Esther, Lecture 2
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Session Two (Chapters 1-3)
Chapter 1 is an intentionally grandiose introduction to the king. His name is presented twice at the outset, a stylistic touch that sets the stage for the continuous procession of dyads through the description of the Persian court (cf. Levenson, *Esther* 10-11). Honor and royalty are linked repeatedly throughout the chapter; names, titles, and positions seem to be of primary importance, but the reader becomes aware that, in truth, the text is poking a good deal of fun at the upper crust of the Persian monarchy.

The primary term for honor in the book of Esther is y+q*r. The adjectival form (y*q*r) means precious, costly, rare, or valuable. A related adjective is K^b@d, meaning heavy or weighty. Its cognate, K^bod, means glory and a noun form (also K^b@d) refers to the liver, considered the seat of emotion, and representative of the self. Honor, linked repeatedly in Esther with royalty, is demonstrated by an interweaving of substance, status, and splendor with the self. In the public arena, respect for status, awe in the face of splendor, and dependence for largesse (substance) all enhanced the reputation of a given individual. [see diagram] The king's royal banquet was clearly an occasion to honor himself. None of these facets was static; status was always changing and being challenged (Laniak 17-20; 36-40).

1. The story begins with w^y+h' B!m? ("it happened in the days of…"), a phrase that also commences the narrative of Ruth ("it happened in the days of the judges…). By itself w^y+h' introduces several of the historical biblical texts and, on three separate occasions, it explicitly connects with the preceding narratives (*way^{e}hî* a^j^r? mot… "it happened after the death of…" [Josh 1:1; Judg 1:1, 1 Sam 1:1]).

The king's name is a^j^vw@rov in the Masoretic text, rendered Ahasuerus in some English translations. It is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khshayarsha* of which Xerxes is the Greek transliteration (Paton 41-45).

India and Cush represented the southeast and southwest corners respectively (Berlin 6). "The parallel expression, "from Dan to Beersheva," is a standard biblical designation of the full extent of geopolitical territory. In this case, the designations were representative of the whole known world (Bush, *Esther* 353) and established the universal sovereignty and therefore supreme honor of Xerxes (Laniak 38-39).

The number of provinces has been the focus of a good deal of skeptical commentary (Paton 71-72; Clines, *The Esther Scroll* 275). Herodotus (III.89-96) indicated there were twenty satrapies in the Persian Empire under Darius. A m+d'n>h (province), however, was a smaller entity than a satrapy as is evident from Esther 3:12 which mentions both terms. Given the importance for Xerxes of consolidating Persia's hold on the vast empire, citing the number of provinces instead of satrapies made it sound more impressive (Baldwin 56). Daniel 6:2, referring to the Medo-Persian conquest of Babylon, also indicates 120 provinces. Apart from the possible propaganda engine evident here, it is, from a literary standpoint, another mechanism for poking fun at the king who ruled 127 provinces but lapsed in his own palace garden.

2. **In fact,** Ancient Persia had four capitals: Ecbatana, Susa, Persepolis, and Babylon. Susa served as the winter residence for the Persian kings (Gordis, *Megillat Esther* 21). There is a consistent distinction made between the B'r>h ("citadel") and the "city" (Esth 3:15; 4:16; 8:15).

3. The term for banquet is m]vT#h, a word which comes from the Hebrew word meaning "to drink." Characteristically, at royal celebrations large quantities of food were distributed (cf. 2 Chr 30:23-24; 31:3-19; Neh 5:14-18; Berlin 4). Here there is no mention of food whatsoever; the entire focus was drinking and the significant details of chapter 1 have also to do with drinking (Beal 17). Because some of it was quite excessive, by the king's own authorization, it undermined the superficial displays of honor (Klein 154-155). Vast numbers of people were guests at banquets in antiquity; Ashurbanipal, at his own recording, invited close to 70,000 to the celebration of the completion of one of his palaces (Bickerman 185).

The pairs of words that characterize the descriptions in this first chapter appear here in increasingly widening circles. "His nobles and his officials" (literally "servants") may have been local bureaucrats. They were joined by "armed forces from Persia and Media" and finally more distant "princes and provincial nobles."

4. In the Hebrew text, "showing" is the first word; Xerxes was establishing his splendor before whole entourages of notables that he needed to impress. The verbal pairs, double constructs, and other forms of redundancy (Levenson, *Esther* 13) highlight the inconceivable wealth of the kingdom.

"…for many days, in fact 180 days!" The narrator registers astonishment at the amount of time. It is unlikely that all of the princes, servants, army personnel, and diplomats were carousing together for the full 180 days. Instead, this was an ongoing diplomatic effort to woo broad support for the attack on Greece and groups were arriving in succession.

