

Return from Captivity

(Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther & Job)

Lesson #11

Esther, Part 1

(1: 1 – 2: 18)

Preview

Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the Jews who—thanks to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia—returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in 539 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel, their appointed governor. The returnees numbered 42,360 men, along with their families, totaling around 230,000 people. After much opposition, they rebuilt Jerusalem’s second temple, completing it in 516 B.C.

Ezra, the priest and scribe, returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., accompanied by 1,771 men, plus their families, totaling about 5,000 people. Ezra reintroduced Scripture to the returnees, and he served as religious leader of the nascent community.

Nehemiah, an important court official serving the Persian king Artaxerxes, returned to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, rebuilt and repopulated the city itself, and instituted major reforms in Jewish religious and civil life.

Ezra and Nehemiah told the story of those who returned from the Babylonian captivity.

Preview, cont.

Many Jews, however, did not return from Babylon. After all, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. and the surviving Jews were relocated throughout the Assyrian Empire. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, then defeated the Assyrians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. Next, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, taking the first wave of Jewish captives to Babylon in late 605 B.C. (the prophet Daniel was among them); he attacked again in 597 B.C., taking another wave of captives to Babylon (the prophet Ezekiel was among them); and he attacked a third and final time in 588 B.C., resulting in a 2-year siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the city and temple in 586 B.C. (the prophet Jeremiah was an eyewitness, living in Jerusalem throughout the siege). The survivors of the siege were taken captive to Babylon (Jeremiah was left behind with a remnant, and he and the remnant later fled into Egypt and disappeared).

Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, then defeated Babylon without a shot being fired in 539 B.C. A very enlightened and innovative monarch, Cyrus issued his famous decree allowing all the people taken captive by Assyria and Babylon to return home and rebuild their cities, temples and infrastructures.

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Cyrus Cylinder (Akkadian cuneiform script on clay cylinder), 539 B.C.
British Museum, London.

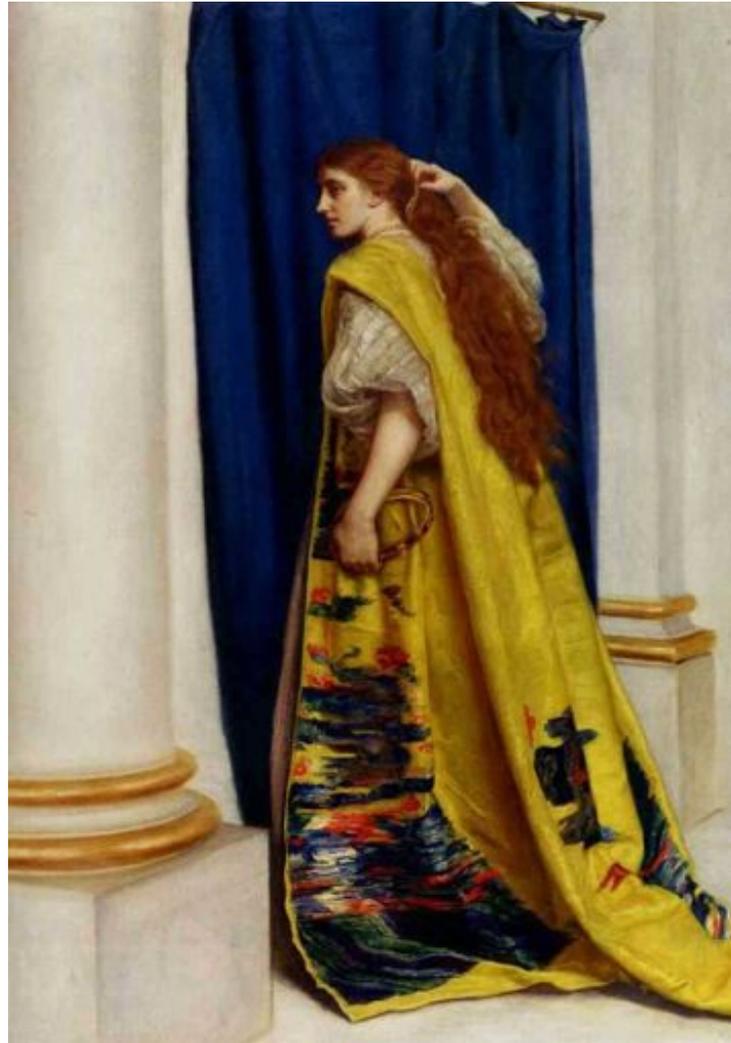
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Preview, cont.

Many Jewish families, however, had been living in Assyria for nearly two centuries (722-539 B.C., 183 years), while other Jewish families had been living in Babylon for nearly 70 years (605-539 B.C., 66 years). A great many had wholly or partially assimilated into those dominant cultures, or they were happy living as Jews in the beautiful, prosperous and well-managed cities, towns and villages of the Persian Empire. Very few had ever seen Jerusalem, let alone lived in it. They had built new lives in their new homes. And many Jews fared quite well in Persia: both Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, were highly educated, well-placed officials in the Persian court at Susa.

Many Jews—the majority, in fact—did not return to Jerusalem.

The book of Esther tells their story.



John Everett Mallais. *Esther* (oil on canvas), 1865.

Private collection.

[Fellow Pre-Raphaelite painter, Valentine Prinsep, dressed General Charles George Gordon in this yellow gown for Prinsep's "Chinese" portrait of Gordon (1866). Mallais so fancied the "yellow jacket" that he borrowed it and dressed his model, Muir Mackenzie, in it for *Esther*, but he turned the brocaded cape inside out to create the abstract color patterns you see here!]

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The book of Esther tells the story of a beautiful young Jewish woman, Hadasseh (known as “Esther,” from “Ishtar,” meaning “star,” the Mesopotamian goddess of love, beauty, desire and sex). Through a memorable series of events, Esther becomes the wife and queen of the Persian king, Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.), and she thwarts the planned genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of Haman, a vile, high-level official in king Xerxes’ court.

The story is not “history” in the modern sense of the term; rather, we might consider it an “historical novella.”



The book of Esther was originally written in Hebrew, perhaps in the 4th century B.C., providing the context for the Jewish feast of Purim.*

Esther was the last book to be included by the Rabbis in the Hebrew canon of Scripture, however, doubtless because it is the only book in which God is never mentioned.* In the Hebrew text, the Jewish people are saved solely through the efforts of Esther and Mordecai.

