

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Esther, Lecture 2

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At this point, we begin to address the text of Esther, and I will be reading primarily from the New International Version, although from time to time I will also indicate what a more literal rendition of the Hebrew does say. As we start out, it's important to realize that Chapter 1 is an intentionally grandiose introduction to the king. His name is presented twice at the outset.

That's a stylistic touch that sets the stage for the continuous procession of dyads through the description of the Persian court. Honor and royalty, two very important themes, 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 *yakar* in Hebrew. The adjectival form of that word means precious, costly, rare, or valuable. And there's a related adjective that will be used as well, *kaved*, which means heavy or weighty.

It has a cognate, *kavod*, which means glory. And a further related noun form refers to the liver, which is considered the seat of emotion and representative of the self. Honor, linked in Esther repeatedly with royalty, is demonstrated then by an interweaving of these facets of substance, status, and splendor all wound into the self.

In the public arena, which is indeed our Persian court, respect for status, awe in the face of splendor, and dependence for substance all enhance the reputation of a given individual. And now let's turn to the text. This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, or again, Ahasuerus, Achashverosh in Hebrew.

This is the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Kush. The story in Hebrew begins with *vayhi bimey*, it happened in the days of, a phrase that also commences the narrative of Ruth. By itself, this term *vayhi* in Hebrew introduces several of the historical biblical texts, again intimating that this is intended to be read as history.

The king's name is Achashverosh, rendered Ahasuerus in some English translations. It's the Hebrew equivalent of a Persian word, of which Xerxes is the Greek transliteration. That's why those two apparently different names are there.

India and Kush, represented in verse one, are the southeast and southwest corners of the empire. The parallel expression from Dan to Beersheba that we see throughout much of the biblical text is a standard designation for the full extent of

geopolitical territory. In this case, these designations were representative of the whole known world, and they are another factor that establishes the universal sovereignty, and therefore, the supreme honor of Xerxes.

The number of provinces, 127, has been the focus of a good deal of skeptical commentary. Herodotus indicated that there were only 20 satrapies in the Persian empire under Darius. A Medina province, however, was a smaller entity than a satrapy.

This is evident particularly from Esther chapter 3, verse 12, which mentions both terms, so that's really not much of a problem. 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. Apart from the possible propaganda engine evident here, it is also, from a literary standpoint, another mechanism for poking fun at the king who ruled 127 provinces, but it lapsed in his own palace garden.

Verse two, at that time, King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. In fact, ancient Persia had four capitals. Susa was only one of them.

It seems to have served as the winter residence for Persian kings. There is, by the way, a consistent distinction in this text between the bira, citadel of Susa, and the city itself. In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials.

The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles of the provinces, were present. The term for banquet is *mishte*, a word which comes from the Hebrew word meaning to drink. Characteristically, at royal celebrations, large quantities of food were distributed.

We see this in a number of places in the historical books in the Bible. Here, there is no mention of food whatsoever. The entire focus was drinking, and significant details of chapter one also have to do with drinking.

Some of it was quite excessive by the king's own authorization. At the end of this verse, the pairs of words that characterize the descriptions have ever-widening circles to them. Nobles and 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. Verse four states that for a full 180 days, he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

In the Hebrew text, showing is the first word. Xerxes was establishing his splendor before whole entourages of notables that he needed to impress, again, perhaps to bolster support for his war effort. The verbal pairs, double constructs, and other forms of redundancy highlight the inconceivable wealth of this kingdom.

The text literally says for many days, in fact, 180 days. And the narrator registers astonishment at the amount of time. It's unlikely that all the princes, servants, army personnel, and diplomats were carousing together for this full 180 days, however.

Instead, this was probably an ongoing diplomatic effort to woo broad support for the attack on Greece. Groups were possibly arriving in succession. Now, just to do a little background, prior to this grandiose introduction to Xerxes, with which the Hebrew text begins, the Septuagint both revises the historical context and puts the narrative into a distinctly theological framework.

It first names not Xerxes but Artaxerxes as the Persian monarch and then identifies Mordecai as a Benjamite in captivity, exiled by Nebuchadnezzar. The main focus of the introduction in the Septuagint, however, is to report the apocalyptic dream in which Mordecai saw two dragons ready to fight amidst appalling tribulation. The righteous people cried out to God in this dream, and a small stream became a mighty river, notably referring to Esther.

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 Septuagint, where it is indeed interpreted. In the meantime, also in the Septuagint, at this juncture, Mordecai overheard two eunuchs of the king plotting his assassination, and it's here that he reports it to Artaxerxes.

