

“A Beauty Pageant”

INTRODUCTION: “After these things, when the anger of the King had subsided, he remembered Vashti ...”

1. So begins the second “pericope” or second scene of this Story of Esther.
2. **J. G. McConville**: *Ezra-Esther: DBS; p. 161*
 - a) *The story of Esther is a little like the plots of modern novels or films in which the reader/audience is slowly introduced to the characters, who appear at first to bear no relation to each other, but whose lives are ultimately interwoven in a complex way. The scene having been set in chapter 1, events might have unfolded in any number of ways. Their actual course is now determined by two coincidental circumstances.*
 - b) “After these things ...” How long after chapter 1?
 - c) Answer: Quite a while actually: 4 years!
 - d) Chapter one: 483 B.C. ... Chapter 2: 478 B.C.
 - e) and quite a lot happened in those five years.
3. Xerxes was a *deeply religious* man, and a follower of the Persian prophet **Zarathushtra**, also known as **Zoroaster**.
 - a) *Zarathushtra* means “with golden camels.”
 - b) He was a contemporary of **Cyrus the Great**
 - c) His teachings developed into *Zoroasterianism*, the major religion of ancient Persia.
 - d) He believed in *one god*: **Ahura-mazdah**
 - (1) “Wise Lord”
 - (2) official head of the Persian national pantheon of gods
 - e) **Zoroaster** believed in free will; the judgment of the soul after death, heaven and hell, a resurrection of the body reuniting with the soul for eternity, a last judgment and a Paradise that lasted for eternity.
 - f) He opposed *polytheism*, the use of hallucinogenic Haoma plant in rituals, animal sacrifices and the ornate, overly-ritualized pagan religions. He rejected the worship of the *daevas*.
 - (1) *daevas*: “true gods”; the other major gods of the pantheon who became evil.
 - (2) *daevas* were “demons” (bad/evil spirits)
 - (3) **A. T. Olmstead**: *History of the Persian Empire; p. 96-98*
A century before, Ariyaramnes had presented Ahuramazda as one god among many, but to Zoroaster he was sole God. Other divinities from dim Indo-European times – the sun-god Mithra, for example – might be cherished by

kings and people, but to Zoroaster these daevas were no gods but demons worshiped by the followers of the Lie. Ahura-Mazdah was in no need of minor divinities over whom to rule as divine king.

Ahura-Mazdah, clothed with the firmly fixed heaven, is sole God, but in eternal struggle with him is the Evil Spirit. From the beginning, there were twin spirits, the Better and the Bad. They established Life and Not-Life, the Worst Existence for the companions of the Lie, Best Dwelling for the follower of Righteousness. The daevas also took counsel together; delusion came upon them; they chose Worst Thought and together rushed to Frenzy, by whom they sicken the life of mortals. But to man came the Kingdom, Good Thought, and Righteousness; Piety gave continued existence and indestructibly of body, that at the Last Judgment he may have precedence. Man has free will; each must decide for himself before the Great Consummation.

The daevas are all offspring of Bad Thought, the Lie and Pride, long known for their deeds in the seventh region of earth, the abode of man. Men who do the worst are called pleasing to the daevas, who have defrauded man of Good Life and Immortality, taught by Evil Spirit, Bad Thought, and Bad Word to ruin mankind.

- g) **Zarathushtra** (Zoroaster) was trained for the priesthood, beginning at the age of seven, and became a priest at the age of 15 or 16. At the age of 30 he received a *revelation* from the god *Ahuramazda*, in a vision. He wrote about that moment in these words:

*As the Holy One then I acknowledged thee Mazda-Ahura,
When at life's birth I first beheld thee,
When thou didst make deeds and words or reward,
Evil for Evil, a good Destiny for the good,
Through thy wisdom at earth's last turning-point,
Thus, Ahura, Zarathustra chooses for himself,
Mazdah, whatever Spirit of thine is Holiest,
May Righteousness be incarnate, mighty in life's strength,
May Piety be in the Kingdom that beholds the sun,
With Good Thought may he assign Destiny to men for their deeds.*

- h) **Zoroaster** converted *Vishtaspa*, a Persian ruler and his queen *Huatoasa*. They sponsored, supported and protected Zarathustra until he died at the age of 77.
- i) He was married to three wives.

