

Esther 1:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Analysis

And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure. This verse describes the feast's drinking protocol, introducing an apparent tension: "according to the law" (k'dat, נֶתֶר) yet "none did compel" (ein ones, אֵין אָנֵס), and everyone could drink "according to every man's pleasure" (k'ratzon ish va'ish, כְּרָצֹן אִישׁ-אִישׁ). The phrase "according to the law" likely refers to established Persian drinking protocols rather than imposed consumption quotas. Ancient sources describe elaborate rules governing royal feasts—who drinks when, in what order, with what toasts.

The clarification "none did compel" addresses Persian drinking customs that sometimes required guests to match the king's consumption. Ahasuerus specifically suspended this protocol, allowing each person to drink as much or little as they preferred—an unusual gesture of royal magnanimity or perhaps practical recognition that forcing diverse guests to excessive drinking might create problems. The king "appointed" (yissod, תָּסַד) his palace officers to ensure this policy, making individual choice the governing principle.

Ironically, a king who allows subjects freedom in drinking refuses his wife freedom to refuse his drunken demand (v. 12). The narrative subtly exposes royal inconsistency: magnanimous regarding wine consumption, tyrannical regarding personal dignity. This detail also highlights the feast's atmosphere of indulgence

and permissiveness, creating conditions for the crisis that follows. When "every man's pleasure" governs, poor judgment and moral compromise often result.

Historical Context

Greek sources describe Persian royal drinking protocols as elaborate and sometimes oppressive. Herodotus reports that Persian custom required guests to drink when the king drank, potentially forcing excessive consumption. Xenophon describes drinking contests and peer pressure to consume large quantities. Against this background, Ahasuerus's suspension of compulsory drinking appears magnanimous, though it may simply reflect practical recognition that diverse guests had different capacities and that forced consumption might lead to embarrassing incidents.

The phrase "according to the law" (dat, from Old Persian data) appears throughout Esther, emphasizing the Persian legal system's rigidity and formality. Persian law famously could not be altered once decreed (Daniel 6:8, 12), creating both stability and inflexibility. The contrast between strict law and personal pleasure introduces a theme that runs through Esther: the tension between rigid legal structures and human agency, between unchangeable decrees and creative responses to crisis.

The reference to "officers of his house" (rab beito, רָב בֵּיתוֹ) indicates the administrative infrastructure governing even informal celebrations. Persian court life operated under elaborate protocols, with specific officials responsible for different aspects of royal entertainment, food service, and guest accommodation. This bureaucratic approach to pleasure reflects Persian administrative sophistication but also perhaps excessive formality.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does the principle of 'every man's pleasure' as ultimate authority differ from biblical understanding of freedom and self-governance?
2. What are the dangers of confusing permissiveness with genuine freedom, and how does Scripture address this confusion?
3. How should Christians respond to cultural narratives that make individual autonomy and subjective preference ultimate values?

Interlinear Text

וְשַׁתִּי הַ	כִּתְבָּהּ	אֵין	אָנָּסִי	כִּי	כִּי
And the drinking	was according to the law	H369	none did compel	H3588	H3651
H8360	H1881	H597			
בָּתְּרִיפְתָּה	כָּל	כָּל	בָּתְּרִיפְתָּה		
had appointed	for so the king	H5921	to all the officers	of his house	
H3245	H4428	H3605	H7227	H1004	
לְעַשׂ וְתִ	כְּרִצְתִּי	אֲוִישׁ:	אֲוִישׁ:		
that they should do	pleasure	according to every man's	according to every man's		
H6213	H7522	H376	H376		

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 51:7 (Parallel theme): Babylon hath been a golden cup in the LORD'S hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad.