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Majesty, alcohol and example

Please read Esther 1:1-22

When nothing seems to be happening spiritually, much may be taking place behind the scenes. If we had lived in the fifth century BC, we might have come to the conclusion that God was doing little or nothing in the Persian Empire. We might have thought that perhaps he had forsaken his people, the Jews, many of whom were exiles scattered throughout its territories.

However, God was at work. Knowing the end from the beginning, as the God of knowledge, the Alpha and Omega,¹ he had already anticipated the problems that were to face the Jews, and his deliverance was on its way. That is an abiding principle of God's dealings with his people, now as then. What takes us by surprise does not catch him unawares!

The first chapter of Esther describes an incident in the court of

the Persian Empire, providing the background for the dramatic events that were to follow. The narrative itself provides no obvious or outstanding clue as to the best way to interpret and apply it practically. However, it provides us with a clear illustration of 1 John 2:16–17, where John reminds us that the essence of worldliness is its lust for physical pleasures, its desires for everything we see and its pride in possessions, all of which will pass away.

Kingship means majesty

Ahasuerus (1:1, AV, NKJV), King of Persia, is commonly identified with Xerxes I (486–465 BC). The name ‘Xerxes’ comes from the Greek, which represents old Persian, meaning ‘ruling over heroes’ or ‘he who rules over men.’ ‘Ahasuerus’ comes from the Hebrew rendering of the name. He was the son of Darius I and Queen Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus, and was in his thirties at his accession to the throne in November 486 BC. He was less able than his father.²

Greek historians know Xerxes mostly as a commander of armies on the battlefield. He and most of his brothers served as generals and officers in the army. Herodotus draws attention to his handsome physical appearance, and in particular his tallness: ‘Of all those tens of thousands of men, for goodliness and stature there was not one worthier than Xerxes himself to hold that command.’¹ As soon as he succeeded his father, he subdued a rebellion in Egypt. He then spent three years preparing a huge fleet and army to punish the Greeks for aiding the Ionian cities against Persia in 498 BC and for defeating the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC. Herodotus estimated the combined strength of Xerxes’ land and naval forces as 2,641,610 men—an incredible total that has aroused considerable scepticism. No

doubt, however, whatever the precise number, it was the largest mustering of forces ever known up to that time.

The opening verses of the book describe six timeless trappings of kingship or authority.

1. Xerxes had dominion (1:1)

He ‘ruled over 127 provinces ... from India’—i.e. the Indus valley—‘to Cush’—i.e. Ethiopia, the modern Nubia, or the upper Nile region. (The use of the past tense implies that Xerxes was dead by the time Esther was written.) Under his father the Persian Empire was divided into twenty satrapies, each sub-divided for purposes of administration into a number of provinces. Xerxes’ dominion extended from east to west—India and Ethiopia marked the two extreme boundaries of the then-known world.

In the royal palace at Persepolis, a palace of considerable magnificence, extravagance and lavishness, archaeologists discovered a foundation stone that confirms Xerxes’ titles and his territorial claims mentioned in the book of Esther. It illustrates not only the extent of his territories, but his arrogance. It begins, ‘I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of [all] countries [which speak] all kind of languages, the king of this [entire] big and far-reaching earth—the son of King Darius, the Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan descent.’² Herodotus confirms the extent of Xerxes’ territories.³ His empire was thought to be so vast that the sun never set upon it.

2. Xerxes had a royal throne (1:2)

Throughout the ages a throne has been a symbol of dominion and royal power. Xerxes’ throne was in Susa, a city surrounded by mountains and streams. Persepolis was his capital in theory,

and Susa, a citadel in Elam, 150 miles east of Babylon, located in modern Iran, not far from the Iraqi border, was his winter home. Susa was renowned for its fruit and flowers and, in particular, the lily that gave the city its name. Especially since the time of Darius, it had become more and more the magnificent and preferred official residence of the Persian kings.

Excavations at the site from 1852 onwards uncovered the hall and throne-room of the palace. The racial mixture of the Persian Empire is reflected in an inscription written in three languages on four columns. Further excavations from 1884 revealed that the ruined city had originally covered an area of almost five thousand acres. It was divided into four distinct districts: the citadel-mound, the palace, the city (the business and residential area) and the district on the plain to the west of the river. The palace itself had three courts of different sizes, surrounded by halls and apartments. Beautifully coloured glazed bricks decorated it. Various artefacts bearing Xerxes' name have been found in the excavations.

3. Xerxes gave banquets (1:3, 5)

Banquets or feasts are a significant feature in the book of Esther. The term occurs twenty times in the book, and only twenty-four times elsewhere in the Bible. The narrative begins with two feasts given by Xerxes and ends with two instituted by Mordecai.

Greek writers describe in detail the fabulous feasts given by Persian rulers. They were lavish in scale, and not least in the number of guests invited. Such extravagances were deliberate attempts to draw attention to Xerxes' wealth and power. He invited all his nobles and officials, the military leaders of Persia and Media, and the governors of all his provinces. The banquet was held '*in the enclosed garden of the king's palace*' (1:5). The

mention of the garden is significant because the Persians loved flowers, with the rose as their probable favourite. Both 'lilac' and 'tulip' are Persian names. 'Tulip' and 'turban' were originally the same word, and the big coloured turbans of the East resemble the shape of tulips.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) suggests that the banquet was arranged to celebrate the king's marriage. His *'third year'* would have been 483/2. It has been thought that the mention of the third year of the king's reign (1:3) implies that the intention of the banquet was to give Xerxes' guests confidence in his strength and resources to defeat the Greeks, as it was about this time that, having conquered Egypt, he assembled at Susa the influential people of his realm in order to make arrangements for the invasion of Greece. Notice the reference to *'military leaders'* (1:3).

