

# Esther 1:10-12

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*On the last day of the banquet, Ahasuerus is quite drunk. He commands seven servants to fetch his wife Queen Vashti to show off her beauty to the men at his party. Vashti refuses the insulting demand. Ahasuerus is humiliated and angry.*

In this section we will see the King's injured pride, the Queen's resistance, and the implications of a royal refusal.

King Ahasuerus, known historically as Xerxes I, reigned over the Persian Empire from 486-465 BC. This empire, at its height, stretched from India to Ethiopia, making Ahasuerus one of the most powerful rulers of his time. This event took place in the third year of his reign, roughly three years prior to his audacious and unsuccessful invasion of Greece in 480 BC.

*On the seventh day* of a lavish banquet that the king had thrown, *when the heart of the king was merry with wine* (v 10), we see an indication of the influence of alcohol on decision-making. Intoxication often leads to poor judgment, and in this case, King Ahasuerus, under the influence of wine, makes a command that has significant implications.

The king's command is delivered to *seven eunuchs*, all of whom are named, which highlights the importance and trustworthiness of these individuals. In ancient Eastern courts, eunuchs often held significant authority as they served the monarch closely and were involved in personal and confidential matters of the state. Many *eunuchs* were castrated males, presumably to diminish their incentive to attempt to displace the king (since they would not be able to produce an heir to the throne and create a dynasty).

The eunuchs made up a bureaucracy in Persia famous for running everything. In the story of Daniel and the lions' den, we see that the top-level bureaucrats successfully hatched a plan to manipulate the king to their will, although their plan was thwarted by God (Daniel 6:5-16).

The names of the listed eunuchs reflect typical Persian etymology, adding historical authenticity to the account: *Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas*. These were *the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus* (v 10). We can take from this that these *seven eunuchs* were the king's personal aides whom he relied on to execute his most important personal tasks.

The demand itself was for the seven eunuchs *to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful* (v 11).

History records that Xerxes I/Ahasuerus was a prolific womanizer. At one point he is reported to have attempted to seduce his brother's wife, and when unsuccessful instead took his daughter. So

we can infer that the king's intent to *display her beauty* might have been inappropriate on a number of fronts.

The fact that the women and men were segregated in their festival tells us that the eastern notion of modesty for women is ancient (Esther 1:9). So the idea of a queen parading in front of a large group of men would likely have caused Queen Vashti to become a disgrace.

It seems that the apparently drunken King Xerxes I/Ahasuerus could have had in mind for his queen to put on a lewd demonstration for the all-male gathering being hosted by the king (Esther 1:3, 9). Jewish tradition holds that the request to have Queen Vashti appear *with her royal crown in order to display her beauty* indicated an intent for the crown to be her only attire. This would be particularly demeaning.

In this case, she was being asked to perform before a vast audience of men, including *the people and the princes*, before whom the king wished to display her.

*But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs (v 10).*

We are not told Queen Vashti's reasoning, so we can only speculate as to her motivation. It could be that Queen Vashti's refusal is an act of significant courage and assertion of dignity. In an environment where the king's word was absolute, we might consider such an act of defiance was not only unexpected but also dangerous. However, it could also be that the Queen simply calculated and chose what she considered the best among a number of unenviable options.

If she were to succumb to the king's demand and be reduced to a "stripper," perhaps she deduced that when the king sobered and regained his full senses she would then have neither her dignity nor her office. So perhaps she thought it best to refuse the king and hope when he came out of his drunkenness he would forget his request. Or perhaps she hoped that it would be improbable for the king to do anything brash or publicly brutal after spending 180 days partying lavishly in order to win over the loyalty of his subjects—(if this was her thinking, it seems to have been correct).

The narrative concludes this segment with the king's reaction: *Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him (v 12)*. A king such as Ahasuerus, who was unaccustomed to being defied, especially in his own court and during an event designed to showcase his grandeur, would be expected to react with intense anger. The *wrath* mentioned here indicates a deeply emotional and furious reaction, setting the stage for the subsequent events in the Book of Esther, which would have profound consequences for the Jewish people within the Persian Empire.

Even though the king is furious, it seems he retained his demeanor sufficiently to call his advisors rather than acting rashly. It was, after all, the very end of a 180-day festival intended to elevate the loyalty of his closest allies. In the next section we will see he and his advisors hatch a plan to reframe the entire event as an opportunity to re-assert male confidence in the kingdom, again playing to his primary audience.

## **Biblical Text**

**10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful. 12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.**