

II. The Occasion for Esther's Coronation (1:1-22)

Like every good story, the book of Esther begins by establishing a context for the subsequent narrative. Those contextual elements include the setting for the story and the introduction of the character who plays a key role in the movement and development of the narrative.

- The setting is the city of Susa, capital of the Medo-Persian Empire and seat of the throne of King Ahasuerus (486-464 B.C.), who is introduced in the first verse of the book.
- Ahasuerus' dominion, which extended from India to Ethiopia, also included the two houses of Israel – both those exiles who had returned to Jerusalem decades earlier and those who remained scattered throughout the Middle East.

Ahasuerus' crucial role in the story is tied to both his reign and the empire he rules. As the king of Medo-Persia, he held supreme authority, and that authority included his sole prerogative to impose and enforce royal edicts that would henceforth serve as the "law of the land." But lest any ruler become capricious, careless or self-serving in the use of his royal authority, the Medo-Persian legal system imposed its own overarching law to which even the king himself was subject. That statute specified that no royal edict could be rescinded once it had been issued and written into law. Knowing that he would himself be forever bound by any law he passed, a king would think carefully before exercising his legal prerogative.

Thus Ahasuerus' importance in the story lies primarily in his relationship to the Medo-Persian conception and implementation of law, which itself is a central thematic element (ref. 1:8, 13, 15, 19-20, 3:8, 14, 4:8, 11, 16, 8:13, 9:1, 13-14).

- It was observed previously that the genius of the book of Esther is that the story plays out on two levels: the natural and the supernatural. The narrative focuses on the natural – the people, motives, intentions, events and circumstances that make up the story. And yet it serves to tell the greater supernatural "story" that runs in parallel behind the scenes.
- Law is a key feature of the book in that it contributes to the story's rising tension and the interplay between the natural and supernatural. Because Medo-Persian law was inviolate and irrevocable, it serves two important and related purposes in the narrative:
 - 1) First, it helps to create, direct, and reinforce the expected disastrous outcomes associated with the various situations the story presents.
 - 2) But it also importantly provides the single great obstacle to the favorable outcomes that actually transpire.

In other words, being permanent and unchangeable, Medo-Persian law acts to build the tension in the story by appearing to secure certain outcomes; it heightens the sense of predictability within the movement of the "natural" story and thereby tends to cultivate the reader's resignation to what is "seen" and his insensitivity to the unseen presence and overruling power of the supernatural.

A. Ahasuerus' Introduction (1:1-8)

The writer begins his story by introducing King Ahasuerus, but only as a vehicle for arriving at the true starting place, which is the king's banquet. Thus he interrupts his opening statement ("Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus...") with a clarifying description of this king before returning to the subject at hand, which is the banquet Ahasuerus held for his subjects.

1. The focal point of the writer's description is the greatness of the Medo-Persian king, expressed in the power and extent of his kingdom (1:1-2).
2. The author establishes at the outset Ahasuerus' power and authority because it makes an important contextual contribution to the situation he is concerned with.
 - a. In the third year of his reign the king called for all his nobles, administrators, and military leaders to come to his capital so that he could amaze and impress them with the magnificence of his kingdom. Ahasuerus' greatness was reflected in the greatness of his dominion, and the writer emphasizes the extent of that greatness by noting that 180 days were set aside to fully display it (1:3-4).
 - b. As the capstone of that presentation, Ahasuerus held a lavish, week-long banquet for those in attendance. The production of such an extravagant event may not seem like much to a modern American reader, but it would have left Ahasuerus' subjects (and ancient readers) awe-struck. So the writer goes to great lengths to show the grandeur and opulence of the whole proceeding (1:6-7).
3. As a side note, some interpret the text as indicating that Ahasuerus actually held *two* banquets, one for his administrators and one for his subjects. This is the interpretation adopted by the NASB. It is also possible the writer was following the Hebrew practice of introducing a subject, digressing to provide some background or explanatory information, and then returning to pick up the subject again. If that's the case here, the author introduces the matter of the banquet in verse 3 and then explains that this feast was the culmination of a six-month period during which the king sought to spotlight the splendor and riches of his kingdom (vv. 4-5a). After that explanation he returns to describe the details of the banquet and its outcome (which is his real concern).
4. Whether there were two banquets or only one, Ahasuerus' intention was the same, which was to bring to a crescendo the display of the glory of his empire, and thereby cause those in attendance to perceive his own greatness as king. It was with that same intent that he sent for his queen on the last day of the banquet: He commanded his eunuchs to bring her "*in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes*" (1:10-11).

B. Vashti's Insubordination (1:9-12)

After six months of parading his authority, power and wealth to those who ruled his kingdom in his name, Ahasuerus sought to culminate his display by presenting to them one of the most splendid of his conquests, namely his beautiful wife Vashti.

1. But for her part, Vashti was unwilling to be put on display as one of her husband's trophies and testimonials to his greatness. On top of that, the banquet guests, like the king himself, were full of wine (v. 10) and Vashti had every reason to expect that this would prove to be an undignified and even dishonoring situation. Therefore, she sent the eunuchs back to the king with the declaration that she would not answer his call.
2. Ahasuerus' response to this news was entirely predictable (v. 12). It appeared that the great king who wielded unchallenged authority over the world's largest empire couldn't command the submission of his own wife. What made matters worse was that Ahasuerus had summoned Vashti in the presence of all his guests, and now he was being humiliated in front of the very individuals he had worked so hard for months to impress.

C. Vashti's Deposition (1:13-22)

1. The king's response was to immediately call for his wise men – the seven princes who held a preeminent place in his kingdom – in order to determine with them what should be done, according to Persian law, with this defiant woman who had publicly spurned and shamed him (vv. 13-15).
2. During the discussion one of the princes named Memucan addressed the assembly, asserting that Vashti had not only wronged the king, but all the men of the kingdom. For the news of her insubordination would surely spread throughout the empire, and when it became known it would encourage the same attitude and behavior in other women. Therefore it was necessary to deal with Vashti quickly and severely (vv. 16-18).
3. Memucan's recommendation was for Ahasuerus to issue a royal edict that Vashti should be deposed as queen and dismissed from the king's presence. Moreover, this edict should be written into Medo-Persian law so as to establish an irrevocable statute that would discourage all such future insubordination in wives toward their husbands (vv. 19-20).
4. This counsel pleased the king and he proceeded to issue the edict and distribute it by letter throughout his empire (1:21-22). In accordance with the laws of Persia and Media, Vashti's deposition was to be immediate and permanent. She would never again sit as queen over the Medo-Persian Empire.

The writer's purpose for recounting this episode had nothing per se to do with either Vashti's conduct or Ahasuerus' response. The reason for beginning his story in this way is that it sets the stage for his introduction of Esther and the role she will play in the ensuing events. Vashti's deposition as queen would leave a notable vacuum, and it is the need to fill that vacuum that provides the occasion and backdrop for Esther's emergence.

The irrevocable quality of the "laws of the Medes and Persians" sealed Vashti's fate, and she will not appear again in the story. Thus the first instance in the narrative of the application of Medo-Persian law serves toward Esther's exaltation to the status of Queen. But that which facilitates her entrance into the royal palace will later serve – to all appearances – to seal her destruction along with the rest of her people.