Prior to this grandiose introduction to Ahasuerus (Xerxes) with which the Hebrew text (MT) commences, the LXX both revises the historical context and puts the narrative into a more distinctly theological framework. It first names Artaxerxes (464-425 BCE) as the Persian monarch and then identifies Mordecai as a Benjaminite in captivity, exiled by Nebuchadnezzar from Jerusalem (587 BCE). The main focus of the introduction in the LXX is to report an apocalyptic dream in which Mordecai saw two dragons, ready to fight amidst appalling tribulation. The righteous people cried out to God and a small stream became a mighty river, light arose, and the lowly were exalted. The audience and Mordecai are left to ponder the implications of this dream until the end of the LXX where it is interpreted. In the meantime, at this juncture Mordecai overheard two eunuchs of the king plotting his assassination and reported it to Artaxerxes. The matter was examined, the eunuchs were hanged, and Mordecai was brought to serve in an official capacity in the court. In another key diversion from the MT, we learn here that Haman determined to harm Mordecai and his people because of what happened to the two eunuchs, thus tying together aspects of the plot that are left ambiguous in the MT.

The King's Liberality in Susa (1:5-8)

5. The separate seven-day feast for all the people remaining in Susa indicates that the previous enterprise had been staged primarily for foreigners whom the king was trying to impress. With this one, he may have been thanking the local population that had hosted "tourists" for half a year. In the Hebrew text of verse 5, the successive nouns in construct at the end of the verse take

the reader step by step into the interior - "in the courtyard of the garden of the pavilion (B't^n) of the king." The syntax intimates that this access was a special occasion.

6. The description of the inner quarters provides a rich feast for the imaginative eye. From ceiling to floor, the columns, draperies, and parquet flooring were the sumptuous backdrop for couches on which guests would lounge. The words in the long list are exotic and the identity of materials is difficult, creating the impression of something almost surreal. The rugged syntax conveys a sense of wonder at the opulence. At the same time, the repetitious dyads poke fun at the officious Persian court. T+k@l\t, deep blue or violet material, was used extensively in conjunction with the tabernacle and temple (Ex 15-28; 35-39 and 2 Chr 2-3). Perhaps the author intended a subtle contrast between the dwellings of the King of the universe and this "king."

8. The drinking process as described here was a microcosm of the real nature of both the empire and its ruler. On the surface, all details were controlled by law (D*t) but the law, in fact, meant the king let people do as they wished, a matter that would find sobering expression in Haman's being allowed to write whatever decree he wanted (Levenson, *Esther* 46).

a?n a)n}s most likely means "there was no restraint" although the expression is used only here in biblical Hebrew. In later usage, a)n\s means "compulsion," "force," or "unavoidable interference" (Jastrow, *Dictionary* I:29). Both early and more recent commentators have wrestled with the two contradictory clauses.

Royal Honor Threatened and the Assertive Queen Banished (1:9-22)
Vashti's Refusal to Cross a Boundary (1:9-12)
9. In verse 9, the narrator presents the banquet for women as a parallel to the ongoing feast of the king. At the same time, the contrast between the simplicity of this statement and the effusive description of the king's banquets is not to be missed.
10-11. After seven days, the king's condition was distinctly affected by the wine. The expression, fob l@b, can be translated anywhere on the spectrum from "cheerful" to "drunk." It appears in other biblical contexts where intoxication is connected to impending destruction (Judg 16:25; 1 Sam 25:36; 2 Sam 13:28; see Levenson, *Esther* 47). The number seven plays a significant role in these early stages of the narrative. To be brought by seven eunuchs on the seventh day may suggest that the king intended to show off another possession, his queen, as the grand finale to days of basking in admiration and honor. It was a consummate act of self-aggrandizement in an already over-extended parade. The eunuchs were commanded "to bring" Vashti, indicating that it was simply expected she would display her beauty before the people and princes. It is telling that the term "to show" is used with regard to both Vashti and the king's possessions (Esth 1:4). Vashti was to wear a royal crown, the specific mention of which prompted the rabbinic commentators to suggest that this was *all* she was to be wearing (Meg 12b; Esther Rabbah 3.13-14; First and Second Targums). Thus, it was utterly humiliating when Vashti refused to come. The command via seven eunuchs emphasizes again that everything about this court was over-done, but according to official protocol (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 20).

12. While the text does not explicitly state why Vashti refused, it is not difficult to surmise that she was loath to show herself, clothed or otherwise, before a large group of men well under the influence of their wine.

The king's wrath is described in doublets, even the sound of which indicates his sputtering (y]qx)p) with rage and the anger that was smoldering within in him (B*u^r>h bo).

Unable to determine the proper course of action, the king Consulted the Sages (1:13-15)

13-14. But the crucial question from the king to his counselors is interrupted by an elaborate parenthetical note on the decision-making body in the governmental structure, another jab at the excessively regulated and farcical nature of the entire court. These wise men (j^k*m'm), also styled as "those who know the times," came from within the ranks of those who were experts in D*t w*d'n and had immense potential for influencing the king as they were in his presence and were seated first in the kingdom. The precise nature of their expertise is debated. The same expression appears in 1 Chronicles 12:33 regarding members of the tribe of Issachar who, because they understood what Israel ought to do, were among those who came to Hebron to make David king. It clearly involved a degree of political savvy in that case. Wise men were a traditional institution in the courts and several of these names were found in the Persepolis Tablets (Millard 481-488). Ibn Ezra, a medieval Jewish commentator, suggested that "those who knew the times" were astrologers and D*t in this case referred to the "laws of the heavens" (Walfish 114-115, 273, n 46), an interpretation that has continued to hold some sway (Baldwin 61; Levenson, *Esther* 50-51) although there is little textual support for it. Here, it seems that their wits were likewise beclouded with wine. As will become evident, those who "knew the times" and feared a women's uprising missed the conspiracy that Mordecai the Jew uncovered. The names of these ministers and the eunuchs listed in 1:10 are similar when read in reverse order (Clines, *The Esther Scroll* 116-117). Although there are several aberrations in the reversed patterns, this might be a literary device hinting from another perspective at the reversals that characterize the entire narrative.
15. That the king had to ask how to handle his rebellious wife and expected some sort of response "according to the law" adds to the hilarious tone of the narrative.

