

ESTHER

Week 4, Chapters 2 and 3

As we left off last week in Esther chapter 2, Esther was now residing in the royal harem in Susa (she and her adoptive father Mordechai were already living in Susa at the time). We noticed that the Bible gives us no implication that Esther was kidnapped, forced against her will, or mistreated when she was sent to the harem. And there is also no hint that this was the case for any of the other virgin girls. In fact, since what was really happening was that these girls were entering a beauty pageant with the winner becoming Queen of Persia, it seems to me that most of these girls and their families would have considered this a great and unexpected opportunity. And this is especially so when we consider that in Persian society there were 7 aristocratic families from which the king always chose his queen. So for this customary marriage protocol to be set aside and instead any girl of any family, ethnicity or social status in the enormous Persian Empire who was beautiful and charming enough was to be given a chance to become royalty, well, such a thing was simply unheard of.

Mordechai inexplicably told Esther that she was to say nothing of her Hebrew heritage. We aren't told his motive for this instruction, but there is also nothing that would tell us that Jews were seen as lesser, or undesirable, or that it would create a problem in the harem. Rather it seems, at this point in our story, to be an otherwise non-issue.

Let's pick up the plot of the story from chapter 2 verse 10.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 2:10 – end

Verse 11 offers us a tantalizing remark that we shouldn't pass by. We're told that every day Mordechai would walk around in front of the courtyard of the royal harem in order to try and keep track of how Esther was doing. The first question that enters my mind is: wouldn't he look suspicious? Even more, was the royal harem located in a common place such that anyone could just walk by and gawk? The harem is where the king's private concubines and wives lived. It was customary that the children lived with their mothers in the harem. So security and a level of privacy would have been maintained, and it's hard to imagine that just anyone could hang out in front of the harem house without being questioned. How was Mordechai able to do it? I'll leave that hanging for just a few minutes and we'll take it up again.

Beginning in verse 12 we get an overview of the interview procedure for the virgin girls. After going through some kind of a vetting process, where it was Hegai who seems to have decided who could even remain in the contest and who was likely sent home, then each of the semi-finalists had her “turn” before the King. But this didn’t happen until all the remaining girls went through a 12 month beautification process that no doubt included lessons in court etiquette and other aristocratic refinements. Sometime after the 12 months, a girl would be sent in to be with the king overnight. She was allowed to ask for a gift, probably some kind of adornment, of most anything she wanted. This is yet further proof that these girls were not mistreated but were given special favor.

Verse 14 explains that she would be shuttled in at evening and then returned on the following day. But she didn’t return to where she had lived the last several months; rather she would now reside in a different part of the harem house and would be placed under the care of a different supervisor. This other supervisor’s name was **Sha’ashgaz**. It is clear from the Hebrew words used to describe this process that after a night in the king’s bed, her status changed; she was now called a **pilegesh**, which means concubine. It’s not so hard to understand. Up to that night, she had been a virgin; now she wasn’t. And in the ancient world having intimate sexual relations under such circumstances brought certain commitments from the male with it. So what we have then is that in one section of the harem house the virgin girls resided and were prepared to be auditioned; and then once auditioned they became part of the king’s stable of concubines. From this stable of concubines the king would eventually choose his new wife. Let’s be clear: this is NOT how it was usually done. This wasn’t the standard Middle Eastern way of wife choosing for kings. Rather this is the unique system that King Xerxes’ royal court came up with for this particular situation. And in some ways, it’s really rather absurd.

But the last half of verse 14 tells us something rather sad; the girl who is now a concubine would never go to the king again unless he called for her by name. That is, whereas when the virgin girls were taken to him, it was at the selection of Hegai and each would eventually be given her opportunity, nonetheless each virgin girl was a stranger to King Xerxes. But once he had spent a night with a girl, she was now officially his concubine and from here forward the king would decide when, if ever again, he wanted to see her. We see here the cruelty of polygamy; each girl was merely a number. This is the downside of living in a royal harem. If the king had a large number of concubines (which most did), he only called for his favorites. The rest were forgotten and they would languish there for the rest of their lives.

