

# Esther 1:13-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/esth/esth-1/esther-113-20/>

*Ahasuerus's counselors are summoned to advise him concerning Vashti's disobedience. His wiseman, Memucan, reframes the insulting matter as an affront to all men in the Persian Empire, that Vashti's action will influence all wives to disrespect their husbands. An official message should be sent abroad informing the subjects that Vashti has been demoted of her queenship. This will inspire women to respect their husbands.*

In the last section, King Xerxes I/Ahasuerus was hosting the last seven days of his 180-day festival, where all the men of the capital city of Susa were invited. Full of wine, he commanded his seven closest advisors to bring Queen Vashti before the men of the city to show her beauty. It is inferred that the showing for the men-only gathering would be demeaning and exploitative of the queen, as the queen refused the request.

The king is approaching the end of a lavish 180-day festival apparently intended to create loyalty and enthusiasm among his close advisors and princes in the kingdom to enforce his policies. He is depending upon these princes and military officers to substantially raise taxes as well as conscript a vast army to invade Greece (which will commence in about three years) so he needs their full loyalty.

Having made a rash request that was refused by his queen, the king seems to recognize that it is important now to make a careful calculation and not squander the good will he has created among his subjects. So he summons his closest advisors:

*Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so to speak before all who knew law and justice and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom (vv 13-14)*

The king summons a group of men described as *wise men who understood the times*. To his credit, this was *the custom of the king*, to consult these men, that he might make sound decisions. Further, to his credit, King Xerxes I/Ahasuerus had assigned or ratified these *wise men* to sit in *the first place in the kingdom*, having the most authority in the kingdom after him. Further, the king allowed these *wise men* to have *access to the king's presence*.

The scripture names these men: *Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan*—we can note that this is a different list from the seven men in verse 10 described as “seven eunuchs” who served in the king's presence. We can infer that the seven eunuchs served the king's daily needs and demands while the seven *wise men* who were also *seven princes of Persia* likely spent their time governing the empire, and only came into *the king's presence* as was necessary.

That the *wise men* are said to *understand the times* infers that they had their ear to the ground, and understood how people would react to policies. We might consider these wise men as being like modern pollsters—they had an acute understanding of the people and the flow of events.

This insight might include what level of taxation would bring people to a point of rebellion. It might include assessing the strength and weaknesses of enemies. Consulting the *wise men who understood the times* is reminiscent of the Babylonian practice where Nebuchadnezzar sought advice from magicians, conjurers, and Chaldeans (Daniel 2:2). These were men learned in law, governance, and matters of statecraft.

In this case, the primary topic appears to be how to reframe the king's indiscretion with Queen Vashti without dispersing the goodwill he has carefully cultivated during his 180-day festival. Further, the decision about Vashti would influence legal and social precedent, which is another reason why those skilled in *law and justice* were consulted.

In the Persian Empire, the *law* was considered sacred, and was not to be broken, not even by the king (Daniel 6:15). In this case, they must discuss: *According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?* (v 15). It would seem that the queen has broken Persian law by not obeying the king's command. It is also true that many men were present who witnessed this event, and had wives at home.

How do the wisemen navigate the law, while preserving the goodwill that has been built up, and try to turn this into a political win for the king?

*In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus"* (v 16).

*Memucan*, one of the *seven princes of Persia*, now reframes the issue. He says this wasn't just a personal affront to the king but an act against all the *princes* and *all peoples* of Persia. The context makes clear he has in mind the male population of the empire.

In making this assessment, *Memucan* is doing a number of things that are politically shrewd.

In reframing this from "the king has been defied" to "all the *princes and all the peoples* have been wronged," *Memucan* appears to accomplish a number of objectives politically useful to the situation:

- He is redirecting the issue away from being personal to the king, allowing for a better decision.
- He is saving the king's pride (this is against *all the princes and all peoples*), allowing the king to shift to thinking more outwardly, about how to "help the people," thus continuing to support the objective of building morale among his people, adding to rather than detracting from the benefit gained by the 180-day festival.

*Memucan* continues reframing the issue from “the king has been dishonored” to “all the men of Persia have been dishonored”:

*For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.’ This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s conduct will speak in the same way to all the king’s princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.*

It could be that part of the objective for the wiseman *Memucan* is to deflect the king’s anger and avoid an oppressive act against the queen, which could make Xerxes I appear weak, and would demoralize the people. *Memucan* argues that *there will be plenty of contempt and anger* among all the men of Persia if their wives emulate Vashti and *speak in the same way to all the king’s princes*. He is redirecting the king’s anger and positing it upon all the men of Persia.

But *Memucan* is also reframing the issue from focusing upon the ego of the king to a focus on the morale of the men of Persia, whom Xerxes I/Ahasuerus will count upon to support his looming war effort. Furthermore, *Memucan* is demonstrating loyalty to Xerxes, which will further cement his status with the king. We can certainly see ample evidence that *Memucan* was, indeed, a wise man who *understood the times*.

Xerxes I/Ahasuerus is recorded in history to be a brutal tyrant. It appears this lavish 180-day festival was intended, at least in part, to rebrand him as a benevolent and law-abiding king who honored his people (at least among the ruling class). So *Memucan* might have an awareness that he needs to redirect the king’s attention to avoid an act that could squander the goodwill that has been created.

