* has as its root in Hebrew that from which we get the word *vision, spectacle, appearance, form*. Esther must have been strikingly beautiful. Her facial features, her feminine figure, and her personality all combined to make her as beautiful, comely, shapely and desirable as the "beloved" young bride in Song of Solomon (cf. S.S. 1:8; 1:15-17; 2:14; 4:1-8, etc.). Mordecai, her cousin, took her into his home and into his heart and she became his adopted daughter.

v. 8-11 *Opportunity*: There must have been hundreds of young women gathered to the emperor's palace. The word *ravvoth* means *large number, great number, myriads*. They were all given to the custody (Heb. "into the hand of") Hegai, the emperor's eunuch (cf. 2:3) who was in charge of the emperor's harem. It seems clear from these verses that this was no ordinary beauty contest. These contestants had not entered by their own choice. The fact that the many were "gathered" and Esther was "taken" indicates they were compelled to be made part of the emperor's harem. In the Jewish Targums there is a story that Mordecai tried to hide Esther from the emperor's servants when they came in search of beautiful maidens. Not only were these maidens forced to compete for the emperor's favor, the losers were probably not allowed to return to their homes but retained in his harem. Polygamy can be traced back to the pre-Noachian times. Lamech is the first recorded polygamist (Gen. 4:19, 23). Some think polygamy was the outcome of tribal wars. When men had separated into

clans and had taken up different places of abode, collisions soon occurred between them. In such wars the great majority of men would be massacred; the women and children, driven to the abode of the conquerors, there to become concubines and slaves. Of course the strongest man or the chief of the clan would assert his right to the choice of captives. Thus down through the centuries of time it became a status symbol. So we have even in Solomon's temple a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. Emperors and kings, with all of a nation's wealth at their command, could afford to support such harems. There were other facts involved in polygamy. First, there is the natural sex-drive in man, which, *not* under the control of the express will of God which commands one woman for one man, leads man to sexual promiscuity. The natural sex-drive *under control* is good, because it is created by God. Second, in an agricultural society which did not have the benefits of technological work-savers, a man would desire to produce as many offspring as possible to become a work-force and produce the highest standard of living possible. Women and children were usually considered "property" in such cultures. Of course, the principle "a man's life does not consist of the things which he possesses" was as true then as it is now. Polygamy and harems have always brought jealousy, intrigue, ruination, financial disaster, slavery and moral guilt. Solomon's polygamy bankrupted Israel and brought about a divided kingdom saturated with idolatry. It is doubtful that Esther would have chosen to become a member of Xerxes' harem. But she had no choice, except death to herself and probably to her family.

Esther pleased (*tov*) Hegai, supervisor of the emperor's harem. Just how she pleased him we are not told; most probably by her sweetness of disposition and determination to "make the most" of an unwanted circumstance without complaining or rebelling she was shown kindness (*chesed* in Hebrew). No doubt, her radiant beauty also prompted him to put her in a position to catch the emperor's eye sooner than the rest of the maidens. First, Hegai quickly gave Esther the ointments (*tameruqeyha* in Heb.) and cosmetics with which to adorn herself before being taken to the emperor's presence. Second, he gave her the customary portions

of food (*manotheyha* in Heb.; the word used of the special food in Dan. 1:5; see also Esther 9:19, 22). Third, Esther was given seven women attendants, probably the loveliest and most efficient of all the servant girls, suitable to the exceptional charm of Esther herself. Fourth, Hegai "removed" (*yeshanneha* in Heb., meaning, *altered, changed, transferred*) Esther and her maidens to the best place of the harem. Apparently she had been given quarters in a less desirable part of the harem when she was first brought to the palace.