4. **Please Note:** *Zoroaster's* beliefs, practices and personal life with multiple wives greatly influenced a young Arabian man named *Muhammad*, some 1,200 years later. Muhammad even adopted his "testimony" of a visionary revelation from *Allah* (God). Zoroastrianism has greatly shaped Islam.
5. As a young crown-prince, **Xerxes** (*Ahasuerus*, *Esther 1:1*) became a devoted follower of the god *Ahuramazdah* and the teachings of *Zoroaster*.
6. **A. T. Olmstead** explains King Xerxes' devotion to *Ahuramazdah* in these words (*History of the Persian Empire*; p. 232):

Xerxes goes on to tell us that “within these lands was a place where formerly the daevas were worshiped. Afterward by the favor of Ahuramazda I destroyed that community of daevas and proclaimed, “The daevas you shall not worship. Where formerly the daevas were worshiped, there I worshiped Ahuramazda and the holy Arta.”

“And there was other business which was done ill; that I made good. That which I did, all I did by the favor of Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda brought me aid until I had finished the work.”

Xerxes urges his successor to accept his own form of personal religion with its stress on holy Arta: “You who shall be hereafter, if you shall think: ‘May I be happy while living and when dead may I be blest,’ have respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established” – the law which Ahuramazda had revealed to his father Darius. “Worship Ahuramazda and the holy Arta. The man who has respect for that holy law which Ahuramazda has established, and for the holy Arta, shall be happy while living and blessed when dead.”

7. Although he did not *want* to do so, Xerxes believed that his god *Ahuramazdah* spoke to him in a series of 3 dreams, telling him to invade and recapture the mainland of Greece.
 - a) He had successfully recaptured a rebellious Egypt in the first year of his reign.
 - b) Reclaimed a Babylon in revolt, and the dismantling for good of the last vestiges of the Babylonian state.
 - c) And, after almost 3 years of preparation, sets off in 481 B.C. to conquer all of Greece.
8. Xerxes was 35 years old at the end of Esther chapter one.
9. Xerxes *was truly* a powerful king, and able leader and a good general. his army was *massive*: over 200,000 troops in all!
10. He built the Persian army into a powerful machine.
 - a) at the *core* of the army were the **Immortals**: Persian soldiers, 10,000 in number, with gold-decked uniforms, who were allowed to take their concubines and servants with them into campaigns.
 - b) **A. T. Olmstead**: *History of the Persian Empire*; p. 288

Each soldier stands stiffly; both hands, adorned with big drooping gold bracelets, firmly grasp a spear of cornel wood whose silver blade and silver pomegranate set hard on the toe prove that they are members of the Ten Thousand. Over the left arm is the uncased bow, and over the left shoulder is the quiver. An elaborate robe covers the whole body from neck to wrists and ankles, leaving only a glimpse of bare flesh above soft leather shoes which are buttoned or laced and which have high projecting tongue.
 - c) His expeditionary force included 6 armies, under 6 proven generals.
 - d) They set out from Persia in late 481 B.C. and marched to the shores of the Asia Minor, the Aegean Sea, and the Hellespont Straits.
 - e) **A. T. Olmstead**: *History*; p. 250

Seated upon a white stone throne on a hill near Abydos, Xerxes reviewed his troops. Incense was burned on the myrtle-strewn bridges, and at dawn the king poured libations

from a golden cup, prayed with his face toward the rising sun, and cast into the sea the cup, a bowl, and a sword.

- f) A huge bridge of ships tied together was built to cross the Hellespont Straits – It took the Persian Army 7 days and nights to cross over into Macedonia!
- g) **A. T. Olmstead:** *History; p. 251*
A second review was held at Doriscus. The Strymon was crossed by bridges, while Magi sacrificed white horses to the stream for good omen; at the Nine Ways nine children were sacrificed to the underworld gods.
- h) The Greeks and Macedonians fell back before the advancing Persians.
Victory appeared certain to the Persians. Not only did they control all the Greeks of Asia and Africa, whose ships were included in their navy, but already half the European Greeks had submitted.
- i) The Spartans attempted to stop the Persians at *Thermopylae*, where “The 300” delayed the Persians in a heroic act of self-sacrifice. The Persians prevailed.
- j) But a huge storm from the East destroyed hundreds of Persian warships, anchored off Cape Sepias.
- k) On September 22, 480 B.C., the Grand Fleet was ambushed by Greek ships at *Salamis*, and 200 Persian ships were sunk (the Greeks lost but 40 ships)
- l) But the Persian army pushed the Greeks back in a massive retreat; many Greek forces and cities surrendered.
- m) The army of Xerxes moved onto the Corinthian Isthmus, they occupied the City of Athens, and then marched north to the plains of *Platea*. Victory was near.
- n) The Persian General **Mardonius** (Xerxes’ chief general) was killed in the Battle of *Platea*, and the Persians were defeated.
- o) **A. T. Olmstead:** *History; p. 259*
Like earlier battles, Plataea also by itself was not decisive. Only one of the Persian armies had been engaged, and the second had not even entered the battle. Yet instead of throwing fresh troops upon the battle-weary allies and sweeping them rapidly to the southernmost tip of Peloponnese, Artabazus retired, and the war in Europe was lost. The reason was that he had heard news from Asia.
- p) In the Spring of 479 B.C., the Persian Fleet began to come apart because of desertions and lack of supplies.
- q) The Greek Alliance rebuilt their fleet, sailed to *Samos* and then attacked the anchored Persians and one Persian Army at *Mycale*.
- r) On August 29, 479 B.C., the Athenians broke through the Persian defenses and slaughtered the Imperial Army there – the Persian soldiers fighting to the last man.
- s) Two Persian armies were destroyed, a third was thus forced to retreat from Europe, and the remaining three were needed to cover the retreat of Xerxes’ forces back to Persia.

t) **A. T. Olmstead:** *History*; p. 261

Truly the Allies might say that the gods had fought for them; the war had been lost by the Persians through repeated military and diplomatic blunders and not won by timid, incompetent, or disloyal allied commanders. But, however won, victory it was, and a new phase of Perso-Greek relations was initiated.

11. Badly shaken, frustrated and humiliated **Xerxes** returned to Susa.

- a) Blamed for a failure that was *not* his fault
- b) Dismayed that *Ahuramazdah* had directed him to go to Greece for victory only to face defeat by the Greek gods!
- c) Discouraged over the decimation of his grand army by a smaller force, of lesser soldiers, led by incompetent Greek generals! How?
- d) And, on top of all this: *His personal life, with his wives and family, was in disarray!*

12. Xerxes had a lustful urge for numerous beautiful women. It got him in deep trouble! **A. T. Olmstead** explains: *History*; pp. 266-267

The fine promise of Xerxes' younger years had not been fulfilled. Failure of the European adventure opened the way to harem intrigues, with all their deadly consequences.

Masistes was soon to find himself in yet greater danger. While dallying at Sardis, Xerxes had fallen in love with his brother's wife. As a virtuous woman, she repulsed his attentions, whereupon the king married her daughter Artaynte to his eldest son Darius in hope that the mother would now be more amenable.

After the court returned to Susa, the fickle affections of Xerxes veered from mother to daughter, and Artaynte proved more compliant. Xerxes was tricked into giving the ill-fated girl the robe of state which Amestris had woven with her own royal hand. The queen was outraged and, blaming the mother for the trick, demanded the wife of Masistes at the New Year's feast when the king must grant every requested gift. The unfortunate woman was horribly mutilated; Masistes with his whole family fled toward Bactria, intending to raise a revolt, but, before he could reach his satrapy, he was overtaken and all were put to death.

More and more the character of Xerxes disintegrated. The enlarged but still crowded harem at Persepolis tells its own story.

13. *Queen Amestris* angry and estranged from Xerxes; Beautiful *Queen Vashti* exiled from court; family alienated from Xerxes because of intrigue, murder and infidelity; defeated in battle and losing his grip on the empire ...

14. Into the midst of this walks a lovely Hebrew girl named *Hadassah*, whom Xerxes would call *Esther*, after the Babylonian goddess *Ishtar* ("star")

- a) goddess of sex, love, fertility, power and war
- b) chief consort (wife) of the chief god (*Ahuramazda*)
- c) so ... a good name for the beloved wife of the King of Persia.

15. **J. G. McConville:** *Ezra-Esther: DBS*; p. 161

- a) *The opening scene (vv. 1-4) follows naturally enough from the disgrace of Vashti. The king's servants, ever watchful for some new idea that would please him, suggest a kind of beauty contest, whose winner – and the king would be the sole judge – would be queen. The servants thus cleverly facilitate an important affair of state and at the same time pander to the king's well-known interest in lovely women. (This latter characteristic is suggested not only by chapter 1 but also by non-biblical historical sources.)*
- b) Coincidental Event #1: Mordecai and Hadassah living in Susa!
- c) Coincidental Event #2: Mordecai's work in the palace and his saving of Xerxes' life!

