

## Esther 2 – Esther Is Chosen Queen

### A. The gathering together of a harem for King Ahasuerus.

#### 1. (1-4) *A search is made for a replacement for Queen Vashti.*

**After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her. Then the king’s servants who attended him said: “Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king; and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel, into the women’s quarters, under the custody of Hegai the king’s eunuch, custodian of the women. And let beauty preparations be given *them*. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This thing pleased the king, and he did so.**

a. **After these things:** This is broader than just the events of the previous chapter. Esther 2:16 indicates that there was a four-year span between chapters one and two. During that time King Ahasuerus made his great, unsuccessful invasion of Greece and he came home a defeated man, wanting to cheer his heart through sensual diversions.

b. **Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king:** The plan was to assemble a harem from the most beautiful women of the land; to bring them into a harem for the king, and to choose the most favored woman to be his queen from that group. This was sort of a “Miss Persian Empire” contest, and the winner would **be queen instead of Vashti**.

c. **This thing pleased the king, and he did so:** The ancient Jewish historian Josephus says the Ahasuerus had a total of 400 women selected.

#### 2. (5-7) *Esther and her family.*

**In Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite. *Kish* had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. And *Mordecai* had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.**

a. **There was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai:** Mordecai, the cousin of Esther, came to Persia in one of the waves of relocation that the Babylonians imposed on Judah when it conquered that land.

b. **And Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter:** Esther (whose Jewish name **Hadassah** means “Myrtle”; the Persian name *Esther* means “star”) was raised by her cousin Mordecai since the death of her father and mother.

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i. “In prophetic symbolism the myrtle would replace the briars and thorns of the desert, so depicting the Lord’s forgiveness and acceptance of his people. (Isaiah 41:19; 55:13; cf. Zechariah 1:8)” (Baldwin)

ii. They were part of the large Jewish community that was forced to relocate out of Judah and didn’t decide to return with Ezra. In the day of Mordecai and Esther, the land of Judah was regarded as a wild and backward place.

c. **The young woman was lovely and beautiful:** The Hebrew for **lovely and beautiful** is literally, “beautiful in form and lovely to look at.” Or, as the NIV has it, *lovely in form and features*.

i. We regard that the Bible is generally given to understatement; when it says that Esther was *lovely and beautiful*, we know that it isn’t exaggerating.

3. (8) *Esther is taken into the king’s harem.*

**So it was, when the king’s command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king’s palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women.**

a. **That Esther also was taken to the king’s palace:** It seems that Esther didn’t really have a choice about this.

b. **Into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women:** Hegai was the *king’s eunuch* (Esther 2:3), a man entrusted with the oversight of the king’s harem for obvious reasons.

i. According to Baldwin, Hegai is specifically mentioned by the Greek historian Herodotus as being an officer of king Ahasuerus.

## B. Esther in the courts of the king.

1. (9) *Esther’s favored treatment in the palace.*

**Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favor; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king’s palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best *place* in the house of the women.**

a. **Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favor:** Esther *obtained favor* with Hegai, the man in authority over her. In this, her godliness ensured a fulfillment of Proverbs 3:3-4: *Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, and so find favor and high esteem In the sight of God and man.*

b. **He readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance:** Because of this favor, Hegai gave Esther special beauty preparations, beyond **her allowance**. He also gave her **seven choice maidservants** to look after her beauty needs.

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- i. Esther was beautiful to begin with; now she looked like one of those “after” pictures from the glamour photo studios – and she looked that way all the time.
- ii. The ancient Hebrew word for **beauty preparations** comes from the root “to scour, to polish.” (Huey)

2. (10-11) *Esther conceals her Jewish identity.*

**Esther had not revealed her people or family, for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it. And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women’s quarters, to learn of Esther’s welfare and what was happening to her.**

a. **Esther had not revealed her people or family:** Normally, there is never a good reason for hiding the fact that we are Christians. Far too many Christians act as if they are “secret agents” – and they always conceal who they are in the Lord.

i. We must take the warning Jesus gave in Matthew 10:32-33 seriously: *Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.* We can’t live a life of denial and expect God to recognize us.

b. **For Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it:** However, we do recognize that there are situations where God may have us be reticent about our Christian identity – not for the purposes of permanently concealing it, but waiting for the opportune moment to reveal it. Apparently, this is what Mordecai sensed was right to do in this circumstance, and Esther agreed.

i. For example, in some situations one might initially act as if they know nothing when approached by a Jehovah’s Witness or a Mormon, and do it not to deny Jesus, but to seize a strategic opportunity.

c. **Every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women’s quarters, to learn of Esther’s welfare:** Mordecai’s great interest in Esther’s state shows his love and concern for her in such a potentially dangerous place.

3. (12-14) *The method of preparing and presenting the women before the king is established.*

**Each young woman’s turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months’ preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for thus were the days of their preparation apportioned: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations for beautifying women. Thus prepared, each young woman went to the king, and she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the women’s quarters to the king’s palace. In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch who kept the concubines. She would not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and called for her by name.**

a. **After she had completed twelve months’ preparation:** Persia was one of many countries famous for its aromatic perfumes and ancient customs for the preparations of brides, including

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ritualistic baths, plucking of the eyebrows, the painting of hands and feet with henna, facial make-up, and applications of a beautifying paste all over the body, meant to lighten the color of the skin and to remove spots and blemishes.

- i. One reason for the lengthy time of preparation was to tell if the women had been pregnant upon coming into the harem, so that the king would not be charged with fathering a child that was not his.
- ii. Matthew Poole says that the oils and perfumes were necessary because “The bodies of men and women in those hot countries did of themselves yield very ill scents, if not corrected and qualified by art.”

**b. Thus prepared, each young woman went to the king:** It sounds wonderful – a year of constant spa treatments. Yet the destiny of these women should also be considered: one evening with the king. If he chose them from the 400 others to be his queen, then she would be his companion (until she displeased him). As for the 399 who lost, they were banished to the harem where they stayed the wife or the concubine of the king, but rarely if ever saw him afterwards. And they were never free to marry another man, essentially living as a perpetual widow.

4. (15-18) *Esther is selected as queen.*

**Now when the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king’s eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her. So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the *other* women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king made a great feast, the Feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king.**

- a. **She requested nothing but what Hegai the king’s eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised:** Esther’s humble wisdom was shown in the way that she allowed the **custodian of the women** to assist her preparations.
- b. **Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her:** This was because of *both* Esther’s godliness and beauty.
  - i. Beauty often gains people (especially women) favor with others. This is a fact that Christians must accept, wisely teaching their children what really matters, and refusing to rely too much on beauty for our judgment of people.
- c. **She obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins:** Because of the great favor that she obtained with the king, Esther was selected to be the queen to king Ahasuerus.
  - i. Esther’s life so far has been remarkable. She was the child of Jewish exiles, who both died; she was raised by her cousin in a foreign and often hostile land; she was taken by

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compulsion into the king's harem; she found favor with all whom she met; and she was finally selected to be the queen of the realm.

ii. This remarkable course of events wasn't an accident; it wasn't just because of luck or fortune or Esther's good looks or sparkling personality. God had a plan, and Esther is part of it. As Psalm 75:6-7 says: *For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another.*

iii. In *exactly* the same way, we have a place in God's plan. Wherever you are at right now, God has a purpose for it – maybe a short purpose, or a long one; perhaps a large purpose or a small purpose, but God has a reason.

iv. To this point, the story of Esther also shows us that in the outworking of His plan, God can use the evil of man. God did not make Ahasuerus drunk, or make him demand that his queen present herself in an immodest way before the lords of the kingdom; yet God allowed this wicked action of man to fulfill a purpose in His greater plan. We find assurance in the truth that no other person, no matter how evil they are, can defeat God's plan for our life, no matter what they have done to you or will do to you.

### C. Mordecai saves the king's life.

1. (19-20) *Mordecai's rise in prominence and Esther continues to conceal her Jewish identity.*

**When virgins were gathered together a second time, Mordecai sat within the king's gate. Now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her, for Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him.**

a. **Mordecai sat within the king's gate:** This position indicates that Mordecai was associated with the decision makers and men of influence in the kingdom.

b. **Now Esther had not revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her:** Some have thought that the book of Esther carries this idea of concealment too far. This book has been criticized because it does not mention the name of God (as neither does the Song of Solomon).

i. Some say that the name of God was left out of the book of Esther because of its use in the festivities surrounding Purim, where people commonly became drunk. One rabbi taught: "A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he is unable to distinguish between 'Blessed be Mordecai' and 'Cursed be Haman.'" Some have wondered if, in that atmosphere, it would be too easy to profane the name of God if it were to be read at such a festival.

ii. Others see the name YHWH hidden in acrostics, based on the initial and final letters of successive words in Esther 1:20, 5:4, 5:13, and 7:7. In some manuscripts, the letters in these words are written a bit larger to give them prominence.

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iii. Perhaps also the book of Esther does not contain the name of God because it was written under Persian rule, and for distribution in the Persian Empire.

works *behind* the scenes; God is always active in Esther, even though it is behind the scenes.

2. (21-23) Mordecai hears an assassination conspiracy and informs the king, saving the king's life.

**In those days, while Mordecai sat within the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. So the matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, and both were hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.**

a. **The matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king:** Mordecai's attitude wasn't "I'm a Jewish man in exile under a pagan king, so I do not care if he is killed." Instead, he fulfilled Peter's thought in 1 Peter 2:17, before Peter ever wrote it: *Fear God. Honor the king.*

i. This threat of assassination was real. Ahasuerus was eventually murdered by his prime minister, who placed Artaxerxes I on the throne.

b. **Both were hanged on a gallows:** The word **gallows** is literally *tree*; the idea that they were *hanged on a tree* probably refers not to a hanging with a noose around the neck, but to impalement on a stake, much like crucifixion.

i. "A pointed stake is set upright in the ground, and the culprit is taken, placed on the sharp point, and then pulled down by his legs till the stake that went in at the fundament passes up through the body and comes out through the neck. A most dreadful species of punishment, in which revenge and cruelty may glut the utmost of their malice. The culprit lives a considerable time in excruciating agonies." (Clarke)

## QUESTIONS

### Text Questions:

1. List the four steps from verses 3-5 that the attendants proposed for selecting a new queen (in almost all translations the steps are introduced with the word "Let...")
2. The passage's first description of Esther defines her as an orphan, adopted by her cousin. How would you describe their relationship, based on the information given?
3. The author says that Esther pleased Hegai and won his favor; that she won the favor of everyone who saw her, and, most importantly, that she won the approval of the king. What qualities might have led to this widespread approval? Can you find evidence of these qualities in the passage?
4. List the reasons given in the text that our society would consider "valid" for labeling Esther as a victim. Do you think she took on that label? Why or why not?

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**Application Questions:**

1. "True holiness and virtue command permanent respect and affection, far more than charm and beauty of face and form." -John MacArthur. Think about this quote as you read Proverbs 31:30. What do you value most highly in your life, your character and your virtue, or your outward appearance and the way people perceive you?
2. Winning favor is an active process. While this phrase is used passively (favor is given or bestowed) elsewhere in the Bible, in chapter two of Esther, the Hebrew used describes an active seeking. How does winning the favor of your professors, peers, and future coworkers bring God glory?
3. Has there ever been a time in your life when you have been bogged down by your circumstances and found yourself blaming others rather than seeking favor?

Take a moment to reflect on the circumstances you are currently facing.

Has God placed you in these situations for a specific purpose?

Are you choosing to be gracious and to seeking to grow in wisdom and humility in the midst of them?

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