Esther had not revealed her ethnic background. We assume she looked enough like a Persian that her Jewishness was not discernible. Since both Persians and Jews were of Semitic origin their physical features were enough alike to present no problem for Esther. Why did Esther not reveal that she was a Jew? And why did Mordecai advise her that she should not do so? Many answers have been given. One says, "Mordecai reasoned something like this: If Esther is chosen queen, it can only be because God desires to make her the instrument of His purpose. If she reveals that she is a Jewess, she will prejudice her choice . . ." Another suggests that she did *not* reveal she was from *royal* origin (descended from Kish and thus King Saul) hoping the emperor might think she was of humble origin and send her away. There is no evidence Esther was of royal lineage. Ibn Ezra says, "So that she might observe her religious obligations secretly. If she revealed her Jewish faith she would be forced to transgress" (cf. Dan. 1 and 6). Another Jewish tradition says Mordecai's modesty dictated that Esther's racial ties not be known; he modestly wanted to forego the advancement and publicity which would come to him if his relationship to Esther (when she became queen) were known. We would question whether Mordecai could have been that accurate with his premonitions. Could he know with certainty that Esther would become queen? The most natural reason, it would seem, for Esther to conceal her racial roots was the anti-Jewish feeling there (cf. 3:5-6; 5:13; 6:13; 8:11). The Jews suffered this anti-Jewish prejudice in Egypt under the Pharaohs, by their pagan neighbors while they were in the Promised Land, when they were taken captive to Babylon and Persia, from the

Samaritans after their return from captivity, from the Seleucids (Dan. 11), from the Romans, and from certain people of every nation with which they have been associated since. We think Mordecai's purpose was to protect his beautiful cousin from any violence should her ancestry be made known immediately. That Mordecai was very much concerned for her safety and well-being is evidenced by the fact that *every* single day he went to the court of the harem to inquire about her present circumstances and what the future might hold for her. It is apparent that Mordecai has some official duty or standing within the palace itself that would allow him easy and continuous access to the harem courts. Perhaps he was one of the porters who watched the many gates of the palace or had the responsibility of storing supplies within the palace.

Some question the ethics of Mordecai and Esther in keeping her racial ties silent. It needs to be understood that it is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would serve no good purpose. The fact that they did not reveal she was a Jewess certainly did not cause others any suffering or loss. When Rahab did not betray the Hebrew spies there was nothing unethical in her action, (Josh. 2:1ff). Samuel withheld information from Saul at the direction of the Lord (I Sam. 16:1ff). Elisha withheld information from enemies (II Kings 6:19ff). The Lord Himself was party to military deception in the assault against Ai by Joshua (Josh. 8:3-29, esp. v. 18). Jesus advised concealment of truth from those who have no claim upon it (Mt. 7:6); Jesus himself would not so much as speak to Herod when questioned. Mordecai knew that the truth about Esther's ethnic background would only bring suffering (perhaps even death) to her and the Jewish people if such information should be divulged at an inopportune time.

C. Season of Preparation

TEXT: 2:12-14

- 12 Now when the turn of every maiden was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that it had been done to her according to

the law for the women twelve months, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odors and with the things for the purifying of the women,)

- 13 then in this wise came the maiden unto the king: whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.
- 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, who kept the concubines; she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and she were called by name.

Today's English Version, 2:12-14

The regular beauty treatment for the women lasted a year—massages with oil of myrrh for six months and with oil of balsam for six more. After that, each girl would be taken in turn to King Xerxes. When she went from the harem to the palace, she could wear whatever she wanted. She would go there in the evening, and the next morning she would be taken to another harem and put in the care of Shaashgaz, the eunuch in charge of the king's concubines. She would not go to the king again unless he liked her enough to ask for her by name.

COMMENTS

v. 12 *Purification*: We have already discussed the reasons for the purification process (cf. 2:3). Some presume another reason for such rites stems from the idea that Persian emperors considered themselves divine. They believed that such deity was resident in them that even pure maidens had to be purified ceremonially before approaching their emperor. We do not think it had anything to do with religion at all. It probably had to do with training in Persian customs. Daniel spent his quarantine in Babylon

becoming learned in all the wisdom and laws of Babylon. This may have been one of the purposes of the "purifications" for these maidens. The "law" for the women is the word *dath* already discussed (1:13-15).

