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Vashti Banished

Last time we introduced the Book of Esther; the book where God is never mentioned but in fact God is the unsung, unseen hero. Esther's contribution to the canon of Scripture is the truth that God is at work "behind the scenes" to accomplish all His good pleasure. Without Esther we could not see "behind the scenes." But this little book pulls back the curtain like no other book and reveals the personal orchestrator behind history, God Himself. His orchestration involves all the little details of history, what people subjectively call, "the minor details of life." But how do we know they are minor details? The question itself reveals the fallacy. We are in no position to declare something a minor detail. And when thought about in the light of Esther we realize there are many so-called minor details that don't turn out to be minor at all!

So the doctrine of providence states that God is at work "behind the scenes" in every detail of life. And while many Christians don't like this doctrine one bit at all today it's nevertheless true. What they're struggling with is the idea that if God is providential over every little detail of life then man is a just a robot. But that's not what this is saying. That's the error of fatalism and we must never fall into it. History, of course, is not fatalism. Fatalism says, "whatever will be will be," *que sera sera*, and logically if that is the case then I can just sit on my haunches and do nothing and God's plan is going to come to pass anyway. That is not biblical. At the same time it's equally wrong to say that man's libertarian free will decisions are shaping history. This is the other side of fatalism which is chance and we must never hold to this. Chance says history is open and undecided upon until man makes a move. But that's not the biblical view of God or man or history. Both fatalism and chance are pagan views of history. The biblical view is that God is providentially taking history where He wants it to go and man is invited to enter into this history

by making responsible choices. These choices are very real because if man does not make certain decisions then certain things in the plan will not come to pass. And yet, man's responsible decisions are means that God has included in His providential rule in order to bring His plan to pass. And yet every decision of man is what man wants to do. No one is twisting his arm.

Now Esther shows us this biblical model of God's providence and man's responsible choices throughout. So if you don't understand how this all works just stick around because we will see it illustrated over and over in this book. And so as we go through Esther 1 tonight we are looking to see that man always does what he wants to do but at the same time God's providential plan comes to pass.

To introduce Esther 1 let me introduce the two main characters, Ahasuerus and Vashti. Ahasuerus is introduced in verse 1, he's the King of Medo-Persia at the time. His name Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name, it's how he was known among Jews who spoke Hebrew. His name among the Persians was Khshayarsha so they knew him differently but this is a book written in Hebrew so it uses Ahasuerus. His Greek name is the name most historians know him by and that name is Xerxes and I'll use this name a lot. He's the same as Ahasuerus so don't get confused. He was prophesied to rise to power in Daniel 11 along with those other 150 prophecies. In Dan 11:2 the angel said, "Behold, three more kings are going to arise in Persia. Then a fourth will gain far more riches than all of them, as soon as he becomes strong through his riches, he will arouse the whole empire against the realm of Greece." The fourth who would gain far more riches than all of them was Xerxes, the Ahasuerus of verse 1. He is the king who grew powerful through his wealth and then instigated an empire-wide military campaign against Greece.

His wife was Queen Vashti. She's introduced in verse 9. She's often said to be nowhere mentioned in extra-biblical literature. However, it has been shown that the Greeks knew her as Amestris. She wasn't a very nice girl from what Herodotus says. On one occasion she was jealous of Xerxes brother's wife because Xerxes thought she was beautiful and so she manipulated the situation so that his brother's wife was disfigured. And when Xerxes brother found out about it he planned to assassinate Xerxes but this plot was found out and Xerxes crushed his brother's entire family. So she's not a very nice

girl, she was very beautiful but not very nice. There was a lot of intrigue in this kingdom.

There are several minor characters mentioned by name in chapter 1, fourteen to be exact, but most notably Memucan who is introduced in verse 14 as one of the seven princes of Persia, a wise man who understood the times. He's the one who comes up with the counsel to banish Vashti from the King's presence and to replace her with someone else and his advice was followed.

So there are your major and minor characters for chapter 1 and as we study the details we are watching for God's providential, "behind the scenes," work. Verses 1-4 is the first scene, the king is holding a banquet for 180 days which served as a cover for the military planning session against Greece.

