

# Esther: Removal of Vashti (Ch. 1)

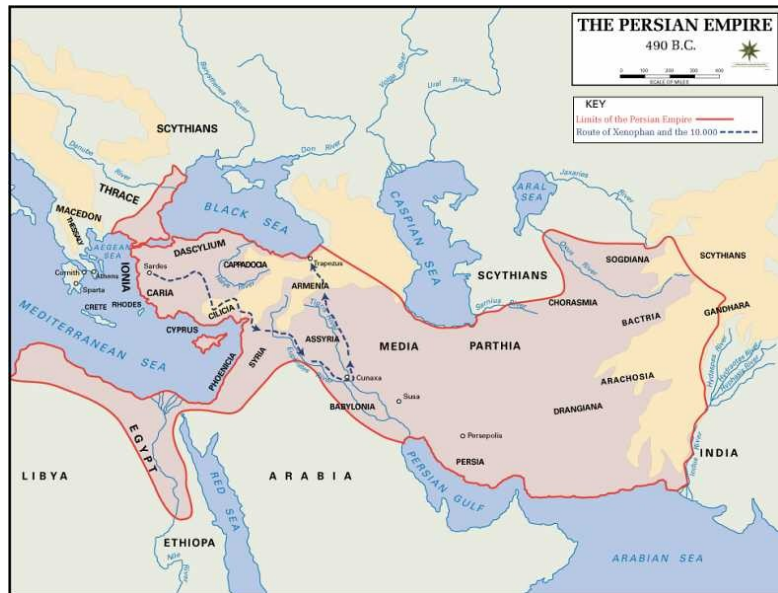
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## Verse 1

As mentioned in the introduction, this Ahasuerus (“lion-king”) is most likely Xerxes I, king of Persia (486-465 BC; cf. 1:3). There are three different men by this name in the Bible (Ezra 4:6; Dan. 9:1), and the writer apparently recognizes the popularity of this name by further identifying which this was.

By the time of Xerxes I, the Persian Empire formed by Cyrus The Great (559 – 530 BC), had reached Ethiopia under Cambyses II (530 – 523 BC), and India under Darius I (522 – 486 BC).



## Verse 2

Shushan (or Susa, meaning “lily”) was the capital city of the Persian Empire located 200 miles east of Babylon. The size of the palace was very large “the great central hall was 343 feet long by 244 feet wide” (Smith’s Bible Dictionary). As cup-bearer to the king, Nehemiah took up residence here (Neh. 1:1).

## Verses 3-5

During third year of his reign (483 BC), the king makes a feast for all his officials and servants, called here “the powers of Persia and Media.” In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great, the Persian, defeated his grandfather, Astyages, king of Media, establishing the Medo-Persian Empire. Darius I is noted for reorganizing the empire into satrapies (provinces), over which these princes, or satraps, governed.

The only reason provided for giving this feast was for the king to show off his wealth, which evidently was common to Eastern kings (Clarke). According to Barnes, some Persian rulers entertained 15,000 guests. Still, one would think it would get tiresome after 180 days! This obviously was not the case with Ahasuerus, who made another feast for 7 days to all those in Shushan.

## Verses 6-9

White and blue were the royal colors of Persia (cf. 8:15), and the couches were where people reclined to eat (cf. 7:8). Each cup was made of gold and distinct from the others. The picture is that of extravagant wealth.

It appears these “feasts” (banquets) were more focused on drinking wine than eating a large meal (5:6; 7:2; 7:7-8; cf. 1 Pet. 4:3). Given the statement that “the drinking was not compulsory”, it appears that the norm at these “feasts” was that drinking was compulsory. While evils of alcohol are numerous (Pr. 20:1; 23:29-35; Hab. 2:15; Eph. 5:18), it is possible the Jews were not altogether forbidden to drunk it (Deut. 14:26), though the priests certainly were (Lev. 10:9).

Queen Vashti (“beautiful”) also hosted a feast for the women, as men and women did not intermingle in public (Barnes).

### **Verses 10-12**

On the last day of the feast, the king was “merry with wine” (i.e., drunk, cf. 1 Sam. 25:36) and decided it would be a good idea to show off his beautiful wife. Vashti did not think this was such a good idea, and refused to go. The reason for her refusal is not stated. Perhaps she knew the king and his guests were drunk and refused to be an object of amusement, or perhaps the king was going against Persian custom (see above) and dared not appear publicly in the presence of the men. Other possibilities include the fact that she was hosting a feast of her own (v. 9), or she was being outright rebellious against her husband. Whatever the case, it made the king very upset at her refusal, either because he was hot-tempered, embarrassed, or both.

Eunuchs were employed by kings for various functions, but it appears chiefly to minister to the royal harem (2:3). The reasons for this should be obvious. It is difficult to say why their names, no doubt Persian in origin, are here enumerated.

Names of the eunuchs:

Mehuman (“faithful”), Biztha (“eunuch”), Harbona (“donkey-driver”), Bigtha (“gift of God”), Abagtha (“God-given”), Zethar (“star”), Carcas (“severe”)

### **Verses 13-18**

The king decides to consult his wise men (as many kings did, cf. Dan. 2; Matt. 2:7), “who understood the times,” perhaps referring to their understanding of Persian culture and law, and how the empire would be affected by this situation. Like the eunuchs, these wise men are seven in number and are also mentioned by name, stating that these ranked highest in the kingdom. Access to the king's presence appears to be a great privilege, based on the fact that no one could approach the king without permission, on penalty of death (cf. 4:11).

The counsel, provided by Memucan, is that all women in the empire would despise their husbands after looking at Queen Vashti's example. While it is true that a contentious woman is bad for the household (Pr. 21:9, 19; 25:24), one has to wonder if this conclusion is somewhat or entirely exaggerated. If Vashti refused to appear due to her own moral convictions, would that not encourage the women of the empire to behave with more chastity? And regardless of Vashti's motives, certainly not all women in the empire would be incited to rebel against their husbands, would they?

That said, we need to always be mindful of how our actions might affect those who are looking at us as examples (Matt. 5:13-14; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:1-10; 1 Pet. 5:3). We also should note the importance of a right balance in the marriage relationship, that is, the wife is to be submissive to her husband (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Note that this is not a master-slave relationship, as the submission is voluntary. The husband is supposed to love, honor, and cherish his wife as his own body, and the wife is to respect her husband (Eph. 5:22-33). These are the roles God has designated, and has designed to genders to fulfill them accordingly. It appears the Persians understood this as imperative to the peace and order of society.

Names of the wise men:

Carshena (“illustrious”), Shethar (“star”), Admatha (“given by the highest”), Tarshish (“established”), Meres (“lofty”), Marsena (“worthy”), Memucan (“dignified”)

### **Verses 19-22**

Based on his conclusion, Memucan advises the king to remove Vashti from her position as queen and not allow her to come before him any longer. It is essentially a divorce, though perhaps she was still permitted to remain

in the women's quarters. He emphasizes the importance of law in Persian society by stating that this decree, once recorded in the laws of the Persians and Medes, will not be altered. It appears that the law was taken seriously (cf. 8:8).

The king agrees that this is a good idea, and so does according to Memucan's advice by sending out letters. The Persian postal system was well organized and efficient (cf. 8:10), providing a basis for modern systems. Of this system, Herodotus writes:

No mortal thing travels faster than these Persian couriers. The whole idea is a Persian invention, and works like this: riders are stationed along the road, equal in number to the number of days the journey takes – a man and a horse for each day. Nothing stops these couriers from covering their allotted stage in the quickest possible time – neither snow, rain, heat, nor darkness. The first, at the end of his stage, passes the dispatch to the second, the second to the third, and so on along the line, as in the Greek torch-race which is held in honour of Hephaestus. The Persian word for this form of post is *aggareion*. (Herodotus, The Histories 8.98)

Memucan surmises that all wives will honor their husbands when they see that Vashti's behavior was not tolerated. It would have certainly been a powerful example for the queen herself to be so punished. However, though we have already stated that wives ought to submit to their husbands, was it necessary to make a decree that “each man should be mater of his own house”? Adam Clarke maintains that this law did nothing and that common sense concerning the marriage relationship would have prevailed anyway, though we clearly see in our day that such knowledge has been suppressed rather than embraced.