* Purim celebrates the saving of the Jewish people from extermination, a holocaust planned by Haman, the Persian court official. Purim is celebrated on the 14th day of Adar, the 12th month on the Hebrew lunar calendar, usually during March on our Gregorian calendar.

* Until recently Nehemiah was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls either; however, a fragment of Nehemiah has appeared among Cave 4 fragments, and the fragment has been edited and published by Torleif Elgin, *et al.* It is included in *Gleanings from the Caves* (The Library of Second Temple Studies, 71). London: Bloomsbury—T&T Clark, 2016. The Song of Songs doesn't mention God, either, but it is erotic love poetry, an entirely different genre of biblical literature. It was reluctantly included in the Hebrew canon, since it is attributed to king Solomon.

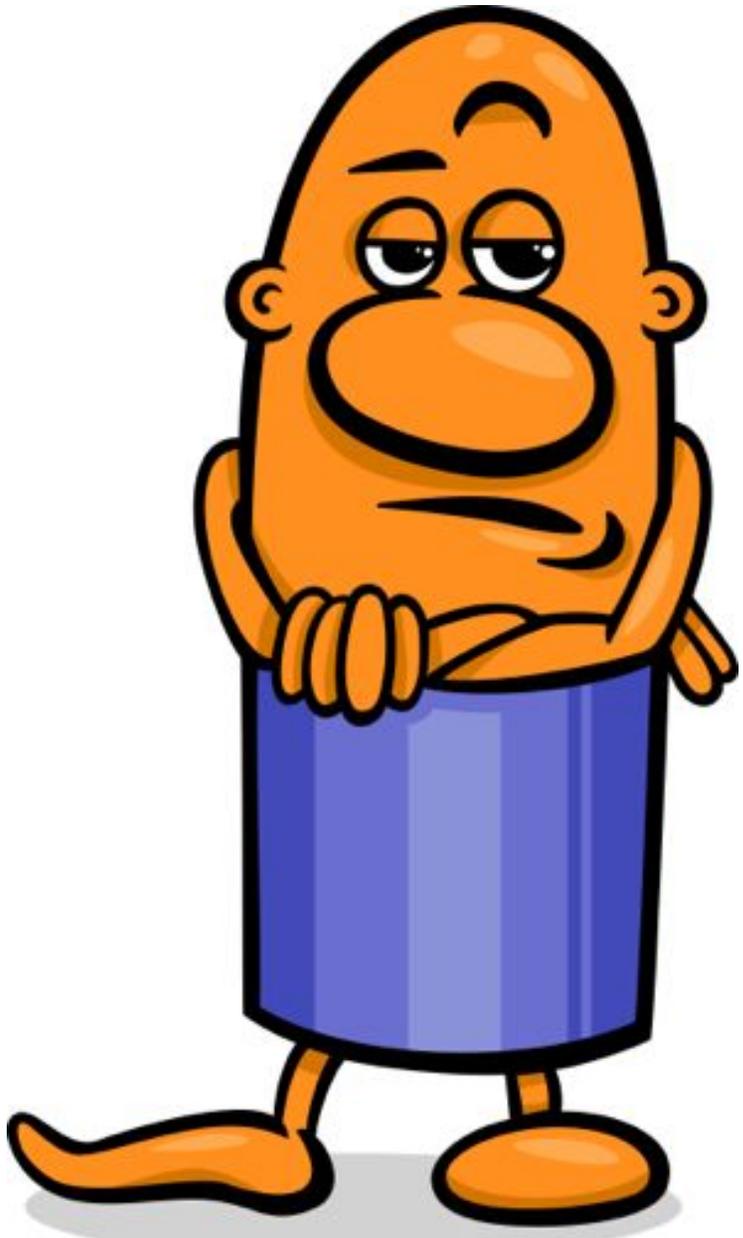
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Consequently, a later Greek version of Esther emerged during the late 2nd or early 1st century B.C., and it was included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. This Greek version of Esther adds significant material to the story:

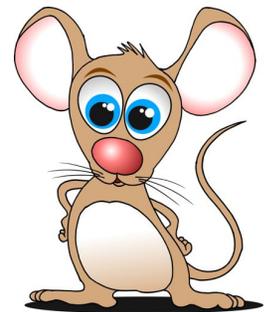
- an opening prologue that describes a dream that Mordecai had;
- the contents of the decree against the Jews;
- prayers for God's intervention offered by both Mordecai and Esther;
- an expansion of the scene in which Esther appears before Xerxes, with mention of God's intervention;
- a copy of the decree in favor of the Jews;
- a passage in which Mordecai explains his opening dream in light of its fulfillment;
- a Colophon attesting to the authenticity of the text.

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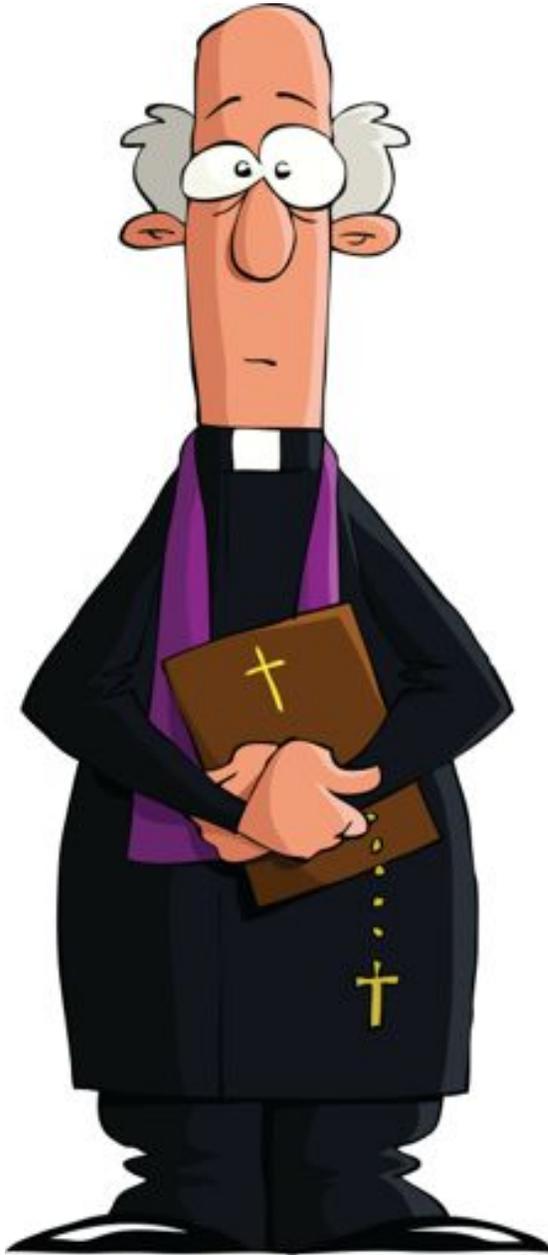


Reading the augmented Greek Septuagint version of Esther is an *entirely* different experience from reading the original Hebrew version.