In verse 1 we get the timing, the king who reigned and the extent of his kingdom. **Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus.** **Ahasuerus** we said was his Hebrew name, it's how the Jews referred to him, but the Persians referred to him as Khshayarsha. But we're going to refer to him as Xerxes because that's the name the Greek's gave him and that's the name most people know this ruler by.ⁱ

Now verse 1 also tells us the extent of his kingdom, **Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces** is vast. **India** corresponds to modern day western Pakistan and **Ethiopia** corresponds to modern day Sudan as well as the northern portion of Ethiopia. So the Persian kingdom was a remarkably vast empire, it was far larger than the Babylonian kingdom, it engulfed all of Babylon and extended far beyond it. It was in fact the largest empire in the history of the world up until that time. In due time the Greek Empire would surpass it and the Roman Empire would surpass even that. And even now a world empire is forming that will surpass all prior kingdoms. But at the time the Persian Empire was the greatest in extent the world had ever known and Ahasuerus was the world's most powerful man.

However, also note that the way the verse reads seems to imply that there was another Ahasuerus and the author is trying to make sure his audience knows which one he's talking about. He says he was **the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces**. And in fact we know from Daniel 9:1 there was an earlier Ahaseurus who was a contemporary of

Daniel. This other Ahasuerus was the father of Darius the Mede who we identified in the Babylonian Chronicles as Gubaru. So there was another Ahasuerus but he was of Median descent not Persian and he did not reign over this entire realm so the author makes clear which one he's referring to.

Now you could argue that this observation shows that the Book of Esther was written to a later audience who did not live through the events of Esther. So when they were sitting in history class they would hear about Ahasuerus the father of Darius the Mede and they were hear about Ahasuerus the ruler from India to Ethiopia. Which one did the events of Esther occur during? Verse 1 would answer their question. So it seems from this verse that whoever wrote Esther was writing to a younger generation that didn't see these events and so it puts the date probably at the earliest around 450BC. The other point related to the writing of this book is that chapter 1 records a lot of details about the seven day banquet that begins in verse 5, the decorations, the people present, the location, the drinking vessels, the rules regarding drinking, what happened on the seventh day, the drunken condition of the king, the names of the seven eunuchs, the names of the seven princes, the name of the prince that stood up to give counsel to the king. All these details occurred four years before Esther and Mordecai enter the story. Where did he get all this detailed information? It sounds like the author personally attended the banquet and so was an eyewitness. And years later after all the events unfolded, he looked back and saw God's providential hand at work. That's how providence works, you can't tell in the midst of the situation the importance of many little factors, it's only in hindsight that you can detect the hand of God shaping, constructing and organizing history to set up the next part of His plan. And it's the same way with our lives, we look back and we can see how God was orchestrating the events in our life to bring about the present situation, but we could not see it then. It's important to realize that even now God is setting things up for the future; in other words, to live in continual acknowledgement that He is shaping your life.

So we see in verse 1 the king is Ahasuerus, the one who reigned over this vast realm that was divided into **127 provinces**. All the events, verse 1 tells us, occurred **in the days of** this king. So what were the days of this king? He acceded to the throne in 486BC upon the death of his father Darius I. But since the accession year was not counted as a regal year then the first year of his reign was 485BC. He reigned until 465BC when he was assassinated in

his bedchambers by his vizier Artabanus who had his own political dreams. So the events occur between 485 and 465BC. And verse 3 tells us they begin **in the third year of his reign** which was 483BC.

Now you see in verse 2 where the king was at the time. **in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa.** he's being very specific because **Susa** was one location of several royal thrones. In the south there was the throne at Persepolis, this was his main residence. It was a lavish city and palace. His throne in the north was at Ecbatana, this was his summer palace, when it got hot he would go to this palace. Susa was in between Ecbatana and Persepolis, it was where he had his winter palace. This occurred while he was at his winter palace of **Susa**.

Now **Susa** is the Greek for the Hebrew *Shushan*. This is interesting because Daniel found himself in vision at Susa in Daniel 8. In that vision he saw a ram signifying Medo-Persia and a buck goat signifying Greece clashing and the Greeks crushed and stomped the Persians. So we know that vision pertains to Alexander the Great's conquering of Persia around 331BC. So Daniel was in Susa in vision about 331BC whereas the events of Esther 1 in Susa occurred in 482BC, about 150 years before Daniel will be there in vision.

Alright, so he's at **Susa** and in verse 3 we are told it was **in the third year of his reign** that's 483BC. Now the banquet he has here in verse 3 and 4 lasts **180 days** which is exactly six months. After it in verse 5 he holds another banquet that lasts just seven days and it's held in the royal garden parks. Now I would argue that since he was at Susa which was the winter palace then the first six month banquet was held indoors at the palace starting in the closing months of 483BC and running up to early spring in 482BC which is when he held his seven day banquet outdoors in the royal garden park which would be coming into full blossom. So these events began at the end of 483BC and ended in early spring of 482BC. His military campaign is going to be launched in 481BC and he'll return and marry Esther in 479BC. So you see these events in chapter 1 occurred four years before Esther ever comes into the picture and this shows you how far reaching God's providence is, it's shaping, it's constructing many, many years in advance to create necessary conditions that no one could have imagined at the time.

