

Lesson 15

Last week when we ended we were discussing Esther 1:10-12.

As we struggle to come up with a motivation for Vashti's refusal to appear before the king, we should step back and ask a broader question – why aren't we given her motivation? Why is the text silent on that key question? Anyone reading Chapter 1 would naturally be puzzled by her response and would wonder why she did what she did. Why doesn't the Bible tell us? The book of Esther certainly provides motivations elsewhere – why not here?

The book of Esther is a textbook on divine providence. It shows us how God's providence works. And what we find is that God's providence works in part through human behavior, and we see here that that behavior can flow from even the most ambiguous and confused of motives. One seemingly insignificant event leads to another in the opening chapters of Esther, and in that mysterious chain of human actions the promise of the covenant made long before between God and his people is upheld and fulfilled.

It is telling that the book of Esther does not begin with Mordecai or Esther. It does not begin by retelling the history of the Jews. It begins instead with the Persian king Xerxes, who neither knew nor worshiped God. A completely pagan king decides for purely worldly reasons to give a banquet. On the last day of the banquet, he decides to treat the men of his empire to a good look at his beautiful Queen Vashti. She decides not to obey him. He decides. He decides. She decides. With these decisions, they set in motion a chain of events that takes on a life of its own. Why? Because God used that chain of events to bring about good things for his own people.

Why aren't we told their motivations? Because Vashti's motivations are irrelevant. Because Xerxes' motivations are irrelevant. Was Vashti courageous? Was Vashti modest? Was the king cruel? It matters not. God would use their decisions and their actions to bring about good things for his people.

The events in the book of Esther provide an example of the promise in Romans 8:28 – “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

We often talk about God opening doors for us, but it is interesting to think that we also open doors for God. We have free will, so we can decide to open door A or open door B. Whichever door we choose, for good or evil, God can turn it into something good.

Isn't that exactly what happened with Joseph's brothers? Genesis 50:20 – “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” They made an evil choice, but God turned it into something good for his people. Their evil choice opened a door for God to do something wonderful. Had that door not been opened, God would have used something else or someone else to accomplish his plans, but that particular open door allowed God to use Joseph for that purpose.

If the choices we make can open doors for God, is the opposite true? Can the choices we make

somehow limit God? Perhaps. And the evidence for that answer is Psalm 78:41 – “Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.”

The Hebrew word translated “limited” in the KJV is translated “provoked” or “troubled” by other translations. The Hebrew word means making a mark to delineate or to set a mark for a limit or a boundary. In short, they placed a mark on God. It could be that the verse just means that in their arrogance they were trying to place a limit on God. But it could also mean that they were in fact limiting God by their evil choices.

How can that be? How can God be limited? Well, for starters, if there is any limit on God, we know it came from God himself. God is all powerful, and he could do with us whatever he wanted if that was his will. But we know that is not his will. God has given us free will, which means he has limited himself with regard to us. And so, in that sense, we can limit God when we make decisions and free will choices.

Our action, or more likely our inaction, can cause God to accomplish his plans using someone else. In that sense God is limited only in that he cannot use us as he would like to use us. Yes, God is all powerful, but God has chosen to give us free will, and he will not override that free will. God is not willing that any should perish, and yet most will perish. Why? Because of their own choices. God wants to give them eternal life, and yet they refuse it. They have limited God by their own free will decisions. I think that view fits well with the context of Psalm 78:41 – they limited God by turning back. The limit in Psalm 78:41 is tied to their free will choice of turning back.

Does that mean God could not use them at all? No. God uses the righteous and the unrighteous to accomplish his plans. You can read in Romans about how God used Pharaoh to free his people and how he used the unbelieving Jews to bless the entire world. If we limit God in one way by some choice we have made, God will find some other way to use us.

Was Esther free to choose whether to stand up for her people or not? Yes. Would Esther have played the role she did in history had she kept her seat? No. Would God have allowed his people to be wiped out? No. God would have used someone else to save his people from destruction.

As for Vashti, whatever her motivation, her refusal certainly seems to have been a courageous action (some might say foolhardy), and she paid the price for that courage. She defied her king and her husband in public. It seems that she was willing to give up her status and power for some reason, perhaps to preserve her modesty, but we don't know for sure. We will see a courageous action by Queen Esther in Chapter 5, and again we will ask about her motivation.

We see a very subtle message in these verses – this all-powerful king was not in charge! We see very early in this book an answer to the questions, “Who is really in charge? And who should be obeyed, and at what cost?” These verses are doing more than just providing an explanation for why Esther would enter the scene. These verses are also showing us a glimpse of a central question in this book. Who is really in charge? Could it be that the one who is really in charge is not even named anywhere in this book of Esther?

