

ESTHER

Week 3, Chapter 2

The reason that I chose to present you with the Book of Esther is its historical and chronological position in Israel's history. It bridges the exile to Babylon with their return to Judah and rebuilding of the Temple that we find becoming fruitful in Ezra and Nehemiah's time. So today some of what we'll do is add some details and paint with a little finer brush as we seek to understand the era in the context of the story.

Chapter 1 set the stage for our story of Esther. It takes place in Susa (**Shushan** in Hebrew) the administrative capital of the Persian Empire. The king at this time was Xerxes, the 4th king of the Media-Persian Empire (he was called **Achashverosh** in Hebrew and Ahasueras in Persian). It is about 480 B.C. and the king is now in his 3rd year of power after taking over from his father Darius I. The Babylonian Empire had been conquered about 50 years earlier, and now Persians were in control of everything that had formerly been Babylonian territory.

The Jews were no longer in exile and hadn't been for a few decades. The 1st King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, had emancipated his captive Jews and several thousand had gone home to Judah. But if we were to attach a percentage, perhaps those who left Persia would amount to no more than 10% and possibly a little as 5%. That is, the 90 - 95% of Jews who had been living in the Babylonian Empire against their wills, and then in the past 50 years in the Persian Empire, had by their own choice elected NOT to return to the Holy Land. Why is that? It is because for a great many of them, Babylon and now Persia was home. When Persia conquered Babylon most Jews weren't relocated. Babylon simply became Persia. The cities and towns they lived in merely had a change of government administration. A million or so Jews were born there; it's the only culture those Jews ever knew. Other Jews had perhaps been children when they were hauled off from Judah by their conquerors in about 586 B.C., but a full century and a bit more had passed since that time and all but a handful of that first generation of deported Jews were dead and buried in the place of their exile. The Jews had assimilated and they were now in harmony with their new surroundings. They were generally at peace with the Persians, Medes, and scores of other ethnic cultures that formed the Empire.

They were treated well in Babylon, some of their ranks even rising to the highest government offices as we find out in the Book of Daniel. Daniel even served the 1st King of Persia for a short time. Towards the end of their stay in Babylon, things got a bit worse, and of course they were never free to go home. So one of the first edicts of King Cyrus was to declare that the Jews were free and even aided their return using Persian treasury money. The modern name for the many millions of Jews who chose to make their lives outside of the Holy Land is Diaspora Jews. Diaspora is a Greek loan word that means scattered or dispersed.

There was another reason that so many of these Jews elected to stay in Persia, and it was because Judah was a disaster area. The main city of Jerusalem had its defensive walls torn down, and the Temple was a shambles. There was practically no working economy. What would the returnees do for a living? Where would they live? Tents and temporary shelter didn't look very attractive compared to the well ordered mud brick homes and organized towns and villages where they resided in Persia. But just as important an issue was how might they defend themselves from bandits or petty lords and kings who wanted to take Jerusalem from them if they had no walls?

In 2014 about one-half of the world's Jews live in Israel, and the remainder live scattered throughout the rest of the world. The USA easily has the biggest concentration of Jews outside of Israel. So, why, since Israel has been restored to a vibrant modern nation and it is their natural homeland, and anti-Semitism is on the rise (admittedly mostly outside the USA), aren't the skies full of planes taking the Jews back home? Because Israel hasn't been their home for almost 2000 years. Because most feel no attachment to Israel.

The Jews of today, other than the most Orthodox and zealous, don't make a religious connection to Israel. Most don't sense a spiritual bond or see a biblical imperative to uproot their families and move even though they are welcomed with open arms. They don't even speak, or wish to learn, Israel's native language, Hebrew. Everything I just told you applied equally to the Jews of the Persian Empire 2500 years ago and so they made the same kinds of decisions, for the same reasons, to stay put and not go to Judah.

The only reason Israel exists as it does today is the result of a horrific irony. The Jews were forced back to their ancient homeland, such as it was, as a result of the Holocaust of WWII. The nations of the world didn't want to take them in, and many Jews couldn't imagine themselves trying to rebuild their shattered lives in the same place where their next door neighbors sang Christian songs and called them Christ killers as they turned them over to government authorities for a one-way trip to the many death camps in Europe.