It appears to have been a Persian habit to hold consultations about war and other important state affairs during meals. We know from other sources that in the third year of his reign Xerxes called together an assembly to consider an expedition against Greece, and his banquet may have been combined with this assembly.⁴ 'After the conquest of Egypt, when he was on the point of taking in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes called a conference of the leading men in the country, to find out their attitude towards the war and explain to them his own wishes.'⁵ As the book of Proverbs counsels, 'For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.'⁶ The Persian custom was not like ours, which is rather to do important business first, and then to entertain. They did both at the same time.

The king also arranged a second banquet *'for all the people from*

the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel' (1:5). These would have been the ancillary staff involved in the special assembly the king had convened, made up of a variety of officials of varying importance—rather like the entourage that accompanies government ministers when they gather in international conferences.

The king's banquets were lavish in duration. Extravagance and luxury were characteristic of eastern kings, and particularly the Persians. The first banquet lasted '*for a full 180 days*' (1:4), roughly six months, and the second for '*seven days*'. A six-month feast was in keeping with the general pattern of things for Xerxes, in that it was a matter of royal principle that everything he did had to be bigger and better than anything that anyone had ever done before. It is likely that all the nobles did not remain at court throughout the whole period of feasting but took their turn, some leaving as others arrived. The banquets were almost certainly a deliberate public-relations exercise to boost morale in the empire with further military operations about to begin.

There is more than a suggestion of decadence in the duration of these banquets. The Bible does not condemn banquets, but indicates that there is a right and wrong time for them. To engage in feasting at an inappropriate moment, or in an unsuitable manner, is a sign that false standards are operating.⁷

4. Xerxes was capable of great displays of wealth (1:4, 6)

He showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his majesty (1:4). When his subjects arrived at the second party, or banquet, they saw white curtains and blue hangings caught up to silver rings by means of cords made of fine linen and purple (1:6). These, Xenophon tells us, were the royal colours of Persia. They saw '*marble pillars*' and '*couches of*

gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl' and precious stones (1:6). Porphyry is a beautiful and very hard rock, quarried in ancient times in Egypt, composed of red-and-white crystals. The exotic nature of the decor of the king's garden is expressed by the unusual and rare words used to describe it. The ornamentation of the palace had been transported from all over the known world. Drinks were served in a variety of goblets (1:7). Changes of drinking vessels at a royal entertainment were designed to display the abundance of the king's possessions. We can imagine the gasps of amazement, and the pointing of fingers in astonishment, as the guests witnessed the evidences of the king's wealth. The queen's ability to hold a banquet for the women at the same time similarly underlined the extent of the king's riches (1:9).

5. Xerxes could show considerable bounty (1:7)

Liberality marked all he bestowed on his guests. The royal wine was served in goblets of gold—everything was according to the status of the king. The royal wine was lavished upon his guests 'in keeping with the king's liberality'. There was no thought or possibility of anything running out, or being in short supply.

6. Xerxes had great authority (1:8, 10)⁸

He could give orders, and these had to be obeyed, even about the manner in which people should drink at the banquet (1:8). The Hebrew in verse 8 can be translated as 'Drinking was according to this rule'—the rule being stated in the next words: 'Each guest was allowed to drink in his own way'. The usual pattern was probably that when the king drank, everyone else drank. On this occasion the king commanded that it should be otherwise: people should be free to drink as they chose. Everyone was to do as he wished. The word translated 'command' in the NIV is 'law', a word used throughout the book of Esther in regard to all

royal decisions, from simple instructions to stewards (as here), to the judicial sentence punishing an illegal action (4:11) and to royal edicts allowing genocide. The Persian Empire lived under a rule of law in every detail of life. Xerxes likewise had authority to command his queen to be brought before him (1:10–11). His banquets were opportunities for him to honour himself. He intended the display of Vashti's beauty to be the culminating moment of the feasts.

Kingship presupposes majesty—majesty displayed in dominion, a throne, banquets and displays of wealth, liberality and authority. The worldly symbols of kingship and authority have not altered significantly throughout the centuries.

Christians do not begrudge authorities these symbols because they know that proper authority and government are God's gift to humanity, and are ordained by him. All authorities that exist have been appointed by God.⁹ Whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who withstand it bring judgement upon themselves.¹⁰ Those in authority, like all of us, must one day answer to God for the way in which they have exercised and fulfilled their responsibilities.

The King to whom all are subject

As the story of Esther proceeds, Xerxes is seen to be subject to the King, the Sovereign Lord, whose majesty surpasses all others. Xerxes proudly called himself 'the great king, the only king' in the inscription we quoted earlier. However, there is only one King of kings—our Lord Jesus Christ!¹¹ Before his majesty all the frail trappings of human kingship pale.

1. Our Saviour and King, Jesus Christ, has dominion

He reigns not only from India to Ethiopia, but in and over