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Ahasuerus, the Son of a Stable-Master

Vashti insults Ahasuerus by calling him “the son of my father’s stable master” (b. *Megillah* 12b). Persian sources, including the story of King Ardashir I, shed light on the origin and significance of this calumny.[1]

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*Ahasuerus, by*Maurycy Gottlieb  1876 National Museum, Kraków. Wikimedia

Vashti’s Refusal and Ahasuerus’ Fury

The Book of Esther begins with the story of Ahasuerus’ banquets. On the last day of his second banquet, when he is drunk on wine, Ahasuerus decides that he wants his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear at his banquet so he can show off her beauty to all the men there. Vashti refuses and Ahasuerus becomes furious:

אסתר א:יב וַתְּמָאֵן הַמַּלְכָּה וַשְׁתִּי לָבוֹא בִּדְבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיַד הַסָּרִיסִים וַיִּקְצֹף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמָתוֹ בָּעֲרָה בוֹ.

Esth 1:12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him. (NJPS)

The story continues with Ahasuerus removing Vashti from her position as queen and his subsequent search for a new queen, leading to his marriage to Esther. The text never explains why Vashti refuses to appear or why Ahasuerus gets so angry. These lacunae leave room for rabbinic midrash to fill in the gaps.

Ahasuerus, the Son of Belshazzar’s Stable-Master

Rava, the fourth century C.E. Babylonian Amora, has Vashti sending the following message to Ahasuerus in response to his request to appear at the banquet (b. *Megillah* 12b):

בר אהורייריה דאבא. אבא לקבל אלפא חמרא שתי ולא רוי וההוא גברא אשתטי בחמריה.

Oh son of my Father’s stable-master![2] Father would drink wine before a thousand (cf. Daniel 1:5) and was not satiated. Yet that man (i.e., Ahasuerus) was intoxicated with his wine.

Vashti here insults Ahasuerus in multiple ways:

Unmanliness – Vashti’s comment that Ahasuerus is incapable of holding his drink is an attack on his virility. His behavior would then contrast sharply with the renowned remark by the Greek author, Athenaeus (*Deipnosophists*,10.45.434d) that Darius had written on his tomb, “I could drink much wine and bear it well.”

Son of a Stable-Master – By calling Ahasuerus the son of her father’s stable-master, Vashti is reminding her husband that he is not of royal blood but a usurper, while Vashti was royalty, being the daughter of the previous king, Belshazzar. Elsewhere the Babylonian Talmud tells us that Ahasuerus not only married the king’s daughter, but that he was a usurper who killed the previous king.[3]

But why did Rava pick “stable-master”? It is evidently a gross insult but the source of such an insult is less clear. Nothing in the biblical text suggests that Ahasuerus’ father might have served in this capacity.

A comparison with other ancient Persian stories about kings demonstrates that Rava did not invent this calumny but is applying a popular calumny found in Persian tales about other kings to the biblical story of Ahasuerus.[4] To demonstrate this, we will look at several stories from Sasanian Persia in which a stable-master plays a role.

Ardashir, the Stable-Hand of King Ardavan

The most telling parallel to Vashti’s claim about Ahasuerus in the Babylonian Talmud comes from a legend about Ardashir I (224-242 C.E.). The story appears in a Pahlavi work titled, *The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, son of Babag* (*Kārnāmag -ī Ardašīr-ī Bābagān*), which apparently stems from late Sasanian times, but was no doubt based on earlier sources and was inspired by a time-worn custom of relating the legends of past kings.[5] In this work, we follow the rise of Ardashir, the son of Babag, from relative obscurity to becoming the founder of the new Sasanian dynasty.

The story is set in the time of the last king of the Parthian Empire, Ardavan. In one of the early scenes, we hear that the young Ardashir excels in his riding ability. After word of his equestrian skills reaches the royal court, he is invited to accompany the nobles on a hunt. During the chase he enters into a dispute with the king’s son that results in his demotion from the king’s favor; specifically, Ardashir is sent to the stables where he finds himself a mere stable-hand for his sovereign, Ardavan, and is prohibited from mounting a horse.