Their family heritage is where they are now (sometimes it's for centuries). And because especially USA Jews enjoy the fruits of a free country, the richest in the world, a nation who seems to avoid attack from foreign powers, and a generally easy life is what they enjoy. Here they don't worry about rocket and mortar attacks from a hostile neighbor bent on their annihilation that is located just a couple of miles away. They don't deal with \$9 per gallon gasoline and a 100% sales tax on new cars. Here where a 2000 square foot home is rather average, there only the wealthiest could afford such a thing. They don't make aliyah to Israel because they choose not to; they see no advantage, and every risk, in doing so. Israel is a foreign land in every sense of the word to the modern Diaspora Jews, as it was to the Jews of our story of Esther.

We've learned some things about the Persian way of life and especially about the ruling class. First, they liked to party and drink. Almost all of the 1st chapter of Esther is about lavish banquets, intoxication, and how men and women are greatly separated so that the men can be drunk and disorderly but the women can stay cloistered and their purity and honor maintained. It's not that wives and girlfriends didn't go to banquets or festivities with their husbands or

weren't allowed to go to public events. It's when the purpose of the get-together was to get very merry very fast that they were prohibited from joining in.

Second we learned that the Persian royalty enjoyed finding every way possible to spend their vast wealth on decadent indulgences. Where as today we'd be horrified to learn that our President or Prime Minister made serious national decisions while in a state of a near alcohol induced incoherence, then it was not at all unusual.

Third we learn that politics hasn't change much over the centuries. Spin and protecting the leader's credibility at all costs was always paramount. No matter how silly or not believable of a reason for some head-scratching action was given, some of the population would always accept it, and the leaders themselves saw (and see) inventing these reasons as perhaps their most important function.

Thus in Esther chapter 1 we find the inebriated and bombastic King Xerxes boast of the beauty of his wife Queen Vashti, and so ordered her to do something that she couldn't possibly do and maintain her honor and respect: appear before a group of drunken high government officials (all males of course) to be shown off and ogled like the centerfold of Playboy magazine. She had little choice but to refuse and accept the consequences because the alternative was too awful and long lasting to contemplate.

When the king was told she wouldn't come he became furious; no doubt due mostly to his embarrassment in front of these men. After all, he was the king of the world, and a mere woman was telling him "no"? So he called his closest and wisest advisors together to decide what to do. They perfectly understood what their REAL job was: to make the king look good and put the blame for this mess somewhere, anywhere, but as his feet. So the solution was to turn this from a personal issue of face saving to one of grave national importance. The spin would be that Queen Vashti's refusal was indicative of the growing rebellious attitude of wives in general, and something needed to be done about it before the entire social fabric of Persia unraveled. Thus as heartbreaking as it would be to the king to have to take this harsh action, he would have to essentially remove Queen Vashti's crown from her, kick her out of the royal harem, and send her away. But of course this would be presented as a regrettable action that was taken for the sake of the collective good and family harmony.

Thus a new law was enacted and sent to all 127 districts of the Persian Empire, written in the scores of languages of the empire that wives were to show respect to their husbands. And that when in a situation of a multi-ethnic marriage there was to be only one culture respected and one language spoken in the household: that of the husband.

Let's read Esther chapter 2.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 2 all

The first words of this chapter are *ahar ha-debbarim*; this means "after these things". This is

a standard Hebrew grammatical way of providing a break in subject and of changing the scene. It means some undefined amount of time has passed and unless there is some indication in the context about the amount of time there is no way outside of speculation to know. So in our case: after WHAT things? Remember, just because at some point the completed Bible was broken up into chapters and verses doesn't mean it was intended to be, or what it created that way. Thus we must connect this first verse of chapter 2 with the last verse of chapter 1, and so what happens in chapter 2 takes place after the law against women disrespecting their husbands, and the divorcing of Queen Vashti, had taken place.