So, we're going to work with the original Hebrew version (NIV translation), and after reading it, we'll investigate the Greek additions.



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We should add that when St. Jerome translated the Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek into Latin during the 4th and 5th centuries (382-405 A.D.), he recognized the Greek additions to the Hebrew text, but he included them not within the main body of Esther, but at the end of his Latin translation as an appendix, of sorts.

Nevertheless, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) reconfirmed the entire Septuagint text of Esther, both the original Hebrew and the Greek additions, as canonical, and that's how Esther appears in most Catholic versions of Scripture, including in our New American Bible translation in the *Catholic Study Bible* (Oxford University Press).



So, here's the historical context of our story. Recall the sequence of Persian kings, starting with Cyrus the Great:

<u>Persian King</u>	<u>Reigns</u>	<u>Jewish Events</u>
Cyrus the Great	(559-530)	First exiles return
	537	Temple rebuilding starts/stops
Cambyses II	(530-522)	
Darius I	(521-486)	
	520	Temple building resumes
	516	Temple completed/dedicated
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	(486-464)	ESTHER
Artaxerxes I	(464-423)	
	458	Ezra to Jerusalem
	445	Nehemiah to Jerusalem
	433	Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes
	post-433	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

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Our story opens during the reign of Xerxes, three years after he becomes king, 482 B.C.

This was the time of the Greco-Persian Wars, 499-449 B.C., a series of conflicts between the Persian Empire and the Greek city-states. The Persians first invaded Greece in 492 B.C., during the time of king Darius, Xerxes' father. The first invasion ended in disaster with the famous battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., in which the Greeks thrashed the Persians according to Herodotus, leaving 6,400 Persian bodies on the battlefield, while the Athenians lost only 192 men.

News of the victory reached Athens by the messenger Pheidippides, who ran the 26 miles from Marathon to Athens, delivered the news . . . and promptly dropped dead!

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Luc-Olivier Merson. *Pheidippides Giving Word of Victory after the Battle of Marathon* (oil on canvas), 1869. Private Collection.

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After the colossal failure of the first invasion, Darius began raising a huge army to subjugate the Greeks completely. Before he could do so, however, Darius died and his son Xerxes took the throne in 486 B.C. Xerxes continued his father's preparations for attacking Greece.

As our story opens, it is 483 B.C. and Xerxes is building support for his campaign.

“This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

(Esther 1: 1-3)



So, Xerxes* invites all of his officials from throughout the Empire to Susa for a grand banquet (one of ten banquets in Esther—foodies, it seems!), to drum up support for his military campaign against the Greeks.

Herodotus (*Histories*, 3.89) tells us that Darius, Xerxes' father, had organized the Empire into 20 satrapies, governed by 20 satraps. Provinces were smaller units within the satrapies.

* The name in the Hebrew text is Ahasuerus; Xerxes is the Greek form of the name, both deriving from the Persian *Khshayārsha*.

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The archaeological site of Susa in Iran.
Aerial photograph taken on October 23, 1935.
Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.



Site today, with urban sprawl encroaching.



Site today, with acropolis to the right.



Footprint of the palace built by Darius, used by Xerxes.

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“For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars . . .

. . . There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished."

(1: 4-8)



**Jacopo del Sellaio. *The Banquet of Ahasuerus* (tempera on panel), 1490.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence.**

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**I'd like a goblet of
Screaming Eagle
cabernet, if you
please.**

“Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.”

(1: 9)

“On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas—to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.”

(1: 10-12)

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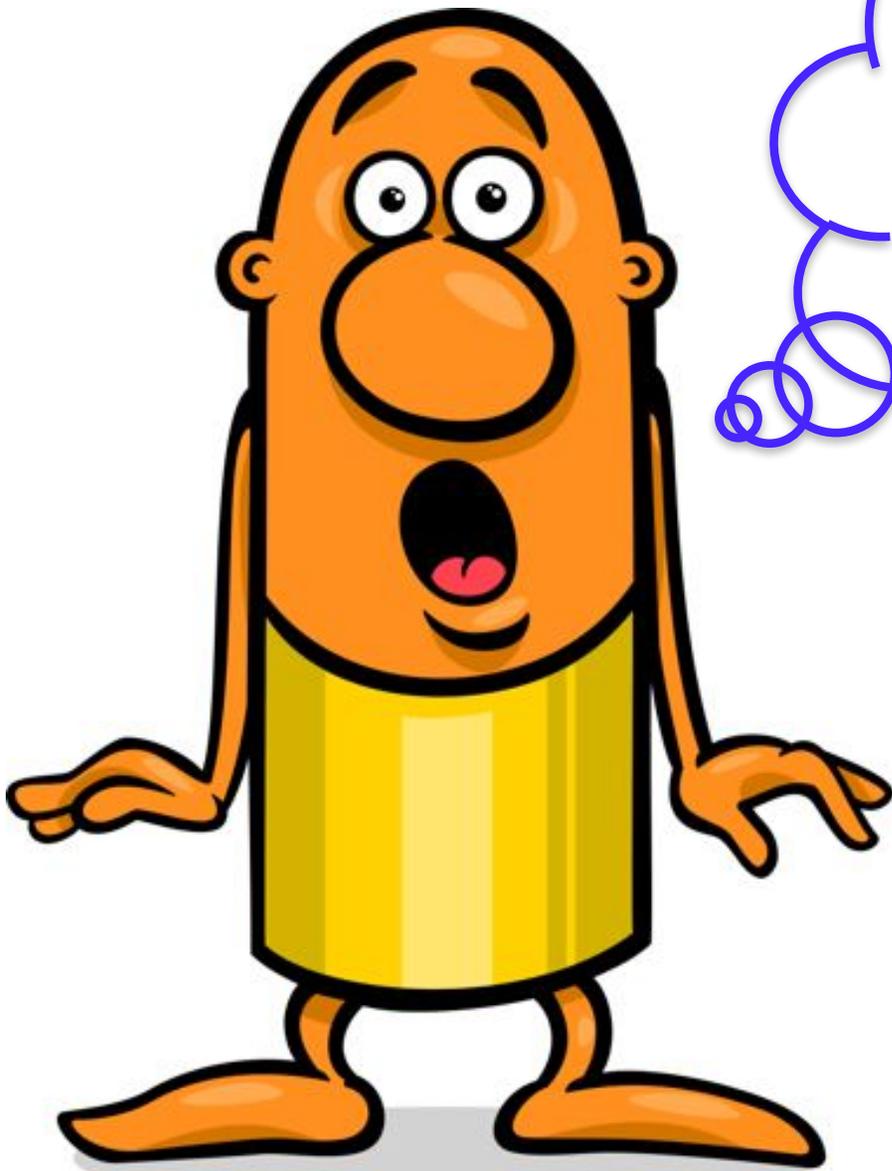
Queen Vashti refuses Xerxes' request to "display" [רָאָה, *rah-ah*] herself to the king's drunken friends at the end of the 7-day stag party, wearing [only?] her royal crown!

