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# A Regent Spurned

## Esther 1

Why study the Old Testament?

It is Scripture all of which is profitable for us so that we will be fully equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

It reveals God in His person, purposes, plans and pursuits. We know who He is and what He is like. The narratives of the Bible show us God engaging people and events so that we will know His will and discern His wisdom.

It speaks of Christ. Jesus affirms that the whole Old Testament show us the Lord Jesus (Luke 24:25-27; 44-49).

<sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

The study of the Old Testament then is profitable for us to show us who our God is and to help us to know Christ better, to love Him more and to serve Him more faithfully.

What about the book of Esther?

The name of God is not mentioned in the book nor is God directly spoken of. It reminds us that even when it seems that God is totally absent from our situations and our lives, He is still moving with His sovereign purposes, plans and providences.

This story takes place with God's people in exile in a foreign land. They live as an identifiable people among the nations. They are known to serve and worship the God of the Bible. They are hated for who they are. Yet they are to trust that God will take care of them and bring them safely home. That is us. We are the people God whose citizenship is in heaven and who live in a foreign land until our King brings us home as His great city and temple and bride.

God's providence and protection is evident throughout the book. From beginning to end, we see God moving through the events to do what His will has purposed to be done. In this story and on the stage of history, God has written the script and is directing the play. All to bring about the day when He sends His Son to save His people from their sins.

May God then reveal Himself, show us Christ and cause us to trust His bitter and sweet providences through this book, the Word of God.

## The King's Lavish Banquet

(v. 1-9)

<sup>1</sup> Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, <sup>2</sup> in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, <sup>3</sup> in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants.

### Its Times

(v. 1-3a)

There is some discussion as to who this king is and therefore when this takes place. If this is late Persian King, Xerxes, then this takes place around 483 BC. If this is Cyrus the Great, then it is taking place around 547 BC in the third year since he conquered the Medes. The events of the book of Esther cover around 12 years. He defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC. He had 7 rulers over his provinces but added 120 when he defeated Babylon. He issued the decree to rebuild Jerusalem in 538 BC. The events beginning with Esther 3:7 occur in 538 BC, the 12<sup>th</sup> year of his rule.

The ruler is referred to in this text as Ahaseurus which is a title, not a name (like Pharaoh, Abimelech). What scholars have done in trying to identify this king is to transliterate the characters for Ahaseurus into the Greek, Xerxes. Therefore, most commentators assert that this is Xerxes. The argument is reinforced from secular history by reading the character of Xerxes into the Esther account. I don't believe any of this will bear up under Biblical examination. The Biblical data points us to Cyrus the Great. I am going to mention some here and then highlight them more later.

Esther 2:5-6 tells us that Mordecai was at least an infant and more likely a teenager in 597 BC when Israel was taken into captivity. If this is Xerxes, then Mordecai is at least 118 years old! Furthermore, 12 years passes in which Mordecai is elevated making him 130. Yet there is no mention of his advanced age.

Esther's father and Mordecai's father were brothers. Esther's parents were taken in the captivity and died early in the captivity. She was being reared by Mordecai and is clearly described as a young virgin.

Finally, in Esther 3:15, the Haman's edict to destroy the Jews is described as causing confusion. Why would this be? Could it be that it was following so close on Cyrus' decree that was in favor of the Jews?

There is a problem with this being Cyrus. In secular history, he is known to have loved his wife very much having several children by her and honoring her with a special tomb. Xerxes also had a much loved queen, Amestris, who was his first and only queen and was never banished. Since the secular histories have difficulties with both, it is better to rely on the Biblical data.

For the sake of our reference here, I am going to refer to him by his title, Ahaseurus. Who the man actually was we may not know for certain. But we do know for certain that he was the ruler of Persia, husband of Vashti and later, Esther who conquered and ruled Babylon while the Jews were still living in Babylon and Persia.