Memucan's Advice Heeded (1:16-22)

16-17. Vashti had publicly dishonored the king, and her action could be presented as having severe repercussions for male honor, official and other wise. Memucan's speech moved the bright spotlight of humiliation from focusing solely on the king to include all of the men, a brilliant maneuver for someone close to the king and responsible for his reputation (Bechtel 24). Those who were at the highest ranks in this tenuous honor-holding sphere had the most to lose (Laniak 48-49). Memucan's tone was that of near panic, probably because he knew that gossip spreads like wildfire: "all" the nobles, "all" the people, "all" the provinces. While the women who had gathered for Vashti's feast would likely be part of the feared newsflash, the verse indicates that everyone would be talking about the scandal; the suffix on the infinitive construct is masculine plural. Vashti's offense was presented as worse than impropriety. The Hebrew verb is *'avah*, related to a common noun form, *avon*, most frequently rendered "sin."

18. According to Memucan's worst case scenario, the women of nobility would hear of the queen's shocking behavior and brazenly use it to shame their own husbands who, because honor was woven into the very fabric of the culture, could only respond with rage (q\x\p). This verse is

not a redundant repetition of the previous statement but is a subtle indicator of class distinctions; even the noble women would shame *their* husbands (Gordis, "Studies" 24). While the general inebriation could have accounted for some of the apparently excessive anger, the prospect of public humiliation because of public disobedience really lay at the bottom of the rage. An expression of anger in that cultural context would not only be acceptable; it would have been expected (Laniak 56-57).

19. Subtly indicative of the impersonal political and legal machinery, the recurring pattern of passive verb forms begins with the issuance of the royal decree. The edict was to "go forth from the king" and it was to "be written in the laws of the Persians and the Medes."

Memucan's advice made permanent and *public* Vashti's own refusal to be in the king's presence at the banquet. It also effectively removed her from any sphere where she might in the future exercise power. It is no accident that at this point in the text, she is no longer called Vashti, the Queen. Her position would be given to one who would, in the fondest hopes of Memucan, the king, and the rest of the nobles present, have a more pliable disposition.

20. In this finale of Memucan's speech, full of the requisite bowing and scraping, there is a modification in the nature and implications of the decree. The only way to achieve the restoration of male honor would be through *all* the women of the empire demonstrating obedience. Therefore, not only did the decree banish Vashti; it vainly attempted to address Memucan's real concern, compelling all women to give respect (y+q*r) to their husbands, from the greatest to the least. In his presentation, it would only have to be heard (another passive form of the verb) for proper hierarchy and honor to be restored!

21-22. In a land where law was supposedly so important, this one came into effect because it "seemed good" to an inebriated king and his princes (Baldwin 62). He determined to issue the decree regarding Vashti and, in a vain bid to bolster the expected empire-wide results, an odd and unenforceable mandate was added (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 23). The literal rendition of the last two clauses is "every man is to be ruling in his own house and speaking the language of his people." The NIV has changed the subject of m+d^B@r from "every man" to the previously referenced dispatch that would reach each location. Reading it that way, however, simply repeats what had just been said, that the text was written in the language of each location to which it was sent. This might, however, be better understood in light of the sub-culture described in Nehemiah 13:23-24 where intermarriage had resulted in families speaking the language of Gentile mothers instead of Hebrew. This may testify to a significant degree of intermarriage and to the power that resides in language. Writing for each political entity (m+d'n>h) and language (l*von) for people groups are further examples of the dyad patterns throughout the narrative. This pair is a literary indication that the coverage was indeed to be comprehensive.

Mobilizing for a New Queen (2:1-23)

Vacancy: Search for Replacement (2:1-4)

Chapter 2 is a critical transition between the court excesses described in the first chapter and the grim narrative details that will unfold in the rest of the story. The excesses are still here, but change is in the offing and after this chapter, nothing is languid any more!

1. "After these things" is often used to start a new section of narrative in Hebrew (Bush, *Esther* 359)." Once the king's wrath subsided, he remembered three things, each preceded by the Hebrew particle a@t, emphasizing their distinctiveness: Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her. The narrator skillfully kept the king's responsibility out of this; it all had to do with what *Vashti* had done and what the nameless bureaucracy had decreed.