In the Persian equestrian culture, where riding one’s mount meant everything, this was humiliating. Ardashir cannot accept his fate and he escapes from the king and leads a revolt against him. Ultimately, Ardashir defeats Ardavan in battle, kills him, and becomes king in his stead; later, he even marries Ardavan’s daughter.[6]

While the *Kārnāmag* account provides omens of Ardashir’s future takeover, and the requisite Achaemenid lineage, no other cause for his revolt is indicated other than taking away his riding privileges and making him a stable-hand. The personal insult inflicted upon Ardashir justifies his rebellion against his master. This is a theme common to many stories of Persian provenance.

A Low-Level Official

The storyteller’s decision to make Ardashir a stable-hand of the reigning king is neither incidental nor insignificant. Various texts suggest that the stable-master was a lowly dignitary in the Sasanian court hierarchy.

* Ardashir I’s Court Officials – In a mid-third century monumental trilingual inscription on the Ka‘ba-i Zardusht in Iran, Ardashir’s court officials are listed in order of importance. The title, *āxwarrbed*, “stable-master” appears as the twenty-sixth dignitary out of the total of thirty-one.
* Shabur I’s Court Officials – Ardashir’s successor, Shabur I, who actually set up the monument, lists 66 of his own court dignitaries in the same inscription but the stable-master does not even make his list.

Hence, Ardashir’s position, working *under* such a dignitary, would be particularly ignoble.

A Response to a Calumny

The claim that Ardashir formerly worked in Ardavan’s stables was almost certainly not invented by the extant version of the *Kārnāmag*, which is sympathetic to Ardashir and paints him in a positive light. Instead, this claim likely made its appearance at an earlier date as a way of insulting Ardashir and calling his royalty into question.

In fact, the *Kārnāmag* version appears to be *responding* to this claim by adding a mythical tale of the royal beginnings of Ardashir’s family and including the story of Ardashir’s falling out with the prince during a hunt to explain how Ardashir found himself in the stables to begin with. In other words, the *Kārnāmag* does not dispute the tradition that Ardashir had been a stable worker, but rather directs the reader to understand that this was neither his rightful nor original state.

Rabbi Judah HaNasi’s Rich Stable-Master

The low status of the stable-master within the royal hierarchy appears to have acquired for itself a proverbial place in contemporary Persian folklore to express that a given official is of little or no importance. One example of such a usage appears in the Babylonian Talmud. In an effort to impress upon the audience the immense wealth that the Palestinian patriarch, Rabbi Judah HaNasi (= Rabbi), was alleged to have possessed, the Babylonian Talmud (b. *Shabbat* 113b) asserts that:

אהוריריה דרבי עתיר משבור מלכא

Rabbi’s stable-master was richer than King Shabur!

This suggests that *even* the lowest member of R. Judah HaNasi’s household was richer than King Shabur![7]

Shabur II’s Stable Master Insults Arshak II

An Armenian source from roughly the fifth centuy C.E. tells the story of the Armenian king Arshak (Arshak II, ca. 350-367/8 C.E.) visiting Shabur II. While the two were taking a stroll through the royal stables, the Persian stable-master[8] audaciously insulted the Armenian king: “You [there],” he called out, “King of Armenian goats, come sit on a bundle of grass!” In a swift response, the Armenian commander, named Vasak, who was accompanying the Armenian sovereign, drew his sword and slew the stable-master on the spot in a spontaneous display of loyalty towards his Armenian lord.

Shabur, however, did not seek vengeance for his loss, but declared his admiration and greatly extolled the subordinate’s loyalty to his master, since devotion to one’s lord is, apparently, a value to be recognized and esteemed wherever it is found. In contrast, the life of Shabur’s stable-master is portrayed here as quite expendable.[9]

Ardashir and Ahasuerus

The parallels between the *Kārnāmag*’s Ardashir story and the Talmud’s Ahasuerus story are particularly telling. In both stories:

* The new king is a usurper who kills the previous king and establishes a new dynasty.
* The new king was previously associated with the royal stables; Ardeshir as a stable hand and Ahasuerus as the stable-master’s son.
* This new king marries the previous king’s daughter.