Even if they were somehow released, no man would want a former king’s concubine for a wife because she wasn’t a virgin. As part of a harem she lived like a well cared for hamster in a cage. Or more aptly, as a living widow. She had no chance of having children unless impregnated by the king, and if the harem was a large one those chances were minimal. The concubine’s relationship with the king was impersonal. Her children were the king’s children but they were of lesser status than the children of the king’s several legal wives. Most of the time the children of concubines lived with their mothers in the harem until they matured; but at some point the king might take a liking to one or more of them, and once they became of age they could be moved into the king’s quarters.

Verse 15 tells us that the inevitable night came for Esther's audition and it is in this context that we first hear that her father's name was **Avichayil**. And when Esther went in to be with King Xerxes, when asked what she might like as her personal gift of adornment, we're told that she followed Hegai's advice and asked for nothing. No doubt Hegai knew how to play this game and he favored Esther so he went about helping her to win over the king. And equally obviously Esther WANTED to win this beauty contest and become the Queen.

There was something very special about Esther's bearing that she seemed to win over all she came in contact with; even with the girls she was competing against. It is clear throughout the story that her physical beauty was glorious, but it was her inner beauty that set her apart. How often I have stood just out of sight and watched my wife wisely counsel our young granddaughters as they stood before a mirror primping and looking at themselves admiringly. She reminds them that while indeed they are lovely to look at, God sees something else; something far more important. He sees what matters most; what lies under the outer shell. He examines them for the beauty of their hearts and minds and thoughts and even their deeds.

And she tells them that in the physical world of humanity on earth, there will be lots and lots of pretty girls and in a sense they'll be competing with them and comparing themselves against them. But what will separate them from the others and make for longer lasting and happier relationships is their inner beauty. Men being such visual creatures may well be attracted by shapeliness and a pretty face....at first. But it doesn't take too long before that kind of beauty wears off and we're looking around for the next one **unless** there is an inner quality of loveliness that transcends and draws us to her in a way that we can't so easily forget or escape. Esther was apparently the epitome of inner beauty, which is a choice; but was also the recipient of outward beauty, which is a gift from God.

Now, in the 16th verse, we get a time marker. It is in the 10th month of the year, in the 7th year of King Xerxes' reign that Esther was called upon to go into the king. Notice once again the number 7. We have found a growing sequence of sevens in the Book of Esther, which lets us know that the God of Israel was directly involved. It was in Xerxes' 7th year that Esther was elevated to Queen of Persia, the number 7 giving us a clue that the providence of God was working behind the scenes to get the timing of her coronation in perfect co-ordination with His plans. And by the way, in the Septuagint and other Greek versions, we are told that it was the 12th month of the 7th year (as opposed to the 10th month of the 7th year) that the King of Persia fell in love with Esther.

Let's back up to chapter 1 and we find that it was in Xerxes' 3rd year that the incident with his wife Queen Vashti occurred. So about 4 years have passed since that time. Esther and many other girls have been part of the harem for going on 4 years, preparing and waiting their turn; getting used to the idea that their lives are forever changed. And when Esther is chosen by Xerxes as his new Queen, where does that leave the rest of them? That hope for the ultimate prize is now gone. Some girls no doubt have embraced the change and enjoy the attention, the luxurious surroundings, and their lives of leisure. Others are coming to realize the emptiness of soul, and lack of love and meaning in their lives that such constant decadence and separation from their families brings.

The marriage with Esther included yet another banquet sponsored by the king, this one in Esther's honor. But those invited were mainly high government officials. For the remainder of the Persian population so that they might join the celebration a holiday was declared and gifts (probably of food) were distributed.

Verse 19 explains that the harem girls would gather outdoors on occasions, and when they did Mordechai would go and sit at the King's Gate. The reality is that this verse is not at all clear in its meaning and in fact the Septuagint version is quite different than the Hebrew version. It is not that there are additional Greek verses in this chapter; it is that the Greek Septuagint takes a bit different approach than the Hebrew.

In reality, the Hebrew version translates more literally as: "When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordechai sat at the palace gate". But for these same verses (18 and 19) the Septuagint says:

Esther 2:18-19 LXA

18 And the king made a banquet for all his friends and great men for seven days, and he highly celebrated the marriage of Esther; and he made a release to those who were under his dominion.