2. The satire on the Persian court continues. The young servants of the king made this decision as well but did it adroitly to make it appear that Xerxes himself would choose the new queen (vs 4 – "the young woman who pleases the king…"). The criteria, repeated in the next verse, are articulated as n+U*rot B+tWlot fobot m^ra\h – "young women, virgins, beautiful." Each term narrowed the field and set this up as one of antiquity's beauty pageants. B+tWl>h indicates a young woman of marriageable age who is under the guardianship of her father (Walton, *NIDOTTE* I:781-784). It does not have to mean "virgin" (see its use in Esther 2:17-19 and Joel 1:8) although that is the general interpretation.

3. The round-up of beautiful young virgins would be conducted in the same officious manner as the rest of the Persian bureaucracy. A "commission," responsible for getting all the likely prospects to the harem at Susa, was appointed to gather them from each province. The description of the operation makes it quite clear that local populations, which would include Mordecai, had no choice in the matter. One can imagine the confusion once all of these young women began converging on the citadel area. The text implies large numbers with "every" (K"l) province and "every" (K"l) young woman. Once there, the beauty treatments followed (see Esth 2:12).

4. The attendants deferred to the king's approval ("pleasing in the king's eyes") regarding both the acceptability of their plan and the ultimate selection of the young woman. The plan had two stages. The first was gathering all the beautiful virgins; the second was the contest. They seemed to be aware that the last thing the king wanted was an ambitious woman. The round-up was necessary and would demonstrate that the king was firmly in control.

Members of the Jewish Diaspora (2:5-7)

And that sets the stage for the human heroes of the story. The identities of these main characters are more important than their surroundings. This is a stark contrast to the description of the Persian court in the first chapter. Mordecai and Esther have a venerable history, as indicated by Mordecai's lineage.

5. The word order of the Hebrew text is significant. The verse begins with a!v y+hWd', a Jewish man, who was *in the citadel of Susa.* These identifying marks appear even before his name and they hint at the conflict that follows, setting up the Jewish counterpoint to the Persian king and key members of his court. The focus of this verse is Jewishness and genealogy. Mordecai is repeatedly called "Mordecai the Jew," pointedly distinguishing him in the diaspora context.

The primary question regarding the genealogy is the impossible age of Mordecai if the relative clause of verse 6 refers to his being taken into exile rather than the last named individual in the genealogy, Kish. Because that is unlikely for a narrator seemingly so careful about detail, it

is more probable that Kish was the individual taken into exile and these forebears of Mordecai had names that reflected earlier generations of the family tree. It was not unusual for clan names to continue throughout generations. If that is so, then for Mordecai to be a responsible man, caring for his cousin and functioning in the king's gate, in the 480's, he may have been born in exile toYair in ca. 520. Yair's birth might date to approximately 550 and his father, Shimei, may have been born shortly after Kish was taken into exile in 597. Attention is directed toward the Kish who was the father of King Saul (1 Sam 9:1; 1 Chr 8:33), in order to prepare for Haman's ties with Agag. It was that long-standing enmity between Amalekites, the people of Agag, and Israelites that made the crisis between Mordecai and Haman understandable. Both were descendants of royalty – King Agag and Saul, first king of Israel.

6. The literal rendition of this verse focuses on the exile: "who was exiled from Jerusalem with the group of exiles which was exiled with Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took into exile." The first two verbs are passive, and the last refers to Nebuchadnezzar who caused the exile of the people. The exile shaped these characters whose lives mirrored the national experience of Israel. Mordecai's family had lived in Jerusalem and their exile in 597 along with Jeconiah (also known as Jehoiachin) indicates that it was an upper class family (2 Kings 24:8-16; Jer 29:1-2). The eunuchs, nobles, and officials of the king were taken in that wave.

7. Again, word order is significant. The verse begins with w^y+h' A)m}n, "he was caring for," a noun used in regard to guardianship of children (Num 11:12; Is 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.

"Hadassah, that is Esther," is the only character to have two names, indicative of her two worlds, initially separated, and one of which was hidden. Nevertheless, she would publicly fuse them in the power center of the Persian Empire. The very complexity of these unfolding processes is even captured in the names themselves. At the simplest level, Hadassah means "myrtle" (h^d^s). That name alone carried significant associations. In the prophetic symbolism of Isaiah 55:13, the myrtle would replace the desert thorn. In post-exilic times, myrtle was carried on the feast of Tabernacles (Neh 8:15), symbolizing peace and thanksgiving (Baldwin 66). A more challenging question has to do with the meaning of Esther and the possible relationship between the two names. Esther has popularly been identified with Ishtar, the goddess of both love and war (see Lewy 128-130). If this was intended as a "literary nickname," it was a good choice as Esther proved herself in both realms! A better etymology, however, derives the name from Old Iranian *stara* meaning "star" (see Ran Zadok, "Notes on Esther,"*ZAW* 98 [1986] 107; Bush, *Esther* 364). There may be an even simpler relationship. Based on his study of the preservation of Old Persian forms, Abraham S. Yahuda concluded that Esther is the Persian equivalent of Hadassah and itself means myrtle. While the Persian for myrtle is *as*, the name as it appears in the text preserves an older and longer form, the Medic *astra* via Old Persian ("The Meaning of the Name Esther," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* [1946] 174-178; repr in Moore, *Studies* 268-272).

