

Study Notes: Esther 2
May 15, 2022: “A Match Made in Heaven”
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Later when King Xerxes’ fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

- After some time passed (scholars believe about four years), Xerxes’ anger relented and he remembered three things: Vashti, the things she had done, and how he had cast her away. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary provides some historical context as to what is happening at this time in history, “Almost four years have transpired, and the war with Greece has offered the king another humiliation. Given the ubiquitous availability of women from the harem and the evidence from Herodotus that Xerxes was self-indulgent in this regard, it is unlikely that Xerxes is pining for feminine companionship. Whether the number was symbolic or factual, sources indicate that Persian kings maintained 360 concubines, and they were ‘employed’ (Briant, 280–85). In light of the abundance of women, there seems to have been something particularly significant about the role of this Persian queen.”
- The personal attendants suggested that beautiful young virgins be brought to the king and placed in the care of Hegai, one of the king’s eunuchs. After they were given beauty treatments, the king could select a new queen to take Vashti’s place.
- Of course, the advice of the attendants appeased Xerxes, who had an appetite for pleasure. The New American Commentary notes how this search for a woman to please the king accentuates his selfish desires, “The king could have had any young woman he wanted. The Oriental kings caused much suffering among many people in satisfying their personal desires. Similar oppression still occurs today, although the means of carrying it out are sometimes so indirect (e.g., economic) that few notice the injustice. The prophets of Israel raised their voices against such unjust oppression (e.g., Amos 5:7–12).”
- The Expositor’s Bible Commentary further explains how the process would work, “The plan has two stages. The first is gathering all the beautiful virgins; the second is the contest. The servants seem to be aware that the last thing the king wants is an ambitious woman. The roundup is necessary and will demonstrate that the king is firmly in control.”

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

- After setting up the process of the plan to replace Vashti, the author introduces us to two key characters in the book, Mordecai and Esther. In Hebrew, the word order of these verses is significant. When Mordecai is introduced, the first word in the sentence is “a Jew,” highlighting the significance for later in the story. The author also notes that Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin. The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “The narrative may emphasize Mordecai being a member of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin because his later foe, Haman, could represent an ancient foe of the Benjaminites, dating to the time of Saul.”
- It is also important to note that Mordecai had been carried into exile with the rest of the Jewish people. It appears that he had taken the advice of the prophet Jeremiah, and had gone about his business, living his life in exile (see Jeremiah 29) rather than seeking to rebel against the authorities.
- Next, the passage introduces Hadassah, who is also known as Esther, a name that was given to her after she was carried into exile, and from this point forward. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes, “Hadassah ... [that is] Esther’ is the only character to have two names, indicative of her two worlds, initially separated, and one of which is hidden.”
- Esther had been left with neither a father nor mother, so Mordecai, her cousin, became her caretaker. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes that the Hebrew description of Mordecai’s caring for Esther is important, “The verse begins with wayehî ’ômēn, ‘he was caring for,’ a noun used in regard to guardianship of children (Nu 11:12; Isa 49:23). It is related to amen, which has in its semantic range ‘trustworthiness.’ This clause is important in establishing the exemplary character of Mordecai.”
- Esther is said to have been beautiful as well as having a lovely figure, compelling Xerxes to have her be part of his contest to determine the next queen. The Faithlife Study Bible notes, “Esther is described similarly to Rachel in Gen 29:17. The Hebrew expression here indicates that she is physically attractive — in terms of her body, including her face, and her overall appearance.”

When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

- The king’s order was carried out, and many women were brought to the citadel and placed in the care of a man named Hegai. Esther was also taken, which the Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes would have caused her great anguish and shame.
- However, even though the circumstances caused her pain, Esther still pleased Hegai and won him over. He quickly moved Esther into a good position, and gave her beauty treatments, special food, and seven attendants.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

- These verses provide some foreshadowing as to the events that would later happen. There is nothing to suggest that the king couldn’t have found out Esther’s background if he had so desired, so this detail is probably included to further the narrative. It probably also provides a reason to the reader as to why Esther broke some of the Jewish ceremonial laws with her diet. It also leaves us with a tension between Esther and Daniel, who did reveal his identity.

- We do not completely know why Mordecai called Esther to keep her identity a secret at this point, but we do know that Mordecai continually kept watch over Esther, even as she entered the king's harem. About Mordecai's continued care for Esther, the Expositor's Bible Commentary explains, "Mordecai's continued care for Esther is manifested in his daily presence outside (lit., 'in front of') the courtyard of the harem, where he checks on her welfare (šālôm), perhaps through connections he maintains in the harem. Mordecai will soon become apprised of the long process, perhaps trying his patience as it goes on for a year!"

Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

- For a year, Esther went through beauty treatments. These would have involved such things as oil and perfume, necessary in the hot and dry climate, and associated with sexual attraction and love.
- As the king desired women, each evening one was sent. If the king was pleased with her, she was summoned by name, but if not, it appears she was discarded and left as a widow. The Faithlife Study Bible states, "This text also seems to imply that, at times, concubines had sexual relations with the king once and were never called on again. Life for these concubines was more like widowhood than marriage. Although they lived a life of luxury, it seems that concubines in the Persian Empire were treated essentially like property of the king — primarily viewed as sexual partners with no legal rights. Any child born as a result of their intercourse with the king would have likely been trained to work in the palace and had no rights to the throne. Only the son of the king and his queen could be a legitimate heir."
- Eventually, it was Esther's turn to go to the king, and she followed the advice and instructions of Hegai, whom she has won favor with. The author sets the time and date of when Esther entered the royal residence. The Expositor's Bible Commentary notes about this particular time, "This fact fits well with the intervening interval on the battlefield. If Xerxes had only just returned from war when the mobilization for young women began, then presumably Hegai has moved Esther to the front of the line."

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

- Esther found favor in the eyes of the king. This statement had to be about more than Esther's beauty, since there was a parade of beautiful women serving Xerxes on a regular basis. Like she had done with others before, Esther won favor with Xerxes and was made queen.
- King Xerxes gave a banquet in Esther's honor, and proclaimed a holiday, distributing gifts to his subjects.

When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

- To set the time of events, the author mentions that the virgins were assembling, and Mordecai was at the king's gate. It is also mentioned again that Esther kept her identity secret, and that she followed Mordecai's instructions. At this time, Mordecai discovered a plot with two of the guards, Bigthana and Teresh. These two men had planned to assassinate Xerxes.
- When Mordecai heard of this, he told Esther who then relayed the information to Xerxes, while giving credit to Mordecai. The matter was investigated, and the two men were put to death by being impaled!
- As was the custom, this information was recorded in the annals or official records of the king. This detail would prove crucial later in the story.