I. THE PERSIAN BEAUTY CONTEST (Esther 2:1-4)

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so. (Esther 2:1-4)

1. In what commentator **David Firth** calls "the quest for Miss Persia," the story of Esther unfolds.
2. One characteristic of King Xerxes – in both the Book of Esther and secular historical records – is that he seldom makes big decisions without the input of his advisors. He is an easily influenced man, often lacking his own power of decision making.
3. It is 478 B.C. and the King has been home for 6 months or more after his disastrous Greek campaign ...
 - a) moping, brooding, second-guessing himself
 - b) He needs a *pick-me-up*,
 - c) and his advisors know just the thing: *A New Beautiful Wife*
 - d) to replace exiled *Vashti* and estranged *Amestris*.
4. It amounted to a "*girl-a-thon*" – assembling hundreds of "*beautiful young virgins*"
 - a) i.e., young women between the start of puberty to around age 20 (for by age 20 most girls were married)
 - b) How many? We don't know but I suggest between 127-250, or so. Why that number?
 - (1) *Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, (Esther 1:1)*
 - (2) *And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. (Esther 2:3)*
 - (3) Perhaps a "Miss Province" pageant in all the provinces.
 - (4) One or two beauties from each province = 127-254
 - (5) **Josephus** said there were 400 girls.

- c) *“Let the King appoint officials in all the provinces = men to run the beauty search/ pageant*
5. Let them be *sought* and *gathered* to Susa. There is **no** evidence that this was a random plundering of all the pretty girls in Persia.
- a) First of all, Persian royalty wouldn't marry as queen just any commoner, even if she was gorgeous.
 - b) The *search* is not a “man-hunt” (woman-hunt) but a careful selection of socially and sexually appropriate girls.
 - c) **Anthony Tomasino:** *Esther: EEC; pp. 35-36*
Esther was gathered with the other young women. She is “taken” into the house of women but there is no implication she was forced to go against her will. Mordecai will later state the Esther “attained” the royal station (4:14), perhaps implying that she had actively pursued the position. Nonetheless, there is a sense at this point of the narrative that she is being “acted upon,” rather than acting.
 - d) **Notice:** Mordecai deliberately orders her to conceal her Jewish identity from everyone!
 - e) Why? Most likely only *100% Persian* girls were “eligible” for the pageant.
6. **The Question:** *Should Esther have allowed herself to be put into such an ungodly pageant?*
- a) Answer: No! For **Five good reasons**.
 - b) First: Esther could not hide behind *submission* to her adoptive cousin, Mordecai. Women, children, men need never submit to sinful orders.
 - c) Second: Esther knew it was a sin for a Jewess to marry an unconverted and uncircumcised Gentile.
 - d) Third: Sleeping with a man, without being married to him was undeniable ...
 - (1) adultery, if he had a wife (or more) already,
 - (2) fornication, if he was unmarried,
 - (3) prostitution, if the woman did so for financial gain.
 - e) Fourth: *polygamy* was not God's will. And by this point in Hebrew history was a forbidden practice.
 - f) Fifth: As Queen Esther may well have been required to pledge allegiance to and worship Xerxes' gods.

7. Then why does Mordecai encourage the plan and Hadassah agree?

8. The next paragraph may give us a hint ...

II. THE LOSS OF HEBREW FAITH (Esther 2:5-7)

Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman

had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. (Esther 2:5-7)

1. The two heroes of the story now emerge *Mordecai* and *Esther*.
2. *Mordecai* was a fourth-generation Jewish **expatriate**.
 - a) *Kish, the Benjamite* had been carried off with the Babylonians exile of 595 B.C.
 - (1) *who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. (Esther 2:6)*
 - (2) *Jeconiah = Coniah = Jehoiachin*
 - (3) *Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father had done. At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to the city while his servants were besieging it, and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign and carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as the Lord had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land. And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon. The king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, 7,000, and the craftsmen and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war. And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah. (2 Kings 24:8-17)*
 - (4) *i.e., in 595 B.C.*
 - b) *Mordecai's family had been in Babylonian/ Persian exile for about 117 years (from 595 B.C.- 478 B.C.)*
 - c) *56 years under Babylon; 61 years under Persia*
 - d) *Mordecai was more Persian than he was Hebrew!*
 - e) **Most Importantly:** *Mordecai was Jewish "upper-class," and a Persian court official!*
3. *Hadassah* was his first cousin. She had been orphaned and was being reared by *Mordecai* (?Adopted?) She was reared in the palace precincts among the upper crust of Susa.
4. *Hadassah* was a beauty of a woman – shapely and pretty of face.