The verse emphasizes the absence of Esther's parents, indicating twice that both had died and intimating that, apart from Mordecai, she would have been deserted. Even though Esther was Mordecai's cousin, she was sufficiently younger that he adopted her as his daughter. The doublet

describing Esther emphasizes her beauty – "beautiful of form" (y+p^t-T)a^r) and "lovely in appearance" (fob^t m^ra\h). In other words, her extraordinary beauty far exceeded the qualifications for being rounded up in the net; it would have been unavoidable.

Esther in the Harem (2:8-11)

8. The tone of verse eight is determined by three passive verbs. The word and decree were heard, many young women were gathered, and Esther was taken. Given even a modicum of Jewish values as part of her upbringing by her parents and the subsequent nurturing of Mordecai, this would have been an occasion for anguish and shame (Klein 157-158). The importance of Hegai for Esther's advancement is indicated in the dual mention of his name at this point; she was given into the care (y^d) of Hegai. The contrast between Mordecai's role as nurturing guardian (a)m@n) and Hegai's position as "keeper (v)m@r) of the women" is noteworthy.

9. Continuing the stylistic pattern of doublets, Esther was pleasing to Hegai and won his favor. The expression T]C*a j\s\d, occurring only in Esther, has a sense of active "gaining" rather than the more subdued "finding" grace, favor or kindness, the customary idiom.

Hegai's attention to Esther moved her quickly forward in the process, overseeing treatments and special food (m*not), giving to her the best attendants, and situating them all in the best location in the harem. m*not is also used in 1 Samuel 1:4-5 with reference to Elkanah's distribution of portions of the sacrifice to his wives and children. The seven selected attendants were likely those whom Hegai was reserving for the young woman who might, in his estimation, become Vashti's successor.

10. Mordecai's command that Esther not reveal her people or her kindred raises a sense of danger and nameless dread that sets the stage for what Haman devised in the chapters that follow (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 32; Bush, *Esther* 368). His extreme reaction against all Jews in response to Mordecai's insult suggests that anti-Semitism was already lurking in dark corners. If so, hiding their identity would be a prudent thing to do. It also explains Mordecai's abiding concern to keep himself apprised of Esther's welfare in the court (verse 11).

11. Mordecai's continued care for Esther was manifested in his daily presence outside (literally, "in front of") the courtyard of the harem where he was adept at checking on her welfare (*shalom*), perhaps through connections he maintained in to the harem. Mordecai would soon have become apprised of the long process, perhaps trying his patience as it went on for a year!

"All the King's Women" (2:12-14)

Following on the previous "what would happen," the process is detailed.

12. Each young woman had a turn after a year of preparation. The treatment period (y+m? m+rWq?h\n) was "prescribed" (D*t) with oil massages for six months and spices for another six, no doubt to soften and perfume the skin. The association of myrrh with sexual attraction and love is particularly evident in the Song of Songs (1:13; 4:6,14; 5:1,5,13; see also Prov 7:17). The importance of oiling skin in a hot and dry climate cannot be overestimated. Examples of cosmetic burners have been found at several sites in ancient Israel, the primary one being Lachish. These were filled with a combination of spices and used by women to fumigate themselves and their clothes, ostensibly to make them more desirable (W.F. Albright).

13-14. The "rules of the contest" were that each candidate could ask for anything she wished to take with her to the king's palace, presumably in order to make herself memorable enough to be summoned again by name. That, of course, assumes that the contestants *wanted* to be recalled; their perspective is unimportant to the narrator. It may also be that whatever they asked for was their "payment;" the story does not indicate what the items might have been or whether they could keep them. After one night with the king, the woman was a concubine, and if she was not summoned (passive) by name, she spent the rest of her life in the harem, reduced to essential widowhood (Baldwin 68). That the women were brought to the king in the evening is a notable detail; Esther's later daytime arrival (Esth 5:1) was clearly an aberration in more ways than one.

The Turn of Esther (2:15-18)

15. In one of the Scroll's characteristic parentheses, Esther's Jewish identity is given just as she was about to cross the threshold into the king's palace, not a likely place for a young Jewish woman. She was, the reader is reminded, the daughter of Abihail and adopted daughter of Mordecai, but she would emerge as the Queen. Her strategy is contrasted with that of the other candidates; her success was due to her restraint in taking with her only what Hegai, who knew the king's tastes, advised. Chances are that Hegai also knew women quite well and knew precisely what would enhance Esther's already distinctive beauty. The narrative is reserved but the reader is to surmise that she expected to engage in the same activity as all the others, albeit in a significantly different manner without the excess of adornment. While Esther won favor (j\s\d) in connection with Hegai, who oversaw her and was her superior for that period of time (see verse 9), more publicly, she won grace (j@n), a probable testimony both to her stunning beauty and to her demeanor. There is a hint here that the route to the king's bedroom may have customarily involved a bit of a parade.

16. This is the final instance in which Esther was taken. Even though the narrative depicts her passivity in the human sphere, providentially, it was at this point that she reached the place she was supposed to be (see 4:14) in order for the deliverance of the Jews to take place. She was taken "to King Xerxes, to his royal palace (B?t m^lkWto)" in the tenth month of the seventh year of his reign. Four years had elapsed since the removal of Vashti. This fits well with the intervening interval on the battle front. If Xerxes had only just returned from war when the mobilization for young women began, then it seems that Hegai had moved Esther to the front of the line.