### **Its Purpose**

**(v. 3b-5)**

The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, <sup>4</sup> while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. <sup>5</sup> And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

Ahaseurus gave this great feast to show the lavish wealth of his kingdom and to establish the overwhelming power of his kingdom. The Persian palaces were renowned for their splendor. The ancient kings put on lavish banquets and Ahaseurus seems to have put this on so as to exceed all others.

This first feast was being served for 180 days. It was for his governmental and military leaders as well as lower functionaries, officials and servants. They were invited in so that they will admire and thus serve him better.

The second feast was being served for seven days. Though shorter, this was a larger feast. The invitation was to the general populace who lived in the capital city. This was being served in the vast gardens on the palace grounds. The people were invited in to partake in the bounty and benefice of the king.

### **Its Extravagance**

**(v. 6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. <sup>7</sup> Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. <sup>8</sup> And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.

Cyrus was known for his wealth and his wisdom. His life was temperate and tested. Xerxes was known for his decadence and debauchery. Which one of these does this text reflect?

The writer of Esther wants us to see the extravagance and wealth that was on display. Against a fabulous backdrop of expensive mosaics and tiles, hung expensive draperies embroidered in gold and hung from silver rings. It is meant to portray a visual elegance, lightness and beauty with solid foundations of expensive stone and tiles.

The banquets were also marked by the lavish availability of wines from the king's own reserves. Now let me counter something that is often read into this text that I do not believe the text supports. It is often thought that these were drunken feasts with people sitting for 180 days of continual eating and drinking. Supposedly, here is gluttony and drunkenness on grand display. Except that text is careful to actually point out the opposite. The king provided great bounty, but gave the edict that was be no compulsion. This simple edict actually seemed to be calling a measure of decorum and restraint. No one should drink with outer or inner compulsion. In the face of my bounty, show restraint.

**Its Complement****(v. 9)**

<sup>9</sup> Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Alongside of the king's banquets the queen is giving her own banquet. Her banquet is for the women. This is not in competition with her husband nor is it really reflecting the traditions or culture of the day. This is strategic. This is the king and queen working in concert to influence the kingdom and to consolidate their power.

Ahaseurus then is seeking to show his great power, authority and wealth so as to win the heart, loyalty and service of his people.

**The King's Unwise Command****(v. 10-12)**

Well things have gone so very well for Ahaseurus and Vashti.

<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, <sup>11</sup> to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. <sup>12</sup> But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

**His Condition**

Imagine the scene. We are now at the end of half year of banqueting. It is the end of the last week. The king is now rosy and happy with wine. He is starting to feel the cups. The author is intending not to show sloppy inebriation, but just happy satisfaction – a merry heart. In the fact the Bible seems to commend “a merry heart” (Ecclesiastes 9:7; Proverbs 15:13). So the king is happy. Things are going great.

**His Command**

So he thinks of his beautiful queen who is also feasting with the women across the courtyard. He's been showing off his power and wealth. Why not show off his wife? So a merry heart may be making a dense head. So he sends his seven special servants, probably his body guards, to collect the queen. Be sure she brings her crown.

Now, Queen Vashti refuses to come. We are not told why. All kinds of suppositions abound. Maybe she does not want to be paraded around like a porn queen. Is she really expecting that Ahaseurus is going to put her on naked display with her crown? Nothing in this text points us to that. She is a beautiful woman. Ahaseurus has nothing to gain by degrading her so. Maybe she takes umbrage at being summoned and escorted by his body guards. Frankly, this is more likely. This is actually what the text seems to point to. She is a royal queen. She is not going to be escorted into the king's presence like his prisoner.

**His Response**

Here come the 7 body guards. Sheepishly, “She said, ‘No’. She won't come”. Ahaseurus is enraged. He is mad. He is burning with anger. He really expected her to come. He thought she would walk in with grand elegance and glorious beauty surrounded by these powerful bodyguards. With her crown on her head, she would come at his summons and regally sit

on the throne beside him as the crown jewel of his power and prestige. The denial of his desire and expectation erupts in anger and wrath.