Myrrh is from the Hebrew word *mor*. It is from a small tree growing in Arabia; the gum resin exudes in small tear-like drops which dry to a rich brown or reddish-yellow, brittle substance, with a faint though agreeable smell and a warm, bitter taste. The Hebrew word *mor* means "a bitter weeping, or drops of bitterness." Oil of myrrh was probably used as a cosmetic in this Persian "law" for purification. It may have even been used medicinally, for it was used that way at other times (it was offered to Jesus at His crucifixion as an anesthesia). It is quite likely that some of the "fair young maidens" there at that time had come from homes that were none too clean or sanitary. The time period for the purifications consisted first of six months application or oil of myrrh plus six months application of sweet odors. The Hebrew text has two interesting words here; the first is *basam* which refers to the balsam-tree or is translated *spice* in Song of Solomon 5:1; the second word comes from the Hebrew root *maraq* and means, cleansing or rubbing with *precious perfumes*. For one whole year there was a process of cosmetic, medicinal and dietary preparation of every young girl brought into the emperor's harem.

v. 13-14 *Presentation*: After a full year of preparation, each maiden was granted the opportunity to make her own presentation before the emperor as favorable as she was able. "Whatsoever she desired was given her" probably means she could wear any dress in the harem wardrobes, and adorn herself with any of the jewelry available there. The emperor wished each maiden to appear as alluring and as desirable as possible.

Each maiden, in turn appointed her, presented herself before the emperor in the evening, stayed with the emperor that night, and returned on the next day to the "second house of the women." The Persian emperor's harem was apparently divided into three "houses": (1) a royal residence for the queen; (2) a house for the "women" (secondary wives or concubines); and (3) a

house for the virgins. On returning from her first visit to the emperor's chambers, a girl ordinarily returned to the "second house" because she was no longer a virgin. It must be assumed that the emperor's purpose in keeping these virgins over night in his chambers was sexual intercourse. The "second house" was under the supervision of Shaashgaz, another of the emperor's eunuchs. Once a maiden had been granted her night with the emperor, she was never permitted to be in his royal chambers again unless the emperor called for her by name. If a young virgin was not chosen as queen, she returned to the harem of concubines for the rest of her life. They were virtual prisoners. They would never be allowed to return to the world outside the palace and marry after consorting with the emperor for that would be degrading to the sovereignty and glory of the emperor.

D. Selection of Esther

TEXT: 2:15-18

- 15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.
- 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.
- 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.
- 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.

Today's English Version, 2:15-18

The time came for Esther to go to the king. Esther—the daughter of Abihail and the cousin of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his daughter; Esther—admired by everyone who saw her. When her turn came, she wore just what Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem, advised her to wear. So in Xerxes' seventh year as king, in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, Esther was brought to King Xerxes in the royal palace. The king liked her more than any of the other girls, and more than any of the others she won his favor and affection. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet in Esther's honor and invited all his officials and administrators. He proclaimed a holiday for the whole empire and distributed gifts worthy of a king.

COMMENTS

v. 15-16 *Countenance*: We do not know how the "turns" of the maidens to appear before Xerxes were determined. Perhaps by casting lots, perhaps by the arbitrary decision of the eunuch in charge of that portion of the harem. Shimei (2:5) must have had at least two sons; Jair the father of Mordecai and Abihail, Mordecai's uncle and Esther's father. The Hebrew word *dod* is translated *uncle* and means literally, "father's brother." Thus we are to understand Esther's father to be Mordecai's paternal uncle. When Esther's turn came she did not seek any of the extras offered to the maidens (2:12-14) for their appearance before the emperor. Perhaps she refused extra adornment in an attempt to persuade the emperor to reject her from being queen. Or her modesty may have caused her to refuse the cosmetics and alluring clothes available. Whatever the reason, her natural beauty was so radiant and her personality so pleasant she was admired by all that looked at her. It is unusual that there was no jealousy and murmuring among the women against Esther. This verifies that her bearing and demeanor toward her contemporaries was such

as to obtain only graciousness, even from those competing for the crown!

When one considers the circumstances under which Esther was probably taken from her uncle's home to the emperor's harem and the cultural mores Esther had to sacrifice, it is nothing short of amazing that she could endure this experience without the exhibition of some animosity on her part. She certainly would seem to have justifiable cause for resentment toward these Persians. Yet she was held in favor by all who looked upon her. No little Jewish girl could be blasé about facing what Esther faced. She was about to sacrifice her virginity to a Persian monarch. There was the chance that she might become queen. But there was also the distinct possibility that she might become merely one of his concubines for the rest of her life. Not even the fact that she had been born in Persia and reared in Persian culture could soften the trauma of this experience. Her composure in the face of this moment is marvelous, to say the least.