17. The king's response to Esther is striking; he loved her and she won grace *and* favor (j@n w*j\s\d) above all the virgins who had visited him. He placed on her head the crown, same diadem that Vashti refused to wear (Esth 1:11).

Appropriate for a coronation, there was an immense court celebration and empire-wide ramifications. The great banquet for nobles and officials, specifically noted as being for Esther, closes the look at the seemingly innocuous side of the Persian court.

Doings at the Gate (2:19-23)

19. A dramatic incident occurs at this point and the two parts of this verse, oddly juxtaposed, stylistically hint at its surprising nature. Clearly, the second gathering of virgins sets the context

for Mordecai's presence at the gate but there is no indication as to what precisely it represented, when it occurred, or why. The w^w conjunction before "when [they] were assembled" suggests a connection to what had just transpired. In that case, perhaps there was a large assemblage of virgins as part of the celebrations, but why they were gathered is not clear. If the king was indeed pleased with Esther, maintaining an over-extended harem would not be necessary. On the other hand, it is possible that the king's attendants who knew him well had a regular routine for keeping the harem full. Because eunuchs were integral to the process of herding virgins, and because the two would-be assassins discovered by Mordecai at the gate were eunuchs (verse 21), the narrator may have felt it important to note this particular event as background for that discovery. It might also be that "second" is yet another linguistic indicator of the "twos" in the text, always moving toward two days for Purim.

The significant element for the continuing story was Mordecai's position in the king's gate, a locus of authority where administrative and judicial activities occurred and where information abounded, leading to both intrigue and bids for power. It marked a boundary; guards were an integral part of gate areas and those guards were often eunuchs. Mordecai's presence at the gate is noted multiple times (Esth 2:21; 3:2; 5:9, 13; 6:10,12). If the second gathering of virgins had to do with major changes in the harem structure, this would have been a good occasion to get him repositioned. At the same time, the uproar was good cover for the workings of the plot.

20. Esther's secrecy regarding her people and kin and Mordecai's command to keep silent in that regard are reiterated, intimating the ominous and undefined nature of some threat. Mordecai seems to have been keenly aware of potential danger and, given the nature of his daily activities, he was likely privy to a good deal of sub-surface menace. This text is striking in its demonstration of the depth of nurturing represented by a)m@n. The term reappears here as it did in the initial description of their relationship.

21. The fact that Mordecai was in the gate is repeated, stressing its importance. In those chaotic days when there were more young virgins milling about, officials who were eunuchs were guarding the gate. Among them were Bigthana and Teresh, the former of whom may have been the same as Bigtha (Esth 1:10), one of the royal eunuchs who was commanded to fetch Vashti. The reason for their anger is not given but it was sufficient to hatch the assassination plot. Because they were "keepers of the threshold," they had access into the king's private chambers. In fact, Xerxes was ultimately assassinated in 465 because one of his attendants allowed the captain of the bodyguard in to his bedroom (Diodorus Siculus 11.69; Ctesias *Persica* 29).

22. The covert nature of Mordecai's discovery is implied in the passive "the matter was known to Mordecai." As a loyal subject of the king, he informed Esther who in turn told the king, giving Mordecai the credit.

23. In keeping with Persian impersonal bureaucracy, the matter was investigated, the two were found and hung, and a notice was written – all in the passive voice. This event may account for a further degree of latent hostility between Mordecai and the others at the gate, who had little inclination to protect him later (Esth 3:4).

Hanging on "wood" (U^l-U@x) would have meant either impalement or crucifixion in the Persian period. It is unlikely it was death by hanging; more likely the hanging was public humiliation by exposure of the body after death (Laniak 61; Bush, *Esther* 373).

Chapter 3 – "The Enemy of the Jews"
Mordecai Threatens the Honor of Haman (3:1-5)

1. The narrative is stunningly understated as chapter three commences. In fact, five years had elapsed between the foiled coup at the end of chapter two and Haman's rise to power (cf. Esth 3:7) and there are hints at significant changes in the interval. The plethora of named advisors who surrounded the king disappeared and Haman was singularly empowered in their place, perhaps the result of security measures imposed by the threatened king (Hazony 44-51).

The full identification of Haman as son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, occurs four times in the text (Esth 3:1; 3:10; 8:5; 9:24), two at the outset of his career as "enemy of the Jews," and two after his death. The king made Haman great, lifted him up, and seated him *over* others, creating a hierarchy. The use of three verbs instead of the usual two indicates the significance of this elevation. In addition, it was Haman who was honored (G]D@l - to make great) instead of the expected promotion of Mordecai.