## **The King's Prime Counselors**

**(v. 13-20)**

So, what should he do now? So now he turns to his prime counselors for advice.

<sup>13</sup> Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, <sup>14</sup> the men next to him being 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): <sup>15</sup> "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" <sup>16</sup> Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup> For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' <sup>18</sup> This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

## **Their Place**

**(v. 13-14)**

Ahaseurus turns to his wisest counselors. They are versed in the law and they understand what is going on the world. They are not like modern lawyers. They "understand the times." They are wise in the way of their world. Their counsel is going to reflect that they understand the ramifications of choices.

## **Their Problem**

**(v. 15)**

Ahaseurus presents the problem and asks for a response. While this has a detached sound in our texts, but it was presented with a cold menace from a heart of wrath by the most powerful human being on the face of the earth. So, counselors, "What does the law say should be done to someone who disobeys the command of the king?" Notice that he points to the body guards as well. He fully expected his command to be delivered and done.

## **Their Perspective**

**(v. 16-18)**

They interpret Queen Vashti's response as one of contempt. They see her as setting a negative example for all the women in the kingdom. She has been feasting and has gained enormous influence. It is quite possible that she will end up influencing the women of the kingdom to also show contempt for their husbands and disobey them. And furthermore, if the queen can disobey the clear command of the king, what about all these people? Are they going to be encouraged to disobey the king?

Now look, their insight and counsel makes perfect sense in the world they live in. It makes perfect sense even in our world. Leaders set examples which people will follow.

**Their Proposal****(v. 19-20)**

<sup>19</sup> If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. <sup>20</sup> So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."

They propose that Vashti be deposed as queen. Since she has treated the king with contempt and disobeyed him publicly, then let her be punished publicly. If he will carry out this edict, then all wives will know that they are not to show contempt, but rather to honor their husbands.

**The King's Royal Edict****(v. 21-22)**

How does Ahasuerus respond to this counsel?

<sup>21</sup> This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. <sup>22</sup> He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

**His Attitude****(v. 21)**

The king is pleased by what he hears. Not only is he pleased, but so are his leaders. It seems to me that the aim of the counsel is what is particularly pleasing. He has thrown these banquets to display his power and prestige. He wants to win the loyalty of his people. Certainly, he expects that all the people will admire and submit to him. Now his queen has publicly undermined his purpose. His response to her can cement his purpose.

**His Action****(v. 22)**

Ahasuerus sent a royal letter to his local government officials. He wrote it in his own hand and had it translated into the language of every people and province. He signed them under his own seal and signet. This letter is coming as the power of royal edict.

**His Aim****(v. 22)**

He declares his aim in the letter. The author of Esther emphasizes that the king's edict is designed to uphold the power and authority of leaders in the government and in the home.

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## Reflect and Respond

What do we make of this story?

Just because we do not know for certain who the characters of a story may be in history, doesn't mean the story isn't true or useful. Who this was would have been obvious to the original recipients. The Bible records what happened for its own purpose.

The center of this story is the refusal of Queen Vashti to do what the king wanted. Whatever his intention for summoning her and whatever her motivation in saying no, that is a huge moment. It will set in motion long reaching affects becomes the rest of the story.

There are stories and events and histories all over the world that are advancing God's own story. Ahaseurus does not know he is in the middle of a God-story. He thinks he is in the middle of his own life. What about you? Do you see yourself as just being in your own story?

Here is a king who is a pale imitation of the great heavenly king. He may have thought he was the greatest king ever. But his kingdom came to an end. His might was brought low. In fact, in the record of God's holy Word, we don't even know for sure who he was. Such is the end of all earthly kings.

The failure of human kings all point us to the need for a greater king. Whether the kings of the nations or the kings of Israel, all will fail. None will ever be what God's kingdom requires. The solution? King Jesus.

King Jesus will never command His bride in an inappropriate way. He will never seek the counsel of the world. He would never put her aside or take away her place. He will ever and always love her. Even if it means dying to save her. Which He did.