- a) *He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. (Esther 2:7)*
- b) *Hadassah* means “myrtle;” a lovely flowering tree in Palestine; a Jewish name.
- c) *Esther* (Aster; Ishtar) means *star*; a Persian name.
- d) *beautiful in form*: shapely, feminine, sexually appealing
- e) *good of appearance*: good looking; a pretty face
- f) Esther, to be blunt, was a “knockout”

5. **But ... I suggest:** Neither Mordecai nor Esther were, as yet, spiritually mature or as committed to God as they should have been. They chose *not* to return to Jerusalem; they liked living in a pagan society; they lived among a large contingent of expatriated Jews involved in commerce and government work in Susa; and they were *syncretistic* in their Hebrew Faith.
6. They were **not yet** “great saints.” (And are, interestingly *not* explicitly mentioned in Hebrews 11’s “Hall of Faith”!)

III. THE LOWERING OF BIBLICAL ETHICS (Esther 2:8-11)

So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. (Esther 2:8-11)

1. Here is the condemning statement:
 - a) *Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. (Esther 2:10)*
 - b) Esther would **not** have been harmed if she’s said, “*I am a Jewess and I can’t be the King’s concubine.*”
 - c) Xerxes was a man of *religious tolerance*. Esther simply would not have been selected for the contest.

2. **Timothy Laniah:** *Esther*; p. 204

The beautiful young virgins were corralled to begin preparing for a night with the king. Apparently while the king was anxious to find a more compliant replacement queen, he also wanted one who was at least as attractive. Before Xerxes would see any of the candidates, they had to spend twelve months enhancing their appearance with special beauty treatments.

3. This was *more* than a beauty contest. It was a *base* contest of sexuality and a *brutal* treatment of women. The commentators will not allow us to sanitize the history ...
 - a) **Mervin Breneman:** *Ezra-Esther: NAC*; p. 314

Though this sounds like a beauty contest, it was not a very happy assignment for most of the women. They were uprooted from their communities, which implied confinement to the king's harem, and moved to what would actually be perpetual widowhood. Like the gardens and the banquet hall, Xerxes had great appreciation for beautiful things. Unfortunately, "things" are exactly what Xerxes thought women were. The Oriental kings caused much suffering among many people in satisfying their personal desires. Similar oppression still occurs today, although the means of carrying it out are sometimes so indirect (e.g., economic) that few notice the injustice.

- b) A Brutal way to treat women ...
- c) ... even if she gets to be "queen for a day"!

4. Mordecai realizes how dangerous this process can be – both morally/ spiritually and emotionally/ physically ...

And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. (Esther 2:11)

IV. THE COMPROMISE OF A YOUNG WOMAN'S SOUL (Esther 2:12-15)

Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women— when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. (Esther 2:12-15)

1. Esther found favor (*from God*) and in the eyes of the chief counselor **Hegai**. He coached her, moved her to "the front of the line," and gave her personal attention ...
 - a) Hegai perceived that Xerxes would like Esther most of all.
 - b) He was right.
2. In the process, Esther does not keep a *Kosher diet*. She eats, wears, conditions herself in any way she is advised.
3. **It appears plain** to me that Esther truly wanted to win this contest.
 - a) She moved to the *King's palace* (the Royal house)
 - b) If she was not chosen, she'd spend the rest of her life as a practical widow in the King's *harem*.
 - c) unless summoned by the king for sex. She'd become a *concubine*
 - d) ... unable to be with another man for life!

(1) *In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the*

concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. (Esther 2:14)

- (2) *First Harem*: the new girls who were potential queens,
- (3) *Second Harem*: the used girls who were the concubines.

4. **Anthony Tomasino**: *Esther: EEC; p. 186*

All the women gathered were now, essentially, either wives or concubines of the king. They might have sexual relations with him only once – on the night when they were brought into his presence – but they were not to have sexual relations with any other man. The arrangement might well offend our modern sense of morality, but it was legal under ancient custom. The fact was, the king was taking all the most beautiful women from the entire empire, spending only a single night with most of them, and then sequestering them away from the company of men. What a waste!