19 But Mardocheaus (Mordechai) served in the palace.

So the Greek Septuagint says that a release was made of those under the king's dominion, and that Mordechai served in the palace. A release is referring to prisoners who were being held because they were indebted to the king in some way. So as part of the wedding festivities the king granted pardon for some who were in debt and either in prison or being used as slaves or bondservants. But there is also this matter of Mordechai serving in the palace; that is new information. The question before us is can this be accurate? Was Mordechai actually some kind of appointed official? And why the difference between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible?

Some believe that the Septuagint only added information to make clear what seems to be implied in the Hebrew version: Mordechai held some kind of official government position in Susa. We discussed earlier how he managed to regularly come by the courtyard of the royal harem and yet not find himself being questioned or being run off or even arrested. And now we find him (in the Hebrew version) sitting at the King's Gate. There is little doubt that this passage is not so much reporting on Mordechai's physical whereabouts, but rather it is stating his official position as a member of the royal court. Here's the thing: Susa had a royal area or compound that was off limits to commoners unless invited. The King's Gate was a dedicated gate for the king and his family and entourage to use. And no doubt it was where official court cases were settled, as was customary in that era. At the King's Gate invited litigants would come for justice, and they would stand before an official who "sat" at the gate. Only officials were allowed to sit, everyone else had to stand before them as a sign of respect for their office.

Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Mordechai was a judge or even a palace spy (although that is probably taking matters too far).

Nonetheless Mordechai seems to have had access to places others couldn't normally go. And since in the order of the narrative his "sitting at the King's Gate" comes AFTER Esther was crowned Queen, it might be that with her new royal influence she arranged for Mordechai to be further elevated in his position in the government. As we discussed in our last lesson, the accompanying power, privilege and influence that comes with being a family member of the Queen is not to be understated in this story. In fact I maintain that it plays a pivotal role and we probably have just seen an example of it with Mordechai.

Verse 20 explains that even now, as Queen of Persia, and after 4 years having passed since she joined the harem, Esther didn't reveal that she was a Jew. And it really doesn't appear that Esther necessarily understood why it had to be that way; rather, as says the verse, Esther continued obeying what Mordechai told her to do. This should not be seen as intrigue but rather of a further statement of Esther's sterling character and unwavering allegiance to Mordechai. By Middle Eastern and Hebrew custom, because she was legally married (and there is no challenge even by the Rabbis that this was anything but a legal marriage to the king), then she was no longer under Mordechai's authority. She did NOT have to obey him. But even more, it is unimaginable that anyone in authority, and especially not the king, must have even asked her about her people or her race. Because had they, there is no way she could have refused to tell them. It is rather that race and ethnicity simply didn't matter.....yet.

But then something happens on one of the occasions that Mordechai was at the King's Gate. Two of the king's closest officials, Bigtan and Teresh, were overheard conspiring to murder King Xerxes. In fact other Jewish documents claim that Bigtan and Teresh were gate guards, which explains why they were at the King's Gate. It was common that a king would be assassinated by insiders and in fact that is what seems to have eventually happened to Xerxes.

Mordechai immediately contacted Esther, who reported the conspiracy to the king giving Mordechai the credit for his fine detective work. The matter was proved to be true and the two gate guards were executed. The verses say that they were impaled on a stake, which there is no reason to doubt because doing such a thing was common. However the way it worked was that a criminal would first be executed and then his corpse was impaled on a stake in a public place as a warning to those who might try the same thing, and as a public humiliation for the surviving family.