The words that the king "had remembered" Vashti is an expression of regret. He was uneasy over what had transpired. Since he expressed this regret out loud to his royal court they fully understood that this was their cue to find a solution. But underlying their concern was that it was they who had recommended that the king put Vashti away. But even more that it been done no discreetly, but rather by means of a law that was made known from one end of the empire to the other. So by Persian custom there was no way the king could undo the damage and get his wife back. So the royal court needed to come up with something quick so that the king would not start to get angry at them because with the passage of time it has now caused him discomfort.

The solution? Get him a new wife. One that is even more beautiful than Vashti. Although we really don't know anything about Vashti (nothing has ever been found in any Persian records about her), Herodotus says that Persia had 7 royal/aristocratic families who essentially controlled the nation. And the records reveal that a wife for the king was always chosen from one of these 7 families. So what the king's advisors proposed was far riskier than what it sounds like in these verses. They proposed that the king ignore this custom and political imperative and go outside of these 7 royal families and that the choice of the new Queen and companion for Xerxes ought to be based entirely on beauty. Thus, the choice would include all eligible girls from all ethnic groups and all social levels in the entire Persian Empire.

It seemed obvious to the advisors that beauty was the issue because Vashti's beauty was behind the inebriated king breaking with all protocol and court etiquette by wanting to show her off to his equally drunk officials and male guests. She was the Breeders Cup winner of trophy wives to Xerxes, and little more. Yet I suspect that she was also rather charming and had worked her way into her husband's heart more than he had realized until she was gone. It is interesting that just as exaggerated and over zealous was the immediate reaction to Vashti refusing to come to the king (that is, making it a national issue and decreeing a new law as a result), so the king's advisors once again take that exaggerated approach by flinging the doors open to all virgin females from the entire Persian Empire as wife candidates for the king.

The contestants would be brought from the 127 districts to be made part of the harm in Shushan (Susa). There they would be put under the supervision of Hegai, the man in charge of the royal harem and he would prepare them for the coming beauty show.

Fist let me point out that there are no Greek additions to the Hebrew version of this chapter; what we just read is all there is.

Verse 5 shifts course and introduces us to the two heroes of our story: Esther and Mordechai. It is interesting that Mordechai is called a Jew because it highlights something we've discussed on numerous occasions. But to get there, we first have to notice that a brief genealogy is given for him and understand what it is telling us and what is NOT telling us. It says that he is the son of Ya'ir, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who was of the tribe of Benjamin. Technically a Jew is a person from the tribe of Judah; but Mordechai is a Benjamite. So this is further evidence that much of the tribe of Benjamin had thrown in with the tribe of Judah well before Nebuchadnezzar had attacked Jerusalem and exiled the people of the land. However by this time Judah and Benjamin together formed what was called a Jew, and it will remain so through out the rest of the Bible. Thus, just like Paul in the NT, even though on the one hand Mordechai saw himself as a Jew (a part of Judah), on the other hand he didn't forget his actual Israelite family heritage, which was originally of the tribe of Benjamin. A person can immigrate from Kenya, or Russia, or Germany or Mexico to the USA and proudly call themselves an American. Yet, they will also usually retain an identity as a Kenyan, Russian, German, or Mexican. There was no conflict in this duality.

But there is also something significant about Mordechai's genealogy. It proves that he came from King Saul's royal family line. And this might just turn out to be important to our story if we understand this. More on that later.

To the untrained eye, it looks as though Jair was Mordechai's father, Shimei his grandfather, and Kish his great grandfather; but that is not the case. Rather Kish was Saul's father (head of the royal clan of Benjamin), and this Shimei was no doubt the same Shimei who cursed King David 5 centuries earlier as he was fleeing Jerusalem for his life as David's son Absalom was leading a coup. This Jair might well have been his actual biological father or grandfather, or perhaps some other earlier famous family patriarch; we just don't know. But all these men were important, revered, leading men in the history of the tribe of Benjamin.