5. Esther senses that “momentum” was on her side ...

- a) *When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. (Esther 2:15)*
- b) She was **not** trusting in God’s favor, but in Hegai’s, Shaashgaz’s and (hopefully) Xerxes’ favor!

6. And Mordecai’s strategy, Hegai’s coaching, and Esther’s beauty win the day: She takes only herself into the dinner date with the King, sleeps with him, charms him, and *wins the pageant!*

V. THE RISE OF A NEW QUEEN (Esther 2:16-18)

And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity. (Esther 2:16-18)

- 1. Xerxes returned from his disastrous Greek campaign in September, 479 (according to the ancient Greek historian **Herodotus**).
- 2. In December, 479 (*the tenth month which is the month of Tebeth*) Esther becomes queen.
- 3. The year-long contest is cut short: Esther wins the crown after a mere 3 months ... about 100 days!
- 4. Xerxes “falls in love” with young Esther –
 - a) *the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (Esther 2:17)*
 - b) Xerxes may have “*delighted*” in many of the girls (v. 14)
 - c) But Xerxes “*loved*” Esther: he felt a strong emotional bond with her,
 - d) enough to fill the vacuum *Vashti* left 4 years earlier.

5. Xerxes' love for Esther will manifest itself time and again in this story.
6. Look at verse 18 ...
 - a) *Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity. (Esther 2:18)*
 - b) Xerxes puts on another *royal banquet* (feast)
 - c) But this time there is no "his feast" and "her feast"
 - d) There is but one Royal Banquet = "*it was Esther's feast*"
7. Xerxes remitted *taxes* in Esther's honor and gave *royal gifts* to other noblemen in Esther's name.
8. Esther was *already* beginning to leave her mark on Persia.
9. But ... Xerxes does not yet know that he has as his wife a *Jewess!*

Conclusion: There is a literary device, used in Biblical writings known as *the divine passive* ...

1. This writing technique allowed an author to refer to God's activity without direct mention of Him.
2. God is "hidden" behind the language of chance, events, even "fate."
3. Passive phrases surround the story of Mordecai and Esther. One of the most notable is this one: "*Esther found favor with ...*"
4. i.e., really: *God showed favor to Esther ... God smiled upon Esther ... God remembered Esther ... God blessed Esther ... God used Esther.*
5. **David G. Firth:** "... in the midst of this, the favour Esther finds points to a greater purpose being worked out" (*Esther: BST: p. 53*)
6. **The Providence of God**
7. Here is the first great lesson behind this Book of God which never mentions the name of God: *The Providence of God works according to God's purposes and not according to our worthiness.*
8. We simply *cannot* know all the answers to our questions about Esther –
 - a) Was she forced to enter this beauty contest? Was she essentially kidnapped?
 - b) Did she want to be queen or was she afraid to tell Hegai she was Jewish?
 - c) What conversation did Xerxes and Esther have over dinner that night? Did they talk about *Ahuramazdah* and *Yahweh*? Or did she just listen to a man unload his heart to a beautiful woman?
 - d) How deep was Esther's faith? How orthodox her upbringing? How clear was her conscience?
 - e) ... and a dozen other key questions.
9. *We don't know; We will never know, in this life.* But we **do** know this: Esther found favor with King Xerxes because the favor of God was upon her.
10. This happened to Jews in Susa, in the King's Court. Even in the family of Esther.

11. About 35 years later, a cup-bearer to King *Artaxerxes*, the son of *Xerxes* and *Amestris*, experienced that same divine favor:

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. (Neh. 2:1-4)

And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. (Neh. 2:7-8)

12. **God's providence is rooted in His purposes and tied to the merits of his Son, Jesus Christ. God is good to people – even when they are less than faithful to Him – because His greater purpose outweighs our actions.**

*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.
All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your saints shall bless you!
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,
to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
(Ps. 145:8-12)*

13. And we **do** know that greater purpose: His plan to give to His Son this world and a redeemed people in that world!

*I will tell of the decree:
The Lord said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession. (Ps. 2:7-8)*

*The Lord says to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool."
The Lord sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies! (Ps. 110:1-2)*

14. And Esther ... and Persia, and you and me and America, are part of those people given to God's Son ... *for Jesus has found favor with God!*