2. "Kneeling and paying homage" is another in the pattern of doublets, and the interpretation is critical for the narrative. The terms specifically mean "to bend" [the knee] and "to fall on one's face." The participles may suggest a continual bowing and scraping, perhaps an intentionally ludicrous and humiliating posture. Because the king commanded this exercise, it had his approval and did not mean something untoward from the political standpoint. Mordecai, however, would not kneel down, he would not prostrate himself, and the implication of verse 4 is that it had to do with his being Jewish. Both were actions of humility and recognition of a superior. While there are instances in the biblical text where Israelites bowed to kings (1 Sam 24:8; 2 Sam 14:4; 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16) and to other superiors (Gen 23:7; 27:29; 33:3), the expressions are not the same. Here the terms are K)ru'm Wm]vT^j^w'm. The same pair of Hebrew words does not occur in any of the passages describing homage to another human. Instead, when these two verbs are used together, the individual is performing them in the presence of God (Pss 22:30; 95:6; 2 Chr 7:3; 29:29). At the same time, acknowledgement of the dyad pattern presents a caution; the two terms may simply be stylistic and lack any overtones of worship or idolatry. If so, the primary issue was the long-standing enmity between Israel and Amalek and the corporate honor of Mordecai's people. Two additional matters are noteworthy. This event was taking place in the gate complex which was sufficiently expansive that Haman did not notice the non-compliance of Mordecai until he was informed. Second, the king *commanded* obeisance to Haman, perhaps reflecting Haman's role as his representative.

3. There was clearly an enforced uniformity and Mordecai's behavior was both civil disobedience of the king's law and a public affront to the honor of Haman. The servants' question was a challenge.

4. The servants kept after Mordecai day after day but he (literally) "did not listen to them," an expression that often refers to obedience. Nevertheless, he did give the servants an explanation. His not bowing had everything to do with his Jewish identity. In reporting this to

Haman, the servants wanted to determine "if the D]br? Mordecai would stand." D]br? is variously interpreted as "words," "attitude," or "actions." If it intimates "words," his claim of Jewishness might imply that he was depending on an ethnic and religious exemption. If the general idea was attitude and the accompanying action, the servants were keen to see if perceived defiance would be tolerated. Their decision to tell Haman represents malevolent intent. Up to this point, Haman had not noticed and may have gone on being oblivious, but once the servants knew Mordecai was Jewish, they not only ceased to try and persuade him to bow (as they had been doing), but they turned the matter over to Haman. They did not need any further explanation but, on the basis of his Judaism, they understood the reason for his opposition to the king's decree, reported it seemingly immediately, and did not hesitate to identify the issue as a "Jewish problem" (note verse 6).

5. Haman's rage may have stemmed from several points. For one thing, this public affront to his honor had been taking place for some time (literally "was not kneeling or bowing down"), and he had failed to notice it, a true humiliation. If the ethnic feud contributed equally to his antipathy as well as Mordecai's, that may also explain why he was "filled with rage." Both the king and now Haman had become enraged at particular affronts to their honor and the excessive reactions of both were frightening for the indiscriminate wholesale retaliations attempted.

Haman's Plan for Vengeance (3:6-9)

6. Having been humiliated, Haman formulated a massive retaliation by which he intended the ultimate dishonoring of Mordecai and his people's utter annihilation. "People of Mordecai" is repeated twice. First, Haman was informed of their relationship to Mordecai; then they became the object of his vicious intent. Something, perhaps the long-standing ethnic enmity between the descendants of Saul and those of Agag or more widely brewing anti-Semitism, so inflamed Haman that this became a plan for ethnic cleansing. His plan for comprehensive destruction was the lashing out of injured pride, a terrible reaction inherent in fallen humankind from the outset (cf. Gen 4:23-24).

7. The Hebrew text begins with "in the first month, the month of Nisan," a pointed reminder of Passover and that great deliverance. It was in the twelfth year of the king's reign, five years since the events of chapter two, both the accession of Esther to the throne and Mordecai's unacknowledged exposure of the assassination attempt. That PWr, noticeably without the definite article, was identified as "the lot" (h^Gor*l) indicates that initial audiences would have been unfamiliar with PWr but knew well the practice of casting lots. In fact, the biblical text attests to the use of lots in regard to a wide range of activities (Lev 16:8; Josh 15:1, 17:1; Judg 20:9; Neh 11:1; Jon 1:7). It was a mechanism for determining the Lord's direction (Prov 16:33). Casting lots was a common practice in the Ancient Near East at large (see Introduction and Notes below).

8. Haman had unrestricted access to the king, a privilege not extended to the rest of the people, including the queen. Haman kept his charge vague which was indispensable to gaining the permission he sought. His description was insidious and the opening line carried a double edge. "A certain people" (u^m-a\j*d) made them sound sinister, in that they were unnamed, and

yet only "one" and therefore insignificant and dispensable. Repressing the name of the people precluded identifying *individuals*, such as Mordecai who was known as "the Jew." Haman's presentation started with the truth; they were indeed a dispersed (m+p|Zz*r) people and, in some ways, separated. The pu'al participle (m+p)r*d) is used only here and may be intended to stress that they were intentionally unassimilated (Bush, *Esther* 381). The accusation then moved to a half truth, that they had different customs, and finally to an outright lie, that they did not keep the laws of the king. Haman carefully did not tell the king which laws were not kept. If pressed, the only one he might have cited would be the command to bow to him!

Haman's final ploy was to put the matter in pragmatic terms; "it is not worthwhile for the king to let them rest."