Let's move on to chapter 3.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 3 all

This chapter has a substantial Greek addition to it, which is added in between verses 13 and 14. What this addition amounts to is the contents of the king's decree to commit government

sanctioned genocide upon all Jews in the Persian Empire. Here is that addition:

READ ADDITION TO ESTHER FROM THE JERUSALEM BIBLE

Let's summarize where we are at this point as we see our story of Esther take a sudden dangerous and dark turn. Up to now the story has been a frivolous one that is mostly about banquets, drunken parties, the inner workings of the palace that revolves around the buffoonery of King Xerxes to paint himself into corners and the expertise of his royal advisors to extricate him; and the turning of small personal matters into huge national concerns due to the inflated self-importance of the Persian ruling class. As I hope you are now able to see, even the matter of all the most beautiful virgins of the Empire being called to Susa for a sort of Miss Persia beauty contest, with the winner becoming the new Queen of Persia, was hardly a terrible thing that (as so many misguided movies on the subject depict) involved Persian guards kicking in the doors of homes, terrorizing families and kidnapping the prettiest girls in every town and village in the empire and holding them against their will in the royal harem in Susa. Rather, to this point our story more resembles Cinderella since never before in Persian history had every common virgin girl in the empire been given an opportunity to marry a king and become a Queen. This honor, up to now, had been reserved only for members of 7 aristocratic Persian families. So for the most part this incident would have been perceived as an incredibly desirable opportunity for the eligible girls and their families as wealth, status and a lavish life for the entire family could be theirs if the king chose their daughter.

Another thing that we have discovered is that while Mordechai and Esther see themselves as Jews, and identify themselves as Jews; technically they are of the tribe of Benjamin. In fact the genealogy given for Mordechai in chapter 2 is meant to document and confirm that he was of the same royal family line of Benjamin (the line of Kish) as was King Saul. Thus in our story Mordechai at first seems like a kind of unofficial leader of the Jews in the city of Susa (even though it is not stated), but by the end of chapter 2 it is clear that even before Esther became Queen he held some kind of official position in the Persian government, and after she became Queen that position seems to have become a little more important.

As regards Esther and Mordechai's Jewishness: to this point in the story their ethnicity plays no role. There is no display of any kind of bigotry or intolerance of Jews and in fact Jews seemed to be in as much harmony in Persian society as any other of the scores of ethnicities that made up the multi-cultural Media-Persian Empire. There is no restriction to race or culture of the pretty virgin girls who will vie for Queen. The only hint we get that the Jews might have been seen a little differently by some in the empire was Mordechai's emphatic instruction to Esther that she is not to reveal her attachment to the Jewish people. She doesn't seem to know why Mordechai insists on this, and as readers we haven't been informed, either.

And of course we see God's hand guiding all even if He is not once mentioned. And just so we can know that the Lord was orchestrating everything, we have this long string of the number 7

appearing throughout the passages of Esther. From the number of days of banquets to the year in which the king married Esther, the profusion of 7's makes it clear that Yehoveh is in control of events whether those events involve Hebrews or gentiles. But in the end it is always about the Lord's relationship with, and concern for, His chosen people.

Chapter 3 begins to introduce us to some complexities that are just under the surface. And the first complexity appears in verse 1. Here a new character appears who will be central to the remainder of our story: the villain, Haman. This complexity I'm speaking of is that Haman's identity is different in the Hebrew Bible than it is in the Septuagint (the Bible translated into Greek about 250 B.C.). While the Hebrew Bible identifies Haman as the son of Hamdata the Agagite, the Septuagint identifies him as Haman, the son of Amadates the Bugaeon. Another ancient Septuagint manuscript says, "Haman, the son of Amadates the Macedonian".

We'll have to speculate a bit about the reason for the differences, but I think the reasoning behind it is fairly straightforward. While to a Hebrew audience the term Agagite would make some connections for them, it wouldn't make much sense to Greeks or Romans. Agagite was not an official or known ethnicity among gentiles at this time and probably only lightly known (at best) among Diaspora Jews who, by the time of the Roman Empire, had become greatly disconnected from their homeland. Let's explore this a little bit because it has everything to do with the hostility between Mordechai and Haman that would erupt, mostly because Mordechai instigated it.

The key is that an Agagite means that this person is an Amalekite. Agag is mentioned in 1Sam 15 in a way that turns out to be connected to the story of Esther.

1Samuel 15:5-11 CJB

5 Sha'ul arrived at the city of 'Amalek and lay in wait in the valley.

6 Sha'ul said to the Keni, "Go away, withdraw, leave your homes there with the 'Amaleki. Otherwise, I might destroy you along with them, even though you were kind to all the people of Isra'el when they came out of Egypt. So the Keni went away from among the 'Amaleki.