Thus we have to understand that biblical genealogies are not meant to be exhaustive. That is, they are not meant as some kind of precise, step by step, generation by generation accounting of ones family tree. That is a Western mindset that usually gets read (erroneously) back INTO the Bible. Thus even Yeshua's genealogy is not complete, and we know it skips generations. Even the long genealogies we see in Genesis are incomplete and generations are skipped. But on top of that, these either very brief genealogies (like with Mordechai's) or the very lengthy ones (like with Yeshua) can each be intended to demonstrate something different. Yeshua's was to demonstrate that he was both of the tribe of Judah and that he was of King David's royal lineage, because that was THE firm requirement for anyone who claimed to be the Messiah. While that is only mildly important to gentile Christians, it is everything to Jews past and present.

The purpose of Mordechai's genealogy is not so much to prove that he was a Benjamite, but to prove that he was of an aristocratic and royal line. This gave him special status in the eyes of the Jewish people. Thus we see King Saul's father (Kish) mentioned, and then we see Shimei (an aristocrat who deeply resented David and the tribe of Judah taking the kingship away from Saul and the tribe of Benjamin) placed front and center. Thus these two names were all that was needed to establish Mordechai's credentials. The several generations in

between were irrelevant, so they weren't listed.

Verse 7 explains that Esther was Mordechai's uncle's daughter; that is, Esther was of blood relation as Mordechai's first cousin. But obviously there was a large age difference between the two of them and Esther was in Mordechai's charge because her parents were dead. And since any respectable unmarried Hebrew girl (a virgin) had to be under the supervision of a male family member, she was under Mordechai's authority. In fact, whether it was formal or informal, Mordechai had adopted Esther as a daughter. And, since it is so pertinent to our story, verse 7 emphasizes that she was simply stunning. She wasn't just pretty she was also shapely. She was Jewish eye candy to the max. Knowing what King Xerxes was looking for in a new wife it is easy to see trouble brewing already.

Backing up a bit: we have a bit of difficulty here because the passage seems to say that Mordechai was part of the group of Jews hauled off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar attacked and overthrew the Jewish king Jeconiah, or as we better know him, Jehoiachin. The problem is that this occurred in 586 B.C. Since the Esther story is occurring around 480 B.C. some quick math says that if Mordechai was even only 1 year old at the time of Nebuchadnezzar's attack then he would have been at least 107 years old at this time! While that isn't entirely out of the realm of possibility, considering what Mordechai did and the outcome, it is simply not reasonable to think that this could be the case. And not even the Rabbis believe this.

So how can we reconcile this statement of how and when Mordechai originally came to Babylon with how it relates to his place in our Esther story? There have been several attempts by scholars, but all have substantial holes in them. As it can be quite difficult in Hebrew to attach a certain noun to a certain pronoun or a verb when multiple people are involved in a sentence, the "he had been exiled from Jerusalem" is where we have to look. Is the "he" Mordechai as it certainly seems to be? Or might it be Jair? How about Shimei? I think the best solution is to look at the "he" as either Jair, or more probably as Mordechai's general family line. That is, perhaps it was Jair or some other previous family member who was exiled and Mordechai was born in Babylon. Tribes and families are always called "he" (a masculine pronoun) in the Bible because the name of a tribe or clan or family always comes from the patriarch or male founder. About the only other alternative is to take an otherwise historically accurate story and accuse the anonymous author of making a gross error by saying that Mordechai came to Babylon over a century earlier. That would have been just as unbelievable to the Jews of ancient times as it is to us because these Jews well understood who Kish and Shimei were and of course knew when Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jerusalem.

Next let's tackle the meaning of the names Esther and Mordechai. Esther is a Babylonian name and it is the same as the Babylonian fertility goddess Ishtar. Naming children for their national gods and goddesses was usual and customary in the pagan world, just as adding yah (God) or Yehu (Yehoveh) to a person's name was usual among the Israelites. But we'll also find that in Babylon and Persia, and then later Greece and finally Rome, it was usual for Diaspora Jews to have two names: one of the local language and culture and the other in Hebrew. Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah and it means myrtle. Again we see St. Paul do this in the NT. His Hebrew name was Sha'ul (he was of the tribe of Benjamin and Sha'ul, King Saul, was of course a famous family name). But in Greek he was Paulus or in English just

Paul.