9. Prefaced by the obligatory "if it is pleasing to the king," Haman proposed a decree as the solution. The passive "let it be written for their destruction" removed responsibility from any one person, the king or Haman, and placed it with the unnamed bureaucracy (Fox, *Character and Ideology* 51). Haman's offer of 10,000 talents is estimated to have been approximately 60% of the annual revenue of the Persian Empire. Its total revenue under Darius had been 14,560 talents (Herodotus III.95; Olmstead 297-298). Clearly, as the second person in a kingdom where despots likely amassed huge amounts of wealth, Haman had considerable resources. This, however, seems to be even beyond those bounds. One possible explanation is that he intended at least part of this payoff to come from looting the property of the Jews, even though he made it sound as if the sum would come from his own coffers. The literal rendition of the Hebrew is: "…I will weigh to the hands of those who do the work, to bring to the royal treasuries." Prompted by the promise of further reward, the loot would pour in, and Haman could use it to pay those who brought additional plunder, a scam from antiquity with lethal consequences. This was a clear appeal to the greed of the king and, if Xerxes' resources had been seriously depleted by the war effort, it would have been quite tempting (Paton 206). It was also an indication of the ferocity of Haman's hatred of the Jews. There is a further possible devilish facet to Haman's presentation to the king and here we must presume that the narrator of the Hebrew text was careful to preserve in translation a significant word play in the original dialogue. Haman may have intentionally played on the similar sounds of אבד (l+a^B+d*m – "to annihilate them") and עבד (l^u^b*d!m – "for slaves"). If that indeed were the case, it would explain his appeal to the value of not allowing this unnamed people to "rest" in the preceding verse. It might also provide an interpretive framework for understanding Esther's later reference to the effect that if they had only been sold into slavery, she would have kept silent (Esth 7:4). And finally, it might explain why the king seemed so obtuse about the decree to which Esther referred. He had been led to believe Haman's intent was enslavement when it really was wholesale murder. It is significant that in speaking to the king, this was the only term Haman used; when the decree was written with its triple terminology, there was no mistake as to what he meant.

The Royal Machinery Operates (3:10-15)

10-11. The cavalier manner in which the king accepted Haman's request to destroy an entire people accompanied by a monumental bribe is shocking. If he was under the illusion that this was a sale for enslavement and that it was for the good of his realm because this people posed

some sort of threat (see comments on verse 9), his response may be somewhat more understandable. Nevertheless, he did dismiss them with a wave of the signet ring, addressing first the money and then the people! At the point that Xerxes handed over his signet ring in which was vested the royal authority, Haman's full name reappears, followed by the epithet, adversary of the Jews. The term is stronger than "enemy" (c)n@h - "one who hates"); it is x)r@r - "one who causes distress."

It seems that the king did accept Haman's offer in some form as Mordecai would report a financial transaction (Esth 4:7) and Esther declared that her people had been "sold" (Esth 7:4). While there may have been some purposeful ambiguity regarding the money and the meaning of a-B-d once the king told Haman to keep the money and deal with the people as he wished, Haman's decree added the chilling and unmistakable "kill" and "destroy." The king never asked for clarification but gave Haman free reign to do as he wished, consigning an entire people to slaughter or slavery and promptly forgetting about it – as indicated in chapter 7.

12. The previous mention of Nisan (verse 7) was a veiled allusion to Passover. Now the implications are brought full force; the decree was written on the thirteenth of Nisan, the day before Passover. At the time when the children of Israel traditionally recited the narrative of deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, they would instead face the horrifying prospect of annihilation under another foreign oppressor.

The bureaucratic machinery moved back into action. The scribes were summoned, and everything that *Haman* demanded was written in the name of the king and sealed with his signet ring, each action indicated by a passive verb. The all-inclusive list of recipients started at the top with the satraps, followed by governors of provinces and finally the nobles or princes of each ethnic entity.

13. Although r*x'm originally meant "runners," here in keeping with the efficiency of the Persian postal system (Herodotus V.52-53; VIII.98), they were mounted (cf. Esth 8:10). In contrast to the sense of distance and non-involvement created by the repeated use of the passive voice, the decree enjoined action. They were to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day - and to take spoil. With so much of the text in doublets, the force of *three* verbs in quick succession followed by the comprehensive victim list is unmistakable. The closure granted free-for-all looting after all the rightful owners and potential heirs were disposed of in one day.

15. The verse structure in Hebrew is unusual in that all four clauses begin with nouns instead of the standard verb; couriers, the edict, the king and Haman, and the city. Each of these is positioned to highlight the complexity of responses. The couriers were pressed to the far reaches of the empire where, as we learn from chapter 9, huge numbers of people rallied to the cause, even after the counter decree. At the same time the edict was issued in the citadel. The king and Haman had a private celebration, notable for its callous tone after the immensity of their crime. The population of Susa, significantly last in the list, was genuinely agitated (n*bok>h) about the decree, although we are not told why or what form this took. In fact, a significant part of the confusion may have been due to a vast and tangled complex of varying responses, from horror to unrestrained glee. They were distinguished from the elite of the citadel, a minority that had mandated the bloodshed, and where the edict was initially promulgated.