Verse 12 tells us that King Xerxes became enraged. One reason for his great wrath was no doubt because the refusal had occurred in front of his officers and nobles. He needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey

him! We see in these opening verses the inner weakness of what was outwardly the most powerful empire on earth.

One reason Vashti's decision took such courage was that she no doubt knew what kind of man Xerxes was. History records a number of events attesting to Xerxes' instability, not the least of which involved his punishment of the ocean. That strange event is described as follows in a 1913 text by Ellis and Horne:

“Darius was ... succeeded by his son Xerxes, under whom the war with Greece was carried to a disastrous climax. Xerxes was accounted the handsomest man of his time, but proved also the most feeble; he was as idle and foolish as his father had been active and wise. Inexperienced in warfare, Xerxes planned an expedition of numbers so vast that he expected them completely to overwhelm the rebellious Greeks. It was not easy for a Persian army to travel all the way to far-off Greece, and Xerxes was weary of the march before it was well begun. When at length his forces reached the strait which separates Asia from Europe, a bridge of ships was built from shore to shore. A storm swept this away, and Xerxes showed his petty wrath by commanding his soldiers to give the sea three hundred lashes with whips, as if it had been a human slave. He also had a set of fetters thrown into the water as a symbol of its bondage to him. After this punishment, though possibly not because of it, the sea behaved better; the bridge of ships held firm, and Xerxes entered Europe.”

Herodotus tells us that Xerxes once beheaded the men building a bridge during his Greek campaign simply because a storm delayed its completion. This was the person whom Vashti openly defied and embarrassed!

As I mentioned in our introduction, while we often view Vashti as noble and heroic, that is not the case with all commentators. Many ancient Jewish and Christian sources villainize Vashti as a wicked and rebellious woman for refusing to obey her husband. Even Martin Luther used Vashti as a negative example in his writings about divorce, urging husbands in some situations to “take an Esther and let Vashti go.” (We will have more to say about divorce when we get back to Ezra!)

Esther 1:13-15

13 Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment: 14 And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom;) 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

In verses 13-15, the King discusses what happened with his counselors. It was customary for a Persian king to have such counselors, and it was also customary to sometimes have them killed when they angered him – as Darius II and Cambyses are both known to have done.

That they “saw the king's face” means that these seven had special access to the king. Herodotus described them this way: “any of the seven [may] enter the palace unannounced, except when the king was in bed with a woman” (3.84). These seven were highest in the kingdom (the verse tells

us that they “sat first in the kingdom”). That description was likely literal as well as figurative – they likely always sat next to the king at state occasions or banquets, as they seem to have been doing at this banquet. Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the king’s seven counselors.

Verse 13 says that they knew the times, which means they used astrology and other forms of divination. Again, we have the question in verse 13, “Who is really in charge?” Is it fate? Is it luck? Is what happens to us determined by the stars? Or is there a greater power involved? – the one who created those stars!

What can we say about the names in verse 14? “Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan?” One of them has a speaking role in verse 16, but the others do not. Why are we given their names? (We were also given the names of the seven eunuchs in verse 10.) First and foremost, as we also said for verse 10, having these specific names certainly adds to the historical nature of the text. The first name, Carshena, has been found at Persepolis in the Fortification Tablets.

All of the names seem to be Persian, and that may suggest a second reason why we are given the list of names. One commentator suggests that the very sound of these foreign names would have been “ludicrous to Hebrew ears,” and so the list may have been given to add to the “impression of a dumb chorus” advising the king. There is certainly an aspect of humor and mockery here when it comes to great king Xerxes, as we will continue to see as the chapter continues.

In verse 15, the king asks these seven counselors what he should do with the rebellious Queen Vashti.

Esther 1:16-18

16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. 17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. 18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king’s princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

Verses 16-18 describe the seriousness of Vashti’s offense against the king – Memucan, one of the king’s seven close advisors, explains that it was an offense not just against the king but also against all husbands. When the word gets out about what Vashti has done, it will cause other wives to “despise their husbands in their eyes.” This answer was very clever because it relieved the king from a charge that he was acting out of personal animosity or capriciousness. He was acting on behalf of husbands everywhere! What could be more noble!

Memucan has elevated the king’s marital problem into a national crisis! And the Rabbis, as they so often did, had an additional explanation for Memucan’s plan. According to rabbinic tradition, Memucan had been having problems with his own disobedient wife at home, and he saw this event

as an opportunity to bring her into line!