We don't get Mordechai's Babylonian name, but there is little doubt that it was Marduka. In fact, Mordechai doesn't really have an identifiable meaning like Hebrew names usually do (although there have been some vein attempts to provide one). Thus it seems as though Mordechai was only a Jewish vocalization of the Babylonian Marduka, and not a true Hebrew name at all. And Marduka is a play on the Babylonian's chief god's name, Marduk. So here we have another very unsettling aspect to our story that caused a lot of debate from time immemorial as to whether this book even belongs in the Bible; Esther is named after Ishtar and Mordechai is named after Marduk. The Rabbis just about couldn't stand it.

Now that we have the setting and most of the main characters introduced, the story picks up steam. Verse 8 says that Esther was brought to the king's harem along with many other virgin girls and placed under the care of the king's harem keeper, Hegai. And by the way, there is no hint of violence or kidnapping of Esther or any of the girls for that matter as most films on the subject portray. Many virgin girls and their families would not have welcomed this and no doubt the younger ones especially would have been reluctant even fearful to leave their parent's home. But at least as many would have been honored and ready to go probably at the urging of their families. Ladies, don't look at this through modern western eyes; this was 2500 years ago in the Middle East. You might see this as kidnapping, but they wouldn't have. Marriages were arranged by fathers and usually based on economics. The outcome of a marriage needed to benefit the family. These girls and their families all they knew why they were going to Susa, because it was written into the royal decree. They weren't going to be mistreated or harmed or to become slaves. One of these girls was going to win the lottery and become Queen of Persia. Not so bad. And the Queen's family would soon join her in the lap of luxury and hob-nob with the highest levels of Persian aristocracy. We simply don't hear of Esther's, or any other girl's, resistance. If there had been, you can bet that this story teller would have included it to add an even larger element of drama.

Esther quickly impressed Hegai and so she was shown special favor. She was given the best food and all the expensive cosmetics that apparently many of the other girls didn't receive. In fact, 7 girls were assigned to be her personal attendants and she was given a top tier place in the harem. Please note the number 7 appears again. As we discussed in chapter 1, we see a series of sevens developed in the story of Esther and we've long since learned that 7 is the ideal biblical number and it usually indicates the Lord's direct hand in something. And that is exactly how we should take it here.

Verse 10 tells us something peculiar: Esther didn't disclose to Hegai that she was Jewish and that was because her adoptive father Mordechai told her not to. Why? We're not told. In the man's world of Persia, if the father told the daughter to keep quiet about something, the "why" of it didn't matter. Was Esther therefore being deceptive by keeping her Jewishness secret? There is no hint that her ethnicity was even inquired about. This is used by some scholars to say that such a thing disqualifies the story as real or historical because it is not believable that she could keep her ethnicity secret. I find that absurd. Persia was a melting pot of cultures as evidenced by the many languages spoken there and the fact that the Empire stretched from modern Pakistan to Europe, and from the Black Sea to Egypt, Ethiopia and much of North

Africa. The decree ordered an empire wide search for the most beautiful of the women, and by definition the search was racially and ethnically neutral. There would have been a number of Semitic cultures that were nearly indistinguishable from one another among all the other non-Semitic ones. Esther's Jewishness simply was not an issue to the king or to the royal court.

So why Mordechai's instruction to say nothing of it? I can think of only one reason. Whatever unspoken negative that might have existed for being a Hebrew (although none is mentioned) needed to be kept quiet because Mordechai HOPED Esther would outdo the other contestants and become the Queen. And then once she was, she would be in a position to advance her family and her people, which was par for the course among royalty. Which once again lends evidence to my conclusion that while Esther may not have personally wanted to go into the king's harem, Mordechai understood that there would be great benefits derived from it.

Little did he know just how great and how important his hope for Esther to be chosen as Queen of Persia might be for the survival of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. We'll continue with chapter 2 next time.