She was presented to the emperor, in his palace, in the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. From Passover month (March-April) one counts ten months to Tebeth (December-January), because Passover month is the first month of the religious year. This is the only time in the Bible that the month Tebeth is mentioned. One scholar thinks the name *Tevet* (Heb. for Tebeth) may be related to the word *tava* which means in Hebrew "to dip or sink" and Tevet is thus the "month of sinking in" or the "muddy month" because of the abundant rainfall during that season. There were Jewish fasts observed on the 5th and 10th days of this month commemorating the fall and siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It is not certain whether these fasts were being observed in Esther's day or not. Her presentation to Xerxes was dated also in the seventh year of his reign. This was shortly after (less than a year) his ignominious defeat at Salamis and Plataea in about 480 B.C. He returned home in 479 B.C. and selected Esther as his queen. If Xerxes was about 55 when he was assassinated (see Introduction, page 265) in 465 B.C., then he was about 40 years old when Esther appeared before him. We have no way of knowing Esther's age.

v. 17-18 *Coronation:* There are five or six Hebrew words that may be translated love, but the most common one is '*ahav*', and that is the word used of the Persian emperor's love for the Jewish maiden. He loved her more than all the other *women*. The Hebrew word translated women is the generic word for "mankind" *nashim*. It is difficult to tell from the word *nashim* whether the writer meant all the women in the emperor's harem or just those virgins who had appeared before him prior to Esther's appearance. The next phrase, "... more than all the virgins ..." seems to limit *nashim* to those virgins appearing just before Esther. The word for *virgins* is the definitive word *bethuloth*.

Xerxes set the *kether*—*malekuth*, *crown*—*royal*, upon Esther's head and made her queen in the place of Vashti. *Kether* means "encircle, circlet, diadem," and was probably a heavily jeweled turban. The word *nezer* is the word describing the only crown used in crowning Hebrew kings, so the *kether* describes the crown of a foreign monarch. To further honor his beautiful new queen, Xerxes decreed a new *mishetreh* ("feast") and named it Esther's Feast. *Mishetreh* is the word used to describe the "drinking-bout" in 1:9-11. The word the Hebrews used to describe their religious feasts was *chagim*. The feast decreed by Xerxes was strictly a Persian festival and we do not find the Jews observing it. The Jews did later establish the Fast of Esther and observe it on the 13th of Adar (February-March) and followed it with the Feast of Purim on the 14th and 15th of Adar. But none of these holy days had any relationship to the Feast of Esther proclaimed by Xerxes. In addition to the inauguration of a Feast, Xerxes "made a release." The word *hanachah* has been explained by various commentators as; (a) release from paying taxes; (b) release from forced labor; (c) release of some prisoners; (d) release from military service. The root word in Hebrew is *nucha* and means simply, *rest*. It may mean what we think of today as simply, "a holiday," without any form of amnesty being involved. On this day when the emperor was enjoying the great pleasure of having acquired the most beautiful and personable woman in the empire for his queen, he felt especially generous and gave gifts. He gave

them "according to the bounty of the king," which means either in quantity or quality or both. It was a common practice for eastern potentates to give gifts at times like this. Herod Antipas offered Salome half of his kingdom when she danced for him. The Magi brought gifts to the "king of the Jews." Merodach-baladan sent a present to Hezekiah. It was a custom that served both egomania and politics. It gave kings an opportunity to build their own images as well as to cement national and international political relationships. It still goes on today. Potentates and politicians still curry the favor of constituents with "gifts." International relationships are still built, not on truth and honesty, but on "loans" and "gifts." Perhaps we are judging Xerxes' "holiday" too harshly. But in view of the customs then and continued practice today it would seem his motive was political or personal and not philanthropic.