The matter was examined, the eunuchs were hanged, and Mordecai was brought in to serve in the official capacity in the court. That occurs later in the Hebrew text. In one more key diversion from the Hebrew text, we learn at this point 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 somewhat ambiguous in the Hebrew text.

Back to the text. When these days of feasting were over, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days in the enclosed garden of the king's palace for all the people, from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. 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, who had, in effect, been hosting tourists for half a year. In the Hebrew text of verse five, the successive

nouns in construct at the end of the verse take the reader step by step into the interior. Literally, it reads, in the courtyard of the garden of the pavilion of the king.

The syntax intimates that this access was indeed a special occasion. As we move on to verse six, 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 background 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 in Hebrew conveys a sense of wonder, absolute wonder at the opulence. At the same time, repetitious dyads continued to poke fun at the officious Persian court.

The word for deep blue or violet material, *tehillit*, was used extensively, also in conjunction with the tabernacle and the temple, as we see in Exodus and 2 Chronicles. Perhaps the author intended here a subtle contrast between the dwellings of the king of the universe and this king, Xerxes. Reading verses seven and eight, wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other.

And the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. By the king's command, each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. The drinking process, as described here, was, in effect, a microcosm of the real nature of both the empire and its ruler.

On the surface, all the details were controlled by law. The word is *dat*. But the law, in effect, meant the king let people do as they wished.

Literally, it reads, by law, there was no restraint. This is a matter that would find sobering expression in Haman's being allowed to write whatever decree he wished. Verse nine.

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. Here, the narrator presents the banquet for women as a parallel to the ongoing feast. But the contrast between the simplicity of this statement and the effusive description of the king's banquets is not to be missed.

Carrying on, after seven days, the king's condition was distinctly affected by the wine. The text says he was in high spirits. The expression in Hebrew is *tov lev*, and it can be translated anywhere on the spectrum from cheerful to outright drunk.

It appears in other biblical contexts where intoxication is actually connected to impending destruction. Judges 16, 1 Samuel 25 are two examples of those. In

addition, in this verse, 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 the king intended to show off another possession, his queen, as the grand finale to days of basking in admiration and honor. This was a consummate act of self-aggrandizement in an already overextended parade. The eunuchs were commanded to bring Vashti, indicating that it was simply expected that she would display her beauty before the people and the princes.

It's telling that the word to show is used with regard to Vashti here, and also, you will recall the king's possessions in verse four. Vashti was to be wearing a royal crown, the specific mention of which prompted rabbinic commentators to suggest that this was all she was to be wearing. It was utterly humiliating, however, when Vashti refused to come, humiliating for the king, that is.

The command via seven eunuchs emphasizes again that everything about this court was overdone, but nevertheless, according to official protocol. Reading verse 12, when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Refused is the first word, by the way, in the Hebrew text.

Then, the king became furious and burned with anger. While the text does not explicitly state why Vashti refused, it's not difficult to surmise that she was loathe to show herself clothed or otherwise, in deference to the rabbinic material, before a large group of men well under the influence of their wine. The king's wrath at the end of the verse is also described in doublets, even the sound of which indicates his sputtering with rage and the anger that was smoldering within him.

Unable to determine the proper course of action, the king consulted the sages. But this crucial question, this is verses 13 and 14, from the king to his counselors is interrupted by an elaborate parenthetical note on the decision-making body and the governmental structure. Another jab at the excessively regulated and farcical nature of the entire court.

These wise men, ha-hamim, also literally called those who knew the times, came from within the ranks of those who were experts in law 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, by the way, is debated. The same expression, those who know the times, also appears in 1 Chronicles 12, verse 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.

This clearly involved, knowing the times, a degree of political savvy. Wise men were a traditional institution in the courts and several of the names that are in this list were

also found in the Persepolis tablets. Ibn Ezra, a medieval Jewish commentator, suggested that those who knew the times were astrologers and that dat, the law in this case, referred to the laws of the heavens.

This is an interpretation that has continued to hold some sway, although there's little textual and extra-textual support for it. Here it seems that their wits were, however, also, along with the king, clouded with wine. As will become evident, those who knew the times and fear of women's uprising missed the conspiracy that Mordecai, the Jew, uncovered.

The names of these ministers and the eunuchs listed in chapter 1, verse 10, are similar when read in reverse order. Although there are several aberrations in these reversed patterns, this might be a literary device hinting from another perspective at the reversals that characterize the entire narrative. The king had to ask, in verse 15, how to handle his rebellious wife and that he expected some sort of response, quote, unquote, according to the law, simply adds to the hilarious tone of the narrative.