It is highly unlikely that this “stable-hand to king” motif originated with the Jews and travelled to the Persians; the Persian equestrian background would have provided the natural pasture for the conception of stable hands that such a motif requires. It must then be assumed that it was already current in Persian tales when Rava introduced it into rabbinic discourse. Rava’s statement from the fourth century, many centuries earlier than the extant version of the *Kārnāmag*, is then the earliest version of this motif that we possess.

This reconstruction suggests that when the creators of the Talmud wished to breathe some life into the biblical legends of *ancient* Persian kings they drew inspiration from the popular Persian legends told about their *contemporary* counterparts. In this case, in order to better understand what Vashti did to make Ahasuerus so angry, Rava made use of a popular literary motif that was already in use in Persian legend: his royal wife called him a usurper, whose lowly origins were in the king’s stable.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/ahasuerus-the-son-of-a-stable-master)

1. This piece is based on my article, “Ahasuerus, the former stable-master of Belshazzar and the wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources,” *AJS Review,* 29:2 (2005), 283–297 which can be referred to for further detail.
2. The word for stable-master is Persian. אהור with the ה read as a ח (as found in some of the textual witnesses) is the Persian word, *āxwarr*, stable. On its etymology see for example, Zsigmond Telegdi, “Essai sur la Phonétique des Emprunts Iraniens en Araméen Talmudique,” *Journal Asiatique* CCXXVI (1935): 226; Alexander Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, I: 43; Samuel Krauss, *Additamenta*: 12 (note by Bernhardo Geiger); and Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash, A Critical Commentary* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994) I: 266, n. 80. The word appears in the Talmud manuscripts and editions as אהורייריה, אהוריריה. A fragment found in the Cremona municipal archive in a thirteenth-fourteenth century Spanish hand has אחוריאריה (No. 58, National Library Institute of Microfilms in Jerusalem, No. 34136).
3. Editor’s note: For a discussion of why the Rabbis think this, see, Malka Simkovich, Zev Farber, and David Steinberg,“[Ahasuerus and Vashti: The Story Megillat Esther Does Not Tell You](http://thetorah.com/ahasuerus-and-vashti-the-story-megillat-esther-does-not-tell-you/),” *TheTorah.com* (2017).
4. The Babylonian Talmud is the earliest rabbinic composition to use this slander and appears to be the originator of this insult. It is repeated in the late Palestinian versions of the story, with the Persian term for stable-master being replaced by the Latin term, קומיס איסטבלאות, *comes stabili*[or *stabuli*] (in Greek κόμης στάβλου); see, “Abba Gorion”, *Bet ha-Midrasch*, Sammlung, I, A. Jellinek, (repr. Jerusalem, 1967) 4. The Latin title does not appear to have borne the same stigma as the Sasanian. For further discussion and references, see, Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash,*266-268.
5. The book in turn served as a resource for later productions that chronicled the history of the Iranian kings.
6. The account of the Arab chronicler, Tabari (839–923 C.E.), on the rise of Ardashir also has him marry Ardavan’s daughter, although under different circumstances than in the *Kārnāmag*version. Tabari, known to have made extensive use of earlier Persian sources for his history, states that Ardashir massacred every last one of the Arsacids, men and women, not sparing a single one of them, but then adds:

It is said that he left no one alive except a maiden whom he had found in the royal palace. He was struck by her beauty and asked her–she was really the slaughtered king’s daughter–about her origins. She stated that she was the handmaiden of one of the king’s wives.

He takes her as one of his concubines. Later, when pregnant she reveals her true status to him and the exciting adventure, which need not occupy us here, marches on.

1. Incidentally, Judah I belongs to the period before the Sasanian dynasty and so was not a contemporary of any of the three Persian kings who bore the name Shabur.
2. Armenian: aχorapet. Literally: stable chief.
3. Epic Histories, attributed to P’awstos’ Buzand, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P’awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut’iwnk’)*, Translation and Commentary by N. G. Garsoïan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 146.