Alright, in verse 3 the king **gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence.** Take note of two facts. First, **Persia** is mentioned before **Media**. The kingdom had two branches. Daniel predicted in Dan 8:3 that **Media** would be the stronger branch initially but would give way to **Persia**. Since **Persia** is mentioned first here then **Persia** was the stronger branch at this time. Second, the banquet was given for his government and military personnel from all **his provinces**, that's 127 provinces; it was a kingdom wide banquet involving everyone that would be involved in a military campaign. And the extent of it shows you it's a kingdom wide campaign, a very large campaign. And that's why I've suggested that really this six month banquet was a cover for a military strategizing session against the Greeks. The background of this campaign is reported by Herodotus who said,

“After the conquest of Egypt, intending now to take in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes held a special assembly of the noblest among the Persians, so he could learn their opinions and declare his will before them all. When they were assembled, Xerxes spoke to them as follows:ⁱⁱ... It is my intent to bridge the Hellespont and lead my army through Europe to Hellas, so I may punish the Athenians for what they have done to the Persians and to my father...On his behalf and that of all the Persians, I will never rest until I have taken Athens and burnt it, for the unprovoked wrong that its people did to my father and me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now you can see this plan goes back to an unprovoked wrong committed against Xerxes and his father in prior wars. When he says there was an unprovoked wrong committed by the Athenians he's referring to the Athenians military involvement in the Ionian Revolt from 499-493BC. What happened was the Ionians, who were under Persian rule, revolted against Persian rule and the Athenians sent military support to aid them in overturning Persian rule. This really made Xerxes and his father Darius I mad. Darius swore to burn down Athens. So he launched this campaign and he first put down the Ionian Revolt at the Battle of Lade in 494 but his plan to burn down Athens was repelled by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon in 490BC. That battle was a very important battle and it is a famous battle because it is the battle that gave rise to the distance of the marathon being

26.2 miles. So Darius was defeated and upon returning home he began to raise a massive army in order to invade and subjugate all of Greece. However, this campaign never occurred because his Egyptian subjects rebelled and he had to attend to that matter. In 486BC he died having never accomplished his revenge against Athens. When his son Xerxes came to the throne he quickly put down the Egyptian revolt in 484BC. Then he turned his attention to fulfilling his father's dreams of burning Athens for the unprovoked wrong committed during the Ionian Revolt more than a decade before. Herodotus tells us that Xerxes planned for four years how to conquer Greece. And I take it that the banquet of Esther 1:3 refers to the final six months of military strategizing for this campaign. For this campaign the king amassed a massive army of 200,000 and a naval fleet. Whether he knew it or not he was about to embark on the most important military campaign of his entire career. The campaign occurs from 481-479 in between Esther 1 and 2. Esther 2 is the demeanor of the king after the campaign. He was defeated and downcast. It was at that time that he remembered that Vashti had been banished so he could not turn to her for comfort. Instead his advisors suggested he pick a new queen from among the finest virgins of Persia.

In any case, verse 3 is referring to the final stages of the military planning for Xerxes' invasion of Greece that will be a failure. At this banquet verse 4 describes **he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.** It was a show of wealth; it was a show of power. All his military and government personnel are being impressed by the greatest ruler on earth. And don't forget, the angel in Daniel 11 says, when he becomes powerful through his wealth then he will carry out his campaign against the Greeks. All of this is occurring in fulfillment of Daniel 11.

Now after the military planning session ended we come to scene two in verse 5, another banquet, a seven day banquet. **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.** It was spring of 482BC now and the gardens were in full bloom so he **gave** an outdoor banquet for everyone who lived in the city of **Susa**. You see the king is very benevolent. Why is he so benevolent? He wants support for the war. He doesn't need people trying to takeover the government while he's on the

warpath, he needs support. So he's a very smart ruler, he has this banquet for all the people present at the citadel of Susa, but actually it was just the men because verse 9 says that **Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women**. So all the men **from the greatest to the least**, upper and lower class, were invited to this banquet.

It was a great party, very patriotic, notice verse 6 the national colors of Persia in the **white and violet linen** hangings and these were hanging on **marble columns...by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings**. These were the Persian flags so it was very patriotic. It was also very lavish, the outdoor banquet had **couches** plated with **gold and silver** and the pavement in the park was composed of **mosaics of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones**. This was an awesome display of Xerxes wealth and the good king invited all to enjoy it.