7 Then Sha'ul attacked 'Amalek, starting at Havilah and continuing toward Shur, at the border of Egypt.

8 He took Agag the king of 'Amalek alive; but he completely destroyed the people, putting them to the sword.

9 However, Sha'ul and the people spared Agag, along with the best of the sheep and cattle, and even the second best, also the lambs, and everything that was good- they weren't inclined to destroy these things. But everything that was worthless or weak they completely destroyed.

10 Then the word of ADONAI came to Sh'mu'el:

¹¹ *"I regret setting up Sha'ul as king, because he has turned back from following me and hasn't obeyed my orders." This made Sh'mu'el very sad, so that he cried to ADONAI all night.*

What orders didn't King Saul obey such that this eventually led to him being removed as Israel's king by God? It had to do with not dealing with Amalek as the Lord had long ago said Israel was to do. Early in the Torah we read this about Amalek:

Exodus 17:8-16 CJB

⁸ *Then 'Amalek came and fought with Isra'el at Refidim.*

⁹ *Moshe said to Y'hoshua, "Choose men for us, go out, and fight with 'Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with God's staff in my hand."*

¹⁰ *Y'hoshua did as Moshe had told him and fought with 'Amalek. Then Moshe, Aharon and Hur went up to the top of the hill.*

¹¹ *When Moshe raised his hand, Isra'el prevailed; but when he let it down, 'Amalek prevailed.*

¹² *However, Moshe's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aharon and Hur held up his hands, the one on the one side and the other on the other; so that his hands stayed steady until sunset.*

¹³ *Thus Y'hoshua defeated 'Amalek, putting their people to the sword.*

¹⁴ *ADONAI said to Moshe, "Write this in a book to be remembered, and tell it to Y'hoshua: I will completely blot out any memory of 'Amalek from under heaven."*

¹⁵ *Moshe built an altar, called it ADONAI Nissi *[[ADONAI is my banner/miracle],**

¹⁶ *and said, "Because their hand was against the throne of Yah, ADONAI will fight 'Amalek generation after generation."*

So Amalek would be God's and Israel's arch enemy forever. God instructed Israel to wipe them out completely, but those orders were never followed. Agag was a King of Amalek, and

now Haman is called an Agag-ite, which is either saying that he indeed IS an actual descendant of Agag and thus a hereditary Amalekite or that he was acting in the spirit of Amalek. In the end it doesn't really matter which one was the actual case.

Thus if we are paying attention, when we learn that Haman is an Agagite (an Amalekite) then we know that his very nature is to be against God's people, Israel. But even more, while all Hebrews would have been aware of this to one level or another, we find that those who are of the tribe of Benjamin, and especially of the royal line of King Saul, would have a special enmity towards Amalek (more specifically Agag), and Amalek towards Saul's family line, due to what we just read in 1 Samuel 15. So here in Esther the connection is established between Haman and Mordechai that will soon extend to all the Jewish people, and the connection is that of eternal enemies that only ends when one or the other of the two races is 100% wiped out.

And wouldn't you just know it, this Haman fellow was not only made part of King Xerxes' royal court, he was elevated to place of precedence over all the other of the king's officials. Thus, says verse 2, when the king's servants would appear at the King's Gate they would kneel and bow before Haman; but not Mordechai. He stubbornly refused, even knowing he was breaking the king's orders and all Persian protocol in refusing to acknowledge Haman's status. Notice once again that the meeting place is the King's Gate and that the people who were there were the king's servants and Mordechai. This rather cements my contention that the King's Gate was essentially off limits to all but the king's officials and servants and thus the presence of Mordechai indicates that he was indeed one of the king's officials or servants.

But why wouldn't Mordechai bow before Haman? Verse 4 says that the other of the king's servants were astonished that he wouldn't do so, and when they inquired why he wouldn't he explained that it was because he was a Jew.

Next week we'll see what this seeming personal matter between Mordechai and Haman escalates into, and talk more about what it was about being a Jew that caused Mordechai to refuse to show respect to Haman.