It seems unlikely that there is any truth to the claim that on this *day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s conduct will speak in the same way to all the king’s princes*. A patriarchal society is not going to be overturned so easily in a single day (*this day*). But what is apparent is that the king’s honor has been smeared, so something must be done. And politically (given the apparent objective to build morale among the ruling class and build up loyalty to the king) it was much better to make this “everyone’s problem”.

*Memucan’s* argument is that other women might imitate Vashti’s defiance and *speak in the same way to all the king’s princes*. This indicates that it was the *king’s princes* who were the primary participants in the lavish 180-day festival. They will be the ones the king will rely upon to bring in the tax revenue to finance his planned invasion of Greece, as well as supply men for the fighting.

This mention of the *contempt and anger* the men of Persia would experience due to being rejected by their wives (emulating Queen Vashti) could be taken a number of ways. *Memucan* could be arguing that the *contempt and anger of the king’s princes* might be directed at King Xerxes I/Ahasuerus for allowing this to occur (which would upset the objective of the 180-day festival). It could also infer that the *contempt and anger* would come from the men toward their wives, which would upset the social order of Xerxes’ kingdom.

In either case, the princes' attention would not be upon loyally executing the king's plans, which upsets the likely intention of the mega-festival. The king needs the men's attention focused on carrying out his policies.

This signals that the ladies of *Persia and Media* were influential in their circles, and in their homes. It also infers that the men cared how their wives spoke to them. This is consistent with the biblical narrative that shows the immense influence women have upon men.

Scripture is consistent in directing women to respect their husbands, indicating the deep need men have to be respected by their wives (1 Peter 3:1, 5-6; Ephesians 5:22-24, 33). Apparently part of Memucan's wisdom (in "understanding the times") was to understand the nature of men and women. He appears to be using that here as a part of navigating a difficult situation with his king, known for brutality, who has had his pride wounded.

The wiseman Memucan then proposes a solution:

*If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small (vv 19-20).*

Memucan begins his proposal with deference, saying *if it pleases the king*. This was likely a typical protocol for speaking to royalty, giving clear deference to the king's prerogative to make decisions. The proposal has a number of steps:

- *Let a royal edict be issued*
- *Let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed*
- The order will be that *Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus*
- Further, the proposal is for the king to *give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she*.

This would seem to be an incredibly shrewd proposal on a number of fronts:

- Memucan has reframed the issue from "the king has been offended" to "all Persian men have been offended" thus salving the king's wounded pride and redirecting the proposed action away from "What can we do to Vashti?" to "What can we do for Persia?"
- His proposal sidesteps any reactionary brutality or cruelty to Vashti, (which would seem to have more potential to create domestic strife in Persia than the scenario posed by Memucan, where the queen's defiance spurs all women to suddenly stop respecting their husbands).

- The proposal redirects people’s attention to the excitement of looking forward to the king’s selection of a new queen, and immediately puts Vashti out of the public view (and people forget what they don’t see quite quickly).
- The edict will be able to message to the men (princes and lords) to whom the king desires to show benevolence and inspire loyalty that “We are doing this for you, to increase the respect you will have in your home” thus salvaging (and even boosting) the apparent morale-boost intended by the 180-day festival.

The proposal is to remove Vashti from her royal position and replace her with someone *more worthy*. Vashti apparently will continue to maintain her place in the king’s household; her reduced status is that she cannot *come into the presence of the king*. We will see later in the story that the queen (who was in good standing at the time) was not called into the *presence of the king* for a full thirty days. So apparently it was not that unusual for the king to remain occupied with other women and neglect attention to the queen for long periods of time. Given the reputation of Ahasuerus, it is possible that this new status would have been viewed by Vashti as an upgrade!

The final verse emphasizes the scope and reach of the king's edict. By suggesting that all women would then *give honor to their husbands, great and small*, the king is playing to the ego of the men upon whom he lavished 180 days of feasting, but expanding that to his entire kingdom.

Thus an episode that could have greatly diminished the intended morale boost becomes a “cherry on top”—not only are the men honored by the king, the king proposes that by his action all these men should also be honored at home. Further, this morale boost would then be expanded to the entire kingdom.

And by putting Vashti out of the public view, but without any direct retribution, the episode is swept aside, and replaced by a new buzz, perhaps somewhat akin to a modern gossip story in a pop culture magazine: Who will be the new queen? It is into this dynamic that Esther will be vaulted into prominence.

It is also worth noting again that in Persian law, the king could make laws but he could not repeal the laws he made, which is why Memucan says *written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed*. This is consistent with the story of Daniel and the lions’ den, which took place during his service to a Persian king (Daniel 6:15).

### **Biblical Text**

**13 Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so to speak before all who knew law and justice 14 and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king’s presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom— 15 “According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?” 16 In the presence of**

**the king and the princes, Memucan said, “Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought into his presence, but she did not come.’ 18 This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s conduct will speak in the same way to all the king’s princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger. 19 If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. 20 When the king’s edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small.”**