

Esther 1:5-9

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/esth/esth-1/esther-15-9/>

In the final week of the banquet, Ahasuerus opens his courtyard to the common folk of Susa. The most extravagant finery decorates the palace garden. Unlimited wine is served in golden cups to anyone and everyone, though no one is forced to drink. Ahasuerus's wife, Queen Vashti, holds a banquet in a separate part of the palace for the women.

During the last *seven days* of the lavish festival, King Xerxes I/Ahasuerus's display of grandeur described in the previous section is now extended to the commoners of Susa, *from the greatest to the least*. At the same time the king is entertaining the men of the city, Queen Vashti conducts a *banquet for the women in the palace*.

The phrase *When these days were completed*, refers to the completion of the 180 days of the king's extravagant festival described in Esther 1:4. King Ahasuerus now continues his extravagant display by hosting a *banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa*.

The inclusivity of this last week of the feast, encompassing *from the greatest to the least*, illustrates Ahasuerus's desire to ensure all people in the capital city, regardless of their societal standing, recognize and appreciate his grandeur and benevolence.

As discussed in the prior section, this is likely to secure his standing as Persia's ruler by purchasing the loyalty of his subjects, since he was dealing with various rebellions and was either already or about to both increase tax levies and conscript an army to invade Greece.

The setting of the festival is opulent, capturing the reader's attention and emphasizing the lavishness of the Persian court. The description of the court in verse 6—*hangings of fine white and violet linen* (v 6)—showcases the detailed craftsmanship of the period, using the finest materials available.

There are also *cords of fine purple linen on silver rings* (v 6) indicating the exclusivity and royalty of the occasion. Purple dye was rare in ancient times, being derived from a particular snail, so was often reserved for royalty and the elite. This is further emphasized with *couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones* (v 6).

Such luxurious furnishings are elements that paint a vivid picture of the extravagance of the king's palace. The king has apparently been sharing it with his key officials ("princes" and "army officers") for 173 days, and now during the last seven days of the 180 day festival he seems to be sharing it with all residents of the capital city *according to the king's bounty*.

Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty (v 7).

The royal wine, served in *golden vessels of various kinds*, as described in verse 7, was both abundant and presumably of the finest quality, reflecting the king's immense wealth. This luxurious setting is more than just a backdrop; it functions to underscore the might, wealth, and grandiosity of the Persian Empire under Ahasuerus. Also, *the royal wine was plentiful*; everyone was apparently allowed to have all they desired.

It seems the goal here is to ensure that all who attend leave thinking, "Wow, that Xerxes/Ahasuerus is the greatest guy around." And, although *the royal wine was plentiful*, Ahasuerus ensures that no one feels compelled to consume: *The drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion* (v 8).

The king is being a host and a benefactor: *for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person* (v 8).

History records that Xerxes I/Ahasuerus was an oppressive, violent tyrant. One example of his cruelty is a story regarding one of his subordinate kings who requested that his oldest son be spared conscription into the Persian invasion force, in order to secure succession. Xerxes I/Ahasuerus was angry, believing that this subordinate ruler's request inferred a lack of confidence that his invasion of Greece would meet with success. Xerxes I/Ahasuerus had the ruler's oldest son killed and cut in half, then had the armies march between his parts.

That Xerxes is now hosting a lavish, 180-day festival for his princes and military officers would seem to indicate that Xerxes I/Ahasuerus had decided that the group of people brought to the festival needed to be influenced with largess rather than threats or brutality. Presumably this is because this is the group he needed support from in order to carry out his ambitious plans.

Verse 8 highlights King Ahasuerus's attempt to present himself as a just and benevolent ruler to his administration and the people of Susa. By seeing that *the drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion*.

At least with his close advisors and princes, Ahasuerus showcases his respect for *the law* and each person's individual agency. His command ensured that these key figures did not feel forced into acts they might find unenjoyable during the banquet.

There is no explanation as to what *law* was on the books in Persia that applied to the consumption of alcohol without *compulsion*. But the laws of the Medes and Persians were considered sacred, and not even the king was allowed to break them (Daniel 6:15). So at least with his close advisors, the king is adhering to the *law*.

This is not a situation where the guests feel, "We have to drink this because it was offered and we don't want to offend the king." Rather it is a situation where the people were being served according to their own desires. The inclusion of the phrase *according to the law* would indicate that the guests could consume as they pleased, without fear of the king's displeasure, since they had the *law* as their protection.

Finally, verse 9 introduces Queen Vashti, who plays a pivotal role in the unfolding drama of the Book of Esther: *Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus* (v 9).

This apparently pertains to the last week of the extended festival, where the festivities extend to all the people of the capital city, Susa. Queen Vashti's separate *banquet for the women in the palace* demonstrates the gendered spaces common in the ancient Near Eastern royal courts; the men's party has been segregated from that of the women's. However, although the Queen is hosting the party, the King is the sovereign—as the passage notes that *the palace* was one *which belonged to King Ahasuerus*.

Biblical Text

When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. 6 There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty. 8 The drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person. 9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.