

Notes on Esther 2

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B. Esther Is Chosen as Queen – Chap. 2

The decision to choose a new queen – 2:1-4

Verses 1-4

1. What plan did the king's servants suggest for replacing Vashti?

The king remembers Vashti's conduct

After some time had passed since the banishment of Vashti, King Ahasuerus thought further about her actions and the decree that had been made against her. That decree had declared that her royal estate as queen would be given to someone else (1:19), but to this date no one had been chosen as queen.

A plan for choosing a replacement

Some of the king's servants suggested a plan. They suggested that the kingdom be canvassed for beautiful young maidens. Officers in all the provinces would seek out maidens and bring them to the palace in Shushan. There they would be placed in the house of the women – the harem such as were kept by most kings (cf. Solomon).

These women were apparently to become wives and/or concubines of the king. They would be put in the keeping of a eunuch named Hegai, custodian of the women. They would then be given "beauty preparations" (cf. vv 9,12) followed by an opportunity to please the king. The one who pleased him best would be chosen queen in Vashti's place. So a selection would be made from among the young maidens in the harem to find one of the group to be queen.

This plan satisfied the king, so he decreed that it be so done.

Introduction to Mordecai and Esther – 2:5-7

Verses 5,6

2. Who was Mordecai? How had his family come to be in Persia?

Introduction to Mordecai

The record now introduces the hero and heroine of the story. Mordecai was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. Some of his lineage is given, and we are told that he was in Shushan the palace, though his exact responsibility there is never made clear.

Mordecai was a captive among the Jews during the days following the time in which Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away as captives Jeconiah, king of Judah, and other Jews. See 2 Kings 24:6-17; 2 Chronicles 36:10,20; Jer. 24:1. It is uncertain, from the reading, exactly who v6 refers to as having been taken captive. It could refer to Mordecai's great grandfather Kish, the last named person in the previous verse (as in the NKJV). Or it could refer to Mordecai himself (cf. NKJV footnote). Keil points out that it had been some 120 years since the beginning of the captivity. Babylon had since been overthrown by Persia, and several Persian kings had come and gone. It is unlikely that Mordecai was this old, especially if he had a cousin as young as Esther. Keil suggests that perhaps Mordecai was not born when his ancestors were carried captive, but it was still proper to speak this way since his ancestors were taken captive and he was born as their offspring in captivity.

Verse 7

3. What was Esther's other name? What was her connection to Mordecai?
4. Application: According to the Bible, who has the primary responsibility to care for needy people (such as widows and orphans)? Give **b/c/v**. What can we learn from Mordecai's example?

Introduction to Esther

Mordecai had a young cousin named Hadasseh (Chaldee meaning "myrtle") or Esther (Persian meaning "a star"). She was Mordecai's uncle's daughter, therefore Mordecai's cousin. But she had no living father or mother (v15 says her father was named Abihail). When her parents had died, Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter and raised her (see also on v15). She was fair and beautiful.

Lessons about caring for needy relatives

Note here an admirable quality in Mordecai. He was willing to make the effort to care for a relative in time of need. This is exactly what 1 Timothy 5 teaches Christians to do. If people today would recognize their individual responsibility to care for needy relatives, as Mordecai had done, we could solve much of the "widow and orphan" problem.

Note that Esther was a true orphan – she had neither mother nor father. Had her parents been living, they would have been responsible to care for her. But at their death she became the responsibility of a relative to individually provide for. This is God's way and is best for all involved. Today the church should care only for saints who have no relatives (in the church) to care for them. And then the church should oversee the work, rather than sending the needy person and/or a financial contribution to an institution (Acts 6; 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3; 1 Timothy 5).

For further information, see our article about church organization and work at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Esther chosen for the harem – 2:8-11

Verses 8,9

5. Describe how Esther came to be chosen as a candidate to replace Vashti. What was done for her then?

Esther pleases the custodian of women

When the decree was issued to bring fair maidens into the king's harem, Esther was among those chosen. Whether or not she had any choice in this selection is not stated.

She was placed under the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women, who was especially pleased with her. He quickly gave her the beauty preparations to prepare her to go before the king (v12). Seven maidens were chosen to attend her, and she was moved into the best place of the house of women. Apparently there were various degrees of honor among the women of the harem, and from the beginning Esther was given a favored standing.

Verse 10,11

6. Who knew Esther's ancestry? Why?

Mordecai's care for Esther

To this point Esther had not revealed to anyone in the palace that she was Jewish. Presumably this would have hindered her chances of being selected as queen. So Mordecai had warned her not to speak about her nationality, and she obeyed him (cf. v20). This shows that Esther and Mordecai were attempting to have her chosen queen; if not, they could have easily eliminated her selection by revealing her nationality.

Mordecai apparently had access at least to the courtyard of the house of women. This appears to have been the consequence of his position, whatever it was. It would not have been be-

cause of his relationship to Esther, for had that been revealed it would have identified her as a Jew (we will see that Mordecai was known to be a Jew).

So Mordecai went everyday to pace in front of the court of the women's quarters. There he sought to learn about Esther's well being, though we are not told exactly how they communicated.

Description of the means of selecting a queen – 2:12-14

Verse 12-14

7. Describe how each young woman would visit the king?

These verses describe how a queen would be selected from among the young maidens.