E. Sedition Revealed

TEXT: 2:19-23

- 19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate.
- 20 Esther had not yet made known her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.
- 21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those that kept the threshold, were wroth, and sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus.
- 22 And the thing became known to Mordecai, who showed it unto Esther the queen; and Esther told the king thereof in Mordecai's name,
- 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, and it was found to be so, they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Today's English Version, 2:19-23

Meanwhile Mordecai had been appointed by the king to an administrative position. As for Esther, she had still not let it be known that she was Jewish. Mordecai had told her not to tell anyone, and she obeyed him in this, just as she had obeyed him when she was a little girl under his care.

During the time that Mordecai held office in the palace, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the palace eunuchs who guarded the entrance to the king's rooms, became hostile to King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai learned about it and told Queen Esther, who then told the king what Mordecai had found out. There was an investigation, and it was discovered that the report was true, so both men were hanged on the gallows. The king ordered an account of this to be written down in the official records of the empire.

COMMENTS

v. 19-20 Plot: Why were the virgins gathered a "second time"? According to Jewish tradition, when Esther became queen she refused to disclose her lineage to Xerxes, although she did tell him she was of royal lineage. She rebuked him for following the evil advice of his nobles and having Vashti slain. Esther reminded Xerxes that Babylonian emperors (Nebuchadnezzar et al.) had been wise in following the advice of Hebrew prophets like Daniel. Esther sent Xerxes to Mordecai for counsel. Xerxes asked Mordecai's counsel on how to get Esther to reveal her ancestry. Mordecai suggested that the virgins be assembled again as if the emperor was planning to change queens again. This would move Esther to jealousy and she would then be glad to tell the emperor her lineage rather than be deposed. But, so the tradition goes, this scheme was in vain. Esther did not reveal her ancestry. Others have suggested that this second increment of virgins was gathered as late arrivals from the far reaches of the empire and missed the first series of individual over-night presentations to the emperor. Still others

think this is simply an historical aside noting the customary sexual promiscuity of Persian emperors. Although Xerxes loved Esther above all the women, he retained his polygamous desires for adding concubines to his harem. Whatever the case, the point of the account is the discovery of the plot against Xerxes' life.

Esther did not let her advancement to queen of the empire rob her of respect for the man who had rescued her from an orphan's fate. She kept the word of her uncle, Mordecai, just like when she was a little Hebrew orphan-girl. The word *ma'amar* is translated *commandment*. *Ma'amar* is a word borrowed from Chaldean language; the usual word for commandment in Hebrew is *mitzvah*. No doubt there were pressures on this young Hebrew woman to reveal her lineage, if for nothing else, for the sake of ethnic pride; connected to this might be the temptation to shame Xerxes publicly for having a Jewess as queen of Persia and retaliate for having been wrested from her home and culture and deflowered by a pagan emperor. Furthermore, it was customary in the ancient eastern empires that a person's kinsmen usually rose in political status right along with him. One would expect that when Esther became queen, Mordecai would have been appointed to some official position that would have secured his status before the emperor. Esther would then not need to be silent about her ancestry. The very fact that Esther remains silent indicates that Mordecai had no secure official position in the emperor's palace.

v. 21-23 *Punishment*: Hebrew tradition has it that Mordecai was appointed to "the king's gate." His task was to inform the emperor of any conspiracy against him. Bighan and Teresh, who had previously kept the gate, became incensed, saying, "The king has removed two officials and replaced them by this single barbarian." They devised a plan to prove that the emperor should not have given their job to a Jew—they planned to kill the emperor. By this rather drastic scheme, they intended to prove that the Jew, Mordecai, was an unfit keeper of the gate. These two gate-keepers did not realize that Mordecai was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and knew 70 different languages. So when