Vashti flatly refuses.

“Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom . . .

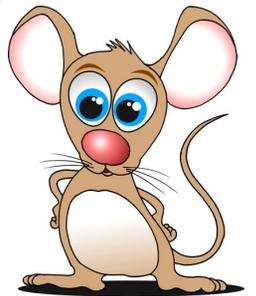
. . . ‘According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?’ he asked. ‘She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.’”

(1: 13-15)



**Ah, oh! Queen Vashti
is in big trouble!**

**You can say that
again!**



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“Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, ‘Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come’ . . .

. . . This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.”

(1: 16-18)



**Those guys are
sexist pigs!**

“Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, **which cannot be repealed**, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she . . .

. . . Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.' The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed."

(1: 19-21)



As we read this story we get a clear sense that we're not reading "history"; rather, we're reading an embellished tale that will lead to a surprise ending.

It's inconceivable, for example, that Xerxes, the king of the Persian Empire, would take an embarrassing domestic slight to his closest advisors who were "experts in matters of law and justice," and as a result issue an Empire-wide decree that cannot be repealed, divorcing his wife Vashti!



Xerxes resolves a minor domestic dispute by issuing a sweeping international edict! This irrevocable edict, of course, will complicate our story as it moves forward, entangling our characters in a self-woven web of melodrama—and not a little comedy.

This is much more like *opera buffa*—comedic opera—than it is history.

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“The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.”

(1: 21-22)



**That's a fine edict,
if I do say so!**



Ernest Norman. *Vashti Deposed* (oil on canvas), 1890.
Gallery Oldham, Manchester, England.



So, Xerxes had thrown the party in Susa to garner support for the 2nd invasion of Greece, 480-479 B.C. Although he did get the support, the extravaganza in Susa was a personal disaster for him—at least on the home front.

Then he went off to war.

Xerxes had a huge army and a massive naval armada. Athens and Corinth were within his grasp. The allied Athenian forces gathered at the narrow coastal pass of Thermopylae (the “Hot Gates”) to stop the Persian advance.



Approximately 7,000 allied forces blocked the pass; the Persian army (according to ancient sources) numbered nearly 1 million, although it was more likely 100,000 or so. Whichever, the Greek forces were vastly outnumbered. The Greeks fought heroically for seven days, but they were slaughtered in one of history's most famous "last stands." The final holdouts were 300 Spartans who fought to the death.*

*** For a dramatic account, watch the 2006 movie, *300*.**

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The Thermopylae pass. The ancient coastline was where the road is today.

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Thermopylae#/media/File:Thermopylae_ancient_coastline_large.jpg

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The memorial to the 300 Spartans.

Dr. C. and his intrepid Logos students visited Thermopylae on their “Footsteps of St. Paul” teaching tour to Greece.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

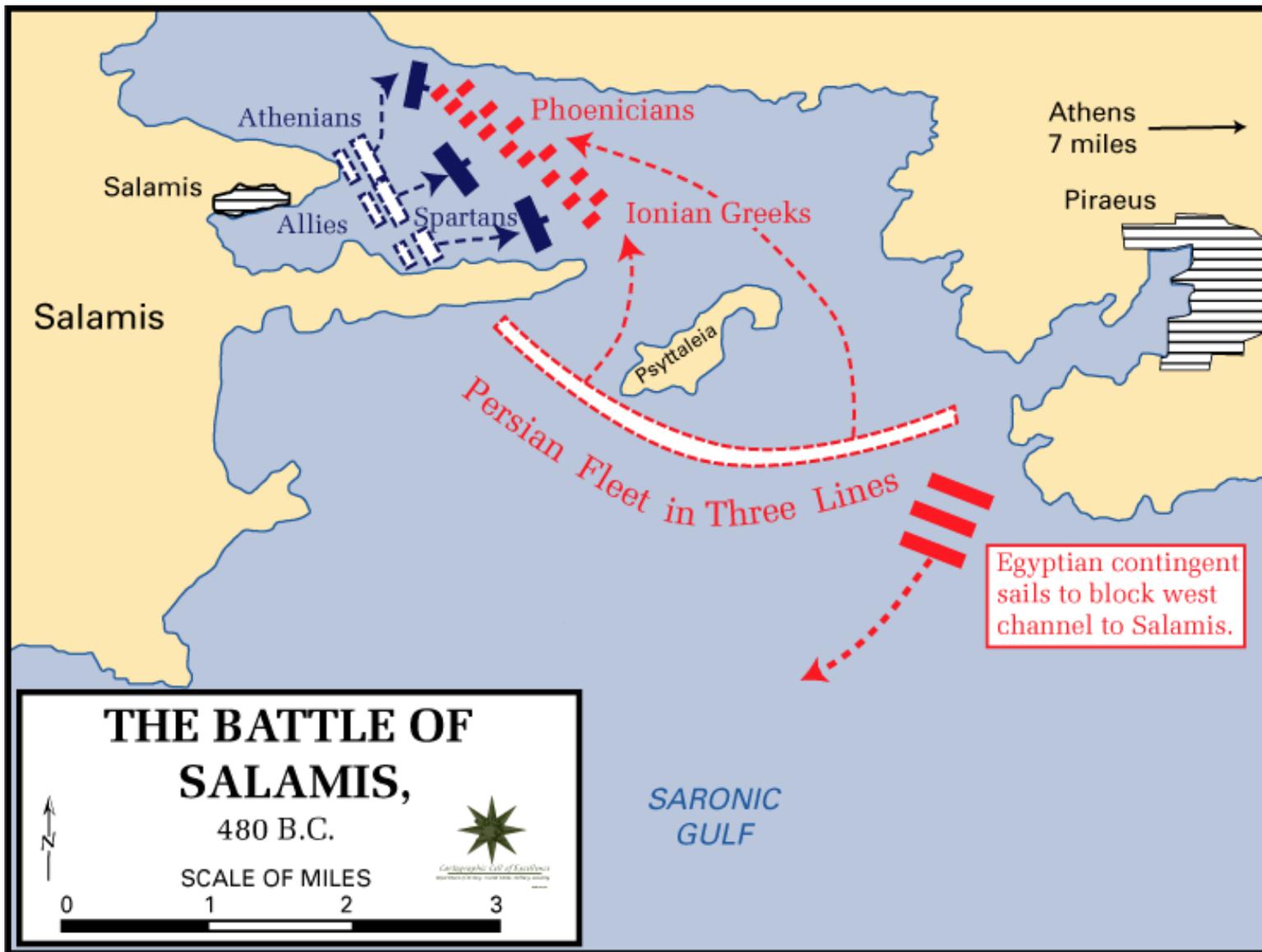
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Emboldened by his victory at Thermopylae, Xerxes pushed on to Athens and torched it. The Greeks were tottering. Xerxes then put his navy into play, moving 800 ships into position to face off the Greeks' 271.