Esther 1:19-22

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small. 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan: 22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.

Verses 19-22 describe the Queen's punishment and the King's decree. For her punishment, Vashti would lose her royal position and never again be allowed to come before the king. Verse 19 says that in her place would be put someone who "is better than she." Notice that for the first time in the book, Queen Vashti is referred to simply as "Vashti" in verse 19. She has experienced a big reversal!

The irrevocability of the king's command in verse 19 is also mentioned in Daniel 6, where Darius (not Darius the Great) was manipulated by his administrators into issuing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer. As we discussed in the introduction, many critics complain that there is no evidence of such irrevocable decrees outside of the Bible. As one noted:

"It is hard to conceive of a legal system which does not allow for emendation of its laws. Furthermore, there is no attestation of such an idea in any Persian source. Nor is there any mention of it in Greek sources, which presumably would not hesitate to point out peculiarities in the Persian way of doing things, as they do when they mock the splendor of the Persian court, for example."

That commentator suggests that the word "repealed" in verse 19 should be translated "transgressed," and that the irrevocable decree against the Jews we will see later was irrevocable only in the sense that once the order had gone out to all the provinces the damages could not be undone because there was no mechanism for recalling it. This explanation, however, does not explain the references to the same concept in Daniel 6.

Also, as we saw in the introduction, Herodotus confirmed that King Xerxes was "compelled" by his own laws. Doesn't that tell us that Xerxes could not alter those laws? Otherwise, how could they compel him?

Also, we have already seen an example in Ezra 4:21 where a royal decree was worded in such a way to permit its change – and that may explain why this was not often an issue. Perhaps the problem arose only with hastily created laws, which certainly describes the irrevocable decrees in

Esther and Daniel. (Even today we have some experience with hastily created legislation that is seemingly irrevocable – health-care anyone?)

Some commentaries cite a passage from the writing of Diodorus Siculus as support for the irrevocability of Persian law. Specifically, they argue that a man named Charidemus was executed by Darius III because Darius could not change what had been decreed. Here is the text:

“Charidemus became angry and made free with slurs on Persian lack of manliness. This offended the king, and as his wrath blinded him to his advantage, he seized Charidemus by the girdle according to the custom of the Persians, turned him over to the attendants, and ordered him put to death. So Charidemus was led away, but as he went to his death, he shouted that the king would soon change his mind and would receive a prompt requital for this unjust punishment, becoming the witness of the overthrow of the kingdom. Charidemus’s prospects had been high, but he missed their fulfillment because of his ill-timed frankness and he ended his life in this fashion. Once the king’s passion had cooled he promptly regretted his act and reproached himself for having made a serious mistake, but all his royal power was not able to undo what was done.”

There are two ways to interpret that passage – (1) that Darius III made a decree that he regretted, but could not change it, or (2) that Darius regretted that Charidemus had been killed, and he could not bring him back to life.

I think the first interpretation is the better choice. As for the second view, why mention his “royal power”? No one in Persia could have brought him back from the dead, whether king or not. Also, the verb tense in the Greek is a perfect participle rather than an aorist tense, which suggests he was making a general comment on Persian law rather than a specific comment about a past event. Also, in the arrest of Charidemus, he mentioned the law or custom of the Persians, which seems to fit well with the mention of his royal power a few sentences later.

If that view is correct, then that passage from Diodorus Siculus provides extra-Biblical evidence for the irrevocability of Persian laws.

The command in verse 22 is curious. The KJV reads, “that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.” A more accurate translation is: “that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.” The traditional view is that the king ordered everyone to speak only their father’s native language in their house, which some argue would have been an odd decree from a Persian king. But the most likely reason for the edict is that the use of the man’s language in his home was a sign of his leadership, which fits well with the context of the edict.

Ironically, by accepting Memucan’s advice, the king ends up publicizing his embarrassing plight to the entire empire! Afraid that all women of the empire would hear about what Vashti had done, he ends up assuring what he fears by sending a dispatch to every province of the empire!

Also ironic is that Vashti’s punishment for not wanting to appear before the king is that she not be allowed to appear before the king! But perhaps this is also why the punishment is appropriate: If she will not come when summoned, let her never come ever again!

Also, note that Memucan wants to be sure that the decree is irrevocable. He stresses in verse 19

that it cannot be altered, and in verse 20 he wants it published everywhere, which would really make it hard for the king to ever change it. Why? If Vashti was the vengeful Amestris, then no doubt Memucan wanted to make sure she never got reinstated!