they plotted together in their native tongue about killing the emperor, Mordecai understood, informed Esther, and Esther informed the emperor who had the two executed. So goes the rabbinic tradition. However, as stated earlier, our biblical text seems to imply that Mordecai had no official capacity. He was probably sitting in the "gate," as before (2:11), to learn news of Esther's fate. The "gate" was the usual large, fortified entrance to the palace enclosure. Gates to the royal residence have always been used in the East as courts of justice, public forums and places to learn daily news. To be placed in command or guardianship of these gates was a signal of high honor and showed that the occupant of the palace (the emperor) placed explicit trust in those so appointed. For some reason these two well-trusted officials were "wroth" with the emperor and were deciding to kill him. Bigthan may very well be the same person as the Bigtha of the group listed earlier (1:10). Both these men were eunuchs (*sariymey* in Hebrew). Conspiracies within the structure of Persian politics were common occurrences. Xerxes was ultimately assassinated by Artabanus, the captain of the guard, and Aspamitras, a chamberlain and eunuch. Just how this conspiracy became known to Mordecai we are not told. Whether Mordecai knew 70 different languages or not, it is almost certain he knew the language spoken by these Persian eunuchs. Mordecai had been born and reared in Persia. It was his home almost as much as theirs. Josephus says that a Jewish slave of the palace came to Mordecai with a report of the conspiracy. Whatever the source, Mordecai revealed it to Esther and Esther told the emperor. What was Mordecai's motive for trying to avert the assassination of the emperor? Perhaps it was his humane concern for the emperor's life. More likely, Mordecai had Esther's interest and the interest of the whole Jewish community as his first priority. If Xerxes should be assassinated, Esther would probably be deposed by the perpetrators of the coup—perhaps even murdered by them. If not by them, she would surely be deposed by the next emperor. Thus the Jewish people would be deprived of one of their own on the throne. If this seems harsh judgment of Mordecai's motives, one must remember that he dares risk Esther's life for the sake of the whole Jewish community later (4:10-17).

When the plot was revealed to the emperor and the matter thoroughly investigated and guilt established, Xerxes ordered the two conspirators executed. The Hebrew word *talah* is rendered "hang" but it probably does not mean to execute by hanging as Western cultures know it. The Jews executed usually by stoning the convicted culprit to death. There are only two clear instances of Jews dying by hanging and those were suicides (Ahitophel and Judas). Occasionally the Jews would "hang" a corpse on a "tree" (or stake) after execution or death (cf. II Sam. 4:12; Gen. 40:19; Dt. 21:22; Josh. 8:29; 10:26-27). The Philistines did this to Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 21:12). The "tree" was a pole or stake that could be lowered to receive its victim and then raised and fixed into the ground so the public could view it. The Persians, according to Herodotus (III; 125 and IX; 78) and Plutarch, *impaled* the dead bodies of criminals and others executed on sharpened poles. This is apparently what is meant by the word *gallows* in 6:4; 7:10; 8:7; 9:13, 25. The word in Hebrew there is *ha'etz* and means literally, "the wood," or "the tree." Archaeological inscriptions have been found of the Mesopotamian civilizations which confirm that impaling victims on stakes was a method of execution.

All affairs of state were entered into the king's personal chronicles (somewhat like our Presidential Papers) and whenever the king wanted to be reminded of past events they would be read out to him. The information given by Mordecai about the assassination plot was very important information! Xerxes intended that this event be permanently recorded for future reference and use. Xerxes probably did not record it for Mordecai's benefit, but this event later played a crucial part in the survival of Mordecai, Esther and the whole Jewish community (6:1ff).

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. The male ego is insatiable and feeds on sexual promiscuity.
2. God blesses those who care for orphans.

3. It is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would benefit no one.
4. Some people (Esther) are willing to make almost unbelievable personal sacrifices for what they think may benefit others.
5. Plotting violence on another's person usually returns in violence to the plotter.

CHAPTER TWO REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Xerxes remembered Vashti?
2. Why would his servants suggest that he select a new queen from young virgins not presently in his harem?
3. What constituted the "purification" process to which these virgins were subjected? Why?
4. What was Mordecai's relationship to Esther?
5. Why did Mordecai instruct Esther not to reveal her ethnic background?
6. Why do you think Xerxes had each maiden come to him individually and not allow them to return to the harem until the next morning?
7. According to the modern calendar when did Esther's turn for appearing before Xerxes come about?
8. About how old was Xerxes when Esther appeared before him as a young maiden?
9. Why didn't Esther prepare herself for her presentation before the emperor with all the accouterments of the harem?
10. Why do you think Mordecai reported the plot to assassinate the emperor?