And now, let me read 16 through 18. Then Memucan replied, or Memucan, replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, quote, Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king, but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women.

And so, they will despise their husbands and say, King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day, the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the nobility who have heard about the queen will respond to all the king's nobles, excuse me, in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

Here Vashti had publicly dishonored the king, and her action could be presented as having severe repercussions for male honor, official and otherwise. Thus, Memucan's speech. It moved the bright spotlight, the speech 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, a good spin.

Those who are at the highest ranks in this tenuous honor holding sphere had the most to lose. 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.

Well, the women who had gathered for Vashti's feast would most likely be part of this feared newsflash. The verse itself indicates that everyone would be talking about the scandal. The suffix on the infinitive construct is masculine plural.

And in addition, Vashti's offense was presented as worse than impropriety. The Hebrew verb is *ava* related to a common noun form *avon*, most frequently rendered sin. According to Memucan's worst case scenario, the women of nobility would hear of the queen's shocking behavior and they would brazenly use it to shame their own husbands, who, because honor was woven to the very fabric of the culture, could only respond with rage.

This verse, verse 18, is not a redundant repetition of the previous statement. Instead, it's a subtle indicator of class distinctions. Even the noble women would shame their husbands.

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. In fact, an expression of anger in that cultural context would not only be acceptable, but it would also have been expected. Verse 19, Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest.

Subtly indicative of the impersonal political and legal machinery, the recurring pattern of passive verbs begins here with the issuance of this 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 be in the future exercising power. It's no accident that at this point she is no longer called Vashti the queen. Her position would be given to one who, in the fondest hopes of Memucan and the king and the rest of the nobles, have a more pliable disposition.

In the finale of Memucan's speech, in verse 20, full of the requisite bowing and scraping, there's 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, *yakar*, to their husbands from the greatest to the least.

In Memucan's presentation, this would only have to be heard, another passive form of the verb, for proper hierarchy and honor to be restored. And then reading 21 and 22, the king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script, and to each people in its own language.

And now, I'm going to read a different translation, which is a little more literal. Every man is to be ruling in his own house and speaking the language of his people. That's the last part of the decree.

The NIV has changed the subject of speaking from every man to the previous referenced dispatch that would reach each location. In other words, it has said, he sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script, to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people's tongue that every man should be ruler in his own household. But notice the difference.

Every man is to be ruling in his own house and speaking the language of his people. Reading it the latter way might be understood in the light of a subculture that's described in Nehemiah chapter 13, verses 23 and 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.

At any rate, writing for each political entity, Medinah, and language, lashon, for people groups are further examples of dyad patterns throughout the narrative. This pair is a literary indication that the coverage was indeed to be comprehensive. 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 anymore. Chapter 2 begins after these things, which is often used to start a new section of the narrative in Hebrew. In other words, once the king's wrath had subsided, and we've already talked about the possibility that that may have meant a number of years, he remembered three things, each preceded by the Hebrew particle *et*, which emphasizes their distinctiveness.

He remembered Vashti. He remembered 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 Vashti and what she had done and what the nameless bureaucracy had decreed.

Chapter 2, verse 2. Then, the king's personal attendants proposed. Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Verse 3. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls 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. Verse 4. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

And as we can see, the satire on the Persian court continues. The young servants of the king made his decision as well. But they did it adroitly to make it appear that Xerxes himself would choose the new queen.

Note they said, verse 4, the young woman who pleases the king. The criteria repeated in the next verse are articulated as young women, virgins, and beautiful. Each term narrows the field and it sets up as one of antiquity's beauty pageants what was about to unfold.

The word for virgin, *betulah*, indicates a young woman of marriageable age who is under the guardianship of her father. This would indeed include Esther under the guardianship of Mordecai. The roundup of beautiful young virgins would be conducted in the same officious manner as the rest of the Persian bureaucracy.

Note 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 absolutely no choice in the matter. One can imagine the confusion once all these young women began converging on the citadel area.

The text implies large numbers with every province and every young woman coming. Once there, the beauty treatments would follow, as we will see. The king, sorry, the attendants deferred to the king's approval.

This young woman was to be pleasing in the king's eyes, as was the decree, regarding both the acceptability of their plan and the ultimate selection of the young woman. The plan had two stages. First was gathering all the beautiful virgins.