After some prolonged sparring, the two navies locked horns in the narrow straits of Salamis. There Xerxes' large fleet worked to his disadvantage, as Xerxes' ships struggled to manoeuver in the crowded strait, becoming disorganized and ineffective. The smaller, more nimble Greek fleet attacked, swiftly sinking or capturing over 200 Persian ships.

At the Battle of Salamis, Xerxes got his butt handed to him, and he crawled home, defeated!



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_salamis.png

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Xerxes returned home in a blue funk: the 2nd invasion of Greece had failed; his navy sat at the bottom of the Saronic Gulf. . . and he missed his queen, Vashti.

Now what?

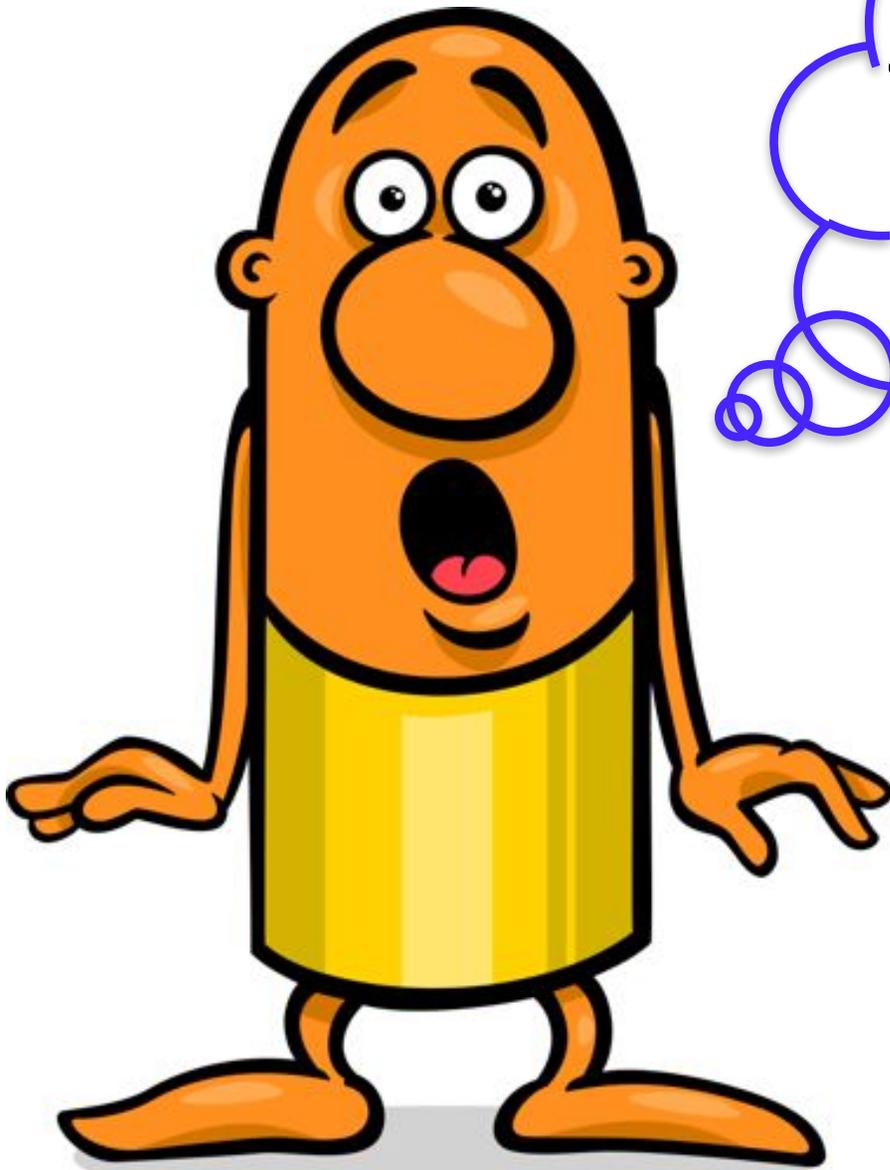
“Later when king Xerxes’ fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, ‘Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa . . .

. . . Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it."