The preparation

Each young woman was given twelve months to prepare before going in to see the king. She would receive six months' treatment with oil of myrrh followed by six months' treatment with perfumes and other preparations. The details are not stated except that this was a procedure every woman went through to beautify her to meet the king. Remember, this was the king of the greatest empire on earth!

The meeting with the king

After a woman had completed her preparation, she would be appointed an evening to spend with the king. She could have anything she wanted to take with her to attempt to impress the king. No doubt many would choose special clothing, jewels, or other ornaments.

When a virgin's turn came, she would go to the king in the evening, then after she returned in the morning she would go to a second house. The first house was for women being prepared for their first visit with the king. This second house was for women in the harem who had already seen the king at least once. It was under the custody of a different chamberlain named Shaashgaz.

A woman in this second house could go to visit the king again only if he called for her by name. Apparently in the meantime they would simply live there as part of the harem. In this way the king could have more than one visit with a woman, either to get to know her better in his choice of a queen, or just to enjoy her. Doubtless even after a queen was selected, the king could still choose to spend any given night with any woman in his harem of his choosing.

Esther chosen as queen – 2:15-18

Verses 15-18

8. What happened when Esther's turn came? What was the end result?

9. Special Assignment: Compare Old Testament teaching about divorce and remarriage to New Testament teaching. Why was Esther allowed to marry a divorced man who had other wives? In light of Ezra 9,10, etc., why was she allowed to marry one who was not a Jew?

Esther's turn to visit the king

Esther's turn to visit the king came in the seventh year of his reign in the tenth month (named Tebeth). This would have been four years after Vashti was deposed (cf. 1:3).

When Esther's turn came to go before the king (we are here told her father's name was Abihail), she did not ask for anything special to take with her. She took only the things that Hegai the custodian advised her to take. Yet her beauty and charm were such that she obtained favor of all who saw her even without special aids.

Esther chosen

Esther so impressed Ahasuerus that she obtained grace and favor before him above all the other maidens. He loved her above all the other women and determined to make her queen and set the crown upon her head in place of Vashti.

To celebrate the crowning of the new queen, the king held a great feast for his officials and servants in her honor. He proclaimed a holiday and gave gifts to the people.

Notes about Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus:

1) We may ask whether it was proper for Esther to marry a divorced man. But we must remember this occurred under the Old Testament, in which God tolerated divorce and remarriage as well as plural wives. Consider the cases of David and Solomon, and compare Matt. 19:3-9; 5:31,32; etc. Jesus explained that the Mosaic Law tolerated such conduct because of the hardness of the people's hearts, though it was not what God had originally intended.

Today, however, a marriage like that of Esther to Ahasuerus would be adultery, since Jesus' teaching returned to God's original marriage law of one man for one woman for life (except if one divorces a spouse for fornication). If one divorces for any other cause and remarries, the remarriage is adultery (see also Rom. 7:2,3).

For further information, see our articles about divorce and remarriage at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

2) We may also wonder why a Jew was permitted to marry a non-Jew in light of the passages forbidding intermarriage to people of other nations under the law. This had been a great concern in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. See Nehemiah 9:30; 13:23-27; Ezra 9 & 10; Deut. 7:1-5; Josh. 23:12,13; etc. (and see other references and notes on the passages in Ezra and Nehemiah).

Some may wonder if this case was justified as an exception in that God intended to use Esther to save the Jews. But how would Mordecai and Esther know this at the time of the marriage? Should such "end justifies the means" be accepted?

The proper explanation appears to be that the Old Testament prohibited inter-marriage, not with people of all other nations, but only with people of the nations that had dwelt in and around Canaan. Those nations were known to be excessively idolatrous. God cast them out of the land and gave it to Israel because the iniquity of those nations was "full." They surrounded Israel and so would be a continual temptation to them. These reasons did not apply to other nations, and the prohibition is nowhere stated regarding them.

Mordecai saves the king's life – 2:19-23

Verses 19-23

10. Who were Bigtha and Teresh? What did they try to do?
11. How was their plot uncovered? What was the result?

We are told that the event here recorded took place "when virgins were gathered a second time." Esther was queen at the time (v22), so this was after the first time that young maidens were gathered to find a queen and Esther had been chosen. Keil concludes there must have been a later time, after Esther was chosen, when maidens were gathered, not to choose a queen, but simply to increase the king's harem.

At this time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Again it is unclear what his position was that kept him there, whether business or government affairs, we are not told.

Again v20 reminds us that Esther still had not made known her nationality. Mordecai had told her to not do this, and she obeyed him even as she had when he was bringing her up. This fact becomes significant in the subsequent story.

The plot

Somehow, as he was about his business at the gate, Mordecai learned of a plot by two eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, who intended to kill the king. They were doorkeepers, so in some sense they were responsible to guard the doors. They became very angry at the king and sought to lay hands on him.

Mordecai learned of the plot and revealed it to Esther. She in turn warned the king, giving Mordecai credit as her source of information (she could do this without revealing her relationship to him).

The accusation against these men was investigated and determined to be true. The men were then hung on a gallows, and the king's life was spared. All this was then recorded in the chronicles, the official record of royal history.

This event also reveals the admirable character of Mordecai. The story may seem to be told here just for the sake of interest, but we will later learn that this record in the chronicles plays a major role in the subsequent story.

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