Verse 7, there were drinks provided, and not only drinks but **Drinks...served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty**. The **various golden vessels** was a Persian luxury, they loved to drink out of all kinds of different vessels. The king provided all of this in addition to the abundance of **royal wine**, the very best wine was served. And I'm suggesting that he's doing all this to keep up the war effort back home. Everyone will have this lasting impression of him when he departs for battle.

Verse 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**. Now this is very benevolent too because typically whatever your host served you, you drank, and to refuse to drink was to insult the host. But in this case the king made a special law that at this banquet each person could drink as much or as little as he desired and there would be no insult.

And of course while this great party is going on in the outdoor park for the men, in verse 9 **Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus**. So the men and the women were at separate banquets.

Then we come to the third scene, verse 10, **the seventh day** and at this point everything is going according to the king's plan, he's finalized his military strategy, he's shown his power and his wealth, he's shown everyone a good time, everything was perfect, **the heart of the king was merry with wine** and so what could make things better? A beautiful woman's presence, we've been drinking and cajoling for six days with no women, we need a woman and who better than the Queen.

So on the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.^{iv} 12 But Queen Vashti refused to come.

Now the problem is why did she refuse to come? And some people say, well it's obvious, she didn't come because in verse 11 the king requested that she come **with her royal crown and her royal crown only**, that is, naked, and this was a distasteful thing for the queen to come naked before all these men. Now I'm not writing that off completely but I doubt it. So other people say she didn't come because her husband was drunk and that may be. Finally, other people say, she refused to come because she was busy entertaining her female guests and that may be. But the truth of the matter is if we were there we might know more but all that we do know is that she refused to come and this spoiled the king's plans. Everything was perfect up until that moment. He'd finalized his military plans, he'd shown off his impressive palace, he'd put on a patriotic, luxurious show in his royal garden park, he had given wine and luxurious drinking vessels, he'd shown benevolence toward all men. But now when he wanted to show off his wife he was met with defeat. Now the irony of the situation is that here is the richest most powerful man in the inhabited world about to embark on a great military campaign and he cannot even command his own wife to come to him. How then is he going to command a 200,000 man army and a naval fleet? It seems that the handwriting is on the wall.

So his response at the end of verse 12 is no surprise, **the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him**. This was embarrassing, he couldn't let this go overlooked, as beautiful as she was, this rebellion from within his own house had to be dealt with. So verse 13 he follows custom.

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 14and were close to him; Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media... Now it was typical for ancient kings to have these kind of wise cabinet level advisers surrounding you. These were the kind of men we met in the Book of Daniel who King Nebuchadnezzar summoned before him to reveal his dream and the interpretation of the dream and all kinds of riddles and difficult problems. You see these men **knew law and justice**. They were lawyers. But also observe at the beginning of verse 13 that they were **wise men who understood the times**. Now this undoubtedly is a description of the fact that they were astrologers or magi, perhaps even priests in the religion of Zoroastrianism. We know that Persia was intensely Zoroastrian and the claims of the leaders of this religion were that they could read the stars and manipulate the fate that the stars foretold. Since things were not going the way the king wanted them to go, these men were necessary to manipulate the current situation and get them back on track for success. Therefore the king is turning to a religious answer to his problems, one that he thinks is necessary to solve his dilemma.

Now it seems from v 16ff that there was no law regarding Queen Vashti not obeying the king's command. There may have been a law regarding others who disobeyed the command of the King but there was no law regarding the Queen. And so the answer is not according to law but according to a wisdom principle. Let's look at the response, **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. 17For 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.' 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.** Now this Memucan

who makes this proposal, we don't know if he was having trouble with his own wife, maybe, maybe not, but if he was this was a quick solution to his own problem. But probably the solution has more to do with keeping peace and harmony in the kingdom while the king goes off to war. They didn't need what he describes in verse 17 **all the women looking with contempt on their husbands** in a time of war. They didn't need what he describes at the end of verse 18, **plenty of contempt and anger** in a time of war. They needed peace and harmony and order on the home front. So he suggests the king put forth a royal edict and have it recorded in the laws of Persia and Media that female liberation movements will not be permitted and the Queen will be banished and there will be a new queen.