(2: 1-4)

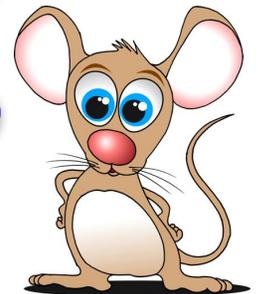


**Ha, ha, ha!
I'll bet he did!**

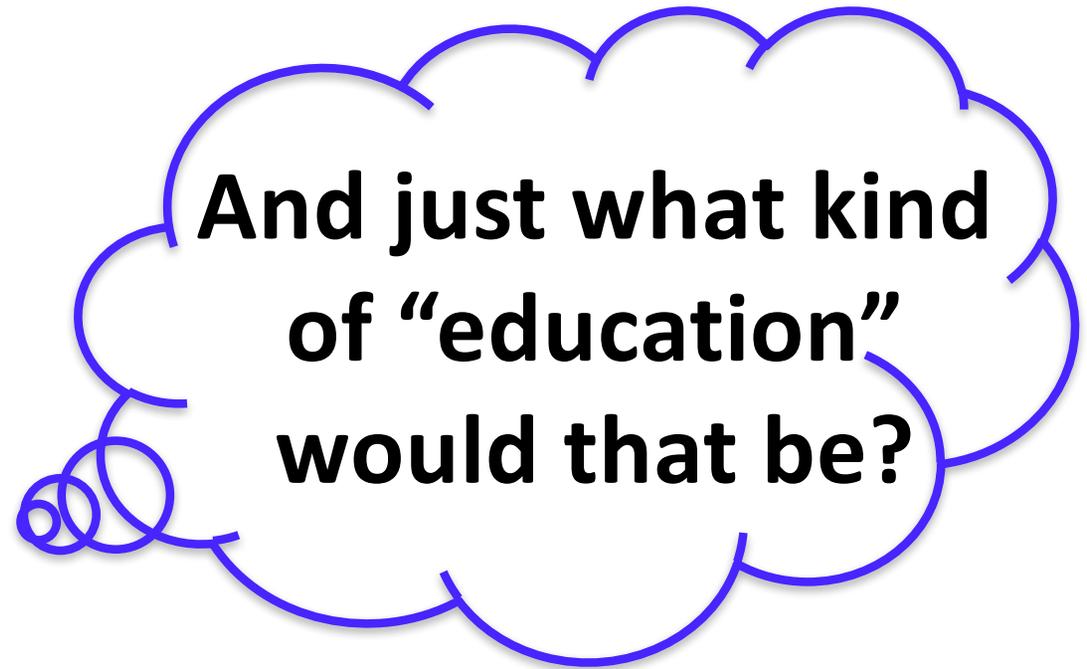


**They're going to have a
beauty contest!**

**The most beautiful girl in
each of the 127 provinces
will come to the palace for a
year's worth of beauty
treatments . . . and
"education"!**

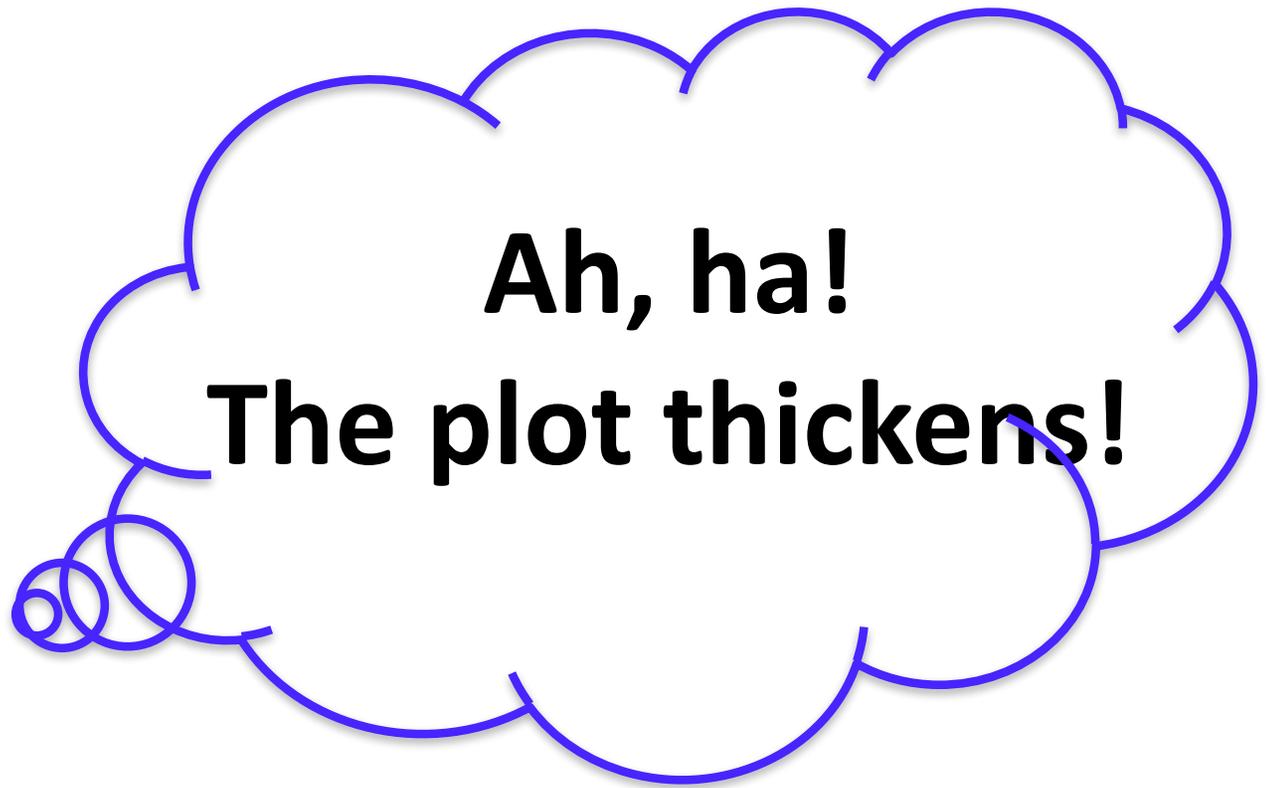
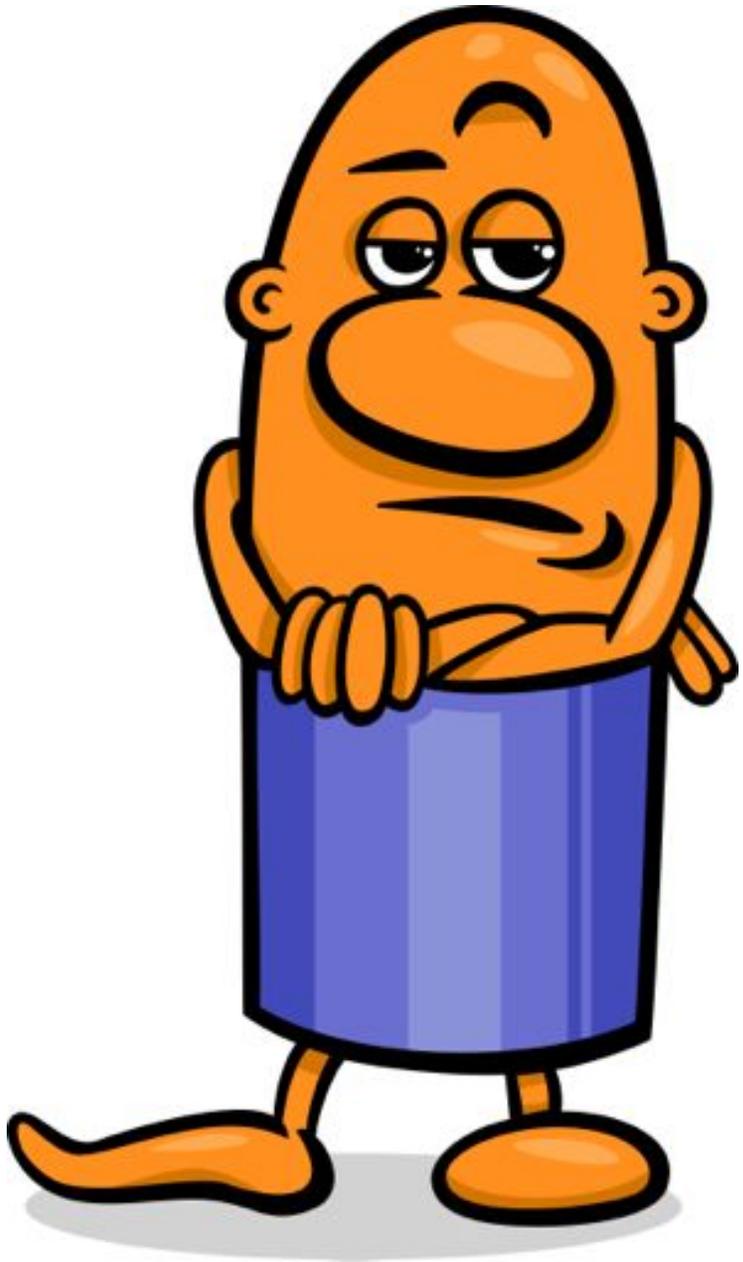