The second was indeed the context contest. They seem to be aware that the last thing the king wanted was an ambitious woman. The roundup was necessary, and this would demonstrate that the king was firmly in control.

And that sets the stage for the human heroes of the story. The identities of these main characters are really more important than their surroundings. And the verse will highlight that.

This is, by the way, a stark contrast to the description of the Persian court in the first chapter. Both Mordecai and Esther have a venerable history, and that is indicated by Mordecai's lineage. Now there was in the citadel of Susa, verse 5, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, son of Yair, son of Shemai, son of Kish, genealogy.

The word order in the Hebrew text is significant. The verse begins with *Ish Yehudi*, a Jewish man who was in the citadel of Susa. These identifying marks appear even

before his name, and they will 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 throughout the text Mordecai the Jew, pointedly distinguishing him in this 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, who is Kish.

Because that's unlikely, for a narrator seemingly so careful about detail, it's really 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 480s BC, he may have been born in exile to Yair in, say, 520.

Perhaps Yair's birth a generation early would be dated to approximately 550, and his father, Shemai, may have been born shortly after Kish was taken into exile in 597. Attention is directed toward Kish, who was the father of King Saul, for Samuel chapter 9, in order to prepare for Haman's ties with Agag. It was, as we already know, that long-standing enmity between Amalekites, the people of Agag, and the Israelites that made the crisis between Mordecai and Haman understandable.

Both were descendants of royalty, King Agag and Saul, the first king of Israel. Moving on to verse 6, a literal rendition of it focuses on the exile. Let me read it literally.

Mordecai, sorry, Kish, who was exiled from Jerusalem with a group of exiles, 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, personally, 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 there was an upper-class family. We see this from 2 Kings 24, verses 8 through 16. The eunuchs, nobles, and officials of the king were taken in that wave, as we learn from that text.

As we've seen before, word order, again, in verse 7 is significant. The verse begins with Hebrew, *v'hi omein*, he was caring for, a noun which is used with regard to guardianship of children. And it's related to a word we know well, *amen*, which has in its semantic range, trustworthiness.

This clause is important in establishing the exemplary character of Mordecai. Hadassah, who is also known as Esther, is, interestingly enough, the only character to

have two names, indicative of her two worlds, initially separated, and one of which was hidden. Hidden is also related to, possibly, the name Esther.

Nevertheless, she would publicly fuse these names 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.

The word is hadass in Hebrew. That name alone carried significant associations. In the prophetic symbolism of Isaiah chapter 55, verse 13, the myrtle would replace the desert thorn.

In post-exilic times, myrtle was carried on the Feast of Tabernacles, symbolizing peace and thanksgiving, Nehemiah chapter 8, verse 15. A more challenging question has to do with the meanings of Esther, meaning of Esther and the possible relationship between the names Esther and Hadassah. Esther has popularly been identified with Ishtar, the goddess of both love and war.

That's a popular identification. 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 from Old Iranian, stara, which means simply star.

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, literally, beautiful of form and lovely in appearance.

In other words, her extraordinary beauty far exceeded the qualifications for being rounded up in the king's net. It would have been unavoidable. Verse 8, chapter 2. When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai.

Esther was also taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hege, who had charge of the harem. The tone of verse 8 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, as well as the subsequent nurturing of Mordecai, this would have been an occasion for anguish and shame for both Esther and Mordecai. The importance of Hege for Esther's advancement is indicated in the dual mention of his name at this point. And further, she was given into the care, literally, the hand of Hege.

In verse 9, continuing the stylistic pattern of doublets, it says Esther was pleasing to Hege and won his favor. The expression tisach hesed, occurring only in Esther, has a

sense of active gaining or winning favor rather than the more subdued finding favor, the customary idiom. Hege's attention to Esther moved her quickly forward in the process, overseeing treatments and special food, *manot* is the Hebrew word, giving to her the best attendance and situating them all in the best location in the harem.

The word *manot* is used also in 1 Samuel 1, verses 4 and 5, with reference to Elkanah's distribution of portions of sacrifice to his wives and his children. Therefore, it was something very special. The seven selected attendants were likely those whom Hege was reserving for the young woman who might, in his estimation, become Vashti's successor.

In verse 10, 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. Mordecai's command that Esther does not reveal her people or her kindred raises a sense of danger and nameless dread that will set the stage for what Haman devised in the chapters that follow.

Haman's 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 have indeed been a prudent thing to do. It also explains Mordecai's abiding concern to keep himself apprised of Esther's welfare in the court.

This 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. The word is *shalom* there, perhaps through connections he maintained in the harem.