Now it's very interesting that Memucan's advice has a kernel of truth in it. It's not unreasonable at all in the sense that leadership set the example and as goes the leadership so goes the people. So if Queen Vashti were allowed to rebel against King Ahasuerus' command then all the women of the kingdom might be allowed to rebel against their husband's commands and this would result in **plenty of contempt and anger**. So verse 21, since the ball was in the king's court, **This word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed**. Now remember, they were drunk or the king at least was drunk, verse 10, though he may have sobered up some by now. But the Persians were fond of wine and they often made decisions when they were drunk. Herodotus says, "They are very partial to wine...it is their custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk; [4] and what they approve in their deliberations is proposed to them the next day, when they are sober, by the master of the house where they deliberate; and if, being sober, they still approve it, they act on it, but if not, they drop it."^v So following this procedure what happened was they discussed Memucan's proposal and approved it, but the next day when the king sobered up they still approved of it. So you can't say this was just a rash, drunk decision. It would have been approved the next day when he was sober.

So, verse 22 he acted on it. **he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.**

Now we already said this king ruled a vast empire of 127 provinces and you can see that the kingdom had a lot of cultural and linguistic diversity. There

were various scripts used in each province and so letters had to be written in various scripts, there were various languages spoken in the kingdom, it won't be until Alexander the Great that the importance of a single language being spoken is recognized. The Persians had many languages spoken in their provinces. But what they did recognize was that for the man of the house to be the man of the house, his language had to be spoken by all in the house. And that's what's being referred to in the last expression here, **that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.** The father's native language would be the language spoken in the house. Now this was not typical because the mother was the one who raised the little brats and she spoke to them in her native language. But not any longer says Xerxes, the language spoken in the house will be the father's native tongue, that way we don't have any of this feminine nonsense going on behind the father's back.

So these letters were sent out to the whole kingdom and this is supposed to keep peace and order and harmony on the home front during the campaign against Greece. And we could comment on the postal delivery system of the Persians but it's enough to say that many scholars think they invented the pony express. But the important thing is that we recognize God's providential work in all of this.

So in conclusion what do we take away from this? First, all these people were doing exactly as they wanted to do but what was happening was exactly what God wanted to do. They could not have known that but we know that because Esther was written and the curtain has been pulled back so we can see how God runs history. Second, and here we will give three examples; first, the Queen had her own reasons for refusing to come before the king and display her beauty but God's reason for the refusal was so that Memucan would make his proposal. Second, Memucan had his own reasons for proposing the king make a royal edict banishing Vashti from his presence, but God's reason was so that the office of queen was empty and prepared for Esther. Third, the king planned to conquer the Greeks and expand his kingdom but God planned for the king to lose the war and be downcast to seek solace in his harem where he would find Esther. Were these just happenstances? Or was this all by divine design? Third, recognize that men may have their reasons for doing things but God has other reasons for what happens and while every

man does what he wants to do it is God's purposes that get established perfectly.

By application to the life of Israel; think of how the Nazi's had plans to exterminate the Jews in the 1930's and 40's but God used this extermination plan to establish a place for the Jews back in their own land. Think of how the Arab nations had plans in 1967 to destroy the Jews but God's plan was to use this war to give Jerusalem back to the Jews. Many, many plans of man, but God directs history.


By application to your own life; do you see God's providential work in your life? Looking back over your life, can you see how God has providentially worked to bring you to where you are now? It is vital to learn the lesson of this book and to look back on your own life and see that God has a plan for your life that you could never have dreamed of. And it is vital to take that hindsight and apply it to the present circumstances you are facing and to realize that this too is something God is working together for the good. God works all things together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose. Can you accept that God is in charge of your life? That He has a plan for your life and it may not be the one in your mind? Your responsibility is to accept that His plan for your life is the best one, not yours and to adjust to Him, to give Him the glory every step of the way. Can you do that?

ⁱ For an explanation for why Khshayarsha came to be referred to as Xerxes by the Greeks see <http://tzemachdavid.org/Vsamachta/purim99/identity.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Herodotus. (1920). *Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (A. D. Godley, Ed.). Medford, MA: Harvard University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Herodotus. (1920). *Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (A. D. Godley, Ed.). Medford, MA: Harvard University Press.

^{iv} Now there are several things here. First, critics of Esther argue that it's not a historical narrative. However, notice the painful detail the author went to in naming the **seven eunuchs**. Why would you name the seven eunuchs if you were only writing a fictitious account? And second, critics of Esther argue that it was written during the Greek Empire. However, all these names are clearly Persian showing it was written in the Persian period. The third thing is that these men were **eunuchs**. It was common for kings of the ancient world to castrate men who served in close association to women in the royal house because they knew how men were; they were full of sexual



lust and power lust. So they'd cut that off real quick so these guys couldn't have sex with female members of the royal house and start dynasties of their own.

∨ Herodotus. (1920). *Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (A. D. Godley, Ed.). Medford, MA: Harvard University Press.

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