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“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.”

(2: 5-7)



“When the king’s order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king’s palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor . . .

. . . Immediately he provided her with beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem . . .

. . . Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.”

(2: 8-11)

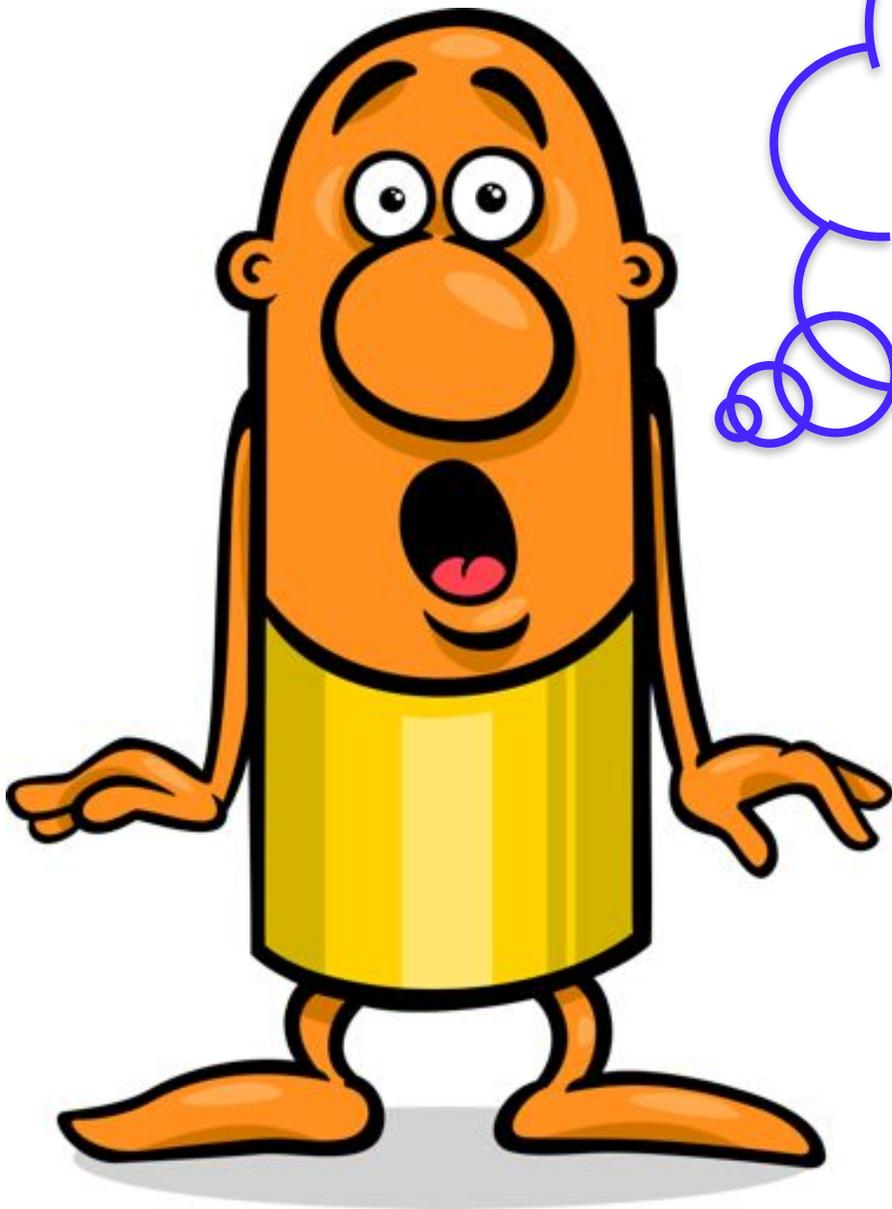


**So, what goes on in
the king's harem?**

Questions for discussion and thought

1. How would you classify the story of Esther as a literary work?
2. Why was there a question among the Rabbis about Esther being included in the Hebrew canon of Scripture?
3. Why is it important to understand the historical context of Esther's story?
4. How do we pick up the erotic sexual subtext of Esther's story?
5. Why did Mordecai advise Esther to hide her Jewish ancestry?

“Before a young woman’s turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace . . .



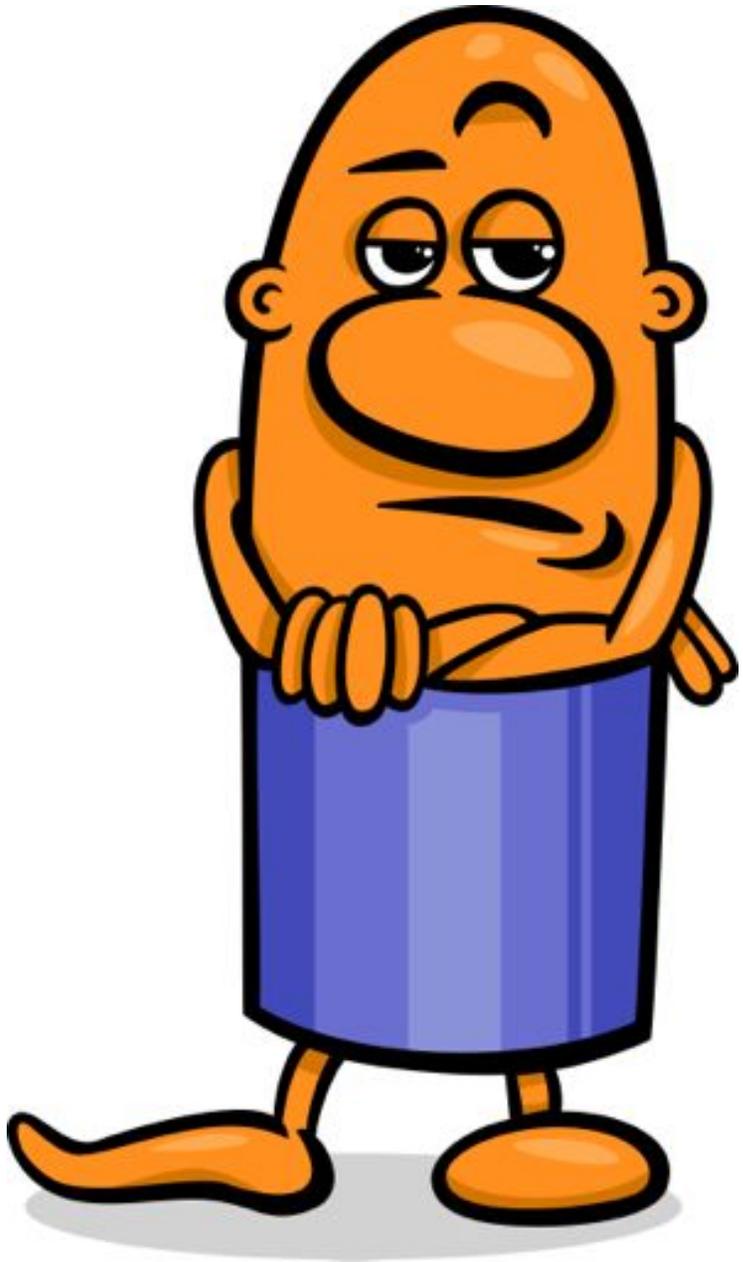


**Théodore Chassériau. *Esther Preparing Herself to Meet King Ahasuerus* (oil on canvas), 1841.
Louvre Museum, Paris.**

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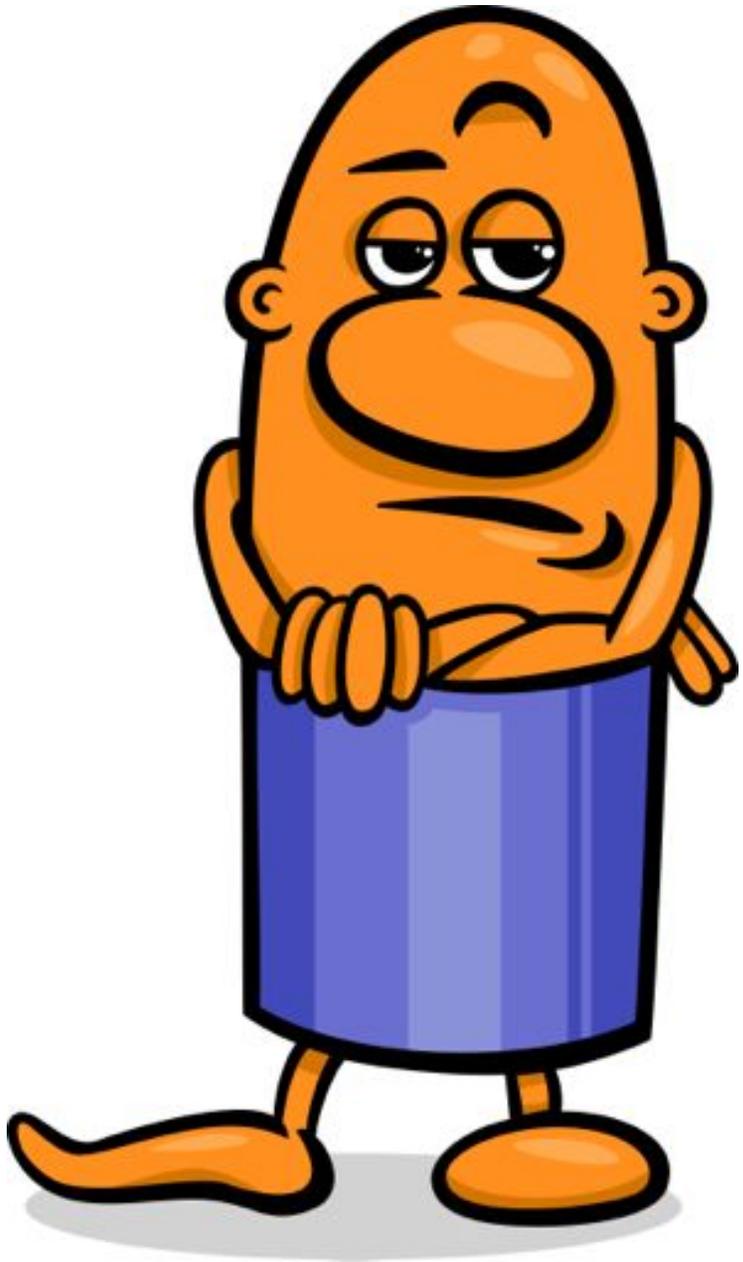
. . . In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.”

(2: 12-14)



**It's good to be the
king!**

“When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested . . .



So when the young women would return from their night with the king, Hegai would “debrief” them, as it were, to find out what the king liked . . . and he passed the info on to Esther!

. . . And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign [479 B.C., a year after the Battle of Salamis] . . .

. . . Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti . . .

. . . And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality."

(2: 15-18)

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