

## Vashti

### The Woman Who Exalted Modesty

*Scripture References - Esther 1; 2:1;4:17*

***Name Meaning*** – *Vashti* corresponded to the significance of her name, "beautiful woman." She must have been one of the loveliest women in the realm of King Ahasuerus who thought so much of his wife's physical charms that at a drinking debauchery he wanted to exhibit her beauty for she "was fair to look upon."

***Family Connections*** - *Bullinger identifies this Persian beauty* as the daughter of Alyattes, King of Lydia, but the only authentic record of Vashti is what we have in her brief appearance in Scripture as the queen of the court of Ahasuerus, or Artaxerxes. It would be interesting to know what became of the noble wife after her disgrace and divorce by her unworthy, wine-soaked husband.

While the Book of Esther holds a high place in the sacred literature of the Jews, it yet has no mention of God or of the Holy Land, and contains no definite religious teaching. Martin Luther is said to have tossed the book into the river Elbe, saying that he wished it did not exist for "it has too much of Judaism and a great deal of heathenish imagination." The book contains a genuine strain of human interest, but it is also heavy with the air of divine providence (compare Esther). Although the story of Vashti only covers a few paragraphs in the book, yet in the setting of oriental grandeur we have the elements of imperishable drama. While the bulk of the book revolves around Esther, from our point of view the shining character in the story is the queenly Vashti, who was driven out because she refused to display her lovely face and figure before the lustful eyes of a drunken court.

By birth Vashti was a Persian princess, possessing along with her regal bearing, an extraordinary, fragile beauty. Although her husband was a king "who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces," her self-respect and high character meant more to her than her husband's vast realm. Rather than cater to the vanity and sensuality of drunkards, she courageously sacrificed a kingdom. Rather than lower the white banner of womanly modesty, Vashti accepted disgrace and dismissal. The only true ruler in that drunken court was the woman who refused to exhibit herself, even at the king's command.

## The Demand

An impressive banquet was to be held in Susa the capital of Persia, lasting for seven days, with the king and his dignitaries joining with hundreds of invited guests in an unceasing whirl of festivities during which wine flowed freely. Both great and small were to be found "in the court of the garden of the palace." Then came the crowning touch of a drunken tyrant's caprice. When "the heart of the king was merry with wine" he commanded that Vashti, his royal consort, appear before the guests. For a week, inflamed with wine and adulation, he had displayed the magnificent wealth and power of his kingdom and the princes had poured flattery upon him. Now for the climax! Let all the half-drunken guests see his most lovely possession, Queen Vashti, who was probably the most beautiful woman in his kingdom. He wanted the intoxicated jubilant lords to feast their eyes on her. The Bible plainly declares that Ahasuerus summoned his wife to the feast simply "to show her beauty." Had the king been sober he would not have considered such a breach of custom, for he knew that Eastern women lived in seclusion and that such a request as he made in his drunken condition amounted to a gross insult. "For Vashti to appear in the banquet hall, though dressed in her royal robes and crowned, would be almost as degrading as for a modern woman of our modern world to go naked into a man's party." What Ahasuerus demanded was a surrender of womanly honor, and Vashti, who was neither vain nor wanton, was unwilling to comply. Plutarch reminds us that it was the habit of a Persian king to have his queen beside him at a banquet, but when he wished to riot and drink, he sent his queen away and called in the wives of inferior rank - his concubines. Perhaps that is the historic clue to Vashti's indignant refusal for she knew only too well that Persian custom dictated that a queen be secluded during the feasts where rare wines flowed freely.

## The Disobedience

To Vashti, the command of the king - her husband, who alone had the right to gaze upon her beautiful form - was most revolting to her sense of propriety, and knowing what the consequences of her refusal to appear before the half-drunken company would entail, refused in no uncertain terms to comply with the king's demand. She stood strong in womanly self-respect and "refused to come at the king's commandment." Her noble scorn at her threatened indignity deserves finer recognition. What the king sought would have infringed upon her noble, feminine modesty, therefore she had every right to disobey her wine-soaked husband. A wife need not and may not obey her husband in what opposes God's laws and the laws of feminine honor and decency. All praise to the heroic Vashti for her decent disobedience.

## The Deposition

Vashti's disobedience excited the king to madness. No one, especially a woman, had ever dared to humiliate such a despot whose word was law in all his realm. Such a slight had but one issue, for forth went the decree, "that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus." This degradation also meant divorce, not only from her husband, but also from the life and luxury she had been used to. Thus amid the tragic darkness Queen Vashti - never more queenly than in her refusal - disappears like a shining shadow. The wise men, court astrologers and princes agreed with the king that banishment from the palace was the only fit punishment for such a crime. They knew that Vashti's bold stand might incite other Persian ladies to disobey their liege lords, and so the warrant, silly as it was royal, was enacted that "Every man be master in his own house, and that all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small!"

As a Persian law once made could never be revoked, Ahasuerus, now sober, and likely regretful of his impulsive anger could not reinstate Vashti, thus Esther was chosen to succeed her as queen. It is quite probable that "Vashti continued to live in the royal household, stripped of the insignia of royalty, but with her own integrity clothed in purple." Surrendering the diadem of Persia, Vashti put on a crown which was beyond the power of a despot king to give or take away, namely, the crown of exalted womanhood. How apropos are the lines of Tennyson as we think of the fine character of Vashti, the pagan Persian - Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, These three alone lead life to sovereign power. Yet not for power (power by herself Would come uncalled for), but to live by law, Acting the law we live without fear; And, because right is right, to follow right Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence.

Vashti chose deposition rather than dishonor with a mortifying refusal to obey. Her refusal to exhibit herself was visited with "a punishment severe enough to reestablish the supremacy which it threatened to overthrow," but to Vashti, conscience and personal dignity occupied a higher supremacy and for this ideal she was dethroned. Allied to her beauty and regal charm were courage and heroism, securing her character from the rot of power. Vashti had a soul of her own, and preserved its integrity; and if women today fail to honor their life they will never win the best God has for them. It is to be regretted that in our modern world many women are not as careful as Vashti the pagan was in guarding the dignity of the body. Fashion and popularity are a poor price to pay for the loss of one's self-respect. Christian ideals in womanhood may be deemed old-fashioned and in conflict with the trend of the times, but divine favor rests upon those who have courage to be ridiculed for such high ideals. Any woman is one after God's own heart when, as Mary Hallet puts it, she determines by His grace - To remain refined in speech and action, when it is the style to appear "hard-boiled" - To be dignified when everyone else pretends to be "wild" - To maintain a true perspective, a real sense of values, in an irresponsible age.