As we have already noted, Esther is one of the funniest books in the Bible. As one commentator has noted, “The book’s incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks.” (And, yes, there is humor in the Bible. Anyone who disagrees with that hasn’t read the Bible!) But is humor appropriate in a book that describes the near genocide of God’s people? The simplest answer is that by the time Esther was written, the threat had passed and all who read it knew of the happy ending.

Another commentary provides a different reason: “Humor, especially the humor of ridicule, is a device for defusing fear. The book teaches us to make fun of the very forces that once threatened – and will threaten again – our existence, and thereby makes us recognize their triviality as well as their power.”

God laughs at the pretensions of earthly powers. “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” (Psalm 2:4). Psalm 37:12-13 also speaks of God’s laughter. “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. 13 The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.” Likewise Psalm 59:8, “But thou, O LORD, shalt laugh at them; thou shalt have all the heathen in derision.”

We see God laughing in the book of Esther! In the context of human fear, divine laughter breaks the tension. It brings us relief. God will prevail over the powers of any and every age! The book of Esther reminds us that relief and deliverance come from God – and that God’s people should be a confident people!

At the end of Chapter 1, Queen Vashti has left the building, and her exit has prepared the way for one to replace her.

Esther 2:1-4

After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her. 2 Then said the king’s servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king: 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king’s chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them: 4 And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

The phrase “after these things” in verse 1 does not specify how much later these events took place. Verse 16 will tell us that Esther came before the king in the seventh year of his reign, which would be four years after the events in Chapter 1, which 1:3 tells us occurred in the third year of his reign. Xerxes’ disastrous campaign against the Greeks occurred between these two events. That loss

depleted his treasuries and discredited him in the eyes of his subjects. Herodotus describes the king's life after that defeat as one focused on sensual overindulgence. He had affairs with the wives of some of his generals, which, among other things, led to his assassination in his bedroom in 465 BC.

It seems to some from verse 1 that the king regretted his irrevocable decree against Queen Vashti, but that is not what the text says. It says simply that he remembered Vahsti. If Vashti was the evil and vengeful Amestris, then perhaps his remembering Vashti and what she had done in verse 1 was not entirely with fondness! It may be that after all these events, Xerxes was more than ready for a new queen! In any event, the decree had been irrevocable, and so in these verses we see the beginning of a search for a replacement.

On the surface, this search sounds like a beauty contest, but for the women involved it would not have been a pleasant experience. They were uprooted from their homes and taken to live in the king's harem. A Persian king could have had any woman he wanted, and history tells us about the suffering they caused in satisfying their personal desires. Herodotus also reports that 500 young boys were taken each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court.

According to Herodotus, Persian kings found their wives from among the noble families or from among the families of their seven closest advisors. (Perhaps this explains why those same advisors were so eager to see Vashti banished.) Plutarch, however, reports that other Persian kings sometimes married women from outside those sources, which seems to be what Xerxes was about to do here, and also what his father Darius the Great had done.

Esther 2:5-9

5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; 6 Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter. 8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.

Of the 16 people mentioned by name in Chapter 1, only King Xerxes remains to be mentioned by name. The Jews are mentioned for the first time in verse 5, and it is interesting that they are spoken of in the third person. One commentator suggests that the inspired author was a Jew but that he

wrote the book as though it were a Persian court chronicle written by a non-Jew. If so, that would explain some of the other unique features of the book.

The phrase “who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away” has been the source of some controversy. Why? Because the event referenced in verse 6 occurred in 597 BC, which would make Mordecai over 120 years old if he was the one who had been carried away.

The most common solution is to read verse 6 as referring not to Mordecai but instead to Kish, the great grandfather of Mordecai. That solves the chronological problem, but commentaries seem to agree that that view “is by no means the natural interpretation of the Hebrew syntax.”

Another way to address the difficulty is to read verse 6 as applying to Mordecai, but to be saying that he had been carried away in the person of his forefather. That is, when Kish was carried away, Kish’s future descendants had also been carried away, even those, such as Mordecai, who were born in captivity.

The fact that Mordecai’s family was taken into captivity with Jehoiachin implies that it most likely belonged to the upper classes of Jewish society.

The Babylonian name Mordecai (“man of Marduk”) refers to Marduk, the chief god of the Babylon pantheon. If he had a Hebrew name, we do not know it. Daniel and his three friends had both Hebrew and Babylonian names.

The text here is clearly associating Mordecai with another Benjaminite who also had an ancestor (his father) named Kish – King Saul. The names in Mordecai’s genealogy associate Mordecai with the family of King Saul: Kish was the father of Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-2); and Shimei was a man from the same clan as Saul’s family who cursed David when he fled from the coup led by Absalom (2 Samuel 16:5). We will see why this association is important when we meet Haman.

In a text from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes that was discovered in 1904 at Persepolis, archaeologists found a reference to a man named “Marduka” who was an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa. Some suggest this was Mordecai.

In verse 7, we finally meet Esther. Mordecai had adopted his cousin Esther because her parents were dead. Esther is the only person in the book with two names given in the book. We already know that it was common for Jews to have both a Hebrew name as well as a name from the culture in which they were living. Hadassah means myrtle, and Esther may be the Persian word for “star,” or it may be a Hebrew transliteration of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. The root Hebrew word for Esther means concealed or hidden. By mentioning both of her names, the text may be stressing that Esther was a woman with two identities, as we will soon see.

If Mordecai refers to the false god Marduk and if Esther refers to the false god Ishtar, then perhaps the text is again asking the question, “Who is in charge?” Will Mordecai turn to Marduk for help? Will Esther turn to Ishtar for help? Or will they instead turn to the one true God who is not named anywhere in this book?

How many women were brought before the king? We don't know, but Josephus says there were 400. The phrase "Esther also was taken" suggests that she and the others were not given a choice. Although the passive voice does not require that interpretation, the same passive voice is used in 2:6 to describe the captives who were carried away from Jerusalem. The passive voice is used quite often in Esther, probably to stress that the characters are for the most part caught up in events over which they lack control.

There is a strong note of irony in verse 9. The man who was pleased by Esther and whose favor she won was Hegai, the king's eunuch. As one commentary observed, "Esther's beauty was overwhelming, even to a eunuch."

Some wonder why Esther did not protest eating the unclean food as Daniel did. Although the text gives no answer, we will see in verse 10 that Esther was instructed not to disclose her identity as a Jew.

Esther 2:10-14

10 Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it. 11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her. 12 Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;) 13 Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house. 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.

We are not told why Mordecai told Esther to conceal her identity, even though it would almost certainly require her to compromise her fidelity to the Law. (Daniel, for example, did not conceal his identity, but rather seems to have proclaimed it to everyone who would listen.) Some suggest that Esther would have had no chance of becoming queen had her nationality been known.

But would that mean that Mordecai was acting out of ambition? One commentator wrote, "These events came at a tragic time when many Jews (perhaps most) had forgotten their calling to separateness and had chosen to compromise their religious heritage for the sake of personal advancement under Persian domination." Could that be true of Mordecai? The text does not tell us. We are not told his motives, we are not told that God was directing his actions, we are not told that he was following the law, and we are not told any extenuating circumstances that might help us explain why he does what he does.

Knowledge of Esther's identity might easily have proved very dangerous to her. We see anti-

Semitism in this book, and Haman might not have been the only one who felt that way and was prepared to act on it. In fact, as we will see, Haman's immediate reaction to being insulted by a Jew is to strike out against all the Jews in the land. Thus, Mordecai likely had good reason to fear for Esther's safety, and particularly so if the now banished Vashti was the evil vengeful Amestris. The fact that Mordecai checked on Esther daily shows that he was concerned.

Verses 12-14 reveal the process by which the girls were presented to the king. Apparently, most of the girls spent only a single night with the king, after which they moved to the house of Shaashgaz and became a concubine. There was no guarantee that the king would ever call them again, which meant they would be confined to what one commentator called "perpetual widowhood." After one night with the king, most of them would live the rest of their lives secluded in the harem. The author is showing that the odds were stacked against Esther. How could such a marginalized person in a hostile world ever make a difference for God? Only by a great reversal!

One commentator reminds us that these verses highlight the inhumanity of polygamy. She writes, "The twelve months of beauty treatment provided 'marriage preparation,' but the sad part was that for the majority what awaited them was more like widowhood than marriage. Though each girl in turn moved from the house of Hegai to that of Shaashgaz once she had become a concubine, there was no guarantee that the king would remember her by name and call for her even once more."

When we think of polygamy, we think of the Mormons. Joseph Smith reportedly referred to polygamy as "the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on earth." But, of course, that most holy and important doctrine was quickly abandoned by most Mormons when it came to a choice between it and Utah becoming a state. There are still some who practice it, most notably the group led by Warren Jeffs, who is now jailed in Texas. We don't have time to say much about this now, but one thing is certain – the most reliable indicator of a man-made religion is that religions' view of sex, and particularly when there is a so-called "special revelation" from God for its leader or leaders to engage in sexual immorality. Muhammad claimed to have received such a revelation, as did Joseph Smith.