Mordecai would soon have become apprised of the long process. Perhaps it tried his patience as it went on for a year. Following on the previous, what would happen, the process is detailed in verses 12 through 14.

I'll simply summarize those. Each young woman had a turn after a year of preparation. The treatment period was prescribed.

Oil massages for six months, spices for another six, no doubt to soften and perfume the skin. The association of myrrh with sexual attraction and love is also particularly evident in Song of Songs. We see it here as well.

The importance of oiling skin in a hot and dry climate cannot be overestimated. As an interesting corroboration from the outside, 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.

We know that because names are inscribed on them and used by women to fumigate themselves and their clothes, ostensibly to make them more desirable. In verses 13 and 14, we have the rules of the contest. Each candidate could ask for anything she wished to take with her into the king's palace, presumably in order to make herself memorable enough to be summoned again by name.

That, of course, assumes the contestants wanted to be summoned. 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. At any rate, after one night with the king, the woman was a concubine. And if she was not summoned, note the passive, by name, she spent the rest of her life in the harem, reduced to essential widowhood.

That the women were brought to the king in the evening is a notable detail. Esther's later daytime arrival in chapter 5 was clearly an aberration in more ways than one. Verses 15 and 16.

When the turn came for Esther, the girl 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 favor, literally lifted up favor, of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign.

In one of the scroll's characteristic parentheses, Esther's Jewish identity is given just as she is 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.

But she would emerge as queen. Her strategy is contrasted with that of the other candidates. Her success was due to her restraint.

Chances are that Hege, who also knew women quite well and knew precisely what would enhance Esther's beauty, gave her just the right thing. 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 excesses of adornment. While Esther won favor, hesed, in connection with Hege, who oversaw her and was her superior, more publicly, she won grace, hen, a probable testimony both to her stunning beauty and to her demeanor.

There is a hint here, by the way, that the route to the king's bedroom may have been customarily involving a bit of a parade. In verse 16, we have 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.

Chapter 4, verse 14 will allude to that, in order for deliverance for the Jews to take place. She was taken in the tenth month of the seventh year, four years had elapsed since the removal of Vashti, and this fits well with the intervening interval on the battlefield. Verse 17, now the king was attracted to Esther.

The Hebrew there is actually the king loved Esther, Ahab is the word, more than 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.

The king's response to Esther is striking. He loved her, she won grace and favor, he hesitated, above all the virgins who visited him. Appropriate for the coronation, there was immense court celebration, empire-wide ramifications, great banquet for nobles and officials, and this seemingly closes the look at the Persian court from the unharmed side.

Now we move as a transition to some more ominous things. Verse 19, when the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. A dramatic incident begins to occur 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's no indication as to what precisely this second gathering represented, when it occurred, or why. The Vav conjunction before when they were assembled suggests a connection to what has 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 overextended harem would not be necessary. On the other hand, it's possible that the king's attendants, who knew him well, had a regular routine for keeping the harem full. Perhaps eunuchs were integral to the process of herding virgins, and because the two would-be assassins discovered by Mordecai at the gate were eunuchs, the narrator may have felt it important to note this particular event as background for that discovery.

The significant element for the continuing story was Mordecai's position in the king's gate. That's a locus of authority where administrative and judicial activities occurred, and where information abounded, leading both to intrigue and bids for power. It marked a boundary.

Guards were an important part of gate areas, and those guards were eunuchs. Mordecai's presence at the gate is noted multiple times. 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.

Verse 20, Esther's secrecy regarding her people and kin and Mordecai's command to keep silent is reiterated, intimating the ominous and undefined nature of some threat. Mordecai seems to have been keenly aware of potential danger. Given the nature of his daily activities, he was likely privy to a good deal of subsurface menace.

Verse 21 stresses Mordecai's presence at the gate. In those chaotic days when there were more virgins milling about, officials who were eunuchs were guarding, and among them were Bigthan and Teresh. The reason for Bigthan and Teresh's anger is not given, but it was sufficient to hatch the assassination plot.

Because they were literally 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 someone into his bedroom. At any rate, the covert nature of Mordecai's discovery is implied in the passive the matter was made known to Mordecai.

As a loyal subject of the king, he informed Esther, who in turn told the king, giving Mordecai credit. 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. Hanging on wood, hung, all rights, would have meant either impalement or crucifixion in the Persian period.

It's unlikely it was death by hanging. More likely, the hanging was public humiliation by the exposure of the body after death. And this all sets the stage for Chapter 3.